

**An important contribution to the early history of the Transvaal Republic**

**O.J.O. Ferreira, *Serpa Pinto amongst Boer and Brit: His Travels through the Transvaal and Natal, 1879***

Tormentoso, Jeffrey's Bay, 2012

174 pp

ISBN 978-0-620-51814-4

R100.00

The First Transvaal War of Independence (1880–1881) and the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) amazingly continue to ignite a steady stream of publications. It seems that the interest in the two wars in South Africa over the last two decades of the nineteenth century remains high. The interesting aspect is that there has also been an apparent shift from more detailed, comprehensive accounts of the two southern African wars to publications dealing with specific or individual aspects of these wars. Such individual experiences or accounts were oftentimes made by incidental observers on the periphery of the conflict and they offer intriguing, fresh perspectives on the events themselves or the developments leading up to the conflicts.

The observations articulated by Portuguese explorer, Alexandre Alberto da Rocha de Serpa Pinto (1846–1900) during his travels in southern Africa provide a typical example of incidental insight into contemporary political events in the Transvaal Republic. Pinto undertook a journey from Angola through the Transvaal Republic in the years from 1877 to 1879 and his final destination was the coastal town of Durban. The journey coincided with a very turbulent period in the local politics of the Transvaal Republic. The internal opposition against President Burgers was at its height and the domestic situation was delicately balanced between independence and the tip-over point back to British control and annexation. Pinto acted as an independent and objective observer of these events. In the process, his observations provide a valuable window into socio-political life in the Transvaal during the late 1870s. He also came across many misconceptions and some deliberate examples of propaganda against the Boers during this period.

O.J.O Ferreira has made a valuable contribution with the publication of Pinto's account and has also provided very informative footnotes throughout the text. Ferreira decided to publish Pinto's experiences to add to the prevailing literature on the period. He realised that in the many related publications dealing with the annexation of the Transvaal Republic there was one glaring omission: Serpa Pinto's account published earlier under the title, *How I crossed Africa*, which needed to be re-introduced.

Ferreira's stated purpose with this publication was to make Pinto's account more accessible and available to South African researchers. However, he has accomplished more than merely adding another source to the existing literature.

The end product is an interesting and intriguing account for the amateur historian and the general public alike. It is also a must-read for anyone who is interested in the early history of the Transvaal. Ferreira, who was ably aided by a team of collaborators, provides a comprehensive contextual account, accompanied by a large number of informative footnotes. The additional information on Pinto's experiences provides a comprehensive and nuanced insight into this remarkable explorer. The book is further enriched by 70 figures and four informative maps which not only contextualise his travels, but bring his adventures to life.

The lineage and early career of Pinto are outlined at the beginning, together with a thorough contextual account of the Portuguese explorers in southern and central Africa. Ferreira provides a detailed list of the explorers who played a prominent role in the period from the late eighteenth century up to the Anglo-Boer War. The majority of the explorations were undertaken from the coasts of Angola and Mozambique into the southern hinterland. Pinto's ancestry, training, military service and first experience of Africa are also discussed. This account is aided by figures that are conveniently provided throughout the text and make for informative reading.

Pinto's travels through the Transvaal and Natal during 1879 are then examined. This section also includes an explanation of how the text was edited in the compilation of the book. Ferreira explains that he has provided footnotes with the necessary source references but has also included explanatory footnotes. This method makes provision for correcting errors and oversights in the original text. The same applies to the spelling of personal and place names that were given incorrectly in Pinto's text. These are retained but with the correct spellings in the footnotes. This section also includes an informative map of Pinto's route from Shoshong north of the Limpopo through the northern section of the Transvaal via Pretoria and down to Durban. The introductory section of the book is followed by Pinto's original manuscript published in 1881 by R.W. Bliss & Company (p 15). The manuscript makes for fascinating reading and provides an interesting and remarkably fresh insight on the Boers whom Pinto encountered along the trail. It is obvious that he had a sharp eye for detail and observation.

Pinto's interaction with the *Dorsland* trekkers is also outlined (p 47). This encounter is a fascinating account of their daily lives and chores, but also their ignorance of certain matters. Although the Boers were just across the Marico River at this stage, Pinto relates that they had apparently lost touch with the course of events back home in the Transvaal. The isolation of these Boers in relation to their government provides interesting insight into their daily existence. Pinto then proceeded to the Pilanesberg region where he entered a well cultivated area (p 51). His account of the Boers' dwellings, especially the frescos on the walls of their homes, is an eye opener into their socio-cultural existence. Pinto clearly deviated from the conventional view of the dour Boers. He described in detail the artistic labour of the decoration of their dwellings, which in his opinion were superior to many homes in Lisbon at the time.

Pinto's journey to Pretoria is outlined in chapter nine. His account of his experiences in Pretoria is preceded by a brief view of the ancestry of the Boer *volk*, dating the Boer's national autonomy back to the period of Bartolomeu Diaz,

the Portuguese navigator. Pinto then outlined the early history of the Boer republics, including the dispute over the possession of the diamond-fields and how the loss of the lucrative diamond fields impacted negatively on the Transvaal, resulting in President Pretorius being deposed and the appointment of Thomas Burgers as his successor.

The way Pinto constructed his narrative account of the Boers has a freshness which this reader found captivating. He was in the proverbial front seat to provide an eye-witness account of the Boers' social and cultural life. Ferreira's informative footnotes provide additional insight and descriptions of Boer society at the time. Pinto describes the dominance of religion in their lives, their biblical beliefs, their patriarchal lifestyle and their strict adherence to what they saw as the "truth". He also provides some explanation on the reasons why, in his view, the Boers have been painted in such a poor light in many early accounts of the Transvaal. Pinto is very uncomplimentary of the "bad" missionaries and the reasons for their negative perspectives on the Boers. He clearly doubted the missionaries' intentions and motivations and was of the opinion that they acted in their own interests and in the process created a major stumbling block to progress in the region.

Chapter twelve contains a vivid description of the excitement in Pretoria after the installation of Sir Owen Lanyon as acting administrator of the Transvaal and the commencement of British rule. Pinto thereafter took his leave of Pretoria and travelled via Heidelberg to Durban. The final part of his account is then devoted to his journey back to Lisbon.

In the closing section of the book Ferreira provides an overview of Pinto's career during his last years. He refers to Pinto's instant notoriety after his travels and the three-hour long public lecture he delivered on his experiences in Africa (p 134). In his summary, Ferreira provides an evaluation of the significance of Pinto's journey and deals with the accusations he faced in response to his views of the missionaries and what he perceived as their overt racism. Pinto's death and commemoration are also dealt with. His fame and notoriety has survived and Ferreira mentions that there are many streets and public squares in Portuguese towns that have been named after him.

All in all, the real value of the book is Pinto's vivid description of the Boers' character and their lifestyle, situated within the time capsule of the mid to late nineteenth century. Through his eyes the political and more especially the socio-cultural life of the Boers in the old Transvaal has been colourfully resurrected. Pinto provides us with a fresh window into the past and one which differs substantially from the one-sided, more well-known accounts written by Dutch and English visitors and explorers into southern Africa in the same period. Although Ferreira's initial intention was to make the book accessible for the researcher he has achieved far more than this modest aim. He has made the wonderful narrative of Pinto as a Portuguese explorer available to the wider public. The book is very well edited and the multiple figures and maps are conveniently placed in the text for quick reference. I came across only one insignificant oversight in Figure 42 which makes reference to 1970 instead of 1870. However, in a final analysis, the

book is highly recommended to those who have an interest in the early history of the Transvaal Republic.

*Pieter Labuschagne*  
*University of South Africa*