

Brief Biography of a 'quite civilized Afrikaner'

Deneys Reitz:

Unbroken ...Dressed in a Grain Sack.

Essay by Suenel Bruwer.

In 1933 Faber and Faber published the second biography of Deneys Reitz, titled 'Trekking On'.^{i[1]} It has a subtitle – *in the company of brave men* – and tells of his experiences in WWI as second-in-command with the plucky 7th Irish Rifles in the trenches of the Hindenburg Line. He transferred to the Royal Scots Fusiliers. He has some surreal experiences in England before his tour of duty in the trenches in France: He sees the Empress Eugenie, widow of Napoleon III, watching a group of German prisoners of war loading timber on a railway truck; while in training at Aldershot is inspected by Lord French, the same short-tempered man he had met on his way to Vereeniging to sign the Peace Convention in 1902, and exchanges thoughts on the East Africa Campaign with King George V, managing to elicit a laugh from the monarch who had asked him whether he had suffered from malaria, to which he replied in the negative as he said he 'had been salted'. In later years the King would keep Deneys' books to hand as favourite reading matter.

His own brave actions are treated with throw-away style, and he even shares the expectation of his imminent demise after an injury due to an attack by the famous German ace pilot, Von Richthofen, with humour: The medical orderly asked what his religion was, and his reply "Dutch Reformed"; alarmed and confused the Red Cross staff said: "What the hell is that?!" While in hospital in London, his half-brother who was studying medicine at Guy's Hospital visited him, and they naturally conversed in their mother tongue (Afrikaans). The cleaner reported them as German spies! Afterwards he says he saw how they watched him with suspicion.

In December 1917 he travelled with Sir Alfred Mond (Commissioner of Public works) and his son-in-law Lord Reading (who had just returned from securing America's entry into the war) to convalesce at Mond's country home. At night they played bridge and he says Reading 'played even better than General Botha'. He recalls how moved these men (both Jews and ardent Zionists) were when the news came that General Allenby had captured Jerusalem. He returned to the front, and fought (and commanded his regiment up until the end of the war.) When news of the end came through to his regiment, he recalls the merriment of his troops when the *curé* in the French village flung his arms around this undemonstrative Afrikaner and kissed him resoundingly on both cheeks. "It was borne in on me that, for

one coming from a small village on the South African veld, I was in the midst of great events; and I rode back from le Quesnoy with my head in a whirl, for Europe seemed to be in a melting pot."

An odd alliance

However much his book reads as a tale of high adventure, it is his spirit that shines through: "To me it had been terrible but not degrading, and I came away with a higher, not a lower, opinion of my fellow men. My chief memory is of great friendships and of millions of men on *both* sides who did what they thought they had to do without becoming the brutes that some writers say they were."

In order to understand the spiritual journey Deneys Reitz had undertaken, we need to return to his early childhood: His great-grandfather immigrated to the Cape in 1791. He was a naval officer and had taken part in the battle of Doggerbank and other actions against the British. When the British captured Cape Town in 1806, he was a considerable landowner, and relieved of his perquisites he decided to send his sons to be educated at Edinburg. One of these, François Guillaume Reitz, born in 1806, was christened by the English Chaplain of the fleet who changed the name to Francis William. In 1845 this Francis had a son, Francis William Reitz the second.

By this stage thousands of Boers had abandoned their farms and shook (or so they naively thought) the dust of British governance from their feet. For two centuries they had been pioneers in wild country, each man a law unto himself. They had to rely on their own resources against indigenous tribes and beasts, and they had become a race of individualists acknowledging no authority save that of their flintlocks." The hardships they endured are a matter of historical record. By 1852 they had established the Transvaal Republic and by 1854 the Orange Free State.

When the father of Deneys returned to the Cape in 1870, he was a barrister. Briefly also a diamond digger, he married and entered the Cape Parliament. He practised at the bar in 1857 when the fledgling Free State Republic set up a Supreme Court he became its first Chief Justice. Deneys was born in Bloemfontein. "There were five of us.... We led a carefree Tom Sawyer-like existence." He writes, "We had a string of Basotho ponies in the stables and the wide uplands teemed with game; so we hunted, fished and rode to our heart's content." When Sir John Brand died in 1889 his father was elected president. "The country was run on simple lines. When my father wished to summon his executive he sent my brothers and me on horseback to collect members of his cabinet from distant farms, and on arrival they lived with us until deliberations were over. Sometimes my father had to go on long tours through the country districts and we accompanied him, riding our ponies beside his state coach. He was invariably escorted by a squad of artillerymen. We fell in with the gunners and looked on the ancient Krupp muzzle-loaders as part of the family plate, so to speak." ii[2]

But storm clouds were gathering over this idyllic world. "The Jameson Raid was a harbinger of war in which my brothers and I were to be deeply involved and which was to shatter our universe entire."

