

# *In Search of Mr Botha*

## *An investigation into a Natal place-name*

Standing as it does on the edge of the Valley of a Thousand Hills and some 150 metres above the surrounding countryside, Botha's Hill has always been a major obstacle to travellers along the old main road between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. Several of those who made the journey in the second half of the nineteenth century have left accounts of its steepness and its roughness and the slippery nature of the track in the wet season. In spite of this early notoriety, however, there exists no satisfactory explanation of the origin of the name. Who was Mr Botha and how did he come to leave his name on the map of Natal?

Local tradition asserts with some vehemence that the name comes from Philip Rudolph Botha, grandfather of Louis Botha, who (it is said) settled in the vicinity of the hill at some time after Blood River. This is the explanation given, too, in the *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*,<sup>1</sup> in Robertson's *Travellers' Guide*<sup>2</sup> and by T.V. Bulpin.<sup>3</sup> The journalist Don Stayt<sup>4</sup> goes further and asserts that P.R. Botha was granted a farm at Botha's Hill in 1839. One lone dissenter, however, is Janie Malherbe,<sup>5</sup> who says that the spot is named after Captain Cornelis Botha, the first harbour master of Durban. Captain Botha, she avers, opened an accommodation house at Botha's Hill after the British occupation.

The existence of an accommodation house at Botha's Hill is, in fact, another strong local tradition, although a separate one from the name of the original Botha. Often the inn is referred to simply as "the old halfway house" and two sites are commonly identified for it, both of them on the north-western or Pietermaritzburg side of the hill. One of these sites is said to have had, until fairly recently, a clearly demarcated boundary of gum trees and some ruined buildings on it. The other is near the railway siding at Alverstone. But local tradition is silent as to the name of either proprietor.

When approached to quote a source for his claim, T.V. Bulpin cited a folder in the Killie Campbell library. Janie Malherbe's reply to the same request was a simple assertion that what she had written was true. Don Stayt referred to all the secondary sources mentioned above. A visit to the Killie Campbell library turned up one other piece of information: a hand-written addendum to the text of a radio talk delivered in 1926.<sup>6</sup> It gave substantially the same details as those given by Janie Malherbe.<sup>5</sup>

The next step was to attempt the verification of the land grant to P.R. Botha. The Natal Archives could throw no light on the matter. There was no record to be found of P.R. Botha's having been granted land by the republican authorities between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. Similarly, no record could be traced of his having registered a farm there under the British administration. None of this is, of course, conclusive evidence because it is not always possible to trace republican land grants, if indeed a

claim was ever registered. In addition to this, many Boers left Natal in the "Second Trek" of 1848 because of the delay in carrying out the promised survey of farms<sup>7</sup> and P.R. Botha may have been among their number, although his descendants farmed in the Greytown district a generation later. There is, however, one piece of positive evidence which weighs against the claim that P.R. Botha lived at Botha's Hill. The hill lies on the farm *Assegay Kraal*, which was registered in the name of J.J. Potgieter in 1848.<sup>8</sup> By 1850 Potgieter's farm was so well established<sup>9</sup> as to suggest that he had been there for some time and was probably therefore the first white settler there.

A study of contemporary accounts proved more fruitful than official records. In 1849 or 1850 the Rev. James Green, on his way to Pietermaritzburg, "put up at an accommodation house kept by a Mr Botha, at the foot of Botha's Hill."<sup>10</sup> The English merchant, Joseph Churchill, on a journey from Durban in January, 1851, to drum up business in the capital, recorded in his diary that he "slept the first night at Botha's Accommodation House, very fatigued with the jolting."<sup>11</sup> Thomas Phipson, travelling down to the coast a few months later, wrote that after climbing "a high mountain or hill" he had gone "down on the other side by a steep declivity to Botha's Halfway House, about thirty-four miles from Pietermaritzburg."<sup>12</sup>

The most valuable account, however, is that given by G.H. Mason after a journey to Pietermaritzburg in 1850. After spending the night at the German House, near Cowie's Hill, Mason and his brother walked through what was to become Pinetown, up Field's Hill (which he called "Murray's Hill") and along the road to a deserted farm by midday. The record continues: "Resuming our journey, we at length reached Botha's half-way house, where we intended to get dinner."<sup>13</sup>

Considered together, these accounts show clearly that in the early 1850s the name "Botha's" was applied rather to the inn than to the hill. But Phipson and Mason take the matter a stage further. They both make it plain that the accommodation house was at the foot of the hill on the south-eastern or Durban side. Phipson approached it from Pietermaritzburg "by a steep declivity", whereas the Masons, fortified by cold sucking pig and congenial company, discovered that "leaving Botha's, our first business was to climb the formidable barrier before us."<sup>14</sup>

Manifestly then the halfway house of tradition, on the north-western side, was not the Halfway House of the 1850s visited by Green, Churchill, Phipson and Mason. Is it possible, a hundred and thirty years later, in an area which is becoming increasingly built up, to locate the approximate site of the inn and, perhaps, to identify more closely its proprietor?

