South Africa

Early history

The earliest inhabitants of South Africa were the San, who were nomadic hunter-gatherers. Evidence for their longevity — they still live in the area today — comes from rock paintings which have been dated to over 60,000 years ago. They were followed by the Khoe — herders of sheep and goats, and then, gradually, by various groups — Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, Sotho and Tswana among others — who had migrated from the north with their iron tools and more settled way of life as farmers. From about AD200 these peoples set up a number of states and kingdoms, each with its own particular customs and traditions.

Dutch settlement

European settlement in South Africa began in 1652 when the Dutch East India Company landed a boatload of immigrants at the Cape of Good Hope with instructions to grow food for ships passing to India. Although the local Khoe-Africans were suspicious, and tensions developed, the success of the early experiment encouraged more Dutch to arrive over the next century and the Cape Colony was established. Settlers — Boers (farmers in Dutch) — began to push inland in search of fresh areas to farm.

Britain takes over

In 1806, Britain took over Cape Colony as part of the war against Napoleon, who was allied to the Dutch. In the 1830s, the Boers decided to trek north-east to escape from British rule. This decision was spurred on by the outlawing of enslavement, which the Boers practised, and also by the British defeat of the Zulu nation which had previously prevented such movement. They moved into Natal and came up against the expanding African kingdom of the Zulus. However, the British now annexed Natal, forcing the Boers to move further into the interior and establish their own republics of the Orange Free State and Transvaal.

The Zulu War 1879

The Zulus are an African nation who rose to prominence in southern Africa at the beginning of the 19th century, especially under the leadership of Shaka (1818–1828), who by 1825 had conquered a sizeable empire. There is some debate over the exact causes of this rise. At the time, southern Africa was in turmoil as a result of the move northwards by British and Dutch settlers in the Cape, and the increasingly predatory behaviour of slave traders who were raiding further inland from Delagoa Bay in Mozambique. The period also coincided with a series of droughts which disrupted agriculture. These factors caused considerable movement among the societies living in the area, and the Zulus appear to have taken advantage of the situation to incorporate many of them, either peacefully or by war. Zulu leaders such as Dingiswayo and Shaka undoubtedly added to the turmoil — the ‘Majani’ (crushing) — and both deliberately geared the Zulus to become a militaristic and expansionist force, but whether they initiated the process is less certain.

From the 1830s, the Zulus came into conflict with the Boers who were migrating towards them. The Boers had little respect for the African peoples they encountered, and they clashed repeatedly with the Zulus over cattle and grazing lands. Becoming exasperated at the actions of the Boers, the Zulus murdered their leader, Piet Retief, and 70 other followers. This led the Boers to seek their revenge at the battle of Blood River where superior Boer armaments proved decisive.

The next problem emerged with Britain, in particular with the policies of Sir Thomas Shepstone, the British administrator of Transvaal, and Sir Henry Bartle Frere, British High Commissioner of Cape Colony. Both were concerned that British plans for federation for South Africa, along the lines of the Canadian Federation in 1867, were being delayed by hostile nations like the Zulus.

The Zulus had been complaining about Boer incursions onto their lands from Transvaal. A British boundary commission actually found in favour of the Zulus. However, Bartle Frere decided to use this as the excuse to reduce the Zulu military threat. He said that the disputed land would only be returned if the Zulu army was disbanded. This was too harsh a term for the proudly militaristic Zulu and they ignored the ultimatum.

The British invasion in 1879 from Natal was poorly planned. The commander, Lord Chelmsford, split his force and the Zulus attacked the main column at Isandlwana with devastating results. A Zulu Impi (battle force) crossed the Umzimkulu River and attacked a British outpost at Berg’s Drift, but was unable to overcome its defence. Much was made of this comparatively unimportant action, doubtless to cover up the shame of the disaster earlier in the day at Isandlwana, and Victoria Crosses were awarded to the defenders.

The British responded by sending an even larger regular army at great expense, which finally defeated the
Zulus at their capital, Ulundi. The powerful Zulu war machine had been curbed, but only at a significant cost to the British.