Stuart Cloete's construction of Voortrekker religion in *Turning Wheels*

F. Hale
University of Stellenbosch

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Abstract

Stuart Cloete's novel of 1937, Turning Wheels, was unquestionably the most controversial of many fictional reconstructions of the Great Trek, a book which fell foul of Afrikaner nationalism and whose further importation into the Union of South Africa was long consequently banned. Religious motifs reflecting the popularised Calvinism of the Voortrekkers figure prominently in the text. Cloete depicted these migrants as people of faith whose removal to a new Canaan entailed both internal strife and repeated clashes with indigenous African tribes. Among the thematic elements are belief in divine purpose and providence, postfigurative uses of the Pentateuchal characters Moses and Abraham, the image of the clergy, the failure of religious belief to maintain ethical norms among the Voortrekkers and the contribution of an ethnocentric distortion of Christianity to disharmonious relations with black Africans.

The centenary of the Great Trek was a seminal event in the cultural history of the Union of South Africa which not only provided immeasurable impetus to the already waxing Afrikaner nationalism movement but also prompted a wave of historical novels in both Afrikaans and English by such local and foreign authors as Pieter Erasmus van der Merwe, Anna de Villiers, Eugénie de Kalb, Stuart Cloete, and Francis Brett Young. To a considerable extent, the Afrikaans writers in question depicted the Voortrekkers in terms quite compatible with the heroic image of these pioneers which such nationalists as Gustav Preller had constructed beginning very early in the twentieth century, while their English-speaking colleagues in the fraternity of *littérateurs* were less beholden to such stereotyping. The consequences of the latters' dissent from the prevailing portrayal varied, but few works in the history of South African fiction have unleashed more immediate or heated controversy than Cloete's novel of 1937, *Turning Wheels*, in which some of the Voortrekkers are seen in a highly critical light. Ironically, however, the stormy reception this book received in the Union of South Africa did not foreshadow extensive scholarly attention. Cloete's name, to be sure, is regularly mentioned in surveys of the nation's literature in English and in certain related reference books such as Malvern van Wyk Smith's *Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature* and the *Dictionary of South African Biography*, but scholars have rarely taken his literary production sufficiently seriously to devote an appreciable amount of time to investigating it. The strife which accompanied the arrival of *Turning Wheels* in South Africa is thus virtually unknown to many scholars, though it was arguably a highly revelatory event in the cultural history of South Africa, not least because it showed Afrikaner nationalism at its most defensive.

Cloete's generally unflattering collective portrait of the Voortrekkers who undertook the Great Trek from the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope to the Transvaal and other regions of southern Africa during the latter half of the 1830s caused a national ethnic furore within weeks of its publication in London. Afrikaners in various quarters vilified

the book as a derogatory work resting on ignorance, while the Anglophone press rallied to Cloete's defence and protested with almost equal vehemence against the banning of *Turning Wheels*. At the centre of the controversy lay the sexual immorality of which several fictitious Voortrekkers were guilty as they trudged through the pages of this novel. The taboos of miscegenation and extramarital sexual relations, though hardly new themes in the history of either Afrikanerdom or South African English literature, were repeatedly broken by these fictional characters and garnered the attention of many critics who deeply resented Cloete's seeming implication that such behaviour represented Afrikaner mores in general.

Almost completely ignored in both the contemporary dispute which precipitated the banning of *Turning Wheels* in December 1937 and the surprisingly scant scholarly attention which this novel has received has been Cloete's reconstruction of the religious beliefs and practices which lay at the heart of the Voortrekkers' communal personality. This is particularly ironic in light of the pivotal rôle which Christianity and the attendant myth that the emigrating Boers were the elect of God, who supposedly held His protective hand over them against overwhelming odds at the Battle of Blood River in 1838, played in the formation of Afrikaner self-identity. Cloete's dismantling of this pillar of Voortrekker life was nearly as devastating as his assault on the myth of exemplary moral standards. Yet this vital dimension of *Turning Wheels* remains a *lacuna* in South African cultural and religious history. In the present article I shall take steps towards redressing this neglect and making a modest contribution to the internationally recognised religion and literature field by analysing in Cloete's debut novel the central themes of belief in divine purpose and providence, postfigurative uses of the Pentateuchal characters Moses and Abraham, the image of the clergy, and the failure of religious belief to maintain ethical norms among the Voortrekkers.

