

*ROOTS AND ROUTES. KARRETJIE  
PEOPLE OF THE GREAT KAROO.  
THE MARGINALISATION OF A SOUTH  
AFRICAN FIRST PEOPLE*

De Jongh, Michael

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This is one of the most exciting books I have read as an oral historian in many years. It tells the story of Michael de Jongh, a professor in Anthropology at the University of South Africa, and his academic journey with the “Karretjie People” of the Great Karoo, a journey that lasted for over twenty years. The “Karretjie People” are descendants of the Bushmen who lived in the semi-desert areas of the Karoo in South Africa. Their belongings consist of a donkey cart (“karretjie”), which also serves as a shelter that can be erected at the side of the road for living and sleeping. With these “karretjies” they drive from farm to farm looking for work, specialising in sheep shearing. De Jongh’s book has saved poor and marginalised people from being forgotten, while addressing their present undignified state of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy.

Three characteristics of this book make it exceptional. The first is the quality of the engagement of De Jongh with the Karretjie People. The observations described are scientific and tested, but the story goes beyond the academic. The Karretjie

People come to life in photos, maps, statistics and figures, but also through their own stories retold with compassion by De Jongh.

This, then, is the second remarkable characteristic of the book: the thirteen “case studies” in which the stories of the Karretjie People are told. This includes the life story of Peppie and Plaatjie Januarie who have “retired” in a shack near Colesberg station, trusting that life will get better. Chrisjan Arnoster stayed on and visited several farms for shearing until his *karretjie* fell into disrepair and he had to sell his donkeys to people from Lesotho. This reduced him to the life of a squatter. Danster Witbooi carefully worked out his travels in and from the Seekoei River area to suit his vocational and personal needs. However, his life and plans were never in his own hands and he suffered long times of inactivity, unemployment and a lack of income. The case studies, then, represent the lives of people who were at the beck and call of landowners and who treated them as dispensables and paid them low wages. And yet, their resilience and self-worth are displayed throughout the stories and constitute the essence of their being.

The third characteristic that makes this book memorable is the advocacy De Jongh engages in on behalf of the *Karretjie* people, the poorest of the poor. He calls on the country’s Constitution and the tenets of human rights widely recognised in South Africa to call the attention of Government to the plight of these people, especially as far as education is concerned.

The book balances academic research, storytelling and empowerment. It engages the reader beautifully in the life stories of these poor people through photographs that are sympathetic, and in maps and charts that embody the lived experiences and worth of the people.

The book should be on the shelves of libraries worldwide, as well as on coffee tables and in the hearts and minds of people.