

Imperial Networks

Creating identities in
nineteenth-century South Africa
and Britain

Alan Lester



London and New York

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Imperial Networks

Imperial Networks investigates the discourses and practices of British colonialism. Focusing on the colonisation of the Xhosa to the east of the nineteenth-century Cape Colony in South Africa, the book places this episode in the context of a much broader imperial network. The book reveals how British colonialism in the region was informed by, and itself informed, imperial ideas and activities elsewhere, both in Britain and in other colonies.

Drawing on materialist South African historiography, postcolonial theory and geographical conceptions, *Imperial Networks* examines:

- the origins and early nineteenth-century development of three interacting discourses of colonialism – official, humanitarian and settler
- the contests, compromises and interplay between these discourses and their proponents in South Africa and Britain
- the analysis of these discourses in the light of a global humanitarian movement in the aftermath of the antislavery campaign
- the eventual colonisation of the Xhosa and the construction of colonial settler identities.

Imperial Networks introduces students to key debates in the historiography of nineteenth-century South Africa, as well as in materialist and postcolonial constructions of the past.

Alan Lester is Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Sussex. His previous publications include *From Colonization to Democracy: a New Historical Geography of South Africa* (1996) and *South Africa Past, Present and Future: Gold at the End of the Rainbow?* with E. Nel and T. Binns (2000).

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Preface

This book is ultimately about the processes through which Xhosa-speaking peoples were colonised in the eastern Cape frontier zone of modern South Africa, particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century. But the book's main subjects are not the Xhosa. In the belief that colonialism was 'shaped as much by political, social and ideological contests among [British] colonisers as by the encounter with the colonised', the main subjects of the book are those who considered themselves British.¹ While it situates these Britons within a network of extraneous influences, this remains primarily a study of their colonial cultures and practices.²

Just as British metropolitan identities were being forged in relation to others during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, different kinds of British identities were being carved out in diverse colonial settings. These colonial identities were constructed in relation to the cultures of Indians, Maoris, Aborigines and West Indian slaves, to name but a few examples. In the eastern Cape, a British settler identity was constructed in tension with those of Khoesan- and Dutch-speakers, but especially, I will argue, in relation to the material and symbolic practices, and not least the resistance, of the Xhosa.³ In each settler colony, colonial identities were also created through communication with, and often out of antagonism towards, certain metropolitan social and political groups that concerned themselves, even if only periodically and half-heartedly, with events at the margins of empire. It is thus not only British colonial, but also British metropolitan identities, and the discourses of colonialism connecting them that provide the substance of this study.

The Britons on whom the book centres include governors and administrators, missionaries and their metropolitan directors, Members of Parliament and colonial politicians, settlers, journalists, travellers and merchants. If they did not themselves shuttle back and forth between the eastern Cape frontier and Britain, the people studied here sent dispatches, compiled reports, wrote letters, participated in official inquiries and moved capital along circuits connecting these two places, together with other nodes, within an imperial network. I aim to consider the ways in which they

imagined and contested colonialism on the eastern Cape frontier and elsewhere, the ways in which they were changed by it and some of the ways in which, through it, they participated in the construction of the modern world both in South Africa and in Britain.

I hope to achieve all this by building upon the foundations established by a generation of materially oriented South African social historians over the last twenty years. However, I seek to contribute to the literature that they have produced in two main ways. First, by critically and highly selectively incorporating certain 'postcolonial' notions that have been regarded with some suspicion by many South African historians,⁴ I hope to illuminate the colonising culture that gave rise to those material interactions lying at the heart of the existing historiography. Secondly, I intend to highlight those discursive/political transactions conducted across a broad imperial terrain, between Britons in the metropole, in the Cape Colony, and in other colonial sites. In the introductory chapter, I will elaborate upon these two 'innovations'.

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the forbearance and encouragement of Jo Nash, and the unfailing support of my family: Patricia, Brian, Gary and Tracy Lester. The book's completion has been much delayed, but for the most wonderful reason: the birth and rapid growth of my daughter Daisy. This book is dedicated to her and to her cousin Jessica.

A number of friends have always been supportive of my academic endeavours and broadly if resignedly tolerant of my South African reminiscences. This seems a suitable place to thank, in alphabetical order, Fe Burbage, Ian Chitty, Matthew Davis, Ewan and Sarah Edwards and Chloë Jolowicz.

