

The British in South Africa: Is history repeating itself?

by David Cherry

Frontiers—The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People

by Noël Mostert

Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1992

1,355 pages, hardbound, \$35

Frontiers is a literary-historical contribution to the struggle for black power in South Africa, by a liberal Canadian of South African Huguenot origin. Author Noël Mostert refers to the current drive for black power as the “final historic evolution” of the social drama chronicled in his book. European oppression, he might say, in its self-imposed blindness, has led to present circumstances in which Africans seem poised to take back control of the lands their forefathers ruled. But that is a proposition to which we shall return.

This vast book is a history of principally British relations with the Xhosa people from the earliest contact. (The “Xh” in Xhosa is pronounced with a click of the tongue against the palate.) At the book’s midpoint we are in the 1820s, and three-quarters of the way through, in 1848. The story comes to a climax in the 1850s, to which the last quarter is devoted: It is a drama in which Xhosa society—suffering from the endless depredations of the British—eventually committed suicide through a messianic movement promising an end to the European presence if all Xhosa would kill their own cattle and destroy their granaries.

Frontiers is vividly and masterfully written. Mostert has

consulted a vast literature of printed and manuscript sources, and weaves quotations into his narrative abundantly and well. The reproductions of contemporary etchings, and photographs from the 1850s, are an outstanding collection. This is not analytical history, but narrative almost entirely. Because Mostert is usually sensitive to the subtleties of human character, he is able to bring alive Africans, missionaries, and British administrators alike. Fortunately, the Boers do not play a large role in his story, because when Mostert thinks of them collectively, he sees only their weaknesses, and these appear in an erroneous, stereotyped form.

The defect in the genre of the non-fiction prose epic is the “television effect.” Because the narrative is graphic, lively, and continuous, and is packed with information, the reader comes to feel that he has the whole picture. There is no suggestion that there might be another viewpoint, apart from the differing viewpoints of the actual protagonists immersed in the events. In fact, the genre does not appear to provide a viewpoint at all: The facts seem to “speak for themselves.” To break this illusion, the reader need only consult one or two other works, which may be chosen from Mostert’s bibliography, and the *Dictionary of South African Biography*.

The British objective

Mostert demonstrates the evil brutality of the British imperial onslaught. The British objective with respect to the Xhosa—well documented by Mostert—was to shatter Xhosan social and political organization in order to put Xhosan bodies to work as helots, provided the conquest could be accomplished at little cost to the British Treasury.

Imperialism had to pay for itself and turn a profit. Moreover, troops were needed in India.

The British therefore carried out a two-pronged attack. On one hand, they occupied more and more of the lands on which the Xhosa depended for grazing their cattle. (The inevitable consequence was theft by Xhosans of Europeans' cattle. The British did not acknowledge their own taking of the land as theft, but cattle rustling by the Xhosa *was* theft, they said, and justified punishment, recompense, or both.) On the other hand, the British attacked the rule of the Xhosan chiefs, claiming that the institution was the linchpin of everything that was backward about the Xhosa. In fact, it was the linchpin of Xhosan society, the good with the bad.

How was this attack carried out? The most noble, compassionate, and intelligent chief of the period, Paramount Chief Hintsá, of strong character and moral authority, was made the target of character assassination for the considerable number of Xhosans whom the British could influence by divide-and-conquer methods. Later, in the Sixth Frontier War (1834-35), Hintsá felt compelled to offer himself and his son Sarili as hostages to the British. After systematic humiliation, Hintsá was shot to death in a highly dubious "escape attempt."

Another element in the attack on the chiefs was the British-inspired "anti-witchcraft movement." The chiefs complained that the movement undermined them. How little it had to do with actually ending witchcraft may be surmised from the claim of one of the movement's leaders, Mlanjeni: Mlanjeni claimed to have the power to cause great harm to any practitioner of witchcraft who came near him! Since British colonialism has always had a use for witchcraft, the chiefs' complaint that they were being undermined by this anti-witchcraft movement probably expressed the only real purpose of the movement.

