

The New Republicans: A Centennial Reappraisal of the 'Nieuwe Republiek' (1884-1888)

A coronation and a spell of duty as a royal bodyguard gave a Boer commando the justification for establishing a republic in northern Zululand a century ago. In September 1984 the town of Vryheid, established as the capital of the New Republic (the original official title was 'de Nieuwe Republiek'), celebrated its centenary. An exhibition on the place of the New Republic in the development of republicanism in South Africa was opened in the renovated and partially restored Raadsaal buildings (now the Nieuwe Republiek Museum) and provided a focal point for the festivities.

There are many superficial differences between this Afrikaans-orientated part of northern Natal and the rest of the province, which can be traced back to the establishment of the New Republic in 1884 and its subsequent incorporation into the Transvaal in 1888. Vryheid only became part of Natal after the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) by which time its essential character as a Transvaal dorp was well and truly established. Nevertheless the underlying similarities between Vryheid's history and that of the rest of Natal far outweigh the differences. The most obvious reason for these similarities is the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population of both parts of the province is Zulu, not English or Afrikaans. The establishment of British and Afrikaner settlements in South-eastern Africa formed part of the same process of European expansion during the Victorian era. The result of this process was the dismantling of the Zulu kingdom and the incorporation of the Zulus into the broader multi-cultural industrial society that is modern South Africa.

This study will focus on the origins of the founders of the New Republic and on their social relationships and economic activities after the establishment of their little state. The efforts of the New Republicans to obtain international recognition for their state and the negotiations with the British authorities in Natal will not be examined as several works dealing with these aspects of its history are available.¹ Some historians have underplayed the significance of the New Republic to a considerable extent, E.H. Brookes and C. de B Webb being perhaps the most disparaging. They dismiss it with the claim that the New Republic's chief distinction was that it gave the future Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa, General Louis Botha, his first experience of public life.² Cecil Emmett, one of the founders

of the New Republic, maintained that the New Republic enjoyed an 'uneventful existence', an impression that Blignaut and Leverton and Pringle have all fostered.³

Stanley Trapido has put forward the view that the emphasis on nationalism in the study of the Afrikaner people has meant that important social relations have been 'very largely ignored'.⁴ He asserts that the property relations in the South African Republic were derived from the various forms of rent paid by the indigenous occupiers and cultivators of the land before its 'seizure' by Afrikaner settlers. Emerging from these property relations was a state created by the 'dominant, quasi-feudal notables who . . . used their dominant position to acquire more land'.⁵ It is plausible to see the creation of the New Republic within these terms and Trapido uses the land purchasing activities of Louis Botha and Lucas Meyer, the President of the New Republic, to substantiate his argument.⁶



Louis Botha and his wife Annie Emmett in Vryheid, 1888.

Photograph: Louis Botha 50th anniversary commemorative service programme, 28 Sept. 1969)

When the history of the New Republic is examined from Trapido's perspective the impression of peace and harmony is shown to be false. Property relations must, however, be considered in their historical context because events and personalities have a considerable influence on men seeking to further their economic interest. It is also important to realise that people act for a mixture of motives and economic considerations are not always of primary importance.

The New Republic had its immediate origins in the chaos that prevailed in Zululand after the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879. Boers living in the old 'Disputed Territory' (including the Utrecht and Wakkerstroom districts of the Transvaal) seized the opportunity presented to them by Britain's indecisive handling of Zulu affairs to take decisive action in Zululand. The situation prevailing in Zululand at the time has been most capably analysed

by Jeff Guy and it is not intended to cover the same ground.⁷ An analysis of the events surrounding the coronation of Dinuzulu and the proclamation of the New Republic will reveal the essence of the relationships between the Boers and the Zulus and the future shape of relationships within the New Republic.

Early in 1884 Boers from the Wakkerstroom and Utrecht districts offered their support to the defeated Cetshwayo in return for grants of land, but their overtures were apparently rebuffed by the king.⁸ Nevertheless the chief



Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo circa 1884.

(Photograph: C.5065, Natal Archives)

Boer negotiators, Jacobus van Staden and Koenraad Meyer, continued their negotiations with other Usuthu leaders. After Cetshwayo's death in February, the two Boers spirited his designated heir, the teenage Prince Dinuzulu, away from the Nkandla forest and took him to the safety of a Boer farm on the Pivane river. This was accomplished by April 1884 and a committee of leading Boer farmers was formed to manage the forthcoming enterprise in Zululand. Volunteers were called for to come to the aid of the young Zulu prince. From the first it was clear that the prospect of land was the principal motivation for the volunteers, although whether or not there was a clear plan to take over the whole of Zululand and establish a harbour at St Lucia Bay is debatable. It is more likely that the Boers' plans developed as events snowballed.

