

COENRAAD DE BUYS IN TRANSORANGIA

by

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In 1803, after an eventful career on both sides of the eastern Cape frontier (1) and in his forty-third year, Coenraad de Buys was induced to settle in the relative security of the Lange Kloof, in the eastern part of Swellendam which later became organized into the district of George, as part of the new Batavian administration's frontier stabilization policy. While old associates, such as the Bezuidenhouts and Cornelis Faber (of Slagtersnek fame), remained on the frontier and one at least, Klaas Lochenberg, continued to eke out a precarious living as a hunter, trader, and hired gun among the Xhosa and Thembu for another twenty-six years (2), de Buys seems to have ceased to be a government concern. Whether this lack of concern is a true reflection of his activities in this period must be doubted in view of subsequent events. Eleven years, and another change of colonial ruler (the second British occupation of the Cape in 1806) after his former escapades, the government had no difficulty in coming (erroneously) to the conclusion, when he disappeared from the colony again, that he had gone back across the Fish River to the Xhosa (3) and the belief persisted in some circles when there was manifest evidence to the contrary. (4) Later de Buys told an associate, the runaway slave Arend, that he fled north after being bankrupted when Xhosa stole some merchandise he had bought on credit at Capetown. (5) One can also point to the proximity of de Buys' farm to that of Lochenberg, but though one can suspect his interest in the illegal Xhosa trade did not cease abruptly in 1803 the evidence is admittedly slight.

Whatever the true nature of this "retirement", it has a strange history to account for. At the end of 1814 Coenraad de Buys, with David de Kooker and Hans Opperman (6), two northern sheep farmers, had quit the colony and, in company with a group of Xhosa marauders, were on the Orange River at the part called then Nu Gariep, Zwart or Black River, and later the Cradock. (7) By April 1815 he was separated from de Kooker, Opperman, and the Xhosa, and until September 1818 he was active in the Griqualand area. Then, propelled by at least two Griqua commandos sponsored by the government, he fled northward and lived with a succession of Tswana chiefs for some time until, probably not later than 1822 or 1823, he abandoned his family on the Limpopo and, in the traditional phrase, "was never heard of again". In personal terms, the only reason de Buys gave for his decision to quit the colony once again was the one he gave to Arend, mentioned above, and most of the sources agree that he fled from the colony. (8) His difficulties may not have been only legal. In 1812 he not only testified against a neighbour to the "Black Circuit" (9), which was enquiring into the maltreatment of Hottentots, but he put aside his two other

"wives" and married, at Swellendam on 7 December 1812, Elizabeth, "geboren in het land v.d. Makinas ochter de Tamboekis". (10) In one of his notebooks from his 1820 journey, now in the South African Library, Capetown, Campbell wrote of a visit he paid to the widow Sondag in the Lange Kloof:

A boor there enquired if I knew a boor who was beyond the limit of the name of Boich who had married a Caffre woman whom his friends so much despised that he left the colony in disgust. (11)

On the other hand, there is some indication of a conspiracy. When Andrew Smith met Hans Opperman in 1834, when he was grazing his flocks on the Caledon river, he wrote:

This was the person who informed upon Conrad Buys, though in the first instance he was one of the persons [two besides Buys] who had agreed to leave the Colony together. (12)

A local Veldcornet in the Nieuwveld was also apparently implicated (13) and de Buys had been in the Nieuwveld for some time before he departed northward. (14) Moreover, de Buys' escort of Xhosa may have involved a break-out from Xhosaland, for, though Xhosa marauders had been on the Orange River pretty regularly since about 1797, the leader of this group, Danster, had been deported from the colony back into Xhosaland in about 1806. (15)