Over the years, the ultimate weapon for crushing the Xhosa was thought to be the obtaining of unconditional surrender by seizing their cattle and torching their crops at harvest time. Sir George Grey, home secretary in Lord John Russell's cabinet, proposed the execution of this strategy to Cape Colony governor Sir Harry Smith in November 1851. The Xhosa responded by driving their cattle into inaccessible places in the bush. They were severely pressed by the warfare of the early 1850s, but avoided surrender.

In this hard-pressed condition, came the cattle-killing messianism.

In 1856, a young Xhosan woman, Nongqawuse, in the capacity of a medium for her witchdoctor uncle Mhalakaza, reported commands from the ancestors that the Xhosa must kill all of their cattle, destroy their granaries, cease their planting and harvesting activities, and abandon all witchcraft. Once accomplished, two suns would rise over the Amatola mountains and collide. The English would then walk (or be driven) into the sea, which would divide to reveal a road along which they would march back to the

place of creation, where Satan would dispose of them. A great resurrection of the ancestors would be accompanied by herds of new cattle emerging from beneath the Earth. Those who had not accepted the commands of the ancestors would not be among the risen. With the resurrection would come healing of the living and restoration of youth. In the new dispensation, no one would have to work, for all needs, even household goods, would emerge from the ground.

In the summer of 1856 the cattle-killing began, continuing into 1857, as chiefs succumbed to pressures and threats. The day of resurrection, Feb. 18, 1857, came and went. Virtually no cattle now remained. Twenty thousand Xhosa died in the agonies of starvation. Another 30,000 straggled westward to the white towns and farms, where, in exchange for food, they became a servile labor force. The chiefs were picked up on various charges, convicted in kangaroo courts, and sent to Robben Island until their power was broken (the last were returned in 1869). The British instituted a system of salaried chiefs supervised by magistrates. Xhosan society was completely crushed.

Where Mostert fails

Because the cattle-killing achieved British objectives so perfectly and with such parsimony, one is driven to ask whether the British themselves could have shaped the cattle-killing messianism from Xhosan ideational materials. This is, however, a question that Mostert will not consider. He is willing to devote a thousand pages and more to spelling out British brutality; but he will not entertain the question of methods that are not entirely overt.

Did the British shape the thinking of their victims to their own crucial advantage? Would that be an unkind accusation? Scarcely. Mostert has already shown us that they sought to break the Xhosa by starvation.

While prophets earlier than Nongqawuse—such as the previously mentioned Mlanjeni and the even earlier genius Nxele—had prescribed the killing of *some* cattle as sacrifice, that was conceptually poles apart from killing *all* cattle and destroying all granaries. It was the difference between spending some wealth and abolishing the means of existence. While Nxele considered (and rejected) a messianic "solution" to Xhosan suffering, the consequence of his messianism would have been his own death, but not the destruction of Xhosan society itself.

There are several other indications pointing toward a British role in the authorship of the cattle-killing messianism, as the following account will show.

While there had been a concerted attempt to capture the earlier prophet Mlanjeni, who had preached the offering of some cattle as sacrifice, there was no attempt to arrest Mhalakaza or Nongqawuse, who called for the destruction of all cattle and granaries.

The British authorities denounced the proposal to kill all cattle, but intelligence chief John Maclean, who was "coldly

detached" and unsympathetic toward the Xhosa, denounced it provocatively, in a "violently bellicose" manner. A case of "denounce what you wish your adversary to adopt"? District Commissioner Charles Brownlee, who had been raised among the Xhosa, on the other hand, sought diligently to dissuade the chiefs.

In late August 1856, Paramount Chief Sarili, son of the murdered Hintsá, who had committed himself to the cattle-killing, sent for Brownlee. Sarili was apparently having second thoughts, and wanted help in arranging a way out. Brownlee was eager to go, and Chief Sandile, who opposed the prophecy, was willing to go with him. At this point, the Xhosa still had large herds, and the catastrophe could have been averted. Brownlee required permission from Gov. Sir George Grey (not the home secretary of the same name) and Maclean. This permission was refused! Sarili soon resumed the killing of cattle.