Alexander Mair's *Map of the Colony of Natal*,<sup>15</sup> published in 1875, provided the first clue. Based on the records of the Surveyor-General's office, this map shows the boundaries of farms registered at that time. It is easy, even on a photographic reproduction, to identify the farm *Albinia*, on which present-day Hillcrest is situated, and *Assegay Kraal* (present-day Botha's Hill). And, sandwiched between them, without any form of identification, is a small property, very much in the shape of a paper dart and lying across the old main road. An earlier map, Watt's *Map of Natal*, which appeared in 1855, shows the same boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

The search shifted to the records of the Surveyor-General. There, sure enough, between *Albinia* on the east and *Assagay* (sic) *Kraal* on the west,

and straddling the old main road, was the familiar paper dart shape of the property officially described as *Botha's Halfway House, No. 921*, 320 acres in extent, which had been surveyed by Thomas Okes in 1849. All that remained then was to attempt the identification of the original owner of the land. In due course, from the Registrar of Deeds in Pietermaritzburg, came the notification that the first registered owner of *Botha's Halfway House, No. 921* was none other than Cornelis Botha, the name of the man written of by Janie Malherbe.

Although, therefore, it is not possible to state categorically that Philip Rudolph Botha never lived near Botha's Hill, the weight of the evidence as presented above seems to be in favour of Cornelis Botha, the erstwhile harbour master (unless, of course, he had a namesake of whom nothing else is known), as the man who gave his name to the hill and to the twentieth century village.

The halfway house at the foot of Botha's Hill turns out to have been, for the best part of thirty-five years, a landmark on the road from the Port to the capital. The earliest reference so far discovered is to *Elliott's* accommodation house, which he named *Albenia* (sic) in honour of Martin West's wife.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of 1847 the establishment bore the name *The Travellers' Home* and was run by Louis Smith.<sup>18</sup> By the middle of that year, however, there appeared an announcement by Cornelis Botha that he was re-opening what he called the *Albany Hotel*, formerly kept by Elliott.<sup>19</sup> Even though within eight months Botha advertised his intention of selling the inn,<sup>20</sup> he was still there in January, 1850.<sup>21</sup> When Charles Barter travelled inland later that year he stopped for the night at Botha's, "the halfway house between D'Urban and Maritzburg", but finding a noisy party already in occupation he and his companion preferred to sleep in their wagon.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, however, Botha must have found at least a tenant, because by the early part of 1852 J.F. Smith had taken over the premises "on long lease".<sup>23</sup> In August of that year Barter stopped at the inn on at least two occasions and noted that Smith was the proprietor.<sup>24</sup> In spite of his original intention Smith's long lease appears to have been relatively short, because by August, 1854, Frederick Ashford was recorded in the jury lists as the "occupier" of Botha's.<sup>25</sup> Two and a half years later, at the time of his wife's death, Ashford was described as "formerly of Botha's Halfway House".<sup>26</sup>

At this point the record appears to fall silent for several years. When, in May 1860, John Dare's 'Perseverance' overturned while going down Botha's Hill, the shaken passengers were taken to McNicol's at Pinetown, "where things were made comfortable".<sup>27</sup> To have done this would have been to pass an obvious source of succour at *Botha's Halfway House*. Does this mean that the inn was no longer in business or that it had degenerated into one of the low-class establishments which decent folk avoided? There is no way of telling but the answer probably lies in the prosaic demands of a transport operator's schedule. The coach had three main stops, at Camperdown, Clough's and McNicol's,<sup>28</sup> and Dare would have lost time as a result of the accident. No doubt his aim was to reach the next stop with all expedition. The fact that the omnibus arrived "safely and satisfactorily in Durban, a little late for dinner"<sup>29</sup> suggests that this is the reasonable interpretation of this incident.