Initially approximately 150 men joined the commando and these were mainly farmers from the border areas of Utrecht and Wakkerstroom. German settlers from the Luneberg area were as active in the movement as the Boers were. Several Boers resigned from their official posts in the Transvaal government in order to participate in the expedition. The government of the South African Republic disavowed the expedition and expressed its formal disapproval.⁹ The protestations from Pretoria must be taken with a large pinch of salt as so many of its local officials were involved with the expedition that it is hardly credible that President Kruger's government lacked any knowledge of the course of events in Zululand.¹⁰ The South African Republic was merely being careful not to offend the British.

The commando entered Zululand with Dinuzulu early in May. By this stage its numbers had more than doubled and the Natal press reported that many Natal Boers 'from as far afield as Greytown' had joined up.¹¹ Others, such as Louis Botha, joined up from the Orange Free State. Botha was typical of many of the early volunteers who came from areas beyond the Utrecht and Wakkerstroom districts. For several years he had taken his father's stock down from the highveld into Zululand in search of winter grazing and his life had been put at risk in the chaos prevailing in that country.¹² The *Natal Witness*, quoting the *Newcastle Echo*, stated that the volunteers were not all 'youngsters and adventurers with nothing to lose' and that they included 'many rich and influential men' whose main object was to acquire farms in a 'country of undoubted richness and suitability for stock'.¹³

There were other motives as well: the lands of the border farmers had been overrun by refugees fleeing from the turmoil in Zululand and, as has been shown in the case of Louis Botha, the chaos severely disrupted the seasonal movement of livestock. A desire to impose law and order in Zululand and protect their existing farms and privileges must have been an



The coronation of Dinuzulu at Zalflager, May 1884.

(Sketch from Schiel, *23 Jahre*, p. 112. Reproduction from photograph C.4758: Natal Archives)

important motivating factor for many of the border farmers.¹⁴ Blignaut maintains that a desire to spread the Gospel among the Zulus was also a minor factor in prompting the expedition.¹⁵ This is more likely to have been a useful moral justification for the expedition than an important motive.

This group of nearly 400 men was responsible for the coronation of Dinuzulu at Nyati Hill* on 21 May 1884. The *Natal Witness* eulogised the event as one of the 'most romantic that has ever found a place in actual history'.¹⁶ The young king was installed by Zulu rites before he mounted a platform built across two wagons and knelt before the leaders of the Boer commando. In the presence of the commando, several princes of the Zulu royal family, and nearly 9 000 Zulus, Andreas Laas anointed Dinuzulu's head with castor oil, presumably the only unction available to the Boers at the time. The members of the Boer committee (the 'Comité van Bestuur') then placed their hands on Dinuzulu's head and swore to uphold him as king and keep the peace in Zululand. This occasioned the *Natal Witness* to remark, 'That the Boers should intervene in the character of peace-makers and protectors of native rights will seem to many one of the oddest features of the whole affair'.¹⁷

The coronation of Dinuzulu placed the Boer commando in a pivotal position in Zulu affairs and with the exception of the British, who were unwilling to intervene, no force in Zululand was capable of withstanding them. On 23 May a document, which appeared to be signed by Dinuzulu, was issued by the Boer committee in which they received as much territory in north-western Zululand as they wanted for the establishment of an independent government.¹⁸ The extent to which Dinuzulu was under Boer influence can be gauged from the role played by Adolf Schiel, the young King's secretary and adviser. Schiel cheerfully admitted that he was never clear in his own mind whether he was selected by Dinuzulu for the post and ratified by the Boer committee or *vice versa*.¹⁹

Binns is of the opinion that at this stage the Boer committee would have been satisfied with undisputed title to all the land in the former 'Disputed Territory' as their reward for installing Dinuzulu as king.²⁰ Early press reports on the motives of the Boers were ambivalent. The *Natal Witness* conceded that the Boers were not influenced by purely 'unselfish motives', but asserted that reports about the Boers 'swallowing up the half of Zululand, or going down to St Lucia Bay are altogether unfounded'.²¹ This is, however, precisely what happened and it appears that in addition to the expansionist internal dynamics of the Boer expedition, the Usuthu played a role in furthering their own destruction.