Cloete himself stood with one foot in the legacy of the Great Trek and the other outside it. More significantly, his mind had been shaped far outside the mainstream of Afrikaner tradition. He was born in 1897 in Paris, where his father, a native of Cape Town who had married a Scotswoman, was engaged in international business ventures. One root of his paternal family tree lay in the soil of early history of the Cape; in fact, the first Cloete there arrived with Jan van Riebeeck in 1652 (Romer 1964:63). As a youngster, Stuart Cloete received most of his formal education in England and served as an officer in the British forces during the First World War before setting foot on South African soil with his English bride for the first time in the early 1920s and spending the balance of that decade as well as the first half of the 1930s in the Transvaal, chiefly managing a farm near Hammanskraal north of Pretoria. By Cloete's own testimony, during this period he learnt Afrikaans, read extensively about the history of the Voortrekkers and gained familiarity with the oral tradition of the Great Trek. By the mid-1930s, however, his marriage was in shambles and he had resettled briefly in London, where he wrote *Turning Wheels* as his first published book. Cloete would subsequently pass the Second World War in the United States of America and in 1947 return permanently to South Africa. After writing many more popular historical

novels and a lesser number of defences of South African racial policies during the Nationalist Party era, he died at Hermanus near Cape Town in 1976.[1]

Cloete's religious views deviated markedly from those of the normative Christian tradition within Afrikanerdom. He stated emphatically in his autobiography, "I believe in no dogma, no revelation", and this veteran of the bloodiest war in European history up to that point had seen little evidence that Christian social ethics had made a noteworthy difference in human behaviour, at least on the stage of international politics. "When 'over there' we were killing with the blessing of the Church. The Germans, equally blessed, were doing the same. Two Christian nations at each other's throats". Christian personal ethics also left Cloete cold. He believed that "the whole concept of a God so concerned with bedrooms and sex seemed to me slightly blasphemous, even rather ridiculous, assuming the existence of this God" and was not prepared to make such an assumption in the first place (Cloete 1972:260). Against the backdrop of this *non credo*, Cloete's keen interest in the religious life of the Voortrekkers may be all the more significant.

Before turning to a consideration of Cloete's portrayal of Afrikaner religious life in *Turning Wheels*, we must briefly refer to a highly controversial if utterly superficial treatment of the same topic which had aroused a storm of protest in South Africa five years earlier. In his autobiographical novel about the First World War, *War, Wine and Women*, which was published pseudonymously in London in 1931 and widely reviewed in South Africa later that year, the British-born lecturer in French at the University of Pretoria, Henry Parkyn Lamont, created a disreputable British character who had spent several years in South Africa and who held derogatory opinions of Afrikaners in general and the Dutch Reformed clergy in particular. The former are supposedly "ruled by the predikants and they are the bloody limit. Narrow-minded, intolerant, selfish, harsh and unspiritual, they rule the dorps with a rod of iron". Continuing his logorrhea of invective against these ostensible wolves in sheep's clothing, the speaker insists that they possess "no mercy, no charity, [and] no human kindness in their miserable hearts" and declares that he would rather subject himself "to the tender mercies of a gang of brigands than to the Dutch Reformed Church predikants" (Saint-Mandé 1931:295, 547). When he reviewed *War, Wine and Women* in *The Times Literary Supplement* in June 1931, an anonymous critic apparently thought these scattered, vilifying utterances too insignificant to merit attention.[2] This was also the case when Anglophone South African journalists publicised Lamont's novel.[3] Nearly a year later, however, a storm of protest erupted in Afrikaans circles. A conspiracy of forces which included *inter alia*

[1] No book-length biography of Cloete exists. For incisive biographical statements, see "Cloete Stuart", *Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series.* Vol 3 (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1981), pp 127–128, and Cloete, Edward Fairley Stuart", *Dictionary of South African Biography*, Vol 5 (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1987), pp 134135.

[2] "A War Book", *The Times Literary Supplement*, 25 June 1931, p 508.

[3] For an example of a typically enthusiastic review in the South African English press, see "War, Wine and Women. Striking Book by a Pretorian", *Pretoria News*, 16 November 1931, p 5.

the South African Women's Federation, the administrator of the Transvaal, the rector of the University of Pretoria, and many of Lamont's Afrikaans-speaking colleagues as well as students at that institution forced him out of his post. In the meantime, four young Afrikaners, all of them descendants of Voortrekkers and one of them the son of a Dutch Reformed clergyman, had kidnapped the young lecturer, tarred and feathered him, and released him on Church Square in the centre of Pretoria on a Monday morning (Hale 1999:55–70). This incident gained extensive press coverage in Pretoria and Johannesburg and, to a lesser degree, elsewhere in South Africa, while Cloete was farming nearby. He could hardly have been unaware of it.

