

Moffat's Way seeking history

Abraham Esau was an Anglo Boer War martyr. Esau, a patriotic Coloured artisan gathered a force of 70 locals to defend the town of Calvinia against the Boer commandos.

But Esau was captured, placed in leg irons and tied between two horses which dragged Esau out of town where he was again beaten and finally shot dead by Stephanus Strydom. The killing took place only three days before Calvinia was recaptured by the British. The legend of Abraham Esau's funeral tells of a sudden thunderstorm scattering the mourners and the wind blew the Union Jack off the coffin, tearing it into strips. The coffin was then destroyed by a bolt of lightning and Esau's shattered face was exposed.

The newspapers in England and South Africa had conflicting reports, but the words of Alfred Milner, high commissioner at the time stand, "Nothing more disgraceful has happened in modern war than the treatment of the man Esau at Calvinia. What I do know is that they flogged him till he fainted, for the offence of being loyal to the British Crown, he being born and bred a British Subject. The man is well known to me by correspondence, and is known to my staff personally. Though Coloured, he was a most respectable, upstanding, and for his class in life (a village blacksmith) superior man – far more civilised than the average Boer farmer". From the book, **Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902** by **Bill Nasson**. Some of the comments above are extremely contentious, but I suppose were common for the period.



The defaced memorial to Abraham Esau.

Crosses, sad memorials to fallen soldiers far from home.



Despite being told that I am the slowest driver on the planet, we made good headway up the N7, stopping in Clanwilliam for the first time. We picked up some basics at the totally out of context, but well stocked Spar (how was permission granted to erect this structure in the middle of the town?).

The essential visit to the graveyard of the Anglican Church revealed the sad rows of metal crosses depicting the loss of poor, young men, so far from home, fighting for an unjustified cause – greed.

Stop for the day was Calvinia, home of that rather large postbox – why I'm not quite sure – and we booked into Die Blou Nartjie. I remember staying in the main building years ago during winter, and with its extremely high ceilings and no heating, it was one of the coldest nights I can recollect. Not so this time, it was comfortable and clean, a good choice.

On our rounds we spotted an intriguing place, and the following morning before breakfast investigated. The owner was away but a guy watering the plants let us in and we photographed, and photographed. It is actually the bakery in town, run by Dirk van Rensburg, who is apparently an eccentric collector of junk. But that makes it sound too trivial. The detritus of our world is imaginatively and meticulously displayed, forming an awesome display. The only way to gauge the man and his style is to check out:

<http://www.karospace.co.za/karoo-space-magazine/arts-and-crafts/41-junkyard-blues>

Having been totally inspired we sped off on the long, lonely road north. It just seems to be forever to the horizon. We had a break at

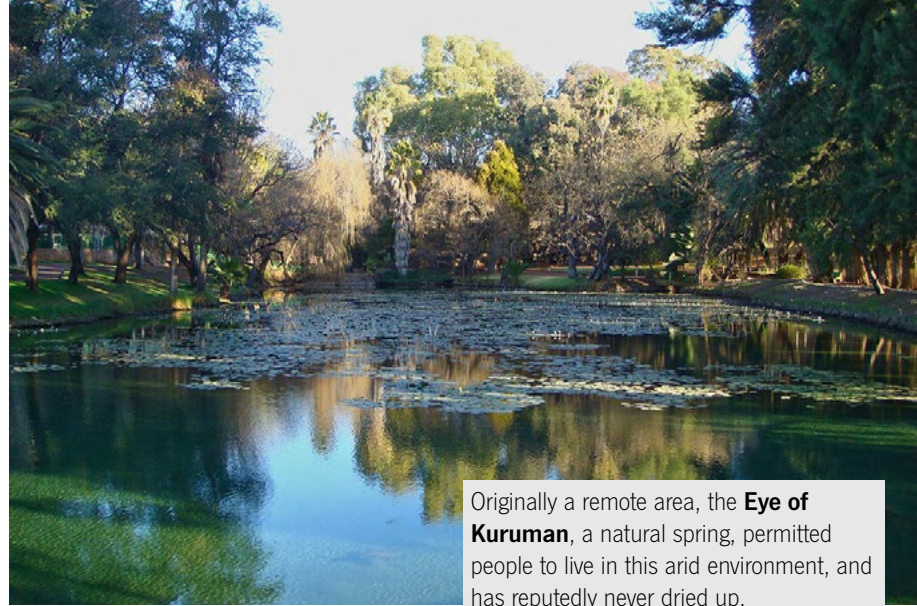
Brandvlei for milkshakes and a look around. The place gave off an air of menace. All the houses seemed to be fortified, the hotel closed, for good by appearances. We hurriedly left.