In October 1899 the storm burst. Deneys had frequently accompanied his father to negotiations at the home of President Paul Kruger, a man dour and deeply religious, but wily and perspicacious. Deneys had two younger and two older brothers. They went straight from the class room into the thick of fighting. Deneys was seventeen. His youngest brother went to war when he was twelve.

He kept a journal of his time in the Anglo-Boer War. It was published in 1929 as a remarkable memoir *Commando*. He wrote: "The war lasted for three years. The Boers put up a heroic resistance, but our leaders, in their blind love of liberty, had pitted us against overwhelming odds. We scored a few spectacular successes in the early stages, but the weight of men and guns and power of the whole British Empire were too much for us, and at length we were beaten to our knees."

General Botha invaded Natal and on the same day general Smuts attacked a position held by the 17th Lancers near Cradock in the Cape. Their camp was completely overrun and looted by the Boers, who were by that stage in rags or wearing British uniforms (as the only option for clothing themselves!) This entitled the British to shoot them under the rules of war, if captured. However they were so short of food and ammunition, it hardly mattered. Deneys wrote that he started the day dressed in a grain bag, with an ancient rifle and a couple of bullets, but ended it 'in a handsome cavalry tunic, riding breeches, etc. and sporting a Lee-Metford, full bandoliers and a superb mount, a little grey Arab.'ⁱⁱⁱ[3] [It is told of the marvelous President Steyn of the Orange Free State, how on commando, and when any fighting Boer in tatters would ask him for help, clothes wise, Steyn would give him his spare trousers. Consequently, in time, he hardly had any left for himself. His assistants started hiding his trousers. When once again a Boer covered in patches of cloth asked Steyn for garments, he insisted they give him his last pair of pants, which he knew they were hiding. When they refused to do so, Steyn got off his horse, took off his pants and gave it to the man. (It is probably from this incident that the Afrikaans idiomatic expression indicating boundless goodwill derives: '*hy sal sy broek uitrek om 'n ander te help*.' [He'll take off his trousers to help another.'])

Deneys accompanied Smuts, then State Attorney from the Okiep siege in the desert areas of the Cape, to attend the peace talks. Colonel Douglas Haig escorted them and thought as Smuts had been to Cambridge that he was 'more or less civilized'. They met with the men from the eastern areas of the country before meeting with Kitchener, and Deneys wrote: "nothing could have proved more clearly how nearly the Boer cause was spent than these starving, ragged men, clad in skins or sacking, their bodies covered in sores from lack of salt and food, and their appearance was a great shock to us, who came from the better conditioned forces in the Cape. Their spirit was undaunted, but they had reached the

limit of their physical endurance, and we realised that if these haggard, emaciated men were the pick of the Transvaal Commandos, then the war must be irretrievably lost.”

The declaration of peace left a scattered family: His mother had died. His father’s second wife and children were refugees in Holland. His two older brothers were prisoners of war in Ceylon and Bermuda. He, his father and next younger brother were under arms when the end came. They refused to accept the peace terms and Lord Kitchener ordered them to be put over the border into Portuguese territory. His father went to the United States and he and his brother made their way to Madagascar, where for some years he made a precarious living riding transport.

“Ultimately I received a letter from Mrs Smuts”, wife of General (Slim Jannie) Smuts prevailing upon him to return home, to where her husband, “Generals Botha and Herzog and the other Boer leaders were rebuilding the country from the ruins of war.” He first attempted to work his passage to America on a tramp steamer as he wanted to consult his father. He got as far as the Red Sea, but was wretched, having suffered from bouts of malaria, and “gave in, finding work on a southbound cargo boat, and with considerable difficulty managed to make my way back to the Transvaal.” He was a ‘bittereinder’ and had already paid a bitter price for his convictions. He was a physical wreck, but when General Smuts got word of his condition, they stepped in. “For the next three years he and Mrs Smuts kept me in their own home, and were it not for their help and understanding in those dark days ...”