In addition to what Cloete learnt about the Great Trek through oral tradition in the Transvaal, it is evident that he was a benefactor of the research which Professor Eric Anderson Walker, a prominent historian at the University of Cape Town, had conducted and incorporated in his study of *The Great Trek*, which had been published in London in 1934, *i e* approximately two years before this neophyte novelist undertook to write a fictional account of the same event (Walker 1934). Nowhere is Cloete's reliance on this work more evident than in his description of the "doppers", a conservative group within the Dutch Reformed Church. Walker described them as believers who

> held closely to the old ways in costume as well as in theology. They wore their jackets shorter than the generality; new-fangled braces were not for them, and they took no stock of belts. They fastened their trousers with draw-strings or with buckle and strap at the back, and, since these devices inevitably let their trousers sag, displayed a greater or less expanse of shirt. Like the light-rumped springbok, emblem of South Africa, the Dopper of the thirties could usually be recognised from behind afar off, and for the same reason (Walker 1934:32).

Cloete's doppers, by remarkable similarity,

> clung to the old ways, not only in theology, but also in their dress; and, scorning belts or braces, held up their trousers, which were of the klap brook kind with a flap in front, by means of draw-strings, and as they wore their jackets shorter than other men and their trousers always sagged, they invariably showed an expanse of white shirt between the bottom of the one and the top of the other, so that from behind they looked like the white-rumped springbok of the plains (Cloete 1937:332–333).

Much less evident are Cloete's sources for what he believed were the dominant religious beliefs and attitudes of the Voortrekkers in general and which come to the fore as decisive characteristics in *Turning Wheels*. Walker commented on this aspect of Voortrekker life in surprisingly brief terms, and in this respect Cloete goes well beyond what one can read about the matter in *The Great Trek*.

Turning Wheels straddles the border between realistic historical fiction and European-African romance in the tradition of H Rider Haggard and countless other writers. On one level, Cloete relates the saga of a group of Voortrekkers who under the primary leadership of an unequivocally egocentric forty-six-year-old widower, Hendrik van der Berg, leave the Cape in 1836 and, after numerous tribulations *en route* take several of their lives and decimate their initially vast numbers of horses, cattle, and sheep, reach the northern Transvaal in January 1838. Some of these migrants battle not merely the forces of nature and black Africans who resist their incursions, but also engage in both physical and psychological skirmishes with each other. Van der Berg possesses an almost insatiable sexual appetite which in turn possesses him. The focal point of his desires is the comely blonde daughter, Sannie, thirty years his junior, of his comrade Johannes van Reenen. Enmeshing this already thorny situation, she has attracted the attention of her grizzly admirer's eighteen-year-old son, Herman, who impregnates her. After discovering their tryst, which has apparently thwarted his fantasy of using Sannie as the maternal component of a dynasty he hopes to engender, the enraged Hendrik implausibly rids himself of his filial rival in a staged hunting accident. He subsequently marries Sannie in a union for which she has no enthusiasm and he exploits exclusively for his own ends. After reaching their destination, the Voortrekkers enjoy some success in creating a prosperous agricultural community before locusts, animal diseases, and other hardships deflate their bubble. Their settlement is eventually largely obliterated by an army of black warriors while most of its Caucasian inhabitants are attending a service of worship in another Voortrekker community. In the meantime, Hendrik van der Berg has set out in pursuit of his young wife, who has absconded with another man, but inadvertently shot himself in the foot and died of the wound. The overall picture which Cloete paints of this segment of the Great Trek is thus one of intrigue, poisoned motives for migrating, social disarray in the community, racial strife and oppression on all sides, and group defeat.

A homespun if surprisingly sagacious witness to this downward spiral of events is Anna de Jong, an immense, middle-aged woman whose philandering husband dies in a raid during the trek. She holds no brief for the clergy and evinces little interest in organised religious life, although from time to time she quotes from the Old Testament and less frequently from the New to illustrate points she is making and to highlight the failure of certain fellow Voortrekkers to adhere to the spiritual and moral standards which they supposedly embody. De Jong prays frequently at her late husband's gravesite before the train of wagons continues to wend its ways north, but this is an aberration in her generally unreligious behaviour. Combining cynicism, fatalism, shrewdness, scepticism about the overall undertaking, and amazing insight into human nature, this seemingly simple, pragmatically inclined farmer comments on the unfolding of the plot in ways not unlike those of the chorus in a Greek tragedy.

