



# CRUQUALAND

OLIVER STRONG

# Griqualand

By Oliver Strong

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# Chapter One: Xhosa Flees

In times gone by a place existed, though absorbed by our modern world its name and geography persist today. A land nestled between the Drakensburg mountain range to the west, the Cape colony of the British to its south, northwards the Xhosa kingdom of Natal and beyond that the Zulu kingdom.

Its genesis, in the early 1800's, seeded by frequent Zulu raids and a Xhosa evacuation, a place named "Nomansland" was formed via lack of population; a desolate region where few survived its precarious placement between British desire, Xhosa indifference and Zulu ire.

Into this vacuum entered a disenfranchised tribe named the Griqua. Wanderers from as far as Cape Town, they'd trekked by foot and wagon for 2 years, eventually crossing the Drakensberg Mountains. Many died before reaching Nomansland, today their bones serve as ink upon dusty pages of an epic South African tragedy.

A distance of 700 miles as the crow flies yet on foot carrying family and possessions, a treacherous trek over desert and mountain with fortunate few reaching their intended destination.

First to arrive were a population of Griquas, later known by the moniker of "Cape Coloureds", mixed with Xhosa.

Next followed the Afrikaans, moving in around 1872 when the city of Kokstad was founded by its namesake and leader of the Griqua tribe. Originally invited into this area by the British Governor of the Cape Colony during the 1850's, the Griquas had finally found a home.

Then came the Boers, evicted from the Cape Colony due to a clampdown on slavery by the British Empire, selling up they settled in Griqualand East.

Each male Griqua residing in "Nomansland" or by its new designation "Griqualand East" was given permission to secure a 3,000 acre plot of land for himself.

Most sold their stake to white farmers relocating from the Cape Colony, squandering their money on cheap booze and expensive women.

One of these white farmers was a man you may be familiar with, or not, nevertheless you will come to know his name, Bastijn Klein Soepenbergh. A descendant of the first Europeans to settle these lands; turfed out of the Cape Colony he found refuge in Griqualand East, a land where he might own a farm and slaves to work it.

Soepenbergh was a man of average height and stocky build, as his work required. He dressed in dusty clothes, a yellowed shirt with rolled cuffs. Leather trousers and thick boots with a crumpled leather hat providing shade for wandering rat like eyes to scan hot African horizon.

Resting in a wooden rocking chair, heels planted on porch gate, the blonde haired Dutchman observed as workers hauled tobacco back to the barn. A large, lash wielding, Griqua guided slaves, keeping them in line with his authoritarian air. Upon meeting the aura of Soepenbergh slaves increased pace.

The blonde Boer, (boer being a Dutch term for burgher), grinned as he rocked back and forth examining his cash crop whilst stuffing a pipe full of the same African shag.

The pit of his wooden pipe crackled beneath burning match as Soepenbergh puffed cold chestnut into life.

Smoke signals rose into clear blue African sky informing enslaved of their master's scrutiny whilst performing his bidding, men and women who once freely populated this region, the San people, had been transformed into little more than slaves of Grikwas and white men.

Upon arriving in Griqualand East both white Boers and Grikwas required labour to till their land and harvest crops. Fortunately for them a few remained present in this land, a nomadic tribe found across the sub-continent of Africa.

Wandering wherever rain fell and wind did blow, the San people resemble Zulu in many respects, seeding their culture from east to west and north to south. Physically they are quite different, even to white eyes, for they bear a distinctive feature. The San's eyes are a crescent shape, suggesting an Asian heritage in this African blood line.

Griqualand San were unfortunate enough to find themselves caught in the perfect storm.

Zulu and Xhosa to the north, Basotho tribesmen to the west in a land known as the Basutoland, Basutoland is now the Kingdom of Lesotho, as of then it was a British protectorate and so formed part of the beast encapsulating Griqualand's western, southern and eastern border ... the Cape Colony, the land of the British, it's ruler and High Commissioner Sir Henry Barkly.

Sir Henry was an Englishman born in Highbury, Middlesex, a former member of the houses of parliament, yet after Robert Peel's overthrow he found himself lost. His opponents offered a life line, the governorship of British Guiana. After demonstrating great skill in managing Her Majesty's territory abroad he was moved on to Govern Jamaica then further across the globe, finding himself in the Cape Colony.

