

Tracking the Colonial History of UBC's 'Great Trek'

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For anyone who has spent a significant amount of time at UBC, the phrase 'Great Trek' will resonate.¹ In the UBC context, this is the name referring to a historical protest march that took place on October 28, 1922.² Students paraded in large numbers from temporary university buildings located in the Fairview neighbourhood close to downtown (in the current location of Vancouver General Hospital) to what is now the UBC campus at the tip of the Point Grey peninsula.³ This land (belonging to the traditional and unceded territories of the Musqueam people) had been set aside for the new university by the provincial government in 1913, but due to the First World War construction had been stalled. The students demanded the completion of the new buildings to enable the university to vacate the cramped and inadequate 'Fairview shacks' and move into new classrooms and research spaces in Point Grey. At the end of the march, a stone cairn was dedicated which to this day is a well-known landmark on Main Mall. The first classes on the new campus were taught in 1925.

The 1922 protest march is generally regarded as a turning point in the history of UBC. Over the past century it has repeatedly, and fondly, been commemorated and celebrated. At the 50th anniversary, in 1972, a time capsule containing various contemporary artifacts was buried beneath the cairn, which was opened and replaced by a new capsule half a century later, in 2022.⁴ Many other events at UBC have been dubbed 'Great Trek' since the original one in 1922.⁵ The university awards 'Trek Excellence Scholarships' to its top undergraduate students. The UBC alumni magazine used to be called *Trek*. Every year, in October, a running race called 'Great Trek' is held on campus, which according to its website "pays homage to the Great Trek of 1922" and which it describes as "a jaunt through

¹ Many thanks to Doug for having first brought the issue to my attention that inspired this contribution to his *festschrift*, and for writing his letter to Martha Piper after the graduation ceremony we both attended nine years ago. I owe a debt of gratitude to him for being such a wonderful and inspiring colleague for all these years. This contribution sits at the intersection of Doug's deep personal commitment to Africa and anti-colonialism, and my own interests in semantics and history. I want to thank Geertje Boschma, Molly Babel, and Anne-Michelle Tessier for encouragement and helpful suggestions.

² Chris Hives, 'The Great Trek: The student pilgrimage that came to define a university', *The University of British Columbia Magazine*, 1925. <https://magazine.alumni.ubc.ca/2015/fall-2015/features/the-great-trek>. A video about the event with very interesting historical footage and photographs can be viewed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDwMEqhuab0>

³ At at party years ago, Doug and I had a disagreement about the meaning of the word *peninsula*. He thought Point Grey is not a peninsula, and I argued that it is. So my apologies, Doug, for using the term here. I don't know what else to call it.

⁴ 'UBC unearths time capsule to mark 100 years since 'great trek' student protest', CBC News website, Oct. 22, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/ubc-great-trek-time-capsule-1972-2022-1.6633761>

⁵ Vassilena Sharlandjjeva, 'Timeline of Great Treks', *The Ubyyssey*, Oct. 29, 2015. <https://ubyssey.ca/news/timeline-of-treks/>

Musqueam territory.”⁶ (Musqueam is one of the organization’s partners.) UBC Properties Trust, the university’s real estate development company, proudly commemorates the 1922 ‘Great Trek’ on its website with historical photos, without mentioning the original stewards of the land, on which it has for decades been constructing classrooms, research facilities, student and rental housing, as well as condos that are being sold in order to build up the university’s endowment fund.⁷

During the graduation congregation in May 2016, then UBC president Martha Piper extensively referenced the 1922 ‘Great Trek’, in celebration of the university’s centennial year, in an event which had started with the customary land acknowledgement. The next day, Doug Pulleyblank, who had been sitting on the stage behind Dr. Piper, together with other faculty members from linguistics and other departments, wrote her a pointed letter. He reminded her about the origin of the name ‘Great Trek’. It comes from Afrikaans, the language of Dutch-speaking European settlers in what is now South Africa. *Die Groot Trek* was the migration of *boere* (lit. ‘farmers’) from the Cape Colony to the interior starting around 1836 in order to withdraw from the reach of the British government which had taken over the Cape from the Dutch during the Napoleonic wars at the turn of the century.⁸ This migration involved the violent displacement and colonization of the Indigenous people living in those areas, and eventually led to the foundation of independent boer republics. (After the Boer War of 1899-1902 these were merged with the Cape Colony to form the Union of South Africa.)