In the meantime, in a sub-plot a superbly talented hunter of both big game and Africans and implacable young hater of the latter, Zwart Piete du Plessis, and his equally hate-filled, manly sister, Sara, accompanied by a Coloured servant named De

Kok, ride off in search of indigenes to raid. Their adventures ultimately lead them to Delagoa Bay in Portuguese East Africa, bring them into contact with Arabic slave-traders in that colony, and involve an alliance with an elderly black sorcerer whom they call Rinkals whose rhetorical and supernatural skills allow him to manipulate other Africans whom they meet. Often alternating with the chapters in which Cloete develops the principal plot involving Van der Berg and his neighbours, these romanticised segments provide relief from its generally oppressive message but arguably diminish the serious character and already compromised plausibility of *Turning Wheels*. The religious life of the Du Plessis siblings and De Kok is virtually nil, but especially Piete du Plessis, as one who is not captive to the axiology and spirituality of the community from which he has emerged, offers a contrast to it. The encounter between his small party and Arabic slave-traders in Portuguese East Africa also gives Cloete an opportunity to underscore parallels between intruding Islamic and Christian attitudes towards and mistreatment of indigenous Africans.

Intertwined themes reflecting the frequently alleged preoccupation of Afrikaners with the Old Testament and concomitant slighting of the New and collective self-identification as a "New Israel" carry much of Cloete's plot as Hendrik van der Berg leads his people north. A foundational motif is the conviction that they, as a Christian people, are not acting autonomously but in accordance with God's guidance, a conviction which, as we shall see shortly, Van der Berg takes to a grotesquely self-serving extreme. No institutional church accompanies their wagons on the Great Trek, but clearly Cloete's migrants are conscious of their spiritual heritage and refer to it frequently. He establishes this in the first few of his thirty chapters. The Voortrekkers read their Bibles as they travel (8). Anna de Jong tolerates her husband's sexual relationship with a Coloured maid on the grounds that there are biblical precedents for the use of concubines (16). She has accepted the premature death of her children on the grounds that the Lord gives and takes away (19). After black Africans attack the caravan, Hendrik van der Berg believes that God has protected his segment of the *volk* from an even greater calamity (28). He refuses to intervene when his horse fights one owned by a colleague: "It is the will of God that these things should be, and who are we to stand between God and His will?" (34)

Intimately related to this deeply ingrained conviction, the Voortrekkers, especially Van der Berg, believe they are the elect of God and maintain a vision of settling in a land which God has apportioned to them. Indeed, this too is established on the first page as the wagons of the Van der Berg party roll "north to the promised land" (8). Van der Berg has little doubt that he is an agent of God's intervention in history, an attitude which some of his mates reinforce. "Ja, my friend, you will lead them to Canaan", Paul Pieters assures him early on, "to the land flowing with milk and honey in the north, you will lead them to the promised land" (66). After a raid on their caravan, a party of fifty men set out to "smite the Philistines" (97) and pray to "the Lord of Hosts" before attacking an African village. Some of these amateur militarists participate in this foray without anxiety, having "faith enough to leave all in the hands of that God who had

chosen, so markedly, the Boer people for his own" (101). A Zulu *impi* reaches and destroys the targeted community immediately before these Voortrekkers can assault it, but the latter thank God for protecting them from that tribal army and attribute the violent elimination of that enemy to divine protection (103–104). After a year and a half of travel, the group finally views its new home, "the promised land", below them as they stand atop a cliff (122). Accordingly, they name it "Canaan" (132). It seemingly possesses all the resources to satisfy their needs as agricultural settlers. When one of the pioneers discovers a salt pan nearby, "Hendrik saw the finger of God in this discovery, but Hendrik saw the finger of God in everything", Cloete explains (135).

In harmony with their prevalent belief in divine purpose, Van der Berg and his fellows perceive natural events that befall them *en route* as signs of God's sovereignty, favour or wrath. When a flood of previously inexperienced magnitude strikes in the wake of van der Berg's murder of his son and the laying of plans to massacre the inhabitants of a black African village and steal its livestock, the Voortrekkers do not interpret it as punishment for their sins but rather as an "exposition of the awful power of their God, the God of Israel, who was a jealous God" (90–91). Two other instances play on Cloete's employment of the Exodus motif in *Turning Wheels*. When the Voortrekkers suffer from a shortage of water, van der Berg curses them "for their lack of faith", dismounts, rolls away one of two great stones between which flows a trickle of water, and exposes a spring (119). Not long thereafter, van der Berg notices a fire on the mountains in the north-west. He interprets this, too, as a sign reminiscent of one in the Pentateuch: "A pillar of smoke by day, a pillar of fire by night." Once more God had directed him, given him guidance" (119). The allusions to Mosaic events in Exodus 13 and 17 are unmistakable.

