

# Forging a fresh path

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Patricia Glyn read her great-great-grand-uncle's diary three years ago, she immediately decided on a roots odyssey. She would walk in the footsteps of her ancestors and peek into the world they once knew.

She grew up with the legacy of her two great-great-uncles, Sir Richard Glyn and his brother Robert, who, in 1863, were the fourth party of foreigners to reach Victoria Falls.

The two Victorian gentlemen kept an illustrated diary of their travels and hunting expeditions, and Glyn decided to follow their exact route from Durban to the falls on foot. Her 2 200km, 19-week trek is the subject of her book, *Footing with Sir Richard's Ghost*, released in South Africa this week.

Glyn kept strictly to her ancestors' timetable, moving and stopping when they did and tracking them precisely, even if it meant cutting through dense bush on her own. With two Isuzus serving as her 21st-century supply wagons and her dog Tapiwa - her forebears also took dogs - she reached Victoria Falls on the same date as Sir Richard had 142 years earlier.

Her trek started in Durban, where her ancestors had disembarked. Sir Richard described the port as "a paradise of venomous insects: mosquitoes in clouds, dogs black with fleas, oxen minus their ears from ticks and men driven mad by something like a harvest bug (sand fly). This is one of the great banes of Eastern Africa; for hundreds of miles not a harbour, or even a safe roadstead, is to be found."

Glyn's Durban city centre was so overrun with traffic that it was dangerous for her dog to walk beside her. The hotel where Sir Richard and Robert stayed, then known as Mr Salmon's Hotel, still exists as the Royal. And she discovered that the well-worn wagon track they used to travel to Pietermaritzburg is today's Comrades Marathon route, the R103.

Robert described Maritzburg as "a pretty town, backed to the north by high hills, laid out in Dutch style". Its market square was cluttered with wagons filled with hunting gear and even the odd tethered wild animal. Today the town's market square is still a rallying point for travellers - it is a taxi rank.

Glyn decided to cross the Drakensberg at exactly the same point as her ancestors, Bezuidenhout's Pass. She describes it as "remote and wild", as it has been closed since the 1940s.

Now on the escarpment, Sir Richard peevishly described Harrismith, the first Boer town, as "a miserable place without a tree or ornament of any kind".

Glyn meandered through the Free State, which she describes as in decline, with deserted houses and farmers struggling to carve out a living. It was in the same province that the old gentlemen tried hunting for the first time. They were disappointed. "The country is covered with skulls of wildebeest," wrote Sir Richard of the decimated game herds.

Moving north, Glyn's great-great-uncle described Potchefstroom as "well watered, with plenty of trees". This was the last town where they could stock up on supplies before they entered the wilderness. Present-day Potch has changed considerably; Glyn describes it as having "an Ode to Americana on every corner ... a much less enchanting place than it was when the old party was here".

She then traversed North West province to Zeerust before crossing into Botswana. On tarred roads thus far, Glyn, like her ancestors, now had to cut through bush. But, unlike the two men, who saw abundant grass and game, she discovered overgrazing and drought that has left sand with scarcely a bird in sight.

The people she passed stared, astonished at the mad white woman and dog walking through their country with the nearest road miles away. Her two Isuzus took the easy route, and Glyn depended on her global positioning system to get her to each rendezvous point.

She walked through terrain where water was even scarcer than it had been when her thirsty ancestors had encountered it, and Glyn was warned by her researchers to stick closely to her path or risk losing her way and dying of thirst.

After six weeks of walking, she reached Sowa Pan, cutting through the magical Makgadigadi Pans. She was now firmly in Big Five country, and while her ancestors relished the hunting here, she was nervous of lion attacks. She also had to beg water from Spanish hunters and was shocked by the "grisly treasures" - including elephant feet - at their camp.

If Botswana's immigration bureaucracy was difficult, getting into Zimbabwe at the Pandamatenga border post turned out to be a nightmare. Sir Richard and his brother strolled through before the border existed; Glyn had to wait for the necessary permits.

In the end, she hired a local Zimbabwean as a ranger to protect her from dangerous game - although her dog was not really allowed in the reserve.

Glyn was apprehensive of passing through war veterans' territory in Zim, but the vets turned out to be extremely

hospitable. They accommodated her in the formerly white-owned farm they had occupied, and wished her well on her departure.

She was now on the last leg of her journey. Walking with her ranger on roadside tracks and through the forest, she heard the falls and spotted the fog thrown up by the tumbling water "as Sir Richard and Robert had done 142 years earlier.

"We could see the tall pillars of vapour rising over the forest trees and marking the spot we had come so many thousand miles to see."

Glyn's ancestors nearly lost their lives on a few occasions during their trip, but her most perilous experience was being caught in a lightning storm on a koppie in the Drakensberg.

"I was never threatened or robbed," she says. "All I found was friendly faces. So much for darkest Africa."

Staring at the Victoria Falls, Glyn reflected on the Southern Africa of her ancestors. She witnessed the killing of big game on her trek and "wept" for all the animals her ancestors and other humans have destroyed.

The contrast between 19th-century and 21st-century attitudes is starkly highlighted by her decision never to touch meat again - while Sir Richard, staring at the falls, could only regret not having brought down an elephant on this travels.

Sir Richard returned to a Victorian England and a life of hunting, fishing and shooting. Glyn returned to Johannesburg to celebrate being an African.