

## Introduction

Slavery was abolished by Parliament throughout the British Empire, including the Cape Colony of southern Africa, in 1834. The Empire's former slaves suffered another four years of so-called apprenticeship before finally being freed in 1838. A short time after this, however, it became clear that for the former Cape slaves, freedom was tightly circumscribed, in some respects even illusory. This study examines the road to that outcome.

After noting the absence of a widely accepted defense of slavery based on the slaves' supposed racial inferiority, Nigel Worden and Clifton Crais ask: "How do we begin to understand the ideological shifts that allowed for a transition from master and slave to black and white in South Africa?" This question was posed in the introduction to a set of insightful essays on the effects of abolition. Contributors to that volume and others, especially Timothy Keegan, have made it clear that, their emancipation notwithstanding, most ex-slaves began their new life without an economic base on which to construct an independent existence; they would soon resume their role as an exploited labor force. They were also subsumed into a class despised by whites.<sup>1</sup>

As Worden and Crais suggest, the principal foundation of the ex-slaves' post-emancipation condition was the developing notion that people of darker complexion are naturally – that is, biologically – inferior to people of European descent. Their proper function was, therefore, as manual

<sup>1</sup> Nigel Worden and Clifton Crais, eds., *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and Its Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 23.

laborers, and they needed to be forced into that status. This was at its heart a racist ideology. How did this happen? The development of ideas about race and society does not conform to some abstract formula. These ideas are created from the unique historical circumstances in the places where they appear. Therefore, the processes differ everywhere and produce varying results, as the contrasting racial orders of the United States, Brazil, and South Africa – to take just three examples – make clear. I hope this study will contribute to an understanding of how a racial order emerged in South Africa.

Overtly racist ideas were evidently not widespread before abolition in the Cape Colony. People assumed the superiority of European culture to African – what Keegan calls an intense ethnocentrism – but they generally eschewed the notion of some biological incapacity on the part of the slaves and other nonwhites to improve. We will, therefore, examine public discourse in which supposedly innate qualities of Coloured and black people are contrasted with behavior that is either explicitly or implicitly attributed to environmental influences, especially those of the cultural environment, which would include slavery.

This may belabor the obvious, but the latter attitude acknowledges the potential for Coloureds and blacks to function competently and one day become accepted in the dominant society. Any assumption of innate inferiority does not.

In this study, we examine events and developments in the Cape Colony in the 1830s and early 1840s that might have influenced the transformation of white people's notions about Coloured and black people, and how those notions were expressed. Some of these developments, such as the 1834 frontier war and two disease epidemics, were coincidental to the ending of slavery. But they contributed to the developing racist mentality nonetheless. I hope, therefore, that we can learn more about how racist attitudes took shape, step by step, in the decade or so after abolition.

An important part of these explorations is a description of how the apprenticeship regime worked. It illustrates the first flush of optimism as the ex-slaves and their white allies looked forward to a new and better existence. It also shows that there were institutional factors built into the apprenticeship system that frustrated freed slaves' attempts to integrate themselves into the mainstream of colonial culture in any role other than menial laborers. This is important. Their failure to improve themselves in a manner satisfactory to whites both contributed to and was, no doubt, partially caused by the growing racism.

*Introduction*

3

As a result, former slaves were absorbed by the preexisting Coloured community, which was already rigidly subordinated in Cape society. Freed slaves, being dark-skinned, looked more like members of the Coloured community than they did whites, and in the 1830s physical appearance came to trump all other qualities in determining one's place in Cape society. We explore the ways this happened in this book.

This is also a decisive stage in the development of the community of Coloured people. Coloureds came to form an official population group in twentieth-century South Africa but had their origins in the early days of the colony. Manumitted slaves, other free blacks, and the remnants of the region's aboriginal Khoisan population formed the group's early core. Many were products of race mixing. While slavery existed, there were significant interactions between Coloureds and slaves. When freed slaves joined the Coloured community, it almost doubled in size and became much more heterogeneous. In 1840, there were about 80,000 Coloureds in the colony.<sup>2</sup> There are Coloureds all over South Africa today, but most live in Cape Town and its vicinity. Lately the propriety of the Coloured designation has been questioned: One organization, the Initiative for the Restoration of First Indigenous People of Southern Africa, has argued for its elimination from national discourse.<sup>3</sup> At the time of this writing, the effects of its activity are unclear.