When problems eventually beset Canaan, these are also interpreted as divine signs. The Voortrekkers are not merely "capable of phenomenal efforts" but also of "phenomenal acquiescence in adversity, taking the manifold blows that were rained upon them as acts of God, sent by him to chasten them", Cloete avers. They perceive repeated tribulation as a series of "trials sent to test their faith, for this God of theirs was no benevolent deity, but a terrible and a jealous God" (235).

This self-styled New Israel in the wilderness is rich in self-serving ethnocentric faith but morally impoverished. Conspicuously absent from many of the characters is any evidence of benevolence or other probity. To be sure, they co-operate, often quite harmoniously, when in either defensive or offensive armed conflict with black Africans and while hunting big game, and at times they are capable of conversing civilly. Otherwise, they are a back-biting, conniving lot who murder, covet, and commit adultery in one chapter after another. Their worldly leader, Hendrik van der Berg, outstrips them all.

This is especially ironic because this Voortrekker perceives himself in explicitly Abrahamic terms as not only the progenitor of a planned clan but also as the patriarch of a nation in the wilderness. This postfigurative selfunderstanding emerges early on when van der Berg, motivated by his lust for Sannie van Reenen and his discovery of her intimacy with his son, takes his cue from Genesis 22 and slays Herman, whose

sin of fornication was a realisation of Hendrik's own desires. His selective reading of the Bible (exclusively the Old Testament) also provides his rationalisation for his filial homicide:

> He had prayed, God had given him guidance, and he had punished the seducer. Like Abraham, God had demanded the sacrifice of his Isaac. Unlike Abraham, God had not saved his son. Why had he not? Why had God, the omnipotent, not caused his gun to misfire? or the boy to return a different way? Why? Because God had meant him to be punished for his sin, and he, Hendrik van der Berg, had been God's chosen instrument of vengeance (95).

After the settlement of Canaan, Van der Berg continues to identify with Abraham and nurture his patriarchal ambitions. He envisages a large number of progeny and wonders whether he was, "like Abraham, to be the father of a multitude?" (172) Again, however, his sex drive provides the impetus to this identification with that patriarch. Discontent with his intimacy with his unresponsive wife Sannie, Van der Berg desires — and eventually has — sexual intercourse with Louisa, Anna de Jong's Coloured maid, but uses her solely as an instrument for the satisfaction of his craving. Adding another egotistical dimension to his religious rationalising, he credits God for his great lust: "And of what good is one woman to a man like me?" he asks himself. "I am the instrument of God, and it is He who has made me as I am" (173). After committing adultery with Louisa, Van der Berg justifies that action on the grounds that God desires human multiplication. Furthermore, he perceives a parallel between Genesis 17:6 and his own promiscuous sex life. "Had not God said to Abraham, 'And I will make thee exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of thee and kings shall come out of thee?'" (195)

The general absence of clergymen on the Great Trek and of organised churches in the neophyte settlements during the late 1830s and early 1940s is, if only by neglect, accurately reflected in *Turning Wheels*. Cloete may have known from reading one of the histories of the Great Trek other than those by Walker that most uprooted Afrikaners did not have general access to weekly services of worship in what became the South African Republic and the Orange Free State until many years after leaving the Cape. This point is made in, for example, Maynard Nathan's detailed *The Voortrekkers of South Africa*, but that volume, which long reigned as one of the standard works about the Great Trek, was not published until 1937, and it is doubtful that Cloete had access to it. In any case, he characterises the announcement of formal worship and the administration of the sacraments as sufficient cause for Afrikaners to travel *en masse* from Canaan to another settlement, Lemansdorp, in hundreds of ox wagons to participate. Cloete nowhere impugns the sincerity of their fundamental commitment to God and their church. They rejoice particularly at the prospect of their children being belatedly baptised. Yet the religious celebration of the Voortrekkers is inextricably

intertwined with the social function of the gathering. "With much singing, laughing and clapping of whips the men drove their spans or rode beside the high turning wheels which carried all they held dear", Cloete relates. The event calls forth both stereotypical masculine and feminine behaviour, especially on the part of youth eager to attract partners of the opposite sex: "Gaily the young men made their horses dance about the white-tented wagons that had borne them so far and staunchly, firing their guns in pleasure at any encounter ...". Meanwhile, no less cognisant of the potential social implications of the occasion, the girls "bandied jokes with them and debated among themselves on what finery they would wear, arguing with each other about the respective merits of the frocks at their disposal, getting out their small parasols, and borrowing combs of tortoiseshell and ribbons with which to dress their hair" (331–332).