The reference above to "Clough's" adds another dimension to the emerging picture. *Botha's Halfway House* had acquired a competitor a few miles away on the other side of the hill and the noiseless tenor of life in those cool sequestered vales had been rudely disturbed by some hot commercial rivalry. When this contest began is not certain but by 1855 E.B. Clough had become proprietor of another Halfway House on the farm *Assegay Kraal*, in the shadow of the hill later known as Alverstone. Dr Bleek spent a night there in 1856 and described it subsequently as "one of the best along the road".<sup>30</sup> Sometimes, to the confusion of the investigator, the house was called *Clough's Sterk Spruit Hotel*.<sup>31</sup> *Sterkspruit* is the name of the next farm along the road, on which the present village of Drummond is situated, and on the bank of the stream which provided its name was yet another small inn, called at various times *Sportsman's Lodge*,<sup>32</sup> *Cheeseborough's*<sup>33</sup> and *Edwards's*.<sup>34</sup> Colenso thought it was Stirk's Spruit,<sup>35</sup> an impression perhaps reinforced by the herd of Zulu cattle through which he rode not far from there,<sup>36</sup> among which there was doubtless a number of yearlings.

In 1860, after the visit of Prince Alfred,<sup>37</sup> the name of Clough's is said to have been amended by the then proprietor, one Thomas Arnold, to *Clough's Royal Halfway House*. How Botha's fared during this period it has not been possible to establish but eventually that inn was taken over by John Padley, who pointedly advertised it in 1866 as "the *original* (my italics) halfway house between the City and the Port."<sup>38</sup> He advised that the establishment had undergone "extensive alterations and additions" for the third time, "to meet the increasing demand for comfortable accommodation on the road."<sup>38</sup> Padley, however, ("he paddles his own canoe"<sup>38</sup>) must soon after this have embarked temporarily upon some other venture, because in April, 1868, Thomas Martin, formerly of the Natal Mounted Police, respectfully announced that he had obtained a lease of "the above-mentioned well known and long established premises" which he named *The Black Horse*.<sup>39</sup> Prof. Hattersley identifies the premises as "the Halfway House at Botha's".<sup>40</sup>

By this time the transport struggle between J.W. Welch and George Jessup was in progress and in the course of the war Welch acquired both Clough's and Botha's, where he provided hot lunches for his passengers as an added inducement to support his line.<sup>41</sup> This prandial persuasion proved the final straw for Jessup, who eventually retired from the field. At this point the picture becomes obscure. Prof. Hattersley states that Welch bought the Botha's building from Martin.<sup>42</sup> A reader of the *Daily News* recalled in 1964 that the original Botha homestead (which he associated with P.R. Botha) was used as a staging post for Welch omnibuses.<sup>43</sup> Yet by 1869, scarcely a year after Martin's initial announcement, John Padley was back at Botha's<sup>44</sup> and when, in 1872, he married the daughter of J.C. Field, he was described as "of Padley's Hotel, Botha's Hill."<sup>45</sup>

Even though it is not clear who actually owned the inn at this time, the association with Padley makes it possible to attempt an approximate identification of the site of *Botha's Halfway House*. At the foot of Botha's Hill, giving access to that part of modern Hillcrest known as West Riding, a road intersects the railway line at a point known as Padley's Crossing. Not far away is the old Padley's Halt. And within metres of the crossing stands a

venerable oak tree which is associated in local tradition with an outspan, a staging post and a nameless inn, in what is very approximately the middle of Cornelis Botha's farm and in close proximity to the old main road. Almost certainly *Botha's Halfway House* was not far from this spot, although today there is no trace of an old building to be seen. Clough's, on the other hand, is said to have survived into the present era and to have been rebuilt as a cottage by a local farmer in the late 1960s.

John Padley died in 1876<sup>46</sup> and in the same year the farm was transferred from the name of Cornelis Botha to that of Elizabeth Cato.<sup>47</sup> Both Halfway Houses must have remained in business for some years after that, however, because in January, 1879, Lt. Commeline, conducting his wagons from Pinetown to Pietermaritzburg, negotiated "a terrible hill known as Bowker's Hill", camped for the night at "the Halfway House" and then returned with other wagons and spent the next night at "a little inn at the bottom of the hill".<sup>48</sup> But for the innkeepers and the coachmen the writing was on the wall. In March, 1879, the railway (which had forced Welch out of business in Britain) reached Botha's Hill<sup>49</sup> and by 1880 it had been taken through to Pietermaritzburg.<sup>50</sup> Almost certainly, although there was a suggestion that the trains should stop at *Welch's Halfway House* for fifteen minutes for refreshments,<sup>51</sup> neither Padley's nor Clough's long survived this onset of civilization. The fact that a photograph of Botha's Hill station taken about 1884 shows both a refreshment room and an hotel immediately behind the station suggests that by then the older inns had closed.<sup>52</sup> They had admirably served their purpose but they belonged to an age which had passed beyond recall.