Having secured the crown for Dinuzulu, the Boer committee was initially content to rest on its laurels, but imposing peace on Zululand was not as easy as the committee had anticipated. Zibhebhu kaMapitha, chief of the Mandlakazi and the arch-foe of the Usuthu royalists, was not prepared to accede to the demands of the Boers. He had defeated and driven King Cetshwayo into the British reserve the previous year and was certainly not going to bow down before the late King's teenage son. The Usuthu, thirsting to avenge their previous defeats, badgered the Boers into taking the field against Zibhebhu.²² During the time that it took the Boers to mount their

* On the modern farm 'Zalflager'.

campaign against the Mandlakazi, the news of their initial successes in Zululand spread around South Africa and hundreds of land-hungry volunteers began arriving at their laager.

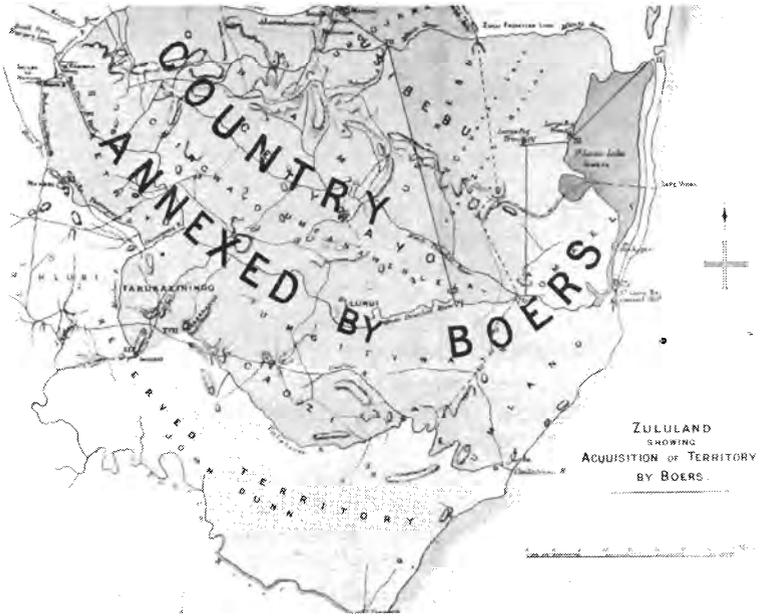
On 5 June 1884 a commando of 100-odd Boers and an Usuthu *impi* of 7 000 Zulu, 'gaunt and lank from long privation and hardship', defeated Zibhebhu at the Battle of Tshaneni.²³ Boer fire-power and the Usuthu's lust for vengeance, overcame Zibhebhu's superior tactics and the shattered Mandlakazi fled into the Ubombo mountains from whence Zibhebhu led them south to the British reserve.²⁴ When the victorious commando returned to the laager they found that more than 500 new volunteers had joined their ranks, bringing the total Boer force to more than 800 men. The newcomers, including what Binns describes as a 'rabble element', all demanded a share of the spoils, although they had done little to deserve anything.²⁵

The newcomers were not as homogeneous a group as the original 300 volunteers and need as well as greed played a part in their desire to join the expedition.

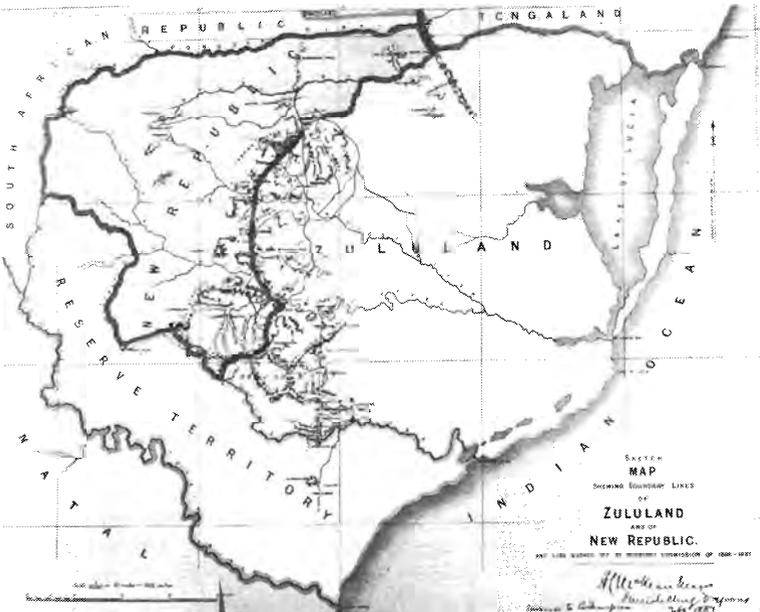
Blignaut quotes a report submitted by Henry Francis Fynn to Sir Henry Bulwer in December 1883 in which Fynn describes a visit by some 40 Boers to him in Zululand. The Boers complained that their farms in the Transvaal had been expropriated by the government or by the estate of the Scottish speculator Alexander McCorkindale. They had been 'pinched out of the Transvaal for want of room for the little stock they have' and were seeking farms in Zululand from anyone in authority to give farms to them, including the British or King Cetshwayo.²⁶ It is highly probable that a considerable proportion of the 'rabble element' included the dispossessed 'poor whites' of the Transvaal, such as Fynn's visitors of the previous year. On the other hand Sir Henry Bulwer, the Governor of Natal, thought that a *nouveau riche* element from the Transvaal was joining the expedition into Zululand. He reported to the Secretary of State for the Colonies that farmers on the Transvaal gold-fields were parting with their land for very high prices and that 'as it is certain they will seek farms elsewhere', they would join the 'other squatters in Zululand'.²⁷