The northern kingdoms of Xhosa and Zulu were ruled by chiefs Kreli and Cetshwayo respectively. Both fierce rivals, Cetshwayo sent frequent raiding parties into his rival's territory creating an area of the Natal designated by both Kreli and Sir Henry as "Nomansland", today in 1875 "Griqualand East" was populated by Griquas and Boers, Boers who'd sold their real estate in the Cape Colony and using those finances they purchased land from Griquas at knockdown prices.

A landscape of beautiful green hills resting beneath blue sky populated by fluffy white clouds, this was fertile land, its soil rich and dark, providing plentiful crops each harvest.

Here Soepenber was able to farm tobacco using slaves purchased at market in Griqualand's central city, "Kokstad".

Men and women of Xhosa and Malay descent also returned from fields to barns. Each laboured beneath a large sack of tobacco leaves on his or her back. A tall well-built Griqua named Jan Le Fleur marshalled slaves, keeping them in order, concentrating their duties lest he rebuke tardiness via sturdy lash, his constant partner in discipline.

Jan was not a slave but a Griqua employee. As workers retrieved tobacco to be stored inside barns, Jan approached his employer. "Unjani?" stated Soepenber, boots up on the porch while he rocked back puffing coarse African tobacco.

The pair spoke in a mixture of language, a delicatessen of communication selected from the African Cape's cafeteria.

Similar to a thick hearty pie assembled from left overs, the British call it bubble and squeak, in this region of Africa a fitting analogy would be "Bobotie". Today bobotie it is the national dish of South Africa, a sweet and spicy dish of curried mincemeat baked with fruit and a creamy egg based topping, left overs thrown together to formed a beloved dish.

And just as the English language is a melange of ingredients, so is the language of Afrikaans, the former, much the same as the latter, using Germanic languages as its base, employing Dutch as its principal layer. Afrikaans, a language formed more than one hundred years ago when the Dutch East India Corporation, better recognised by the "VOC" symbol which stood for "Vereenigde Landsche Ge-Oktroyeerde Oostindische Compagnie", decided to set up a refreshment station on the southern cape of Africa.

In 1652 a settlement was established, providing supplies to ships traveling to and returning from the East; it prevented Dutch crews from succumbing to afflictions such as scurvy on the long voyage between Holland and the Far East.

Although the Dutch were only supposed to set up a refreshment station on the Cape, fertile soil and plentiful lands sparked greed within initial settlers. Within four years they were at war with locals as the Khoi and San tried to drive the Dutch from their most arable lands.

Initially the Dutch imported slaves from East Asia but soon took to using captured Africans as farm labourers.

"Unjani?" said Soepenber, or in today's English "what's up?"

Jan, a fellow tall as he was broad wiped his brow while adjusting leather hat similar to that worn in the Australian outback, "One of them got away, but he can't be far, I'll need a few men to run him down."

Soepenber's rocking motion ceased, all fell calm but for wisps of smoke shifting aloft before being dragged away by afternoon breeze.

The blonde haired Boer rose to his feet, "Which way'd he go?"

"West, I reckon he's making for the Mzimvubu River."



The Mzimvubu River ... when spoken in Xhosa but translated into English it means "The place of the hippopotamus". The Mzimvubu River is one of South Africa's most important rivers, starting in the Drakensberg mountain range it's 160 miles long and exits into the Indian Ocean.

The river provides farmland with fresh water and fishermen with abundant catches; if followed one might also find one's way out of Griqualand and into British territory where slavery had been abolished since the 1840's.

"Bring the shackles," stated the Boer as he stepped inside his farmhouse before drawing a rather obtuse blunderbuss from dark to light.

Jan nodded his head and swung toward the barn where he recruited three reliable farmhands, horses, whips and shackles.

Checking his weapon was loaded the Dutchman calmly strolled to the centre of his corral, better known as a kraal in this region of the world. Slaves watched on, wondering as to whether their compatriot might attain freedom, and if so, perhaps that same path would open to them? For the white man does often say, "Fortune favours the bold," whereas in these parts natives are more likely to recite a local insight, "Indlela ibuza kwabaphambili," or in English, "The way forward is to ask from those who have been before."

Perhaps a marriage of white man's courage and black man's wisdom would lead these unfortunates to freedom?

Soepenbergh saddled up, pulling his steed by its reins until it neighed into compliance. Trusted farmhands, Griqua men paid a wage to marshal his workforce, saddled up, shotguns poking out on one side of their saddles, whips and chains hanging on the other.

"Get them locked in the barn," stated Soepenbergh before digging his spurs and making for the Mzimvubu River while Jan kept an eye on contemplative labourers.

Riding through kraal gates and into fields Soepenbergh's band headed west.

The slave was on foot and much of the distance between here and the river was flat with little opportunity to hide oneself.

Hooves pounded dirt, kicking dust on horizon as an unfortunate man of Xhosa descent made for freedom, turning his head frequently if only to witness a thunder cloud of spite gain ground.

The river was many miles away and so desperate slave decided to turn north and hide within tobacco fields until evening's shroud might obscure his departure.

Soepenberg had a keen set of eyes and on this flat ground it was a simple calculation to make. The Boer's saddled band turned in an effort to cut off his flight into fields, Griqua horsemen following their master.

With pounding heart and drenched brow a young man in his twenties pushed onyx legs as hard as an adrenaline filled heart might allow.

Unfortunately for him his constitution was poor competition against Soepenberg's stallion, and as a fox might be chased down by a pack of dogs, or a wounded wildebeest mercilessly pursued by a pride of hungry lions, he was met before dissolving within green tobacco.

Surrounded by neighing and rearing horse, vile men cracked whips about his body. The Xhosa slave was forced to project his arms forward, defending his face.

"Chain that kaffir up!" snapped a blonde Boer pointing the barrel of his blunderbuss toward absconded serf.

A farmhand moved in, horsewhip aloft.

"Not yet, leave that to later," ordered Soepenberg.

A panting Xhosa, wrists in chains entered kraal to wide eyed wonder of confined colleagues.

Soepenberg dismounted and addressed one of his farmhands, "You, bring me a rack and put it here."

The fellow got down, secured his horse and with a second workman returned carrying one of many racks employed to air-cure tobacco leaves.

The racks, usually kept inside a large barn where curing takes place, was brought into the middle of the kraal. A formerly free Xhosa was bound by arms and neck. Soepenberg took a whip from one of the farmhands, ripped the man's shirt off and proceeded to lash skin from back.

The fellow screamed with each crack, farm slaves winced. Soepenberg pushed his arm in deeper, flexing a master's assertiveness, bringing to heel those who might consider an equally foolhardy future venture.

Slaves and staff stood in the kraal while sun touched horizon, illuminating the horror of a young man lashed until he passed out.

Once he'd collapsed, losing consciousness due to the horrific pain of rope cracking skin, farmhands untied his bonds permitting fellow workers escort groaning slave into one of their communal huts for a night's rest.

The rack remained in the courtyard, resting upon blood soaked earth, a dark taint smearing ground below, a reminder of what might occur should any captive rebel against their master's will.

Every morning a hideous smudge greeted his coerced compatriots on the way to and in late afternoon from the fields, for they were all owned by a single man holding certificates of registration upon which their mark was inked.

Bastijn Klein Soepenbergh was a wretched man, cruelty a common thread in the tapestry of his life. In the 21st century, society might have blamed his parents but these were harder times, when both men and women were pressed to take accountability for their actions rather than cast blame onto an ancestor in hope of absolution.

These people had no nanny state to step in when times became hard, instead they were forced to endure, for the social order in this part of the world had fallen into place by happenstance rather than ordination; and by no means was that social order static, depending on who or what and where you were did dictate your place on the totem pole of life.

In the Orange Free State the Boer or white man occupied the top rung and the African the lowest, yet close by in KwaZulu, the Zulu or African occupied the upmost notch while the white man wallowed at the bottom. In Griqualand East the coloured ran the show, each race and colour jostling for position. In fact you can say that this area of Africa is no different than any other in this respect, only in so much as the white man had introduced some extra tribes into an interesting bobotie of cultures, languages and colours.

And so, with juxtaposed ethnicities and allegiances rubbing up against one another, life was tough, grievances commonly led to violence, especially during times of drought for the most valuable resource at this time and perhaps anytime in Africa were grazing lands, water, labour and women. Added to that, this area of Africa, namely the Cape, was a strategic position for European trade, the entire premise for the white man settling this land.

Upon ownership of The Cape passing to the British many Boer's decided to leave rather than surrender slaves and so misery eventually moved through the Orange State and on to Griqualand East where men made best of a tenuous situation.

Soepenbergh had enough money from selling his farm in the Cape Colony to buy a large holding here in Griqualand, however, life wasn't to be as simple as he'd assumed.

For despite having made the trek with his wife she'd fallen ill with cholera.

Hannah, Soepenbergh's wife, was 28 years of age. Having travelled all the way from Holland to the Cape Colony with her father she met Soepenbergh, a young Boer farmer in his mid-thirties.

After making the trek from Cape Town to Griqualand East she'd contracted Cholera, a deadly disease with no known cure.

Cholera is spread due to the consumption of unsanitary drinking water and or food; facts of which people were unaware during this era, often dumping human waste into a river where those taking the trek to Griqualand stopped to drink.

Bacteria would infect the intestine and since humans were the only known host and symptoms appeared sometimes within 2 hours, there was often little warning as to its onset.

Soepenbergh took his anger out on those around him, those who occupied the lowest rung of Griqualand's societal order. For despite doctors visiting every day to tend his Hannah there was nothing they could do. It would be decades before a legitimate vaccine were created in France. Until then, men and women would succumb in their thousands to this disease.

Soepenbergh paid for treatment, Hannah was regularly administered opioids to ease her pain, each day her eyes sinking further within their skull, her skin turning a blueish purple hue as blood flow diminished. The common outcome ... once a patient has entered this stage ... is death. It gnawed his soul night and day, often released in lashes of fury gracing a man's back, Soepenbergh's ire antagonised frequently by the most token of misdemeanours.

That morning Kokstad's resident Doctor's entered the kraal in his buggy. As slaves exited the barn with tools, Doctor Albronda stepped down, his assistant tied horse and buggy to a post.

Doctor Gerhard Albronda, a man in his 60's peered down to examine a bloodied patch of earth beneath similarly stained tobacco rack. Dressed in light cloth suit with bowler hat, his thick grey brow lifted at the sight; thick mutton chop sideburns ran down his face to touch a chubby, rounded chin.

Albronda lifted his hat while a young man's groaning graced his ears, back bloodied by yesterday's lash. The slave was unable to join fellow workers and so engaged in light duties on the kraal.

"Don't you worry about him Doc, he'll get by," called Soepenber from the main residence doorway.

The doctor's sullen eyes detached from morose Xhosa mien, "If any of your workers require attention, I would be willing ..."

"Those kaffir's don't need anything except food, water and six of the best when they play up," replied Soepenber in his typically upstart attitude.

The Boer's inclination had been carefully cultivated over many years of arduous farm work until finally sprouting as a poisonous plant; much like the dumb cane plant, brought to the cape from other parts of the world it established roots here, known in this area of the world as the elephants ear or as the English say, "mother-in-law's tongue", due to its poisonous properties.

The Boers, originally from Europe had been transplanted into Africa bringing great wealth and becoming an integral part of the local genus, yet there was a poisonous aspect to their genetic makeup.

Doctor Albronda, a portly fellow of average height, lifted his medical bag from the buggy's rear as his Griqua assistant secured their single horse to a hitching post outside the house, "Your employees are only human Mr Soepenber."

Soepenber struck a match before bringing its crackle to wooden bowl and igniting a ball of African shag, "They're replaceable, Hannah isn't."

"I understand, but in all truth you should love those who sleep inside your huts during night and work your fields during the course of day as much as your own wife."

Soepenber took a puff on his pipe and with a somewhat incredulous expression he replied to the doctor's rebuttal, "You what? Why should I care about a bunch of lazy blacks?"

Stepping onto the porch the doctor stood eye to eye with blonde haired Boer, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them?"

"Bah, where'd you hear that rubbish?" spat Soepenbergh plucking pipe from lips while smoke exited mouth.

"Your absence from church has not gone unnoticed this past year."

"Hannah's ill."

"All the more reason to attend," rebuked the doctor as he moved past a stunned Soepenbergh and inside the main house.

The boorish Boer followed Doctor Albronda inside, puffing his pipe with indignation, "Puh, are you telling me Reverend Dower can perform miracle healings now?"

The Doctor halted inside a brick building with roof of wood and straw.

Turning around he hitched a pious gaze upon Soepenbergh, "Please extinguish your pipe, and if you don't mind, refrain from coarse remarks concerning the Reverend."

"This is my house you know!"

"Yes Mr Soepenbergh and a clear atmosphere is conducive should there be any restoration in Hannah's health."

Soepenbergh plucked pipe from lips and scrutinized its brown bowl, "I was told tobacco smoke disinfects the atmosphere."