Robert Ross consented to read the manuscript before its publication, while Saul Dubow assisted by providing me with drafts of his work in progress. I am grateful to both of them for their help. They, of course, cannot be blamed for the weaknesses that remain. Finally, material included at various points in this book has been published elsewhere, as *Colonial Discourse and the Colonization of Queen Adelaide Province, South Africa*, Royal Geographical Society–Institute of British Geographers, Historical Geography Research Series, no. 34, London, 1998; 'Reformulating Identities: British Settlers in Early Nineteenth Century South Africa', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 23, 4, 1998, 515–31; "'Otherness" and the Frontiers of Empire: The Eastern Cape Colony, 1806–c1850', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 24, 1, 1998, 2–19; 'Settlers, the State and Colonial Power: The Colonization of Queen Adelaide Province, 1834–37', *Journal of African History*, 39, 1998, 221–46, and 'The Margins of Order: Strategies of Segregation on the Eastern Cape Frontier, 1806–c1880', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23, 4, 1997, 635–53. I want to express my gratitude to the editors and publishers of these journals and research series for permission to reproduce this material.

1 Introduction

Histories of the eastern Cape and postcolonial theory

Most current histories of the nineteenth-century eastern Cape frontier zone, like those of nineteenth-century South Africa more generally, are broadly materialist in orientation. Materialist endeavours to explain British colonisation in the eastern Cape can be dated to the early 1980s. At this time, Martin Legassick, Basil Le Cordeur and Jeff Peires sought to challenge two kinds of established interpretation.¹ On the one hand, they attacked a cluster of 'settler narratives', dating from the mid to late nineteenth century, which had proclaimed the beneficial progress of colonial 'civilisation', brought by British officials and settlers on the frontier, and its triumph over African 'barbarism' or, even worse, 'savagery'. On the other hand, these revisionists challenged a set of liberal accounts dating from the 1920s, which had argued that the genesis of the white 'attitudes' underpinning modern systems of segregation and apartheid lay in early frontier 'racial relations'.² Critiquing the latter tradition, Legassick emphasised that there did not seem to be a systematic racial ideology among British and Afrikaner farmers on the pre-industrial Cape frontier. He located the construction of such an ideology instead in South Africa's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century 'mineral revolution', and traced it to British industrial capitalists based on the Witwatersrand, and the British imperial state, rather than to their early nineteenth-century predecessors.³

Le Cordeur and Peires took a different kind of approach, but one that still focused on material aspects of the eastern Cape's history. Rather than considering the early nineteenth-century colonial frontier only to dismiss its 'claim' to be the arena for the development of a modern racial ideology, they held that the British colonisation of the region was significant in its own right. This was because it represented the first penetration of a pre-industrial, agrarian form of capitalism into African territory. For Peires, the 4,000 British settlers located on the frontier in 1820 in particular acted as 'apostles of free enterprise and free trade'.⁴ It was these settlers who rapidly became agents for the Xhosa's dispossession and subjugation under a

regime of settler capitalism. That regime was based above all on the production of wool for the metropolitan market, on white-owned farms, using a subordinated black labour force.⁵

Le Cordeur's and Peires' emphasis on the British as harbingers of capitalist social relations and Xhosa labour-domination has received new impetus of late. In a review marking his reconsideration of the eastern Cape frontier zone in 1993, Legassick saw the agrarian capitalism of the British as the main reason why 'the emphasis in the shaping of twentieth-century South Africa is decisively shifted from Afrikaners to British settlers'.⁶ For the same reason, the arrival of the 1820 settlers marks a turning point in Noël Mostert's acclaimed epic narrative of frontier relations, and in Clifton Crais's more theoretical treatment of colonial power and Xhosa resistance.⁷ Finally, British settler capitalism looms large in the more recent, impressive synthesis of the Cape's colonial history written by Timothy Keegan. Keegan argues that it was the British settlers, backed by the colonial state, who 'undermined Xhosa self-sufficiency, eroded chiefly prerogatives, and re-oriented economic activity to new patterns of [capitalist] production and consumption'.⁸

Peires' and Le Cordeur's early interest in British activities on the frontier, then, seems to have been vindicated in Keegan's synthesis. If, as Legassick argued, South Africa's modern system of industrial segregation did not have its origins on the frontier, at least one can be confident that some of the first full-blown capitalist relations systematically predicated on racial stratification were constructed there.⁹ The penetration of the eastern Cape by settler capitalism thus played a central role in prefiguring 'the transformations that were set in motion by the mineral discoveries in South Africa in the last third of the century'.¹⁰

Over the last decade, however, the currents of postcolonial thought, which have affected so many arenas of academic enterprise, have brought challenges to materialist renditions of South African history as a whole. They have initiated, at times, fairly heated debates among South Africanists.¹¹ According to Crais, most historians engaging in these debates 'have sought dry and safe land far from the dangerous breakers of post-modernism'.¹² Nevertheless, 'the appearance of studies more closely attuned to questions of culture and the mind . . . are beginning to fracture an earlier coherence'.¹³ Postcolonialism challenges the materialist notion of an extraneous capitalist 'logic', which, having been imported by European colonisers, underlies racial 'ideology' and generates a particular pattern of historical change. Against such a conception, postcolonial scholars have emphasised the more contingent power relations embedded in that 'congeries of values [and] beliefs . . . that have come to carry the force of nature', and which are generally referred to as culture.¹⁴

In postcolonial readings, capitalism cannot be thought of as having a logic or structure which exists somehow prior to, or outside of, culture. Culture mediates relations of power across social boundaries that are constructed in relation to one another, rather than 'given' by any extraneous framework.