In his letter, Doug expressed his indignation about the president’s remarks in such eloquent words that I’ll just quote him here:

“When the movement of UBC to Point Grey became referred to as the ‘Great Trek’ in the 20th century, the parallels to South Africa would certainly have been obvious. British colonialism was at its height. In referring to these events now, we need to reflect on their meaning and what the historical situation for UBC-V is. Though reference was made yesterday to UBC being located on unceded Musqueam territory, how can this be thought of as indicating a constructive relation with the Musqueam when at the same ceremony the occupation of the territory by the provincial government and UBC is being celebrated — the ‘Great Trek’ — without comment or reflection? We cannot acknowledge in a meaningful way the colonial history that gave birth to UBC while celebrating exactly the process that gave rise to the occupation of the unceded territory referred to in the standard acknowledgment.”

And of course he was completely right. I don’t know if Martha Piper ever responded.

⁶ <https://runvan.org/event/greatrek-5km-10km-halfmarathon/>. See also: Tori Fitzpatrick, ‘The Great Trek: Commemorating UBC’s past and striding towards a future of reconciliation’, *The Ubysey*, Oct. 28, 2022. <https://ubyssey.ca/sports/the-great-trek-commemorating-ubcs-past-and-striding-towards-a-future-of-reconciliation/>

⁷ <https://ubcproperties.com/history/>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Trek

Doug's observations tell us something important about language. The meaning of words and sentences is much more than their informational content, denotation, or truth value. Words also have a social meaning, which is inextricably entwined with their history. In a recent book, David Beaver and Jason Stanley have proposed a new concept to replace the traditional conduit metaphor which treats words as containers for their content, a way of thinking which they argue has been central to most work in the philosophy of language and formal semantics going back at least to Frege, if not longer. Beaver and Stanley propose the metaphor of *resonance* for these social aspects of meaning, and develop this as a key technical term within a whole new framework for semantics.⁹ I think this new metaphor is useful for describing what is at stake here. What is the social meaning of the term 'Great Trek'? How did it resonate at the time the march at UBC took place, and how does it resonate today? How should it resonate for us?

Interestingly, it turns out that 'Great Trek' was not what the 1922 march was called originally. As historian Chris Hives points out, at first it was referred to as "[t]he Pilgrimage (the term Great Trek would be coined some 25 years later)."¹⁰ Some snooping in the online archives of *The Ubysey*, UBC's storied student weekly newspaper, reveals that this is largely correct, though not completely.¹¹ The first references to the march, even before it took place, were indeed to a 'pilgrimage' and even 'the Great Pilgrimage' (with capitals!).¹² The religious overtones are made explicit in the following quotation:¹³

"From here the pilgrimage will be resumed on foot through the wilderness of Point Grey and on towards the Promised Land. When the site is reached, everyone will combine in the performance of certain rites and functions before the moving picture camera."

(Note the word 'wilderness' referring to land that had been lived in and used by people for centuries, suggesting that it was empty and for the taking.) We find several further uses of the term 'pilgrimage' to refer to the 1922 march later in the 1920s. The first use of the term 'great trek' (at first without capitals) dates from 1928, so not quite "25 years later". There are four additional occurrences of the phrase in *The Ubysey* in the 1930s, followed by many more in later decades. Starting in the 1930s, the term 'trek' by itself is increasingly being used for the 1922 march as well. Not all the uses of 'trek' or 'great trek' are to the UBC event, however. In fact, the very first occurrence of 'great trek' that I found in *The Ubysey* was in 1924, referring to a parade preceding an upcoming Thanksgiving rugby game.¹⁴

As far as I have been able to tell, none of the occurrences of 'Great Trek' in *The Ubysey* made explicit reference to South Africa or to *die Groot Trek* of the 1830s. Nor did I come

⁹ David Beaver and Jason Stanley, *The Politics of Language*. Princeton University Press, 2023.

¹⁰ Hives, 'Great Trek', <https://magazine.alumni.ubc.ca/2015/fall-2015/features/the-great-trek>

¹¹ UBC Library Open Collections, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/ubcpublications/ubysseynews>

¹² *Ubysey*, Oct. 5, 1922

¹³ *Ubysey*, Oct. 12, 1922

¹⁴ *Ubysey*, Nov. 6, 1924. (Apparently this rugby game was to take place on *American* Thanksgiving!)

across any mention of the Musqueam, or any acknowledgement of the fact that the university was occupying somebody else's land without their consent. So why was a word with religious resonances ('pilgrimage') in the course of the following decade gradually replaced by a term with colonialist ones ('Great Trek')?