Later, when it seemed that also Sandile would succumb to hysteria, Brownlee sought permission from Grey and Maclean to intervene with him. Permission was again refused.

Grey and Maclean insisted upon a "war plot" explanation of the movement. They claimed that the chiefs planned, by way of the cattle-killing, to force their people to unite in war against the Europeans for sheer survival. If Grey and Maclean really believed that, they would not have denied Brownlee permission to intervene with Sarili and Sandile.

Brownlee could see little evidence that war was being planned, and pointed out that the Xhosa never went to war in times of scarcity. Moreover, Brownlee was keenly aware that for the Xhosa, "Cattle are the race; they being dead, the race dies." Cattle were the chief form of wealth and a major form of prestige, and bride price was paid in cattle. For Brownlee, with his intimate knowledge of the Xhosa, the movement was inexplicable. "The whole thing is so much involved in mystery," he wrote. Mostert acknowledges that "there were sufficient doubts even among the most energetic killers of cattle to create great mental disturbance."

Believers were most numerous where cattle lung-sickness was widespread. The lung-sickness was killing off entire herds in some areas. Perhaps this was understood in those areas as a confirmation of the prophecy, that the cattle had to die. The lung-sickness had been imported from Europe with a shipment of Friesian bulls in 1854. But it did not touch other areas. Intimidation, including murder, was used by believers to force the cattle-killing on those who disbelieved.

The personal fate of Nongqawuse also contains a hint of British meddling. What was her fate? As the cattle-killing went to completion, large numbers of starving Xhosa appealed to the European farmers and townsmen for succor. Official policy did not prescribe charity for the starving Xhosa—they could accept wages for laboring jobs or they could starve. But Nongqawuse was taken into the home of

Maj. John Gawler and his wife, before being moved for a while to Robben Island for protective custody. Gawler was not another Charles Brownlee, with sympathy for the Xhosa. Why was Nongqawuse singled out, instead of being treated as just one more African?

With time, the opinion became general among surviving Xhosa that Nongqawuse had been the cause of the catastrophe, and she became a pariah, although left to live in peace. She died in 1905. It is therefore strange to find that in 1937, the mission press at Lovedale issued propaganda to make her a heroine. It is a play by H.I.E. Dhlomo, entitled *The Girl Who Killed to Save (Nongquase the Liberator)*. The play reaches its climax with Nongqawuse's pronouncement that the mass starvation of the Xhosa was a blessed liberation from the sufferings of the flesh.

In 1950, the superintendent of Grey's hospital in King William's Town, A.W. Burton, wrote that the cattle-killing "proved the greatest blow witchcraft and heathenism ever received and out of its evils came richer ethical and spiritual values and an appreciative sense of the importance and dignity of labor and need for progressive development among a people emerging from darkness into light." But the same author wrote that an aged Xhosan reported in 1936 that "certain Europeans" were behind the cattle-killing movement, according to his father and grandfather.

There is no room for doubt that the British possessed in the 1850s some capability to manipulate Xhosa thought. That is shown by the existence of the Xhosan anti-witchcraft movement. It is probably also to be found in a certain "countergang" to the British attack on the chiefs, an anti-European movement that called itself Young Kaffirland (the British called the Africans Kaffirs, borrowing Arab traders' vocabulary). Unfortunately, Mostert makes no mention of Young Kaffirland. In the 1850s, wherever one encounters Young Italy, Young America, Young France, Young Germany, even Young Bosnia, one finds a British-Mazzinian creation. What then was Young Kaffirland?

How British manipulation could have worked

How could the British have shaped the cattle-killing messianism? Was there a framework of relationships and events within which such a shaping were possible? The witchdoctor Mhalakaza, under whose direction Nongqawuse had received the prophecy from the ancestors, had spent 1849-53 in "a curious relationship" with Anglican Archdeacon N.J. Merriman of Grahamstown. The eccentric Merriman, described by Lord Robert Cecil as free of all cant, went great distances on foot with Mhalakaza as servant and boon companion, sometimes covering 40 miles a day. Mhalakaza was intensely interested in Christianity and Merriman taught him, and confirmed him, in the Church of England.