Thus, 'culture is not some sort of residual category, the surface variation left unaccounted for by more powerful economic analyses, but it is the very medium through which social relations are expressed, experienced and contested'.¹⁵ And these social relations consist of far more intricate inter-meshings of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, language and locality than those that a class-based analysis alone can supply.¹⁶

However, I do not believe that the established historiography of capitalist penetration in the eastern Cape on the one hand, and the relational insights of postcolonial theory on the other, are irreconcilable. First, we can recognise that developments within the materialist South African historiographical tradition as a whole, including that portion focusing on the eastern Cape, have led it away from any orthodox and structuralist Marxism and closer to postcolonial conceptions of identity and change. They demonstrate that the social boundaries of class, race, ethnicity and gender are dynamic and flexible creations, generated through contingent power struggles. Some seek to deal with these social boundaries in an integrated way, and, in common with recent analyses of colonial India in particular, they draw attention to the failures as well as the successes of capitalist endeavours.¹⁷

Furthermore, although most South African historians writing of 'race' prefer to use the more traditional terms 'racial ideology' or 'racial attitudes', in the ways in which they deploy these terms, they have included many of the meanings that postcolonial scholars invest in the word 'discourse'.¹⁸ Indeed, they have been engaged in an historically embedded form of discourse analysis for some time, without necessarily theorising it as such.¹⁹ Thus, they write implicitly of 'race' as an enframing set of representations, rather than merely as a screen of 'bias' or 'prejudice' that obscures some objective 'truth' about difference or sameness. It is in this unstated rejection of the notion of ideology as 'false consciousness or an imagined representation of the real conditions for existence' that we find the clearest connections between current social historical and postcolonial approaches.²⁰

Like the prevailing historiography, this book insists on the significance of the transformations engendered by settler capitalism as a set of practices on the eastern Cape frontier, but it also gives more explicit recognition to three things that are more generally associated, at least overtly, with post-colonial analyses: first, that such practices were culturally conditioned, legitimated and regulated through discourse.²¹ Secondly, this discursive regulation of capitalist practice took place across an extensive imperial terrain connecting Britain's colonies, and its settler colonies in particular, to the metropole. The geographies of flow and connection within a broad imperial network are central to this account. And thirdly, that, for settler capitalist practices to 'work' in the eastern Cape they had to be formulated in response to the conditions which settlers found there. Not the least of these conditions was Khoesan resistance to material exploitation and the Xhosa's 'primary' resistance to the settlers' very presence in the region.

Without wishing to construct them as being mutually exclusive, three main early nineteenth-century British colonial discourses are identified and analysed in the following chapters – governmentality, humanitarianism and settler capitalism. This book is about their differential and overlapping effects, both in the eastern Cape and in Britain. Although any attempt to delineate these discourses runs the risk of creating artificial boundaries and an unhelpful impression of internal homogeneity, I nevertheless believe that each of them, at least in the early nineteenth century, constituted a particular ‘ensemble of regulated practices’.²² Despite their multiple points of origin, each was internally consistent enough to be considered a broad imperial programme in its own right. These discourses were created initially as a result of competing ‘projects’, devised by differentially situated British interests to be carried out in a variety of colonial spaces.²³ It was the incompatibility between the Colonial Office and its governors’ agendas for producing order at minimal cost, philanthropic and evangelical humanitarians’ schemes of proselytisation among ‘aborigines’ and their eventual assimilation, and settlers’ more targeted visions of capital accumulation and security that brought these discourses into being and into collision with one another. Thereafter, they were continually being refashioned in relation to each other.

Critical to each of these discourses in the Cape (and elsewhere), and to the contests that were waged between them, were representations of ‘the disputed figure of the African’.²⁴ Within each discourse, Africans were reduced to stereotypes and each such stereotype necessitated a specific set of colonial responses. Governmental discourse, I will argue, produced the Xhosa and Khoesan of the eastern Cape (and to a certain extent the Dutch-speaking colonists too) as unpredictable objects, predisposed to irrational acts of violence – objects to be located, ordered and disciplined in line with the efficient administration of the Cape at minimal expense. Humanitarian discourse tended to produce them as pliant and childlike brothers and sisters, fellow human beings and creations of God awaiting the blessings of Christianity. Within this discourse, the Khoesan and Xhosa were merely one component in a global enterprise aimed at nothing less than the redemption of souls, the extension of legitimate trade and the diffusion from its British heartland of a spiritually and materially progressive Utopia. In settler discourse, these indigenous Others came to feature primarily as a potent, threatening presence, ominously lurking beyond or, even more dangerously, within the colonial frontier, and requiring to be either removed or rendered tame and productive. Only then could mutual prosperity spread, specifically through sheep farming, infrastructural development, labour control, further emigration from Britain and the supply of the British manufacturing market.