This study has another, only partly tangential, purpose. I was born, grew up, and continue to live in the southern United States. The legacy of slavery still weighs heavily here, and I cannot help pondering the similarities and differences between my region and South Africa. My own inclinations, of course, are not reason enough to subject others to such a comparison. In fact, I believe that the enterprise produces some useful insights about the circumstances of ex-slaves after abolition. There are a number of factors, explored in Chapter 8, that make the South and the Cape similar enough, I believe, to be worthy of comparison. The most important is that the ratio of slaves to whites was similar, but there are others.

The contrasts, however, are stark as well, and they reveal some interesting features of post-emancipation Cape culture. Emancipation was induced by London but occurred relatively peacefully in the Cape Colony.

<sup>2</sup> See table in Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, "The Structure of European Domination at the Cape," in Elphick and Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1840* (2nd ed., Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 524.

<sup>3</sup> Natasha Prince, "Do Away with Term 'Coloured' – Khoisan Group," *Cape Argus*, March 18, 2009.

In the United States, it was forced on the South by the federal government in Washington after a bloody civil war but was followed by a lengthy, extremely violent period in which former slaves suffered horribly. Why were the outcomes so different?

An explanation has many components, and they are outlined in Chapter 8. Most seem relatively straightforward. There is, however, at least one contrast between the two regions that requires further explanation: the fact that in the South, much of the violence was justified by the widespread, almost universal fear among whites that freed male slaves were hell-bent on raping white women. There was no such hysteria at the Cape in the post-emancipation period, even though rape scares occurred later in the nineteenth century in other parts of South Africa. I think this contrast is worth exploring, for it prompts not only discussions of the effects of emancipation on rape and sexual attitudes, but also of the relationship between race and honor. These factors helped create the environment in which the former slaves built their new lives and profoundly influenced the development of the Coloured culture of which they became a part.

A comparison with other British slave-holding colonies, mainly those of the West Indies, suggests itself also, but I have chosen not to do this for several reasons. First, a crucial difference between the West Indies and both the Cape and the U.S. South is that white population of the West Indies was proportionately much smaller. For example, former slaves and free blacks made up an overwhelming 95 percent of the Jamaican population and 85 percent of that of Barbados.<sup>4</sup> The dynamics of social relations in the islands were thus fundamentally different from those at the Cape and in the South. In addition, a foray into the West Indian situation would extend the tangent of analysis a bit too far for the overall purposes of this project.

Slaves were first introduced into the Cape Colony in 1658, only six years after the colony was established by the Dutch East India Company. During the Napoleonic Wars, the colony was handed back and forth from the Dutch to the British, who claimed the colony permanently in 1806. From 1658 until 1808, the time of the beginning of the campaign against the slave trade by the British, the slave population increased steadily. After 1808, the number of slaves grew more slowly. In that year,

<sup>4</sup> William Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830–1865* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976), 13.

*Introduction*

5

there were 29,843 slaves in the colony.<sup>5</sup> By 1834, the year of abolition, they numbered 34,241 out of a total population of 145,042, which also included whites and free blacks,<sup>6</sup> the latter of whom defined as a people of at least partial non-European descent. Slaves thus comprised about 24 percent of the population. In the rural regions in 1780, only 3.5 percent of farmers owned no slaves at all, and nearly 30 percent owned ten or more.<sup>7</sup> (I have not found similar figures for the 1830s.)

Slaves could be found throughout the colony, although they were heavily concentrated in the west. The western districts – the Cape (including Cape Town), Stellenbosch, and Worcester – contained 24,708 slaves, 68 percent of the total in 1834.<sup>8</sup> In the east, if one excludes Albany district, where the largely British settler population had been forbidden to own slaves, the smallest number of slaves was in Uitenhage, where there were about 1,300.<sup>9</sup> By 1795, the colony as a whole encompassed about 125,000 square miles;<sup>10</sup> it expanded only slightly to the north during the next several decades. Therefore, except for the region around Cape Town, the colony was sparsely populated. In 1835, Cape Town proper contained 19,242 persons.<sup>11</sup>

The transition from slave to quasi-free labor is a significant watershed in South Africa's history since Europeans began arriving in 1652. It is comparable to the change from a largely agrarian to an industrial society at the end of the nineteenth century and that from Apartheid to democracy. The development of racial attitudes that came to dominate South African culture, the growth and elaboration of the Coloured community, and the effects of the Great Trek, which was prompted in part by the granting of freedom to slaves and other Coloureds between 1828 and 1838, were changes sufficiently momentous to warrant consideration alongside those two other developments. I hope this study will successfully explain why.