Cloete has little to say about the Dutch Reformed clergy in *Turning Wheels*. Some of his references to them are refractions of popular stereotypes refracted through the embittered mind of Anna de Jong. Others are called forth from the collective memory of the Voortrekkers. When various plagues and other tribulations undermine the initial prosperity of their settlement, some of the pioneers retroactively believe they had been duly cautioned against the endeavour. They should have listened to their ministers in the Cape. "We were warned, they said. We were warned not to 'go awhoring after the high places of the north.' We were warned and still we came" (218).

Approximately three years after the Van der Berg party arrives in the northern Transvaal, De Jong receives without enthusiasm news that a minister plans to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper in Lemansdorp. Cloete underscores her atypicality in this regard as well as in her lack of religious fervour generally: "Tante Anne could well have gone longer without taking communion, but among the devout people of her race she stood apart in this, isolated by her philosophy and the strength of her character". This woman's attitude was born of obliquely defined disillusionment with the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape: "Her scepticism, the natural outcome of her experiences, had resulted in a wide tolerance that took exception at nothing but the bigoted cruelties inflicted in the name of religion and the hypocrisy of some of its ministers. Black cows that demanded tithes, who stood watching disaster, rubbing their hands softly together". To De Jong, clergymen are a suspect lot who bear little resemblance to the hardened males she had known in the Cape and among the Voortrekkers. "A minister was neither a man nor a woman, but something between the two and inferior to either. Their fingers were always soft and often moist with sweat, their faces beardless and their tongues smoother than polished brass" (325–326). The contrast of these abnormal people with the stereotype of male Voortrekkers acting in harmony with their livestock which Cloete stresses on the first page of *Turning Wheels* could hardly be more explicit. There the latter Afrikaners are described as "hard, sunburnt men, bearded like prophets, mounted on small entire horses that threw their heads and opened their wide red nostrils to the hot dusty wind" (7). In the absence of authorial comment or otherwise voiced impressions of the clergy, these disparage-

ments inescapably are allowed to dominate the limited perspective Cloete provides of the Dutch Reformed ministers.

Cloete describes the clergyman who officiates at Lemansdorp "the first of his kind to come north" (325) and insists that the service of worship there is "the first nachtmaal [i e communion] in the north" (329). The historicity of these generalisations is a matter of interpretation. It is true that no Dutch Reformed dominee accompanied the Voortrekkers during the 1830s; indeed, there are references in the standard histories of the Great Trek to clergymen in the Cape warning their flocks against leaving for parts unknown. However, the presence of the missionary Erasmus Smit is well documented. A Dutchman with limited theological education who was commissioned by the Nederlandsche Zendelingengenootschap, he disembarked at Cape Town in 1804 after surviving a shipwreck and the following year began to serve the London Missionary Society instead. Smit was employed by that organisation and, subsequently, the Stellenbosch Zendelings Genootschap until the mid-1820s and also taught at a government school for slaves. Thereafter he did missionary evangelism and other ministerial work in the Eastern Cape and at Graaff-Reinet for approximately a decade. In 1813 Smit had married Susanna Catharina Maritz, and in October 1836 they joined the trek organised by her brother, the well-known Voortrekker leader Gert Maritz, whose surname is recalled in the placename Pietermaritzburg. Another prominent Voortrekker, Piet Retief, took the initiative of appointing him pastor of the migrants. In this capacity, Smit preached regularly, both during the trek and after settling in Pietermaritzburg, officiated at the celebration of the sacraments, taught children of the Voortrekkers, and performed other ministerial duties. Many of the Voortrekkers, however, refused to acknowledge him as a legitimate minister of the Gospel because he had not been fully ordained in accordance with Dutch Reformed practice and because of his lengthy association with the London Missionary Society, which was known for its opposition to slavery. The numbers of Voortrekkers whom Smit was thus able to reach effectively and who declined his ministrations are obviously incalculable. The assertion by Professor F J du Toit Spies that he "was largely able to provide for the spiritual needs of the Voortrekkers" seems grossly overdrawn when one considers these facts and the fairly rapid dispersion of these settlers across a vast territory which would eventually require dozens of ministers to cover (Spies 1967:728–730; Nathan 1937:47–48, 139; Ransford 1972:93–98).