What, in the meantime, of the man whose name began this investigation? Assuming that there was only one man of this name in Natal at that time, it is possible to piece together a little about Cornelis Botha, although much of it is at present unverified. It is said that he ran away to sea as a teenager, joining a ship at Durban<sup>53</sup> and serving for a time in the British merchant navy.<sup>54</sup> Soon afterwards, while he was in his early twenties, he became the master (and perhaps the owner) of a small sailing vessel, the *Eleanor* which traded out of Durban up and down the east coast. In August, 1839, the *Eleanor* was wrecked at the Durban harbour mouth.<sup>55</sup>

The name of Cornelis Botha appears on a list of men to whom land grants were made by the Volksraad in the first half of 1839.<sup>56</sup> Subsequently he was appointed to the rank of heemraad<sup>57</sup> and, early in 1840, was installed as harbour master of Port Natal.<sup>58</sup> According to an account among the Bird papers he was occupying some "Kaffir huts" at the Point at that time.<sup>59</sup> In April 1840 the Volksraad granted him certain additional powers regarding the control of shipping in the harbour (or, perhaps, defined his authority more precisely).<sup>60</sup> By August of that year, however, certain charges had been laid against him and he was suspended, pending an investigation, while his assistant Edmund Morewood acted in his place.<sup>61</sup> Shortly after this, however, at his own request he was released from service.<sup>62</sup>

In November, 1840, he purchased an erf in Port Natal from P. Raats.<sup>63</sup> In April, 1844, he announced the opening of an inn in Church Street, Pietermaritzburg<sup>64</sup> but by September he was bankrupt.<sup>65</sup> He is said to have

married Sophia Maritz, the daughter of the Voortrekker leader,<sup>66</sup> to whom a son was born on 2 March, 1845,<sup>67</sup> christened Gerhardus Marthinus in the following month.<sup>68</sup> By 1847, as has already been demonstrated, he had taken over the *Albany Hotel*, half-way between the capital and the port, only to lease it to J.F. Smith in 1852. Not a great deal more has emerged about Cornelis Botha. The Killie Campbell library has a photograph of him which shows a youthful, dark-haired man with a lock of hair dropping over his right eye. He is said to have been the great-grandfather of the historian, Dr Graham Botha.<sup>69</sup>

Only one further incident needs to be considered. When G.H. Mason and his brother stopped for dinner at Botha's Halfway House, they met "a most entertaining young Dutchman", who regaled them with an account of his activities "during the late war with the English."<sup>70</sup> This unusual man had commanded a detachment of boats, he said, at the time of the Boer siege of Capt. Smith's camp and he had been ordered to capture a British sloop which had anchored off the Bluff. On boarding the ship he discovered to his horror that the hold contained several hundred British troops with loaded carbines and fixed bayonets.

It is tempting to consider the possibility that the young man was Cornelis Botha himself. (By this time he was probably in his thirties.) Mason's account does make it clear that the "young Dutchman" was not their host, but it is not unlikely that Botha had installed a manager to run the inn while he attended to other matters. Perhaps even the management of the farm, which appeared to Mason very productive,<sup>71</sup> occupied his chief attention, although Mason does say that the *host* was the proprietor of the farm. It is reasonable to suppose that in wartime Botha's seafaring experience and special skills would have been valuable at the Port, regardless of the circumstances in which he left the service of the government. In itself unimportant, the incident at the inn has about it a faintly Buchanesque ring. One can imagine Richard Hannay in his younger years narrating it under some such heading as "The Adventure of the Nautical Boer". But, more seriously, the whole affair sounds so very similar to that recounted about the boarding of the *Conch* by Edmund Morewood<sup>72</sup> (Botha's former assistant and his successor as harbour master) that the matter cries out for further careful investigation. In the varied chronicle of conflict "tussen Boer en Brit" naval engagements (even abortive) do not occupy a very prominent place. When one notes that Capt. Bell, the master of the *Conch*, later himself became harbour master,<sup>73</sup> a further element of complication is added. So whether Mason actually passed the time of day with Cornelis Botha in the comfortable travellers' room of *Botha's Halfway House* must remain a matter of speculation. If he did, this would be the only positive identification of the proprietor of the Halfway House with the harbour master of the same name, which has been assumed throughout this article.

Be that as it may, Cornelis Botha did not remain very long at Botha's Hill. His venture there appears to have been, like the others upon which he earlier engaged, relatively short-lived. But like other, greater men he was in the right place at the right time and, as a result, he has joined that select band whose names live on although their deeds may be forgotten.

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ROBIN W. LAMPLOUGH