<sup>5</sup> Shell, Robert C.-H., *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 448.

<sup>6</sup> *South African Directory and Almanac 1835* (Cape Town: A.S. Robertson, 1835), 130.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Guelke, "Freehold Farmers and Frontier Settlers, 1652–1780," in Elphick and Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping*, 83.

<sup>8</sup> James Armstrong and Richard Elphick, "The Slaves, 1652–1834," *ibid.*, 135.

<sup>9</sup> *South African Directory*, 130.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Clement Duly, *British Land Policy at the Cape, 1795–1844: A Study of Administrative Procedures in the Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968), 3.

<sup>11</sup> *South African Directory*, 130.

The primary evidence on which the study is based comes from contemporary newspapers and other publications; official letters, dispatches, and reports; missionary correspondence; travellers' accounts and participants' memoirs; and court records. The bias in these sources is obvious. They are almost entirely written by whites, many of whom had axes to grind. To be sure, there is in some of these sources – for example, in judicial testimonies and depositions – evidence of Coloured and black attitudes. One problem with court documents, however, is that these statements are filtered through the media of translators and court clerks. Rob Turrell adds that, at least in the 1840s, records were not the work of court stenographers but of the judges themselves, as they “laboriously wrote down the translated evidence in English.”<sup>12</sup> Often the sophistication of witnesses' language makes it evident that the translator or the clerk is interpreting rather than recording testimony verbatim. And we cannot, of course, rule out mistakes. I know of no evidence, however, that translators, judges, or clerks consciously distorted the meaning of anyone's statements. I hope I have handled these sources with appropriate caution. Nevertheless, the court documents give Coloureds at least some voice. If more non-European sources were available to me, much of value would undoubtedly be added to this work, and, perhaps, much altered.

#### A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Discussing the South African population always requires wrestling with nomenclature. Race itself is a complicated term. Racial categories, for good reason, have little validity in natural or biological science, but they are regrettably inevitable in social science, because many people believe they are valid and behave as though they are. What does or does not constitute a race varies from one culture to another and is the result of historical developments, not biological imperative. Therefore, when referring to race, I often use such phrases as “racial attitudes” or “notions of race” to indicate that these come from people's minds, not scientific reality.

The Apartheid state made the term Coloured an official racial category, which automatically renders it suspect. It is not artificial, however, as this study and many others show. The various people it represents existed as a discrete, but heterogeneous, community long before the advent of Apartheid, and the word “Coloured” has been used to describe them for

<sup>12</sup> Rob Turrell, “Slaves, Race, and Rape.” Review of Scully's *Liberating the Family?*, *Southern African Review of Books*, June 1998.

*Introduction*

7

a long time. They were conscious of, and many came to accept, their group identity. In fact, this study discusses the addition of one group, the freed slaves, to a Coloured community that was developing its own unique features and integrity.

In this book, I use the term “Coloured,” with an uppercase C, to refer to several groups: descendants of Khoisan, who were the aboriginal population of the Cape Colony; freed slaves and their descendants; and other putatively mixed-descent people who, over time, also became publicly identified as Coloured. We should add that the slave community itself was extraordinarily heterogeneous and thus impossible accurately to classify racially, although this study shows that many people tried nevertheless. Slaves’ origins could be found in eastern and western Africa; Madagascar and other Indian Ocean Islands; modern-day Indonesia (large numbers, because of the Dutch colony there); and south and east Asia, including even Japan and China.

The primary sources spell the term both “coloured” and “colored.” I have tried to render spellings as accurately as I can. I have no idea about the cause of the difference.

The other nonwhite people in the colony are Bantu-speaking Africans, those from kingdoms that originated to the east and northeast of the Colony. They generally had not been slaves. For them I usually use the term “black,” with a lowercase b, because I treat the whites, meaning people of apparent European descent, the same way. In modern South Africa, “Coloured” seems often to be rendered with an uppercase C, whereas no dominant pattern seems evident for “black” and “white.” Undoubtedly some will disagree with this procedure, but this would probably be true of any tack one takes in this complicated topic.