The expedition clearly included many who were not traditional Boers. In addition to the Germans, many of those present at the Battle of Tshaneni had names of British and Irish origin such as Allerson, Emmett, Henderson, Liversage and White.²⁸ While this is no reliable indication as to the linguistic or political affinities of these men, it does suggest that an essentially Boer enterprise was drawing its adherents from many of the cosmopolitan components of South African society. It also tends to support Harriette Colenso's assertion that Natal provided as many 'filibusters and landgrabbers' for the expedition as did the Transvaal. Miss Colenso claimed that she always described the New Republicans as 'filibusters' so as to draw a clear distinction between them and 'the Boers'. Her Zulu informants had told her that certain of the original Transvaal Boers were 'honestly their friends throughout'.²⁹

During the weeks after Tshaneni tense and bitter negotiations took place between the Boer committee and the Usuthu leaders. The presence of the newcomers in the laager made the Boer leaders revise their demands and set their sights higher. The Usuthu initially refused to contemplate any reward for the men who had joined after Tshaneni, but they were in no position to



The New Republic's intended boundaries.
(Photograph: BPP C. 4645, Map 4, p. 75)



The division of Zululand by the British and the Boers.
(Photograph: BPP C. 5143, Map 3, p. 27)



Vryheid in its infancy.

(Engraving: *The Graphic*, 17 April 1886)

withstand the Boer demands. The Boer committee was intent on establishing their republic and considered that the original number of volunteers was insufficient for the establishment of a viable state. Accordingly they were determined to acquire land for the latecomers as well as for the original volunteers.³⁰ In the end the Usuthu capitulated and on 16 August 1884 Dinuzulu issued a proclamation granting 1 355 000 morgen of Zulu territory to the Boers for the establishment of a republic. Dinuzulu also conceded that the remaining portion of Zululand, north of the British reserve, and the Zulu people themselves would be subject to the supervision of the New Republic.³¹ On the same day acting President Lucas Meyer formally proclaimed the New Republic and defined the extent of the protectorate over the Zulus.³² This was perhaps the most humiliating moment for the Zulus since their defeat by the British in 1879.

The most important task facing the new state was the apportionment of the spoils — the surveying of farms. The survey committees completed their task before the onset of the summer rains, but allocating land posed serious problems. The Zulus were rendered landless and it was found that there were more New Republican claimants than there was land in the republic. The survey had to be done again and the boundaries of the New Republic were rapidly extended to the sea between the mouth of the Mhlatuze river and St Lucia Bay, to the intense annoyance of the British who quickly annexed the coastline.³³ A lottery was held to allocate farms and the burghers had to accept the luck of the draw, with the exception of the members of the Boer committee who 'modestly passed a resolution empowering themselves to pick a farm each in such localities as best suited their taste'.³⁴ A committee member was entitled to a 3 000 morgen farm, a volunteer who had enlisted before 10 June 1884 to a 2 000 morgen farm and a volunteer who had enlisted after that date to a 1 000 morgen farm. The veterans of Tshaneni each received a share in the farm *Hlomohlomo* in addition to their own farms. (Lucas Meyer bought out the shareholders in *Hlomohlomo* in 1888.)