We must be careful to remember that the colonial projects identified in this book could converge around particular imperatives which were necessary for any of them to be realised, thus giving the impression of a more unified and totalising colonial discourse. Philanthropic evangelicals, government officials and settlers were all concerned with the effective British ‘management’ of

indigenous peoples in the eastern Cape. They agreed on the imperative for orderly, well-regulated behaviour on the part of colonised subjects, and there was consensus that a British example was needed to show 'natives' (as well as recalcitrant Afrikaners) how to improve their situation. But while the colonial forces at play in the eastern Cape never 'worked from irreconcilably different positions', there was certainly vehement dispute over precisely which British example should be employed.²⁵

On questions of crucial material importance, such as whether 'natives' were to retain access to their land, missionaries and settlers might squabble, while officials generally took less principled and more contingently pragmatic approaches. But to state that the combinations and permutations of colonial interests and their discourses were diverse is only to go part way towards defining the complexity of British colonial culture. Not only was it possible for individuals to shift their allegiances, to reproduce other kinds of discourse and pursue other colonial visions; it was also possible for the same individuals to engage with different discourses, reproducing elements of more than one of them at any given time. Thus, during a period of humanitarian political ascendancy in Britain, colonial officials felt the need to legitimate their decisions in the light of humanitarian concerns, and to deploy rhetoric most often associated with humanitarian discourse – even when humanitarians in the Cape disputed those decisions.

In other words, the analytical boundaries between the colonial discourses delineated here were not so clearly defined that individuals were unable to transgress them. Rhetoric from one discourse could be 'borrowed' to serve the purposes of antithetical projects and political, military and material expediency allowed the fractures between colonial interests to be crossed in the long-term pursuit of shared colonial ambitions.

Imperial networks

Before proceeding in the next chapter to examine the genealogies of the colonial discourses that interweave throughout this account, it is important to identify one other of their characteristics – one that is deserving of much more attention than any parochial account of the eastern Cape would recognise. Crucially, each of the colonial projects and the discourses associated with them that are identified here was forged not just within the Cape, or even within multiple colonies or the metropole, but across a network linking these sites together. Histories of the Cape such as Keegan's, Bank's, Crais's and most recently Ross's, certainly recognise the material and ideological connections between the colony's frontier and Britain, but in the following account I want to give more emphasis to the ways in which the two sites were knitted together within a global cultural and political fabric. I want to suggest that British colonial discourses were made and remade, rather than simply transferred or imposed, through the 'geographies of connection' between Britain and settler colonies like the Cape in particular.²⁶

Colonial and metropolitan sites were connected most obviously through material flows of capital, commodities and labour. By the late eighteenth century, British material culture was already located within intensively developed circuits connecting Western Europe, Africa, Asia and South America.²⁷ As Susan Thorne has pointed out,

The extraordinary scale of British imperial expansion at the end of the nineteenth century has obscured the magnitude of Britain's colonial involvement at the eighteenth century's turn . . . By 1820, the British Empire had already absorbed almost a quarter of the world's population, most of whom were incorporated between the Seven Years War, which began in 1756, and the Napoleonic Wars, which ended in 1815.²⁸

The nodal points holding this expanded imperial web and its extra-imperial trading partners together were ports and, the means of transmission between them, ships. Within these ships, Indian calicoes moved to Africa to purchase slaves, Tahitian breadfruit was taken to the Caribbean to feed those slaves, Caribbean molasses was transported to New England where it was made into rum for trade with Native Americans, and tea, coffee, chocolate, tobacco, sugar, rice and potatoes converged, from sites dispersed across the globe, on the British metropole. Although they were incomplete and subject to disjunctures and delay, the construction of such material networks by the early nineteenth century had created 'a new set of relationships which changed what was grown, made and consumed in each part of the world'.²⁹

However, colonial and metropolitan sites were articulated discursively as well as materially, and through the same kinds of network infrastructure that serviced a global commerce. While each different site within the imperial network had 'its own possibilities and conditions of knowledge' these differentiated knowledges were connected by the communicative circuits of empire, and could thus be mutually affecting.³⁰ British ships carried information between colonial sites, in the form of newspapers, dispatches and letters, as well as produce and personnel, enabling far-flung colonies and the metropole to participate 'in a coordinated metasystem of meaning and action'.³¹ Reinforced later in the nineteenth century by the telegraph, such technologies allowed representations of indigenous peoples in one part of the world to act as precedents, guiding imageries of subsequently colonised peoples elsewhere.³² Indeed, as Bayly argues, precisely because of the development of an imperial network, 'the period 1760–1860 was a critical one in the epistemological and economic creation of "indigenous peoples" as a series of comparable categories across the globe'.³³