Mhalakaza returned to Paramount Chief Sarili's territory in 1853. Merriman wrote—and Sir George Grey noted—that Mhalakaza was prone to sophisticated and detailed visions.

(It is not necessary to suppose a wittingly evil role for Merri- man, but only for those such as Governor Grey and Maclean who would have used his information. Grey was, incidentally, a serious student of “indigenous cultures.”)

Then in 1855, a most unusual development took place. A half-dozen prophets—unnamed by Mostert but not including Mhalakaza—arose in scattered events, all calling for the wholesale killing of cattle and destruction of granaries. We are invited by Mostert to believe that this was simply a sociological phenomenon, a predictable response to the intense compression imposed on the Xhosa by the British. That is impossible! Perhaps it could be believed if a single prophet had appeared with this message. But for five prophets to appear in rapid succession, all preaching the same radical departure from both reason and Xhosan culture, strains belief. The explanation lies rather in intelligence chief Mac-



Chief Sandile, who resisted the cattle-killing.

lean’s extensive network of spies and informants—there were hundreds of them—maintained by rewards and threats. Such a capability is always simultaneously a means for disinformation and manipulation. Mostert acknowledges that Maclean’s work was both intelligence-gathering and manipulation. Maclean was behind these strange prophets, but the prophecies did not take hold, because no chief would endorse them.

Archdeacon Merriman visited Sarili during this year of the prophets. What did they talk about? Sarili never showed any interest in Christianity. Sarili had many of the outstanding characteristics of his father Hintsa, but the British must have known that he was also the victim of a sense of hopeless desperation. He had been a helpless witness to the murder of his father by the British, and, “strangely, his heirs had died, one after another, the last of them, a boy of 12, in 1853.” Sarili was the target because of his moral authority and his utter indifference to European culture and religion: The prophecy could not appear to come from Xhosans who were seen as British-influenced. Some months after the visit from Merriman, Sarili called upon Mhalakaza the witchdoctor to ask his help, in light of the critical situation of the Xhosan people.

Nongqawuse’s first encounter with the ancestors followed in April or May 1856. The prophecy took hold because she—and later Sarili himself, among others—reported not merely hearing the voices of ancestors, but seeing them appear before them, returned from the dead. Mostert writes that there is little doubt that such events were often engineered.

All of these features testify to the British capability to engineer the prophecy and the cattle-killing.

To avoid seeing this, Mostert has to ignore or smooth over the odd features and anomalies in his own account, and fails to mention additional such features mentioned in earlier accounts. He goes so far as to express surprise that Charles Brownlee, with his intimate knowledge of the Xhosa, could not see the Xhosan suicide as a natural response to the British onslaught. Isn’t it normal to commit suicide when faced with a mortal threat? That is Mostert’s view in simplest terms. He ascribes Brownlee’s incomprehension to “the narrowness of the colonial viewpoint.”

Mostert’s failure is not a personal one, however. It has been “politically incorrect” in the highest degree, since long before that apt expression appeared, even to ask about covert actions of governments of this particular kind—more so than to ask about government-sponsored assassinations. If such questions became permissible, one might be faced with the discomfort of asking how the United States, a once-great nation dedicated in liberty, had in a few short years abandoned the Christian conception of love and its work-ethic corollary, in favor of hedonism, or how it had abandoned the economic theory of those who built the country for the Adam Smith theory of those who attacked and disrupted it,

and assassinated its Presidents.²

British of a different stripe

Scots missionary John Philip and his plans for southern Africa are seen by Mostert as something of a model of what the British role should have been. Here Mostert may be right. Philip imagined a series of African settlements under British protection led by missionaries, to which Europeans in general would not have access, and on which they could not encroach. His idea was, apparently, not to exclude European settlement in Africa, but to prevent the corruption of Africans by the immoral tendencies in European society. His approach seems to have much in common with the truly Christian faction in the early United States that fought the evil treatment of the Indians here, but lost out to their British-influenced countrymen. Both efforts may have learned something from the Spanish Jesuits in 17th-century Ibero-America, who were the pioneers of this kind of arrangement.