The government of the New Republic also busied itself with establishing the town of Vryheid, setting up postal services, a school and a Dutch Reformed Church. Its most important problem though, was obtaining diplomatic recognition for the little republic. The agreement that was finally

reached with the British exacerbated tensions within the Boer community itself. In terms of the agreement, reached in 1886, the farms in the modern Melmoth district, known as 'Proviso B', came under British control which was very unpopular with the Boers living in the area. The reminiscences of Joseph Wiggett, a field-cornet in Ward 2 of the New Republic, reveal that this was a very divisive issue and that Lucas Meyer and the Volksraad of the New Republic received as much criticism as did the British. Wiggett also claims that the notables in the government avoided holding promised elections and that it was the unpopularity of Lucas Meyer and his clique that persuaded the President to seek the incorporation of the New Republic with the Transvaal rather than face his voters.³⁵ Emmett believed that Meyer chose incorporation with the South African Republic in the face of public apathy rather than public hostility.³⁶

While the diplomacy surrounding the status and future of the New Republic has received most of the attention from historians, this aspect of its history was not the most pressing for the vast majority of the republic's inhabitants. After the farms were surveyed the major activity of the field-cornets was the collection of hut taxes from the Zulus.³⁷ The revenue thus raised was largely spent in Natal. Leading firms of Natal merchants set up businesses in Vryheid and much of the material and skilled labour for the construction of buildings in the town came from Newcastle.³⁸

Political and commercial interests in Natal pressed for the incorporation of the New Republic into Natal and a Natal Dutch-language newspaper, *De Natal Boeren Vriend*, which circulated in the New Republic, earnestly propagated this view and highlighted internal discontent with the Meyer regime.³⁹ Despite the newspaper's best efforts, and those of Natal's politicians, the New Republic became part of the South African Republic on 20 July 1888 and the boundaries of the Transvaal stretched well down the Mfolosi river into the heart of Zululand.

The chief distinction of the New Republic lay in the part that it played in the political division of Zululand and the incorporation of the Zulus into the industrial and agricultural economy as wage labourers. The Zulus within the republic's borders lost their hereditary land rights, were reduced to the status of tenants, and compelled to pay hut taxes. On the other hand, by securing the Zulu crown for Dinuzulu, the New Republicans probably ensured the continued existence and eventual official recognition of the Zulu royal tradition.

Acknowledgements

I must thank my colleagues of the Natal Provincial Administration Museum Service for their assistance in writing this article and Mrs M. Boshoff, the curator of the Vryheid Museum, for drawing my attention to Joseph Wiggett's reminiscences. The opinions expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the NPA Museum Service.