While their relative significance oscillated within metropolitan imaginations according to multiple local contingencies, the major components of the early nineteenth-century empire of settlement – India, British North America, the West Indies, the Australian colonies, New Zealand and the Cape – became the most significant locales for the production of such

imageries. Images of the empire's racial Others travelled from these colonies during the early nineteenth century in the form of settler newspapers and letters, as well as in official dispatches and travellers' reports. Parliamentary commissions, with their interrogations of colonial and metropolitan witnesses, their minutes of evidence collated from various colonies and their comprehensive reports on matters ranging from slavery to trading transactions and evangelicalism, were a particularly significant mechanism by which news of social relations in these settler colonies arrived at the centre of the empire. From there, the news was frequently disseminated outwards again, via the colonial press, to other colonial sites. The Colonial Office's permanent under-secretary, Herman Merivale, noted in 1841 that in building an empire of settlement, the British had constructed 'channels of inter-communication' throughout the world.³⁴

A number of analysts, both postcolonial and materialist in orientation, have now begun to recover the complex ways in which 'knowledge' traversed these imperial circuits of information, impacting upon both Britain and each of its colonies.³⁵ Among historians of South Africa in particular, Shula Marks has pointed out that by the nineteenth century 'daily life in [the British Isles] – from diet to industrial discipline, from sexual mores to notions of governance – had been permeated by experiences of empire', generated in the colonies as well as the metropole.³⁶ As far as governance is concerned, Ann Stoler has shown that a consideration of colonial and metropolitan affairs within the same terms of reference, meant that the very 'inclusions and exclusions built into [metropolitan] . . . notions of citizenship, sovereignty and participation' were influenced by colonial social boundaries.³⁷ Catherine Hall has also emphasised that continual communication allowed nineteenth-century elites in the British imperial 'centres' and in its 'peripheries', to engage in debate about the proper status and treatment of their respective subordinates. She has thus advocated the recognition of power relations embedded in cultural exchanges that 'criss-crossed the globe'.³⁸

In this book, I share the 'founding premise' of Stoler and Cooper, that 'social transformations are a product of both global patterns and local struggles'.³⁹ In particular I highlight the significance that settlers, missionaries and officials on the eastern Cape frontier consciously attached to their participation within British imperial discursive networks. I also indicate some of the ways in which their activities, reinforced by similar activities in other settler colonies, impacted upon metropolitan representations and practices.

Acutely aware that marginalisation from imperial discursive networks could lead to the loss of access to political support and material resources, and that most Britons could only imagine what their colonial environments were like, each of the colonial groups studied in this book strove continually to fashion circuits of communication with vital metropolitan interests, and thus to shape British understandings of the Cape's places and peoples. Furthermore, each colonial interest had a vital stake in maintaining correspondence

with other, similar interests elsewhere in the colonial 'peripheries'. This, then, is very much a situated history of the Cape – one that conceives of it as a place partly constituted through its relations with other places.

As this book progresses, the focus expands and contracts, alighting on different components of the imperial network at different stages of the argument, but most frequently on the eastern Cape itself and on Britain. Chapter 2 begins with a brief narrative of Cape frontier history and historiography, covering the period from the late eighteenth century to the 1820s. This is intended to establish a context for the reader who is not already familiar with the Cape frontier's historiography. Thereafter the genealogies of British official and humanitarian discourses are traced over the same period. The framework of analysis here has its hub in Britain, but extends to incorporate diverse colonial locales, including India and the West Indies as well as the Cape in particular. In the tracing of an eastern Cape British settler discourse, chapter 3 engages more thoroughly with the colonial side of the Cape frontier, but highlights the material and discursive connections that the settlers there maintained with the metropole. In chapter 4, British colonising officials are followed across the frontier and their first endeavours to subordinate the Xhosa within 'Queen Adelaide Province' (1834–6) are examined in some detail. The close reading of colonialism 'on the ground' in this chapter is followed, in chapter 5, by a dramatic expansion of focus. This chapter consists of an analysis of the terms in which the British empire as a whole, as well as the Cape especially, was conceived within an ascendant humanitarian discourse. In chapter 6, a broad, mid nineteenth-century discursive shift towards biological determinism and away from the assumptions underlying humanitarian discourse – a shift incorporating both metropole and colonies – is identified. Finally, in chapter 7, the focus rests once again on the eastern Cape and British Kaffraria (the former Queen Adelaide Province), with an examination of the local implications of this discursive shift. This concluding chapter also contains a synopsis of the findings, about imperial networks and colonial discourses, that the writing of this book has engendered.

2 Colonial projects and the eastern Cape

I cannot but feel myself the Representative of a Body who cannot speak for themselves and for whom I must act without other guide than my own Conscience.