Frontiers also tells the story of the Kat River Settlement of the Khoikhoi (Hottentots), since its history was closely intertwined with that of the Xhosa. It was founded by the leader of the Cape Boers, Andries Stockenstrom, under British government sponsorship, and was shaped by a missionary associated with Philip, James Read. Education was pursued with a passion there, starting with the three-year-olds. It is a joy to learn that young Khoikhoi girls demanded to be taught classical Greek, just like their brothers. But the settlement was really doomed from the beginning: The Khoikhoi were meant to be auxiliaries to British troops. The settlement was founded on lands from which the Xhosa had been expelled, and was strategically located as a buffer, between the British and the Xhosa.

When much of the settlement arose in rebellion in alliance with the Xhosa in 1851, British troops were astounded to find the Khoikhoi coming into battle against them, triumphantly singing evangelical hymns such as "Awake my soul and with the sun, Thy daily course of duty run." The British themselves had little truck with religious observance, according to Mostert.

Since Philip had some clout in Parliament, he and Read may have imagined that their work had a chance of succeeding. In fact it was tolerated only because it served a purpose for the imperial policy that they opposed. The Kat River rebellion ended their illusion and their dream.

The Xhosa today

To many of this book's readers it will appear that *Frontiers*, as an exposé of British and European duplicity and brutality, provides a justification for the impending advent of black power in South Africa. There is in fact a connection between the history disclosed in the book and the events now unfolding, but that cannot be it, since black power is not actually imminent in South Africa. The concept of "black power" was invented by the enemies of national sovereignty

as a deliberate sleight of hand, and when black power is declared in South Africa, then will South Africans truly be helpless. South Africans are suffering again today from having their thinking shaped to the advantage of their adversary.

Freedom for black Africans, as for the rest of us, lies in the achievement of sovereignty of nations, nations bound together by a community of principle. Otherwise we are stuck with a downward economic spiral in the geopolitical framework we have now, a collection of pseudo-sovereignities ruled in fact by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the U.N.'s blue helmets.

The liberation movements have typically said, "We must win our *political* independence first. Then we can worry about economic development." But the typical result is "independent" Zimbabwe—independent in name only, because political power and economic power are inextricably intertwined: Political power flows from the "business end" of the steel mill that Zimbabwe is not allowed to have. IMF conditionalities do not allow it.

If black South Africans build a movement to save their country from its present destruction by the IMF and its policies—whether the present government likes it or not—they will thereby build enduring and useful forms of political power. The general idea would not have seemed strange to the original (non-communist) outlook of South Africa's African National Congress, could its founders have been confronted with the facts of today's world economy. Conversely, necklacing by liberators who kill to save—and the other forms of terrorism embraced by the ANC in South Africa today—never stopped the IMF, for governments can be induced to use such terror to impose the IMF's dictates.

A further sign in the South African case that black power is a fraud is that two British principles for manipulating former colonies are operative: that power be handed over to a tribal group that is a minority, and that it be a docile tribe if possible. The ANC is dominated by none other than the minority Xhosa, so completely crushed by the British in the 1850s, rather than the majority Zulu, who were never made so docile, and whose chief, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the British have everywhere stigmatized as a "CIA agent."

Notes

1. Modern anthropology, largely a creation of British pseudo-science, asserts even today that there are "positive functions of witchcraft." The fraud involved is exposed in Donald G. Kennedy, "Psychosocial Dynamics of Witchcraft Systems," *Intl. J. Social Psychiatry* XV:3 (Summer 1969), pp. 165-178.

2. For another African instance—and also an Asian one—in which the British shaped the outlook of their victims to their own advantage, see "Low Intensity Operations: The Reesian Theory of War," by Michael Minnicino, *The Campaigner*, April 1974, and two works cited therein: Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*, 1971, and Kitson's *Gangs and Countergangs*, 1960. *The Campaigner* was the theoretical journal of the LaRouche movement in the 1970s. (Back issues are available from Ben Franklin Booksellers, 107 S. King St., Leesburg, VA 22075, 800 453-4108.)