NOTES

- ¹ The earliest academic studies on the New Republic are: J.P. Blignaut, *Die Ontstaan en Ontwikkeling van die Nieuwe Republiek 1884-1888* (MA, Unisa, 1941) and J.L.K. Heystek, *Die Nieuwe Republiek* (MA, Pretoria, 1943). Both these theses are in the Afrikaner Nationalist genre of the times. The bilingual study by B.J.T. Leverton and J.A. Pringle, *The Pioneers of Vryheid: the Nieuwe Republiek and its Staats Courant* (Pietermaritzburg, 1974), appears to have been influenced by their work. The establishment of the New Republic within the context of Zulu history is dealt with by C.T. Binns, *Dinuzulu: The Death of the House of Shaka* (London, 1968) and by J.J. Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War in Zululand, 1879-1884* (London, 1979). The New Republic is discussed within the context of imperial expansion by D.M. Schreuder, *The Scramble for South Africa, 1877-1895: The politics of partition reappraised* (Cambridge, 1980) and by M.C. van Zyl; 'Die Uitbreiding van Britse Gesag oor die Natalse Noord Grensgebiede 1879-97' (*Archives Year Book for South African History*, 1966, Pt 1).
- ² E.H. Brookes & C. de B. Webb, *A History of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1965), p. 154.
- ³ Natal Archives, Accessions, A.1. C. Emmett, *Historical Sketch of the New Republic (Vryheid District Natal)*, p. 11; Blignaut, *Ontstaan en Ontwikkeling van die Nieuwe Republiek*, p. 68; Leverton & Pringle, *The Pioneers of Vryheid*, p. 20.
- ⁴ S. Trapido, 'Reflections on land, office and wealth in the South African Republic, 1850-1900' in S. Marks and A. Atmore (eds.) *Economy and society in pre-industrial South Africa*. (London, 1980), p. 350.
- ⁵ *loc. cit.*
- ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 357.
- ⁷ Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom*, Chapters 11-13.
- ⁸ M.M. Fuze, *The Black People and whence they came* (Pietermaritzburg and Durban, 1979), p. 123. Emmett gives a different interpretation of these negotiations (Natal Archives, Accessions A.1., C. Emmett, *Historical Sketch*, p.1.).
- ⁹ Binns, *Dinuzulu*, pp. 24-25 and Blignaut, *Ontstaan en Ontwikkeling van die Nieuwe Republiek*, pp. 41-43.
- ¹⁰ Jacobus van Staden was a field-cornet and Lucas Meyer resigned from his post as landdrost of Utrecht to participate. See A. Schiel, *23 Jahre Sturm und Sonnenschein in Südafrika* (Leipzig, 1902) p. 108 & p. 123. (A typescript Afrikaans translation of extracts of this work has been used).
- ¹¹ *Natal Witness*, 12 May 1884.
- ¹² F.V. Engelenburg, *General Louis Botha* (English ed. Pretoria, 1929), pp. 27-28 and p. 32.
- ¹³ *Natal Witness*, 6 May 1884.
- ¹⁴ Schiel, *23 Jahre*, p. 107.
- ¹⁵ Blignaut, *Ontstaan en Ontwikkeling van die Nieuwe Republiek*, p. 28.
- ¹⁶ *Natal Witness*, 29 May 1884 (Editorial, p. 2)
- ¹⁷ *Natal Witness*, 29 May 1884 (The Crowning of Dinuzulu . . . Special Despatch, p. 3)
- ¹⁸ BPP C. 4645 of 1886, Enclosure 1 in No. 21, pp. 33-34. Bulwer to Stanley, 18 Aug. 1885.
- ¹⁹ Schiel, *23 Jahre*, p. 114.
- ²⁰ Binns, *Dinuzulu*, pp. 30-31.
- ²¹ *Natal Witness*, 29 May 1884.
- ²² Binns, *Dinuzulu*, p. 31.
- ²³ Lucas Meyer (the leader of the commando) drew up a list of members of his commando, but he was not certain of all the names or exact numbers of all the members (Transvaal Archives, Assessions, A.652, *R.G. Foord Papers*: 'Lijst van Vrywilligers die deel genomen heeft aan de slag tegen Usibepu'; Compiled on 3 June 1884 (sic) — True copy attested to by Lucas Meyer, Vryheid, 29 May 1888). The description of the members of the Usuthu force is from Emmett (Natal Archives, Assessions, A.1, *Historical Sketch*, p. 4).
- ²⁴ For a graphic account of the battle see the *Natal Witness*, 26 June 1884.
- ²⁵ Binns, *Dinuzulu*, p. 39.
- ²⁶ Blignaut, *op. cit.* p. 40.
- ²⁷ Natal Archives, (microfilm) CO 179/152, Natal 6661, Bulwer to Derby, 24 March 1884.
- ²⁸ Transvaal Archives, Accessions, A.652, *R.G. Foord Papers*: 'Lijst van Vrywilligers . . . '.
- ²⁹ Natal Archives, Accessions, A.204, *Colenso Papers*, Vol. 72, H.E. Colenso to Dr Jorissen, 25 March 1886.
- ³⁰ Schiel, *23 Jahre*, p. 138.
- ³¹ BPP C. 4214 of Oct. 1884, Enclosure to No. 44, (p. 69), Bulwer to Derby, 26 Aug. 1884.
- ³² Blignaut, *op. cit.* p. 37 & Appendix A, pp. 124-126 for text of proclamation.

- ¹
³³ Binns, *Dinuzulu*, p. 62.
- ³⁴ Natal Archives, Assessions, A.1, Emmett, *Historical Sketch*, p. 7.
- ³⁵ Vryheid Museum, *Herinneringe van Joseph Wiggett* (dd. 12 June 1943), pp. 5-9.
- ³⁶ Natal Archives, Assessions, A.1, Emmett, *Historical Sketch*, p. 11.
- ³⁷ Vryheid Museum, *Herinneringe van Joseph Wiggett*, pp. 5-9, *passim*.
- ³⁸ Natal Archives, Assessions, A.204, *Colenso Papers*, Vol. 72, H.E. Colenso to Dr Jorissen, 25 March 1886 and Transvaal Archives, Assessions, A.652, *Foord Papers*, Invoices of Parker, Campbell & Co. of Newcastle, 27 February 1885.
- ³⁹ *De Natal Boeren Vriend*, 4 February, 29 July, 5 August, and 14 October 1887.

GRAHAM DOMINY