It is to be remembered that the Afrikaner Nation is a very small nation. A large percentage of them had perished during the war. They were paupers, alienated from their womenfolk, estranged from their lifestyle (whether sturdily pastoral or newly independent townfolk) prior to the war, and had only one another and the remnants of a distant pride. The ghost-candle of a cause (self-determination) still flickered in a few undaunted spirits. Undermining the national pride was effected by tearing the fabric of this group soul, engaging two main methods: the gaudy journalism of the time and systematic corruption of the morale by British seduction. Starving people are easy targets, but worse by far is witnessing the suffering of one’s loved ones. Firstly the Afrikaners of the Cape were traitors^{iv}[4] if they joined the Boer forces and their families suffered accordingly, and their not joining was resented by their kin and kind. After the war these men were not allowed to return to the Cape where their property and families were. Many would pack up again and trek with families and livestock into neighbouring territories. (During the East Africa Campaign when Deneys Reitz was with a British Regiment in Masai Country, they came across several Boer families.) There were the *Bittereinders* (those that wished to fight to the bitter end) versus the *Hensoppers* (hand-uppers- those that wished to surrender), but it is the third group that caused the worst divisiveness and anger- the *Joiners*. Among these were the notorious National Scouts. From October 1901 the British recruited men from within the concentration camps. Some were landless bywoners, hoping for British favour and reward after the war, but the main

motive was in all likelihood to escape unbearable camp conditions and to get preferential treatment for their families.

But history had overtaken Deneys again. Another moral dilemma loomed, in Europe. Another liberty was threatened. Also, there was an odd twist of fate waiting in the shape of German West Africa, a twist causing yet more wedges to be driven into the tenuous re-formation of the Afrikaner nation. Britain was to ask for Afrikaner loyalty in the face of what Empire had so recently done to the Afrikaner, and claim yet more Afrikaner lives very soon. The Archduke of Austria is assassinated in Sarajevo. Who could possibly foresee that this would ask more sacrifices from the Afrikaner?

Let us leap back in time to the seventeen year old Deneys:

He served under General J.C. Smuts when they raided British camps and convoys during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) At the end of the war he went into exile rather than submit to British rule. He was induced to return to South Africa to take part in the reconstruction period. His eldest brother, having returned from prison, was in Holland, struggling in poverty to complete his studies, his brother Joubert on a fever-stricken plantation in Madagascar, his younger brother Arend was working as a dock hand in Cape Town after reaching Table Bay after many vicissitudes. His father lay ill in America and his wife and children were in straitened circumstances. In 1908 he settles in the Free State and slowly builds his legal practice in a Boer community, patiently trying to re-build their ruined farms and overcome dreadful losses.

In 1910 the Act of Union was passed, merging the two British colonies (the two former Boer republics) and General Botha becomes the first Prime Minister. He and General Smuts establish the first South African Party. Deneys' father returns and is elected President. His brothers finally return from their wanderings.

However, the Boers feared that Botha's policies would lead to them being swamped by the British. General Herzog secedes and forms the Nationalist Party, with the object of keeping the Dutch as a separate entity, as opposed to Botha's idea of merging all into one nation. These differences tore the newly recovering nation apart. Deneys' beliefs leant towards Smuts and Botha; his father joins the Nationalist (Hertzog) cause. Deneys often found himself branded as a renegade by his own. This story was repeating itself all over South Africa. Afrikaner leaders, according to the light at their disposal at the time, valid unto their references, were herding a nation that was just beginning to stand on firm ground, into the quicksand. The conundrum of identity ever was so: survival of the strongest individual or co-operation so that the collective may grow stronger. Imagine how difficult it was for men of high principle to take a long view, a view that can encompass what probably looked like an amoral road to a thriving society. This led to the 1914 Rebellion.