Kuruman was our destination and I must say that we were saddened by this town. Obviously a mining centre with evidence of a populace with regular income, squalor was everywhere, dirt in the streets, in the shops too. There seemed to be a mindset that when packaging was finished with, one just ejected it onto the pavement, or street, or wherever you were.

A little oasis from all this was 'The Eye', an eternal spring near the centre, gushing something like 20m litres of water daily (if the publicity was credible), which created the basis for establishing a settlement in the first place. The indigenes must have relished this reliable source of replenishment for aeons.

It must also have aided Robert Moffat when seeking a place to establish a mission to 'save' the locals. In this particular instance they were Tswana peoples, and such was the enthusiasm for gathering a new flock that a printing press was imported and delivered from Algoa Bay (Port Elizabeth), assembled and a translated version of the Bible printed in the local vernacular.

The next expedition was to a most wondrous site, the Wonderwerk Cave. Walking into the entrance of this 140m cave from the bright sunlight, one is immediately greeted by San paintings and etchings, depicting views from the past few thousand years. What then becomes apparent via the still active digs is that this site contains evidence of modern man dating back hundreds of thousands of



Originally a remote area, the **Eye of Kuruman**, a natural spring, permitted people to live in this arid environment, and has reputedly never dried up.

It is one of the factors that allowed Robert Moffat to establish a mission station nearby in 1824 to 'serve' the local Setswana community.

David Livingstone was a frequent visitor, and an almond tree under which he became engaged to Mary Moffat still survives.

Moffat learned the Setswana language and subsequently translated the Bible, and subsequently printed copies, the first such exercise in Africa.



The 'eye' in Kuruman, source of life in the area.

The press used to print the Setswana version of The Bible.



Structures making up part of the Moffat mission complex.



years. Standing there absorbing the deposits and records is most awesome. The excavations go down as much as 4m, telling tales of these past lives in this remote environment. Amongst the detail is the oldest record of controlled use of fire by modern man, along with stone tools from about two million years ago. The scope is breathtaking!

Not far away is a site called the Boesmanggat, a sinkhole 270m deep (a number of divers have died exploring its depths). A fascinating place appearing to be as little visited as the Cave, we were all sorely tempted to return to spend a night at one of the spectacular viewpoints over the feature.

Last stop was Hopetown. A sign in the town indicated 'Die Brug 7kms' so we headed off; the further turn-off was not indicated so we did a bit of cruising up and down and with the assistance of a couple of locals eventually located it. Via a very interesting detour – a brand new guest house called appropriately The Toll House, which of course it had been.

The owners actually lived in what was previously an abattoir, an unusual double-storey stone construction. The toll house alongside had been in a derelict condition, close to needing demolition when they purchased it, but it has been meticulously restored and we have noted it as a place to stay in the future. The bridge too was a magnificent construction: the leading walls were impressive dry stone constructions and this along with the metal work appeared to be recently built such was its condition.



Standing gazing in awe at the phenomenal record of human existence in the Wonderwerk Cave.



Boesmansgat is a natural sinkhole formed when underground water dissolved the dolomite rocks above, creating one of the deepest freshwater caves worldwide.

In folklore it is said that one of the last San families being chased by settlers shooting at them, ran to the edge of the **Sacred Womb of the Earth Mother**, strapping her young child tightly to her, jumped into the womb; the husband turned and shouted, "You will never kill us, we will go back to our Great Mother" (as the site is referred to) and he too jumped in to his death. The site is of spiritual significance to the San.

Detail of the bridge stone base.



The old abattoir (converted) near the iron bridge.

Crossing the Orange River, the iron bridge near Hopetown was constructed in 1882. Demolished by the Boers during the Anglo Boer War it was subsequently reconstructed.