In more general terms, de Buys' switch of operations from the eastern to the northern frontier in 1814 is a symptom of increasing Boer frustration with eastward expansion. While the more vigorous administration of Andries Stockenstrom after 1812 was making the kind of independent raiding and trading indulged in by de Buys and his companions more difficult, over the Orange River were independent groups of Griqua and Kora pastoralists living in close proximity to communities of Tswana whose wealth in cattle had been confirmed anew by the recent travels of Burchell and Campbell. Moreover, missionary/traders such as J. M. Kok and William Edwards had demonstrated the possibilities of the growing Griqua ivory trade. Edwards was so successful between 1801 and 1809 that he was able to survive early dismissal from the service of the IMS and retire to a farm at the Cape for the rest of his days. (16) While whites such as Jan Bloem and Adrian van Zyl had found havens as raiders among the Korana at the end of the eighteenth century, more characteristic of the first decade of the nineteenth were the Kruger brothers, Jacobus and Karel, who settled on the edge of the colony in order to exploit Orange River ivory. (17) More particularly for the study of de Buys, two of his early colleagues from the eastern frontier had switched their operations to the north around the time de Buys himself retired to the Langa Kloof. Coenraad Bezuidenhout turns up in the first Journal sent by William Anderson from his mission among the Griqua. In August 1804, he, Cobus Vry, and four other men intervened between a Kora group and a local Bushman group near Ongeluksfontein on behalf of the former, and carried off considerable booty in the form of cattle, sheep, and children. (18) They were also incidentally instrumental in the first recorded smallpox epidemic in the area. Another, Gerrit Coetzee, who had been a neighbour of Coenraad's uncle, Petrus, on the Great Fish River and on his own deposition spent the years 1787-93 hunting, raiding, and trading with de Buys in Xhosaland (19), appears as a trader from the Nieuwveld at Zak River on two occasions in 1806. (20)

In this connection it is important to note that when de Buys appears among the Griqua in 1815 it is as a political agitator and not as a cattle raider. There is no record of his having raided with Danster, whose function seems to have been initially as a guide over ground with which de Buys himself was unfamiliar. (21) The most northerly point threatened by Danster in 1815 was

Hardcastle, just north of the Orange River, at a time when de Buys was at Campbell, north-east of Griquatown on a tributary of the Vaal. (22) Among the Griqua he articulated a growing resentment, especially among the young, at colonial government interference in their affairs, epitomized by the attempted requisition of twenty Griqua for the Cape Regiment in January 1814 (23), and directed at the tacit government agent, the missionary William Anderson. Legassick characterizes this "Hartenaar" rebellion (so called from the rebels' base of operations, the Harts River) as the classic revolt of frontiersmen against the extension of a system of authority, and so it was appropriate that Coenraad de Buys, the Graaff Reinet rebel of 1795 and '98, should become involved in it. (24) However, his involvement had probably as much to do with ivory as with ideals. The departure of the missionaries from Griquatown would remove not only a potential centre for government interference in his activities but a potential, if not an active, rival in the arms and ivory trade. The cornerstone of missionary power over the Griqua was their ability to supply arms and ammunition. (25) Equally, the temptations of the ivory trade as a supplement to the irregular pittance received from the Missionary Society were almost overwhelming. (26) Either way, de Buys' own influence with the Griqua was dependent upon his ability to duplicate their function as a source of arms, and it is only after his failure to dislodge them or tap their own supplies (27) that he seems to have organized his first raid, probably no earlier than August 1816, twenty months after his arrival in Griqualand. (28) A successful raid with arms supplied by Buys would cement his influence. Anderson wrote to the government in June 1816 that Buys was threatening Griquatown (29), but this was, I suspect, an over-reaction to the news that he had managed to procure arms in the colony, since there is no echo of this in the documents deposited in the LMS Archives. Of course, the delay in organizing a commando may indicate how difficult it had become since the days of Bloem and Afrikaner, which would presumably be due to missionary influence; and it is noticeable that de Buys was never a Hartenaar himself, only an ally, preferring to recruit a party of less settled Korana from the kraal of one Makoon on Harts River as the nucleus of his own personal band. (30) Nevertheless, I would suggest that de Buys' most important function in the years between 1814 and 1818 was in opening up the kind of clandestine trade contacts that were to make the Bergenaars such a force for disruption among the Sotho-Tswana after 1822. Such contacts would require the goodwill of Danster's Xhosa in the Bushman country between the colony and Griqualand, and so we find that by 1817 they were terrorizing the area with guns supplied by de Buys (31), while Griqua travellers had not complained of them since mid-1815. Also, by 1817 Griqua were entering the colony illegally to trade cattle (plundered in company with de Buys) for arms and ammunition. (32) The gentleman himself, while maintaining his base north of Griquatown on the Harts River for the whole period, in March 1816 was expecting Boers from the colony (probably de Kooker and Opperman) (33), and when Arend joined him some time before 1818 he had two English traders with him who, unfortunately, perished in an attempt to bring him powder and ammunition. (34) In July 1818, when Landdrost Stockenstrom was operating against Danster's Xhosa, he discovered fresh waggon tracks leading north and, coming to the Orange River on August 2, he was told that de Buys had been there to meet a friend only the day before and had fled north on hearing of Stockenstrom's approach. (35) Even as late as February 1819, by which time de Buys had been with the Rolong-Seleka north of the Vaal for at least four months, missionary Robert Hamilton could be mistaken for him by a Kora group on the north bank of the Cradock. (36)

Coenraad de Buys' career in Transorangia is divided smartly down the middle by the Griqua commandos of September and October 1818. Before then, although he never attempted to re-enter the colony, his activities were circumscribed by it and operated toward the northward extension of its economic and cultural hegemony. He was less a precursor of the predominantly English hunter-trader than of the more elusive Afrikaner farmer-hunter-cum-trader who

moved into Transorangia in the 1820s. But, as such, he was not overwhelmingly successful. Through the intercession of the returned Griqua elder statesman, Cornelius Kok, and his own willingness to abandon the traditional chiefs, William Anderson was able to effect a reconciliation with the Hartenaar rebels by early 1817 (37), and de Buys did his reputation no great good when he put together a disastrous alliance between the Tlhaping of Mothibi and the Rolong-Seleka of Sehunelo in order to raid a Kwena settlement which Legassick identifies as Fokeng-Motlala, at the end of March. The Fokeng easily repulsed the attack and, in disgust, Mothibi fell on Sehunelo's cattle, only to find de Buys had forewarned him. (38) Mothibi limped home to his new missionary father, James Read, and swore to give up raiding, thus ending de Buys' influence in that quarter, which had been evident since early in 1816. (39) Nevertheless, it was not until the end of 1818 that de Buys took abode with Sehunelo at Thabeng, and until then he was still able to trade on his ability to provide guns and ammunition, and so have some freedom of action. When Stockenstrom visited Griquatown in August 1818 and successfully persuaded its inhabitants to act for the government against de Buys (40), his position in Griqualand became untenable and he was cut off from his trade outlet and his source of influence, gunpowder. He was with Sehunelo from about October 1819 until March or April of the next year, quitting after an unsuccessful raid on a Kwena group (Fokeng-Motlala again?) and forfeiting most of his cattle, which Sehunelo had impounded as a guarantee against his desertion. (41) He then lived, until early in 1820, with the Hurutshe at the headwaters of the Molopo (42) before joining Makaba, the famous warrior king of the Ngwaketse, in raids on Kwena and Lete kraals on the Marico River. (43) Arend told Campbell in 1820 that Makaba was holding de Buys prisoner, and this was repeated by both Stockenstrom and Hamilton, but by 1823 (by which time he himself had visited and traded with the Ngwaketse) Arend painted a much warmer picture of Coenraad's relationship with Makaba, and indeed the 1820 report may have originated with de Buys himself, to dissuade Campbell from visiting the Ngwaketse capital, which it effectively did. (44) At any rate, by October 1820 de Buys was raiding his recent ally in company with Diutlwileng's Hurutshe again (45), and the last documentary record is a letter from Stephen Kay to Landdrost Stockenstrom dated 9 August 1821 (46) which places him among the Ngwato. Michael Buys agrees that this was their last haven before his father abandoned the family on the Limpopo, never to be seen again. (47)

The completeness with which contact between de Buys and the colony was broken off by the Griqua commandos very early made itself apparent. On the eastern frontier, denied an outlet by their outlawry in the colony, de Buys and his companions had very soon made attempts to reach the Portuguese settlement at Delagoa Bay. Faced with the same eventuality when forced to flee out of Griqualand north of the Vaal, de Buys, probably in March 1819, dispatched Arend with one of his own sons eastward in search of the Portuguese. Arend subsequently never told the same story twice, but he apparently reached a Kwena group east of the Kwena-Modimosana (i.e. in central Transvaal) who gave him a detailed description of a white settlement on the coast with a mulatto settlement next to it, and who sold him some linen. He was prevented from travelling further by a war, and henceforth believed he had all but reached Delagoa Bay. (48) However, despite Arend's glowing account, de Buys never attempted to reach the Portuguese by this route, and indeed split from Arend very soon afterwards. His reported last words to his sons on the Limpopo seem to indicate that at that time he was intending to fetch aid from the Portuguese (49), but meanwhile he had spent four years travelling in a northerly rather than an easterly direction. Since it seems unlikely that a man whose main asset in his relations with the tribes he passed through was his gun, and who had a long-standing interest in ivory trading, would not at some point wish to establish contacts with one of the Portuguese trading centres, two possibilities suggest themselves. The first is that de Buys was tracing the general direction of a trade route followed in 1808 by the ill-fated government expedition sent to search for the Portuguese, which was led by Dr Cowan and Lieutenant Donovan, and

probably leading to Sofala or Inhambane. The second possibility is that, under the influence of Arend's hyperbole, de Buys believed that the east coast was very much nearer than it really was and was complacent about his ability to reach it when he needed. The only contemporary reference to de Buys' firearms becoming useless is in Stockenström's report of 13 September 1820 (50), but he is known to have based the report on information supplied by Campbell. In his own account of his travels in 1820 Campbell paints a none too rosy account of de Buys' predicament, but implies that his three guns are still effective. (51) Moreover, van Warmelo has recorded the Birwa tradition of the coming of the Buysvolk to the Blauwberg:

We ... still remember when the Buys coloured people first came hither, Conrad (52), Michael and Doris Buys, who came from the direction of Bechuanaland and entered this country, all of them red people quite unlike the natives, and possessing guns, so that they were called 'Sons of God'.

When the guns were fired, all the people fled to the hills, and especially to the mountains of Venda, to Bolorma mountain. (53)

By 1836 the Buysvolk were certainly getting ammunition from Magwamba itinerants between the Soutpansberg and Delagoa Bay (54), but the intervening period must hold some ingenious tales.

In gauging the impact of de Buys' passage through Botswana, we are hampered by the monumental silence of all sources on the size and composition of his band. The Buys household as represented in his last opgaaf (1813) was apparently sadly lacking in the usual staple of a Boer household, Hottentot servants, since in 1811 they had almost all been rounded up for military service in the absence of contracts to say they belonged to de Buys. (55) Of Buys' sons we are certain only that Doris, Michael, and Gabriel, or Karel, travelled north with him, since they appear in the traditions recorded by van Warmelo and were encountered by the early trekkers. Michael himself recalled 3 others to the missionary Hofmeyr, Dorka, Jan and Baba. (56) With the single wife he is supposed to have taken out of the colony, the Buys "clan" begins to look very lightweight. Makoon's kraal on Harts River, where Coenraad recruited some kind of personal following, was called "a small kraal of Bushmen" when Campbell visited it in July 1813. (57) The single reference to a large following is from Cornelius Kok, explaining why his commando was unable to apprehend de Buys and Arend in September 1818. He says they came upon a far larger encampment than they had expected, which was attended by both Tswana and Bushmen. (58) That de Buys kept a portion of this Tswana support at least while he was with Makaba two years later may be indicated by a reference of Campbell's to "Chookoroor ... a Baroolong, or Mashow man, and rather connected with Buys, the runaway boer, than Makkabba". (59) In truth, the band surrounding de Buys and his family was probably never very large, for he never stopped long enough with a single group to kindle the loyalty accorded to a Bloem, an Afrikaner, or a Danster, and his raids were conducted by means of alliances. The impact of these alliances was cancelled out by the Difaqane, probably within a year of Coenraad's disappearance. Even so, he is credited with far more than his due. P. L. Breutz connects de Buys with the destruction of the Lete capital of Lotlhakane on the Tholwane River, despite the Lete tradition that the attack was made by the Hurutshe. The Buys raid, in alliance with Makaba, was probably made on Lete who had taken refuge with the Kwena on the Marico River to the north of Lotlhakane as much as four years after that town had been destroyed by the Hurutshe. (60) On the other hand, what the Buys raids lacked in intensity they compensated for in their sheer geographical diversity. Stretching as they did over the whole Tswana area, they probably contributed to the atmosphere of dislocation and apprehension on which the Difaqane and the Bergenaar raiders were to thrive.

Notes

- (1) See paper AH/71/17 given at the African History seminar, May 1972.
- (2) For Nicolaas Lochenberg particularly, see Basil Holt "Nicolaas Lochenberg", African Notes and News XI (December 1953), 3-9.
- (3) Mrs A. E. Schoeman, Coenraad de Buys (Pretoria, 1938), 87.
- (4) Ibid., 89, 93.
- (5) A. Smith, Diary (1940), I, 355.
- (6) Schoeman, 88; Smith, I, 95.
- (7) Schoeman, 87. Veldcornet H. J. van der Walt to Landt, Fischer of Tulbagh, 24 November 1814; CO to Landt, Fischer, 13 January 1815, 88. Fischer to CO January 1815. H. G. V. Liebrandt, Slagtersnek (Capetown, 1902), 783. Landt, Cuyler of Vitenhage to Fischer, 16 January 1815. IWS 5/4/C: W. Anderson, Nieuwveld, 24 January 1815.
- (8) See IWS Journals 2/53. Anderson to Helm, 15 April 1815; IWS 5/4/C: Anderson, Nieuwveld, 24 January 1815. R. Moffat, Missionary Labours (1842), 26. J. Campbell, Travels (1822) II, 356.
- (9) Schoeman, 81-2.
- (10) C. C. de Villiers (revised C. Pama), Genealogies of Old South African Families (Capetown, 1966), I, 116; Smith, Diary I, 357; Campbell, Travels (1815), 375; Schoeman, 82-3, particularly de Buys' last voyage, 1813.
- (11) Cf. Schoeman, 83.
- (12) Smith, I, 95.
- (13) Schoeman, 88 & 92. Stockenström to CO, 29 July 1818.
- (14) Liebrandt, 783. Cuyler to Fischer, 16 January 1815.
- (15) Martin Legassick, unpublished PhD thesis (1969), "The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Missionaries, 1780-1840", 49.
- (16) For outraged accounts of the career of William Edwards, see S. Kay Travels and Researches in Caffraria (1833), 40-1; R. Moffat, Missionary Labours (1842), 215-6.
- (17) For early white penetration to the Orange River, see Legassick, Ch. III, passim.
- (18) IWS Journals 1/2-3. Anderson, August 1804.
- (19) J. S. Harrais, Waynier and the First Boer Republic (Capetown, 1944), 31; Schoeman, 14, 22.
- (20) IWS Journals 1/12. Vos, Sak R., 6 January & 9 August 1806.
- (21) Schoeman, 88. Stockenström to CO, 29 July 1818.
- (22) IWS Journals 2/53. Anderson to Helm, Griquatown, entries 5 and 15 April, 20 May, 23 June, and July 1815.
- (23) See IWS 5/4/A. Missionary Conference, Graaff Reinet, to Sec. Bird, 25 April 1814.
- (24) Legassick, 204.
- (25) See, e.g., IWS Journals 2/53. Anderson to Helm, Griquatown, 31 October and 1 November 1815.
- (26) See, e.g., IWS 4/1/C. Anderson, Capetown, 31 August 1809.

- (27) In October 1815 de Buys wrote a most insinuating letter to Anderson, begging for powder, which Anderson firmly rebuffed. LMS Journals 2/53, 26 October 1815.
- (28) LMS Journals 2/55. Hamilton, Journey to Lattakoo, 22 August 1816.
- (29) Schoeman, 90. Anderson to Stockenstrom, 5 June 1816.
- (30) LMS Journals 2/55: Hamilton, Journey to Lattakoo, 13 January 1816; LMS 6/3/A: Anderson, Griquatown, 18 January 1816; 6/3/B: Read, Bethelsdorp, 31 March 1816; 6/3/C: W. T. Corner, Griquatown, 24 April 1816; Read, Griquatown, 12 November 1816. Schoeman, 90. Stockenstrom to CO, 22 March 1816.
- (31) Schoeman, 92. Veldct. J. van der Werthingen to Landt., 23 June 1817.
- (32) Records of the Cape Colony XI, 254. Gov. Somerset to Col. Sec. Bathurst, 23 January 1817.
- (33) Schoeman, 90. Stockenstrom to CO, 22 March 1816.
- (34) Smith, I, 357-8.
- (35) Schoeman, 93-4. Stockenstrom to CO, 27 August 1818. The document in the Cape Archives would appear to be fuller than the version printed in Records of the Cape Colony XII, 34-5, and connects with an earlier letter, 29 July 1818, mentioned in Schoeman, 89, in which Stockenstrom discovered the association of de Buys with de Kooker and the complicity of Veldct. van der Werthingen.
- (36) LMS Journals 3/68. Hamilton, Lattakoo, 13 February 1819.
- (37) See particularly LMS 6/4/B: Anderson, Griquatown, 17 September 1816; 7/2/B, 27 June 1817.
- (38) Legassick, 245-6. LMS 3/64: Read, Lattakoo, 30 March 1817; LMS 7/2/A: Read, Matslakoo R., 20 May 1817; 8/1/B N, Lattakoo, 12 July 1820; 7/1/D: Hamilton, Lattakoo, 15 May 1817. Smith, I, 337.
- (39) See particularly LMS 6/4/C: Read, Griquatown, 12 November 1816; 6/4/D: I. Evans, Griquatown, 14 November 1816.
- (40) Conflicting accounts make the exact number of Griqua commandos, and de Buys' position when they encountered him, uncertain, but LMS Journals 3/68, Hamilton, New Lattakoo, entries 31 August, 6 September, 15 October, 13 November, indicate that there were at least two. The August and September entries correspond with Schoeman, 94, Anderson to Stockenstrom, 2 September 1818, and imply that this, Cornelis Kok's, commando at least expected to find de Buys on the Orange River. For other accounts, see LMS Journals 3/68, Hamilton, April 1819 (Arend); Smith, I, 356 (Arend); Schoeman, 95 (Michiel Buys).
- (41) Smith, I, 356 (Arend); Campbell, II, 357 (Arend); LMS Journals 3/68, Hamilton, April 1819 (Arend); Schoeman: 95 (Michiel Buys); 97, Stockenstrom's Report, 13 September 1820.
- (42) Smith, I, 356-7 (Arend); Schoeman, 95 (Michiel Buys).
- (43) Smith, I, 357 (Arend), II, 75-6, 206; Campbell, I, 312; Moffat, 386; LMS Journals 3/75, Hamilton, 24 February 1820.
- (44) Campbell, II, 141-2; Schoeman, 97; Stockenstrom's Report, 13 September 1820; LMS Journals 3/75, Hamilton, 19 June & 1 July 1820; G. Thompson, Travels and Adventures (1827), I, 106.
- (45) LMS Journals 3/75. Hamilton, 21 September & 9 October 1820.
- (46) Schoeman, 98-9.
- (47) Ibid., 99.

- (48) Arend's various accounts are: LMS 3/68, Hamilton, 30 May 1819; Schoeman, 96, Anderson to Stockenstrom, 5 July 1819; Campbell, II, 358-9; Thompson, I, 104; Smith, I, 356. Legassick analyses Arend's claims in "Notes on the Sotho-Tswana long-distance trade", unpublished paper (1970?), 2-3.
- (49) Quoted in Schoeman, 99.
- (50) Ibid., 97-8.
- (51) Campbell, II, 142.
- (52) Coenraad de Buys did have a son named Coenraad, but there is no record of his having been present on the northward trek. Traditionally, the sires of the present Buys family in Zoutpansberg were Gabriel, Doris, and Michael, and Conrad here is probably a reference to Gabriel, the eldest.
- (53) N. J. van Warmelo (ed), The Copper Mines of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg, S. Af. Dept. of Native Affairs Ethnographical Publication 8 (1940), 105.
- (54) J. C. Chase, Natal (1843), 73. Account of Bronkhorst, with Potgieter's Trek.
- (55) Schoeman, 79-80.
- (56) S. Hofmeyr, Twintig jaren in Zoutpansberg (1890), 7. 9.
- (57) LMS 5/2/D. Campbell, Ulaarwater, 26 July 1813.
- (58) Schoeman, 94. Anderson to Stockenstrom, 2 September 1818.
- (59) Campbell, II, 141.
- (60) Compare Breutz, The Tribes of Marico District, S. Af. Dept. of Native Affairs Ethnographical Publication 30 (1953), 6-23, with Campbell, Travels (1822), I, 312; Smith: Report of the Expedition, 8 June 1835; Diary (1940), II, 60, 75-6, 200, 219.