(Thomas Fowell Buxton, 1832)¹

The Cape colonial frontier

The British government first decided to seize control of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795, during the war with Revolutionary France. The decision was taken in order to prevent the strategically vital harbour at Cape Town, currently held by the Dutch East India Company, falling into the hands of the enemy. Although the Treaty of Amiens allowed the colony to be handed back to the Dutch republic in 1803, the resumption of the Napoleonic War meant that it was captured again by British forces in 1806. By 1814, it was clear that the British government would be holding on to the Cape for the foreseeable future.

The western part of the colony inherited by British officials was already marked by clearly defined status groups and a broadly mercantilist economic structure. Most of the Cape's population, consisting of 20,000 Europeans, 25,000 slaves and 15,000 indigenous Khoesan and people of mixed descent, would have understood where they were positioned relative to others in the social hierarchy.² At the top of this hierarchy were those colonists of Dutch, French and German descent who had accumulated land and wealth through commercial wine and wheat production in the hinterland of Cape Town, a region which Dutch East India Company forces had begun to seize from Khoesan pastoralists from the late seventeenth century. This dominant class is known to historians as the Cape gentry.³ By 1731, colonists of this stature, comprising some 7 per cent of the European population, owned over half of the colony's landed wealth.⁴ However, private accumulation of the most valuable land around Cape Town had guaranteed relative poverty among those colonists who were deprived of access to it. The poorer sons of western Cape farmers or discharged company employees who acted as farm

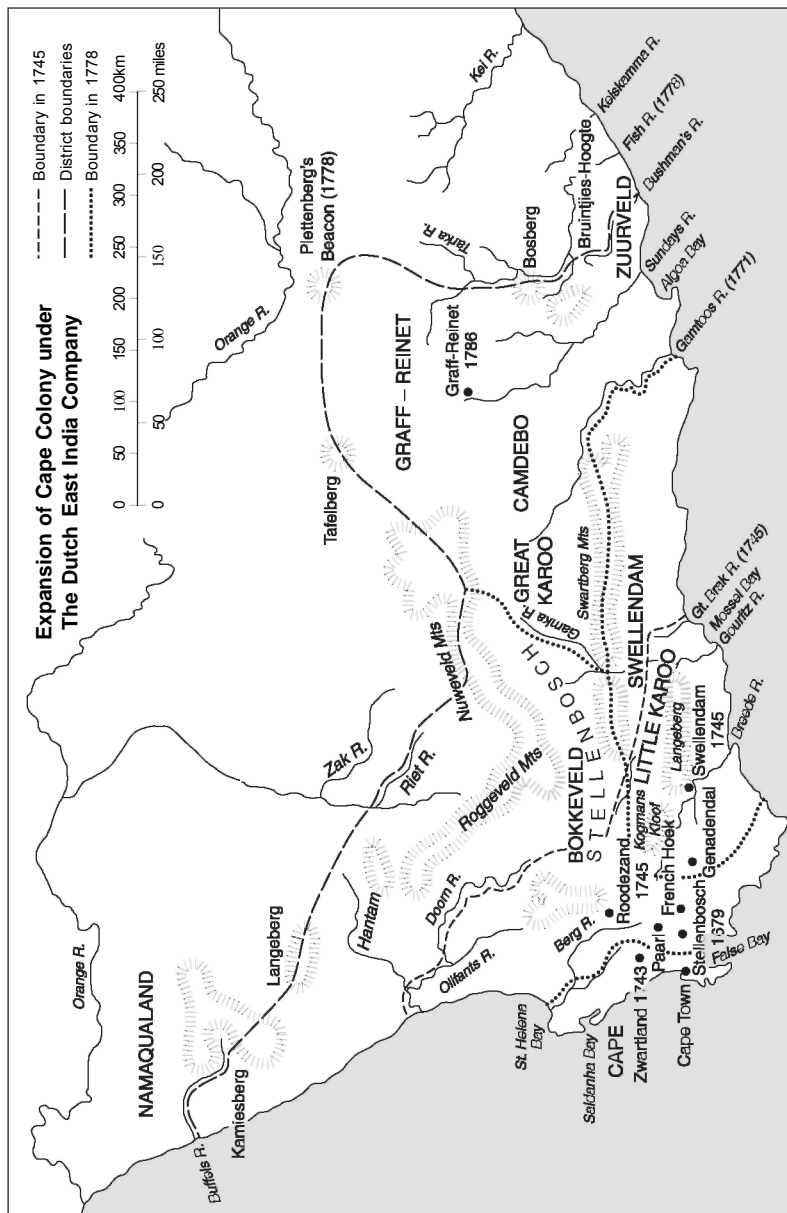


Figure 1 The shifting Cape frontier in the eighteenth century

Source: A. Lester, E. Nel and T. Binns, *South Africa Past, Present and Future: Gold at the End of the Rainbow?* Prentice Hall, London and New York, 2000, p. 57

servants, or *knechts*, had been propelled into the interior, where only livestock could be transported profitably to the Cape Town market.⁵