To find an answer to this question, it's useful to delve a bit more deeply into the history of the terms 'trek' and 'great trek'. *Trekken* is a common Dutch verb that can be translated as 'to pull', 'draw', or 'tow', but that can also mean 'to travel', 'march' or 'migrate'. (The link between these different senses may be in the pulling of a cart by horses or oxen.) In South Africa, already long before *die Groot Trek*, nomadic white farmers were known as *trekboere*.¹⁵ The earliest usage of *trek* in English cited by the online Oxford English Dictionary is from 1849, in a South African context.¹⁶

We can turn to Google Ngram as a useful tool for tracking the historical rise and fall of words and phrases.¹⁷ Figure 1 shows the spread of *trek* in English since 1800, and Figure 2 does the same for *great trek*.

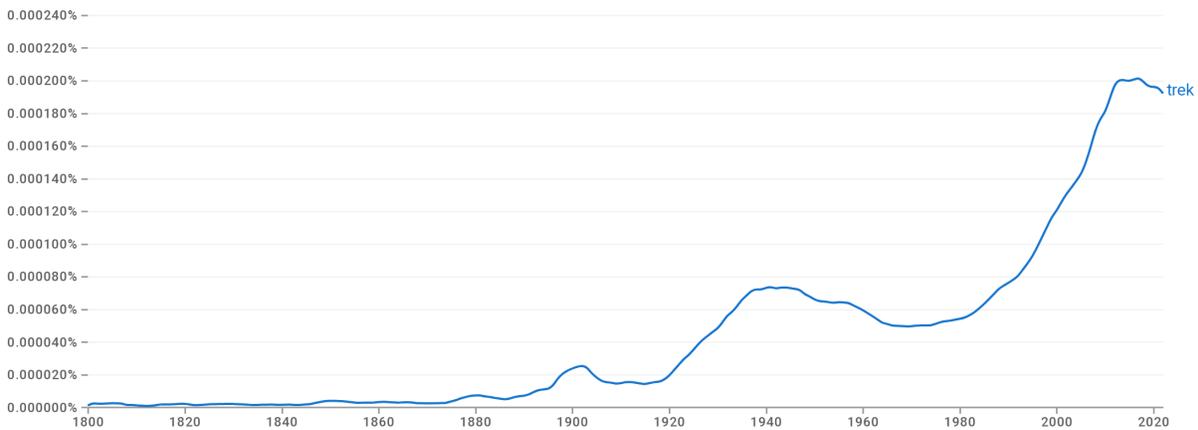


Figure 1: Frequency of *trek* in English since 1800 (source: Google Ngram)

¹⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trekboers>

¹⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'trek (n.),' December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5640288104>

¹⁷ <https://books.google.com/ngrams/>. Note that the frequency of *trek* is two orders of magnitude greater than that of *great trek*, which is why they are here presented in separate graphs. The Google Ngram viewer has subcorpora for British and American English, but since these show by and large the same pattern, I do not separate out those results here. Unfortunately for the concerns of this paper, it has no separate subcorpus for Canadian or South African English.

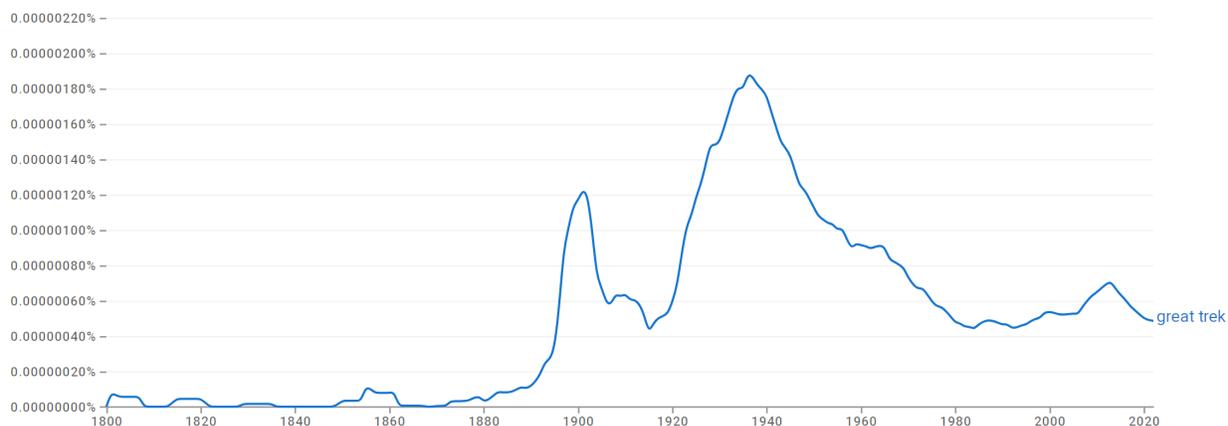


Figure 2: Frequency of *great trek* in English since 1800 (source: Google Ngram)