General Botha was preparing to invade the German territories on the South African borders. "The Boer population had no particular love for Germany. They have tenacious memories, and they still bore the Kaiser a grudge for his refusal to meet President Kruger in 1902, and because he had boasted of having advised Queen Victoria, (blood is thicker than water), how to overcome the two Boer republics. On the other hand, they saw no reason why they should side with Britain in a European war, and it was only natural that they began to ask themselves how we would stand if England were defeated."v[5] On 12 October 1914 Smuts reports that Colonel Maritz with officers and some of his forces had gone over to the Germans, and is henceforth a traitor to the Union. Martial law is declared. Tricky..... Deneys and Maritz were associates in Madagascar. Amongst Maritz's troops was Deneys' brother Joubert, who refused to join them and so is placed in a German internment camp. Deneys is to meet up with his brother again in 1916, after not having seen him for nearly ten years. Joubert was then a sergeant in the 3rd, but had had a long spell in hospital after the privations in the prisoner of war camp. They were to meet again later on the bank of the Ruaha in East Africa, chasing the formidable Von Lettow. By this stage Joubert was pitifully weak from malaria. Joubert had gone into the Anglo-Boer war at the age of eighteen, was captured and sent to a prison in Bermuda for three years, suffered much hardship thereafter, and when he at long last returned to South Africa, he served under Maritz and was treacherously handed to the Germans. He nevertheless volunteered for the campaign but by that stage was utterly broken. Deneys never saw him again. Joubert Reitz, also a writer, wrote mostly verse in English. *The searchlight* was a particular favourite with the prisoners of war:

*"And I think of things that have been
And happiness that's past
And only then I realise
How much my freedom meant,
When the searchlight from the gunboat
Casts its rays upon my tent,"*

The tsetse fly claimed thousands of horses. The tropical climate was as much the enemy as the Germans, and a more effective one at that. Many lives were lost in German South West and in East Africa. Deneys' trusty servant, Ruiters Makana had been with him throughout, and his sang-froid is legendary in South African Folklore. While under fire and tending to his own as well as Deneys' horse, he would insist on calmly finishing his smoke. He enlisted for France and followed Deneys to Europe with a draft of the Cape Coloured Corps, but he was lost in the mêlée of millions of soldiers and long after the War office informed Deneys that he had been killed. vi[6]

On a lighter note he recounts another chance meeting in East Africa; Piet Swart, a Boer farmhand from the Heilbron district. "Haggard with fever, he had starved and suffered and he was in rags, but he held

an original view of the campaign, for when I asked him whether he regretted having come, he said no: he had travelled in a ship, he had seen aeroplanes and Kilimanjaro and elephants, and if his parents wanted to see all this it would cost them over fifty pounds!”

Deneys prepared to go to Europe. At Cape Town he “went to tell my father of my intentions. He said he did not understand why I wished to get myself killed in France for the sake of the British. But I had thought the matter out and replied that I was going to fight not for the British, but with the British and the other allied nations. He finds many correlates between the Irish and the Afrikaner, in particular their dislike of authority and their fighting spirit. His experiences in France during the Great War culminate in his leading a British Battalion to the Rhine. Still undaunted he became a member of the South African Government. Ambivalence towards the British seems to be part and parcel of the Afrikaner’s psyche. Deneys writes “I had no animus against the German people, but I thought then, as I think now, that a victorious Germany would have been a disaster to human liberty.”vii[7] It is in the end the unbroken human spirit that wins; Deneys bids farewell to the men he had associated with: The 1st Scots Fusiliers, 2nd Royal Scots, 7th Shrops....

Towards the end of the trilogy he shares a conversation with General Botha, a man saddened with the knowledge that so many of his own race misunderstood his actions and looked upon him as an enemy. He and General Smuts were on their way to Versailles to attend the Peace Conference, and both were ‘opposed to a treaty that would leave the Germans a broken people....remembering how we had tasted the bitterness of defeat in days gone by and how the sting had been softened by magnanimous peace terms.’ Botha refers to the position in South Africa: that ‘narrow men were conducting a relentless racial campaign that was dividing the people, and that a united nation was a far way off.’ viii[8] This kindly, congenial man could not foresee what we can so clearly see in hindsight.

Sad, prophetic words in the year 1919: The humiliation that laid the foundations of World War II and APARTHEID.

i[1] Reitz, D, *Trekking On*, London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1933

ii[2] *Ibid*, p.3

iii[3] *Ibid*, p.231

iv[4] Being British citizens, living in the Cape Colony

v[5] Reitz, D, *Trekking On*, p.16

vi[6] *Ibid*, p.104

vii[7] *Ibid*, p.54

viii[8] *Ibid*, p.282