In the interior 'frontier' districts, colonial settlement had been achieved during the eighteenth century by small groups of men co-operating in mounted and armed units known as commandos. They had concentrated first on monopolising access to the most valuable land in a semi-arid environment – that surrounding a spring or a watercourse – subsequently getting their claim to it recognised by the company. Control over water supplies and the game which they attracted had often enabled dominance over far more numerous local Khoesan populations without the need for direct conquest. By such means, dramatic colonial expansion had been effected by just a few thousand colonists and their families.⁶ Towards the end of the eighteenth century, however, the further extension of the frontier was proving much more difficult. The boundaries of the colony, ranging from some 100 miles inland of Cape Town to the north, to 400 miles to the east, became spaces of bitter and enduring warfare.⁷

In the east, colonial expansion ground to a halt after colonists entered lands between the Gamtoos and Fish Rivers, lands that were being increasingly densely settled by Xhosa-speaking chiefdoms. In 1776, the colonist Hendrick Swellengrebel noted that unless colonisers 'succeed through industry in reducing the amount of ground necessary for grazing on each farm', competition with the Xhosa meant that it would not be possible for many more colonists to settle in the region.⁸ By the time the British first took the Cape in 1795, many of the colonists in the eastern frontier district of Graaff Reinet were already *bywoners*, or landless tenants. In the face of Xhosa resistance to encroachment, even those who had managed to obtain farms had been forced to evacuate them on more than one occasion. They had discovered that although colonial commandos could destroy Xhosa homesteads and drive their inhabitants away from grazing land, once the commandos were disbanded and their members dispersed to remote farms, they were often incapable of defending those farms from Xhosa raiding parties.

For Xhosa chiefdoms, of course, the marginal area around the Fish River comprised the western, rather than the eastern, frontier. These chiefdoms shared one of the family of Bantu languages, worked iron and practised crop cultivation as well as keeping cattle – attributes defining them in distinction to those Khoesan groups that colonists had first encountered in the west. Some Xhosa chiefdoms had exercised a 'loose sovereignty over Khoekhoe chiefdoms' in the area between the Fish and Sundays Rivers from the first half of the eighteenth century, and others had used the same territory for occasional grazing. But it was not until the 1760s that the first Xhosa chiefdoms erected permanent settlements there.⁹ At that time, the succession of the Xhosa paramount, Phalo, was disputed by his sons Rharhabe and Gcaleka. Fighting between their followers resulted in Gcaleka's dominance to the east of the Kei River and Rharhabe's crossing of the river, along with his followers, to the west.¹⁰ Rharhabe's crossing of the Kei

prompted the smaller Gqunukhwebe chiefdom to move further west in turn, entering what was then the limit of colonial settlement. After the Gqunukhwebe came the Mbalu and the imiDange chiefdoms, also settling during the 1770s in areas abutting vanguard colonial farms.¹¹

Largely disregarding these minor chiefdoms settled between colonial farms on the western fringes of his new territory, Rharhabe set about founding a new and autonomous branch of the Xhosa polity through the conquest and absorption of Khoesan groups that had, until now, retained their independence just beyond the colonial frontier. His project of constructing tributary relations, or of achieving the direct assimilation of subordinate groups, would be continued into the nineteenth century by his son, Ndlambe.

From the 1770s, the 'eastern Cape frontier' was thus a space of interaction between colonial, Khoesan and Xhosa polities and structures of authority. In a sense, it would seem to have been a region approximating Mary Louise Pratt's conception of a 'contact zone'. Here, 'copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices', rather than simple binary oppositions and conflicts, characterise the meeting between previously separated populations.¹² Aside from the frequent sexual contact between colonial men and Khoesan women (only rarely formalised in marriage), relatively isolated and impoverished colonists' housing, dietary, clothing and hunting practices, their techniques of labour control and even their language, were certainly inflected by Khoesan material and symbolic cultures.¹³ However, the clearest evidence of understanding between colonists and Xhosa in the late eighteenth century does not derive from projects of cultural hybridisation. Rather, it points to expedient political and, above all, military alliances forged between colonists acting independently of the colonial authorities on the one hand, and stronger Xhosa chiefdoms on the other. These alliances were orientated largely towards the conquest, expulsion or domination of militarily weaker Khoesan and Xhosa groups.