Looking first at Figure 2, we see two pronounced peaks in the occurrence of *great trek*, both of which are readily understandable in terms of historical events. The first peak is around 1900, that is, the time of the Boer War. It is very likely that this war greatly increased familiarity with South African history in Great Britain and North America, since soldiers from all over the British Empire, including Canada, fought on the British side in this conflict. Newspapers in BC from this period contain several references to the South African ‘Great Trek’.¹⁸ The second, larger, peak occurs in the 1930s. Again, there is an obvious explanation: this was around the time of the centennial commemoration of the ‘Great Trek’ of the 1830s. This was celebrated on a grand scale in South Africa, with re-enactments and the construction of the massive *Voortrekker* monument in Pretoria.¹⁹ These celebrations played an important role in the rise of Afrikaner nationalism (probably not unconnected to the rise of fascism in Europe around the same time), which in the 1940s led to the introduction of *apartheid* (racial segregation) as an official government policy. The centennial commemorations of the ‘Great Trek’ must have drawn attention in other parts of the Empire as well. The newsreel archive of British Paté has a clip from 1939 showing ‘Great Trek’ re-enactments complete with ox-drawn covered wagons, which can be viewed online today.²⁰ It seems quite likely that this or similar newsreels were shown in Canadian movie theatres as well. The historical reference of the term ‘Great Trek’ must have been widely understood all over the British Empire, and elsewhere in the English-speaking world. Looking briefly at the rise in frequency of the word *trek* in Figure 1, we can discern the same two peaks around 1900 and the late 1930s, and then a long and steady climb after 1980, which may have something to do with the popularity of the TV show *Star Trek*.

We may conjecture that the increase in frequency of the phrase *great trek* in the 1930s in the context of the centennial celebrations of the South African ‘Great Trek’ was an important factor in the retro-active adoption of that term for the 1922 student march at

¹⁸ UBC Library Open Collections, BC Historical Newspapers, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/bcnewspapers>

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Trek#Centenary_celebrations

²⁰ <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/68622/>

UBC. As Doug pointed out in his letter, Vancouver was a deeply colonial place at the time, as an outpost of the British Empire that was highly (self-)conscious of its status as a crucial rail and shipping link connecting the British possessions in North America and Asia, and simultaneously something of a colonial backwater. Neighbourhoods on the westside of the city (where Doug and I both live) are still full of place names reminiscent of those colonial connections: many streets are named after battles of the British army and navy (*Balaclava*, *Trafalgar*, *Blenheim*, etc.) or the royal family (*King Edward Avenue*), and there are several schools named after generals (*Lord Kitchener*, *General Gordon*), an aristocratic governor general (*Lord Byng*), or the monarchy (*Prince of Wales*). These neighbourhoods were largely constructed in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, and are immediately adjacent to the UBC Point Grey campus. In such an atmosphere steeped in British Empire traditions and connections, the colonial resonances of the phrase 'Great Trek' will have been felt by most people, without needing to be stated explicitly. Whether many white people were also cognizant (consciously or unconsciously) of the parallels in terms of the occupation of land and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, is an open question.

And what about the resonances today? As Doug rightly urged in his letter to the UBC president, we should not ritually recite land acknowledgements without reflecting on the broader context and deeper historical connections. That includes the history and social meaning of names for events and places. These connections tie disparate places across the world together, for better or worse, in a global history that entangles Canada, South Africa, Great Britain, and also my home country of the Netherlands, which had a colonial empire of its own. *Apartheid* and *trek* are two of the most widespread Afrikaans, and Dutch, loanwords in the English language. The Cape Colony was originally founded in the 1600s by the VOC (the Dutch East India Company) as a waystation on the sea route to what was then the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), where both of my parents were born in the same year that the first classes were taught on the new UBC Point Grey campus, exactly a century ago this year. Colonial resonances reverberate through the centuries and across the globe, and are deeply personal at the same time.

History matters. Words matter.