Nevertheless, the advent of organised communal religious life provides an opportunity for Cloete to underscore what he clearly regards as self-deception in the conviction of the Voortrekkers' that their undertaking is the unalterable will of God and that God will inevitably sustain it. When Piete du Plessis returns unexpectedly as the settlers of Canaan assemble *en masse* in Lemansdorp to participate in the celebration of the sacraments, he warns them that they are taking a grave risk by leaving their geographically vulnerable community at the mercy of Africans in the vicinity. This admonition they reject out of hand, believing, in the words of Johannes van Reenen, that "we are gathered here together that we may worship, and God will protect those things which

are ours in our absence" (336). His false sense of security, undergirded by his belief that divine providence is at work, echoes the sentiment which Hendrik van der Berg has expressed in response to one of du Plessis's earlier warnings. To this imperious farmer, it seemed self-evident that "the time of strife was over, and that they of Canaan had beaten their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks" (271). Like many other passages in *Turning Wheels*, this can be read as a possible microcosm of what Cloete had experienced of race relations in the Union of South Africa during the 1920s and 1930s, with obvious potential consequences for the future of that country, and not merely a commentary on what he had heard or read about white attitudes towards conquered peoples in the Transvaal a century earlier.

As one without appreciable knowledge of Southern African ecclesiastical history, Cloete generally evinced discretion in commenting on nuances within the broad Dutch Reformed tradition. He ventured out on thin ice, however, in describing one religious faction among the Voortrekkers. In depicting the variety of people who assembled at Lemansdorp, Cloete calls special attention to those whom he labels the "doppers", a term applied during the first half of the nineteenth century to certain members of the Dutch Reformed Church on the north-eastern frontier of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope who opposed such ecclesiastical innovations as updated hymnals and the employment of Scottish Calvinist ministers by British colonial authorities to minister to them. These believers also distinguished themselves from other members of the Dutch Reformed church by their unique dress (Spoelstra 1963:1–19). During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the doppers were members of the Gereformeerde Kerk, a denomination which developed in the South African Republic as part of an international movement for the Kuyperian reassertion of Calvinism within the Dutch Reformed tradition. Cloete's description of the early doppers, cited earlier in our consideration of his reliance on Eric Anderson Walker's *The Great Trek*, underscores both their cultural and their religious conservatism. Cloete's characterisation adds further graphic dimension to his narrative. Otherwise, however, it is an aberration which focuses on a tiny minority of the Voortrekkers who do not play a significant rôle in *Turning Wheels*.

A final noteworthy dimension of Cloete's portrayal of the Voortrekkers' religious attitudes *vis-à-vis* the complexities of ethnically pluralistic southern African society also incorporates a popular distortion of Old Testament theology. As mentioned earlier in our consideration of communal self-identification with Israel, there is a tendency on the part of Cloete's Voortrekkers to perceive indigenous Africans as "Philistines". After settling in Canaan, they subordinate the regional black population to their agricultural economy and apparently believe that through such domestication they have found a permanent solution to what had been intermittently violent race relations. Piete du Plessis, after three years amongst Africans, tries to warn them about the folly of this assumption. "Why should they like you?" he asks complacent farmers. "Are you not worse than Zulus who come like a storm, destroy, and then go perhaps never to come again? Whereas you come and take their best grazing, kill the game on which

they live, and expect them to love you. It does not make sense" (243). His is a voice crying in the wilderness, however, and the settlers who hear it immediately dismiss his censorious counsel on facile Biblical grounds. They insist that "the Kaffirs are the children of Ham, it is their duty to serve us. Does it not say so in the Holy Word?" Du Plessis counters that the Africans in question are entirely incognizant of this supposed truth and probably "think they are the people who have been dispossessed, and they are angry". He declares that he can see their anger in their eyes. To this his conversation partners reply vacuously, "Who looks in a Kaffir's eyes?" (243–244). Again, it seems entirely plausible that Cloete's stinging indictment was addressed not merely at the unwillingness of the Voortrekkers a century earlier to address realistically vital questions of racial oppression but also at the failure of many citizens of the Union of South Africa to perceive the gravity of contemporary race relations.

The Afrikaners who found *Turning Wheels* offensive and called for its banning directed their criticism of the novel chiefly at elements other than Cloete's references to the Voortrekkers' religious life and his portrayal of the Dutch Reformed clergy. Several Afrikaans journalists and individuals who wrote letters to the editors of Afrikaans newspapers consequently regarded *Turning Wheels* as a pornographic book; some used that adjective. That the depiction of such matters as interracial sexual relations aroused much more hostility than, for example, Anna de Jong's derogatory thoughts about the men of the cloth is hardly surprising. Miscegenation, after all, had long been a concern — one is tempted to say an obsession — of many Europeans in the Union of South Africa, whereas anticlericalism had not. All four provinces had laws forbidding sexual relations across racial lines by early in the twentieth century, and the Immorality Act of 1929 criminalised such behaviour on a national basis. Long before the National Party acceded to power in 1948, the restriction of interracial activity of many kinds had been one means which the white minority had employed to maintain social, political, and economic control of their ethnically pluralistic country. Cloete's depiction of certain Voortrekkers' desire for sexual relations with non-white women as a *Leitmotiv* in *Turning Wheels* thus struck at the core of this pillar of conservative society. By contrast, De Jong's thoughts about the clergy occupy only a few lines in the text and are obviously those of a bitter and atypical character, though admittedly an intriguing and central one.