"Really?" stated Doctor Albronda, "Pray tell, which physician made such a claim?"

"Nah, it was Jon."

"Jon?"

"Yeh Jon Visser ... the tobacconist."

Doctor Albronda snatched the pipe from Soepenbergh's grasp, emptying its contents on the stone floor before stomping out smouldering embers, "On my return to Kokstad I shall have a word with Mr Visser, now, please lead me to Hannah."



# Chapter Two: Hannah

Soepenbergr entered a modest bed chamber occupied by his beleaguered wife, Hannah. She slept in silence. Even in this dim light her skin reflected an odd blue, almost purple tint, indicating her advanced condition. Glow from a nearby fireplace clashed with lilac inhabiting once fair cheeks.

A maid waited night and day on the lady of the house, keeping Hannah warm and plying her with hot drinks.

Soepenbergr began to stuff rough African shag inside brown pipe, its wood sourced from local chestnut.

Doctor Albronda approached from behind and snapped under his breath, "I hope you do not intend on igniting that weed around my patient?"

"Why not?" protested Soepenbergr.

"Shhh, reduce your tone sir!"

"Aye, alright doc."

"Tobacco is not to be consumed anywhere near your wife sir, it could be detrimental to any possibility of recovery."

Soepenbergr's gaze fell softly upon his Hannah, secluded under warm sheets which were changed for fresh linen every day.

Once vibrant chestnut eyes subdued beneath heavy lids and when exposed to light they seemed dull.

Her sickness reached within his soul, Hannah, the only thing he'd cared for in this world, the only thing that cared for him now lay night and day teetering on the boundary separating life from death.

A ship sailing the world's edge during an era when sailors believed it flat, and if one travelled too far in any one direction he might slide within an abyss, swallowed by a maelstrom that is the chaotic kingdom of Hades. So his wife listed back and forth on the verge which discerns light from dark. Tilting into the gorge of hell, yet Hannah did divine Soepenbergr's form, grasping her hand, calling her name, and so she careened from chasm and into light.



Hannah's malady afflicted her husband with an anxiety he'd not experienced before now, a terrible frustration born of observing his wife's precarious journey, teetering on the threshold marking God's doorway to the kingdom from which none return.

For a moment Soepenber was transfixed, scrutinizing his wife as she groaned on the outskirts of existence.

Doctor Albronda moved past the blonde Boer to Hannah's bedside, the maid pulled up a stool and smiled as he placed his medical bag on the floor, "Would you like a drink Doctor?"

"What have you been providing Hannah?"

"Tea doctor, good and strong."

"Excellent, I'll have the same please."

"Yes doctor," replied the maid before leaving Doctor Albronda to his work. Albronda delicately grasped Hannah by her wrist while removing a pocket watch from his waist coat, "Have you been keeping house fires lit at night?"

"Aye, and it's damn uncomfortable!" replied Soepenber, inserting his pipe inside a dusty old jacket.

It was late summer in Griqualand and the climate remained somewhat warm, for harvesting tobacco was not a one and done deal but a perpetual activity, every 2-3 weeks leaves are harvested from fields and set aside for curing.

Albronda raised a bushy grey eyebrow switching his vision to the Boer for a moment, "Fires must be kept up, your wife is most vulnerable to an attack at night. Warmth chases out not just cold but damp, another of Hannah's enemies."

Soepenber said nothing as the doctor's attention returned to his patient.

"Yet avoid exposure to extremes, heat included."

"Aye doc."

Cholera was a terrible affliction of the 19th century; originating from a pandemic in 1816, in India. Via trade routes it was spread across the globe, killing millions, rich and poor, from lowest beggar to King Charles X of France and the American President James K. Polk.

Maintaining warmth and personal cleanliness were of utmost importance, in both prevention and treatment of this century's scourge, and exposure to damp to be avoided.

Warmth, dryness and regular ventilation was Doctor Albronda's mantra.

The maid returned with warm tea, Soepenbergh moved a bedside table setting it neatly beside the doctor, permitting his workbag space, besides the tea.

"Thank you," said the doctor, placing instruments of his trade atop chestnut table.

Doctor Albronda was a general practitioner ... and a rural practitioner such as he did lend himself to many aspects of a physician's work. From setting limbs to pulling teeth to treating diseases such as cholera; physicians of this age rarely specialized, except for those practicing within large metropolitan areas.

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