During the first two, full-scale, but inconclusive 'frontier wars' of 1779–81 and 1793, colonists acted in a loose alliance with Ndlambe against the other Xhosa chiefdoms claiming rights to the Zuurveld – the seasonal grazing land between the Sundays and Fish Rivers. Their co-operation was designed to guarantee colonists exclusive access to land and Ndlambe political paramountcy over rival chiefdoms.¹⁴ Such colonial–Xhosa transactions were by no means conducive to the dilution of either an exclusive colonial sense of identity, which was being forged primarily in the slave-owning society of the western Cape, or of a Xhosa sense of identity, which was being established through the absorption of tributary groups within a dominant lineage to the east. Indeed, colonists' continuing preoccupation with the founding of new, privately owned farms militated against anything more than an ephemeral alliance with any independent Xhosa authority and embroiled the first British governors of the Cape in two further conflicts along the frontier during the 1790s.¹⁵

Even the Cape's relatively impoverished frontier colonists were determined to create and maintain social boundaries founded on ethnicity and 'race', rather than perpetuate a balance of power that was conducive to the transgression of such boundaries. In other words, cross-frontier borrowings, exchanges and alliances with the Khoesan and Xhosa were, from the start, conceived of as being temporary measures, engaged in until such a time as colonists felt able to construct more robust systems of white dominance. The colonial community on the eastern frontier may not have conceived of their intended subordinates in the biologically determinist ways that would later characterise white racism, but they nevertheless shared both an established discourse and a political project of ethnic superiority.¹⁶ However much Afrikaner farmers and Khoesan came to resemble one another in clothing, language and material culture, and however enduring were the political alliances forged between colonial commandos and Xhosa chiefdoms, relations between these self-defined groups in the late eighteenth century were 'founded on violence' and 'shot through with fear'.¹⁷ This was the over-determining characteristic of the frontier zone that the British would inherit for a second, and more permanent time, in 1806.

British governmentality and the problem of the Cape frontier

After 1806, the turbulent margins of the Cape became the responsibility of a new set of officials embedded within a novel framework of global power. In this section I will consider on the one hand the implications of the frontier for a British discourse of colonial governmentality, and on the other hand, the effects of that discourse on the frontier zone.

Colonial governmentality

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Britain's 'second empire', along with British identity as a whole, was being forged out of the wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France.¹⁸ Having seized the empire, it was the military who also governed it. As in other new colonies, government in the Cape after 1806 rested in the hands of officers with aristocratic connections, most of them having served under Wellington in the Peninsular campaign or at Waterloo. These men were participants in the 'network of relationships and an *esprit de corps* which carried the military, diplomatic and colonial services into the Victorian Age'.¹⁹ They had received their administrative appointments in much the same way as they had obtained their military commissions, through their ability to exploit aristocratic connections 'at home' and in the colonies. One of their major functions was to oversee strategically placed garrisons (the Cape had 6,500 troops in 1810 – more than at Gibraltar or Malta). This meant that their ties with

the British army's headquarters at Horse Guards in London, were as significant as those with the War and Colonial Office.²⁰

Early nineteenth-century governors thus comprised a globally distributed network centred upon two metropolitan hubs – military and civilian. The policies that they implemented in any one place can be conceived of only in the light of those adopted elsewhere, since they reflected both what Bayly calls a 'style' that was established for the governance of new colonies in general, and the British ruling class's own, shifting domestic concerns.²¹ Together, military governors and War and Colonial Office officials formulated their own rules and procedures, their own knowledges of contrasting colonial situations and of their relation to metropolitan ones. Their construction of a coherent system of representation was facilitated by the close-knit nature of colonial officialdom, itself partly the result of the few men considered able enough to govern colonies who made themselves available for the purpose, given the other opportunities available in Britain itself.²² One administrator would often serve in a variety of colonial locations during his career, carrying his package of favourite techniques with him, and building a 'knowledge' of colonial situations in general.²³ He could also transport his own small-scale network of patronage, with acolytes transferred between postings.²⁴ Despite their global distribution, as Cell points out, 'there was enough real or imagined similarity among local administrators to enable reasonably coherent books to be written on the subject of the forms and processes of colonial government'.²⁵ Colonial governmentality, then, was being constructed by these military and often aristocratic men as a discourse of its own.

This discourse may have been constructed within a colonial frame of reference and with regard to colonial conditions, but it was always conceived of very much in relation to metropolitan preoccupations. The period from 1806 to 1815 was one in which the land-owning aristocracy and gentry who comprised the British governing class, were besieged. They were fighting not only Napoleon's armies on the Continent, but also political radicalism and unrest 'at home'. In Britain, 'apocalyptic fears concerning . . . invasion, blockade, food shortage, national debt, a mad king, and a general apprehension [to which we will return below] that England was about to be singled out for divine punishment', were interwoven with destabilising economic currents.²⁶ Fearing that an established ethos of paternalistic, aristocratic hegemony was collapsing under the strain, Tory governments were reacting with repression, cracking down on public meetings and political agitation with a series of legislative and judicial measures.²⁷ From the local autocracy of the landowner and squire to the representation of landed wealth in the parliamentary parties, the British establishment was trying to construct a 'revivified conservative regime'.²⁸

The metropolitan elite's emphasis on stabilising fraught relations between apparently 'naturally' defined social classes immediately became the concern of colonial governors too, if only so that the newly expanded empire could