One of the points to which those who called for the banning of this novel occasionally pointed, however, was Hendrik van der Berg's rationalisation of murdering his son on facile Pentateuchal grounds. Most detractors did not comment on the implausibility of the scene, but simply on what they regarded as outrageous authorial audacity in thus characterising one of their forebears as a man who would abuse the Bible so egregiously.[4] Another outraged Afrikaner indicted Cloete in religious terms for impugning the reputation of the Voortrekkers: "Hy besef nie dat hy heilige grond betree vanneeer

[4] See, for example, "Beswaddering van Voortrekkers", *Die Volksblad* (Bloemfontein), 26 November 1937, p 1.

hy van ons Vortrekkervoorouers praat nie, en hy pleeg die skreiendste heiligskennis wanneer hy sulke onkiese, onware verdigsels omtrent hulle opdis".[5]

Read well over half a century after it was published and evoked the ire of many descendants of Voortrekkers, *Turning Wheels* can hardly be accepted as a reliable witness to the religious life of the Afrikaners who migrated from the Cape during the 1830s. Cloete can reasonably be credited with highlighting the tendency of some of these pioneers to perceive themselves as a chosen people and their movement as divinely guided. He also called to the attention of readers on an international basis the propensity of some Voortrekkers to project their own egos, prejudices, sexual desires, and other subjective forces to the plane of the divine and regard them as manifestations and evidence of God's guidance and favour. Yet one can hardly regard Cloete's portrayal of Voortrekker religion as more than a caricature which falls far short of providing a comprehensive portrayal of the Christian beliefs and practices of these migrating people during a period of upheaval, danger, and duress. One finds little or nothing in *Turning Wheels* about such central Christian matters as concepts of God, prayer, repentance, forgiveness of sins, or ethical norms. The impression gained from the absence of most of the essence of the Christian faith is that in the absence of a formal church the Voortrekkers had little real religion and that which they brought along on the Great Trek was merely a projection of their own materialistic and sexual ambitions in religious dress.

Should readers who are concerned about the historicity of fictional representation be perturbed at Cloete's lop-sided caricature of the religious dimensions of Voortrekker life? Undoubtedly some have simply dismissed it as authorial licence by a neophyte novelist whose grounding in his topic was so inadequate that he — to cite but one example of patent bungling — apparently believed Shaka Zulu (who in fact had died in 1828) was still alive at the time of the Great Trek. The matter becomes particularly problematical, however, because some late twentieth-century literary theoreticians have postulated that historical fiction is a valid source, one which opens a revealing window on events of the past. Michael Green of the University of Natal, for example, has contended this with regard to Oliver Walker's novels about the polygamous British colonist in Natal, John Dunn, *Proud Zulu* and *Zulu Royal Feather* (Green 1988:29–53). It is hardly necessary to emphasise that *Turning Wheels* does not augment Green's case. On the contrary, Cloete's construction of Voortrekker religion underscores the necessity of examining a representative sample of contemporary sources about the Great Trek and, even then, taking them *cum grano salis*. As history, *Turning Wheels* is largely a failure which conceals or distorts far more than it reveals.

Yet fiction is primarily literary art and deserves to be judged accordingly as an artistic dimension of a culture. It seems at least arguable that despite its patent and provocative shortcomings with regard to character development, plausibility of plot,

[5] B. Lamberts (Worcester) to *Die Burger*, undated, *Die Burger* (Cape Town), 27 November 1937, p 6.

dialogue, and historicity, with regard to Cloete's construction of Voortrekker religion his first published novel was a noteworthy effort to call attention to the failure of the popularised Calvinism which accompanied Afrikaners on the Great Trek to provide an adequate and relevant anchoring in Christian social ethics to meet the challenges which that monumental incursion into Africa entailed. The relevance of this historical lesson to South Africa in the twentieth century is, in retrospect, too obvious to require lengthy exposition. Cloete underscored *inter alia* propensities for violent and condescending attitudes towards indigenous Africans and an utterly naïve and complacent belief that all was well in seemingly pacified Canaan. If that settlement is read as a metaphor for the European colonisation of South Africa generally, Cloete's vision of its ultimate disintegration, though exaggerated, in an atmosphere of self-serving, ethnocentric religion may not have been far off the mark.

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F. Hale
University of Stellenbosch
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Author affilition: Dr Frederick Hale, Department of English, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch.