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978-0-521-10959-8 - The Scramble for Southern Africa, 1877-1895: The politics of partition reappraised

D. M. Schreuder

Excerpt

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## Introduction and argument

'Once embarked on the fatal policy of establishing a frontier in South Africa and defending that frontier by force, there seems to be neither rest nor peace till we follow our flying enemies across the Congo and plant the British standard on the walls of Timbuctoo. To subdue one tribe is only to come in contact with another equally fierce, impracticable, and barbarous . . . The theory of war is that it should be the mother of peace, but in South Africa we merely seem to carry on war in order to make it a stepping stone to another.'

Editorial in *The Times*, 28 February 1853.

South Africa was one of the great 'Questions' which strained the ingenuity and conscience of the makers of British external policy throughout most of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Like the enduring 'Eastern Question', or the emerging 'Indian Problem', it proved resistant to any enduring or just 'solution'. Not only was the South African Question bound up with the defence of vital British interests in international politics, but it was also increasingly and intimately concerned with the internal history of the peoples and societies of this vast 'frontier world'. Indeed, so intractable did the Question appear to be by the 1880s – the centre of our period of concern here – that Gladstone, as the British premier, could speak despairingly of the issue as the 'one unsolved, and perhaps unsolvable problem of our colonial system', and depict policy towards the region and its inhabitants as 'a history of difficulties, continual and unthought of.'<sup>2</sup>

This book is about one critical phase in that 'history of difficulties'. Its focus is the period of the great European Scramble for Africa 1877–95, years which witnessed a massive struggle for final hegemony and resources on the veld. These crucial events represented the South African version of the more general Partition of Africa by the agencies of Western expansion. And that African Scramble was, of course, part of an even larger assault by the geo-political forces of the New Imperialism on the undeveloped world beyond Europe.<sup>3</sup>

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In his pioneer history, *The Partition of Africa* (London, 1895), J. S. Keltie wrote – a little breathlessly in the aftermath of the event – that during ‘the last ten years there has been a mad rush and nearly the whole Continent has been gobbled up’.<sup>4</sup> The late-Victorians were pre-eminent in that ‘mad rush’ for Africa. Between 1882 and 1898 over 70 million Africans were politically incorporated into systems of British rule and over-rule, at a cost of some 15p each.<sup>5</sup> By 1895 Southern Africa (including ‘Zambesia’) had contributed over a million square miles to that sequence of conquest, and perhaps as many as 5 million inhabitants (including half a million settlers) – as well as a unique mixture of economic resources, administrative problems and dilemmas in power politics.<sup>6</sup>

The origins of this particular upheaval in African politics were less easy to define than its manifestations. Since Keltie’s initial ‘history’ the Partition has certainly not lacked either critics or analysts – the two roles sometimes coming together, as in J. A. Hobson’s famous polemic *Imperialism* (1902) written after personal experience in South Africa. Yet if the debate on the Scramble has grown ever more complex and sophisticated, reflecting both the complexity of the politics of the Partition and the differing perspectives on imperialism in an age of ‘decolonisation’, we are not necessarily any closer to a generally accepted and unequivocal explanation or thesis for the events.<sup>7</sup> Few scholars would admit to sharing Lord Salisbury’s laconic view, ‘I do not know the cause of it’. But few again would now suggest anything less than a pluralistic thesis – embracing European developments, African politics and the inter-relationship between them – as an ultimately satisfying historical explanation of a geo-political sequence of change in Africa embracing international forces and an entire continent over the course of nearly two decades of world history.

In this extended essay I have worked from two modest presumptions about that historiographical debate; namely, that if we are to make any sense of the tangle of the Partition we shall have to examine it in reasonably manageable regional components; and that we shall probably have to study with care the humdrum piece-meal process of expansion itself before we can advance larger claims for the relative potency of particular expansive forces or ideological factors. The result, in this instance, is a close regional case-study of narrative and analysis, with what might be termed a largely ‘extra-European’ focus of attention. I have not consciously neglected the play of high politics in the cabinets and chancelleries of Europe. But I have thought it vitally important to examine also the immediate effects of these interplays when translated into immediate action in Southern Africa itself. The interaction of forces and societies within the geographical environment of Africa south of the Zambesi is revealing of the degree to which European expan-

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sion in the age of the New Imperialism was not merely a function of continental politics but also of the 'frontier world' itself.

The reasons for this emphasis in the analysis are simple yet important. They go beyond a search for mere novelty of interpretation in what is, after all, an old intellectual argument about motivation and origins; or even an attempt directly to provide a modern Southern African variant of the increasingly respected scholarly view that it is in the 'periphery' that we shall run the elusive New Imperialism to ground.<sup>8</sup> Rather, in a more matter of fact way, it appeared to me as I re-examined the documentation on the Scramble for South Africa 1877–95 – something not really attempted in any singular way since R. I. Lovell's work in the 1930s<sup>9</sup> – that a concern with the metropolis alone was simply insufficient to explain the massive and final Partition after 1877. My researches suggested rather that the 'politics of the periphery' were crucial in shaping the events under study. Indeed, it seemed that the local agencies of Western expansion, increasingly interacting and clashing with the trans-frontier communities of Africans and Boers, had provided the first impetus for a general Scramble in Africa south of the Zambesi.<sup>10</sup> It was only in the 1880s that the 'New Imperialism' of European rivalry had drawn the region into a world pattern of geopolitical 'Partition', and had thereby given a new life and a new ferocity to the Scrambles for Southern Africa *already* in progress there.

As a thesis this is a much less original interpretation than it might appear. It is to be found, even if not fully explored there, in the pioneer works of Professors Walker and de Kiewiet, completed in the inter-war years. There has also, of course, been a growing recognition by recent writers on British imperialism, that the 'frontier' and 'local crisis' generally, played very important roles in the expansion of the empire in the later nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Above all, in the major writings of the authors of *Africa and the Victorians* (1961), there is to be found a highly sophisticated revisionist theory for the New Imperialism as applied to the African Partition which derives not least from basic suppositions akin to an extra-European, or 'peripheral' explanation.<sup>12</sup> First, Professors Robinson and Gallagher have argued that an economy of effort was the hall-mark of British expansion in Africa; and secondly, that it was the eruption of 'local crises' – mainly in North and South Africa – which willy-nilly pressed the Victorian statesmen, those 'reluctant imperialists', against their best pragmatic instincts and treasury concerns for 'economy', to advance to tropical empire and a leading role in the African Partition.

How, then, does this view differ from that interpretation? The answer lies not in any great pedagogical disagreement, but rather in the analysis of the 'local crisis' in South Africa. Where Robinson and Gallagher were

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largely to trace that initial 'local crisis' to the dialectical relationship of instability between metropolitan authorities and the dissident Boers of the highveld, I have suggested a somewhat broader range of the forces of change pressing upon the Imperial Factor. Above all, this discussion gives a larger place to the interaction of white and black political communities in colonial South Africa. The local contest for African resources—in terms of land, labour and minerals—is here generally taken to be a fundamental determinant of the geo-political changes. The triangle of forces identified in Professor W. M. MacMillan's notable *Bantu, Boer and Briton* (first edition, 1929) would appear to come much closer to the realities of the local power situation with which I am concerned.

Yet even that designation does not perhaps take the analysis far enough. None of those three groups were at all monolithic. It is of the essence of the explanation offered below that the local 'politics of partition' gained much of its initial momentum and character from the fragmentary nature of the state-systems of frontier South Africa, coupled with the lack of over-lordship provided by the major Great Power concerned, Great Britain. Once it is perceived that a great deal of the dynamism for political change, and territorial conquest, derives from this colonial 'periphery' itself, it naturally follows that the behaviour of the major local frontier societies—be they Cape financial and commercial classes, Natal settlers, or trekking Boer pastoralists—in company with African political communities trying to protect land and independency in the face of a growing European invasion, becomes one of real significance in any overall explanation of the long-term origins and evolution of the Scramble in Southern Africa.

It also suggests the very considerable importance of the political behaviour of the local senior British imperial officials in the various regions of South Africa. The 'men-on-the-spot' have recently been elevated to an ever larger role in the politics of the empire; South Africa in the years of the Scramble offers powerful support for this view of the significance of the 'prancing proconsuls' in the inner dynamics of British imperialism and expansion. The role of the high commissioners—notably Frere and Robinson—was clearly crucial at certain periods in delineating, shaping, and even occasionally determining, the nature of British involvement in trans-frontier South Africa. They were also vital in influencing the techniques by which British rule and authority was to be maintained. And, below the level of these senior imperial proconsuls, there was an important colonial administrative corps in the service of the settler polities of the Cape and Natal, who also occupied significant roles in the coming and carrying through of Partition. Sir Theophilus Shepstone in South-east Africa was one such crucial 'local proconsul' whose ideas, actions and strategies, were

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to have results far beyond the administrative preserve he had created in the interior of Natal. All told, British proconsular officialdom was to be yet another variant on the theme of 'the frontier' as potent inspirer of much of the politics of Partition.<sup>13</sup>

To point to the significant role played by local factors and figures in this regional version of the general African Partition in the 1880s does not in any way, of course, lessen the need to take the New Imperialism seriously as a force for conquest, and as an animator of the process of white expansion already in motion in South Africa. 'Empire' in this environment was the ultimate expression of a highly complex meshing of metropolitan and local frontier-expansion. It is, in many ways, unwise to attempt a separation of these expansive forces of metropolis and periphery. The political and economic variables which came together, to develop the final Partition in South Africa, lived in close conjunction to each other.<sup>14</sup> We do not have to choose between a totally 'Eurocentric', or completely 'Afrocentric' explanation – such is an unreal choice, given the actual way in which the Scramble for South Africa developed out of a combination of long- and short-term factors embodying both sets of forces.<sup>15</sup>

This point of argument can be shown in specific and important ways in the South African context of the Partition. I have, firstly, absolutely accepted here – as Professor Stokes has well put it – that the role of the European Powers 'has to continue to be treated as an independent variable' in the study of the Partition, not least because of the 'essentially aggressive meaning' of Western imperialism in the African case.<sup>16</sup> The changing nature of capitalist societies, their economic needs and inter-state relationships, were all vital in the rise of the New Imperialism in international politics.

Yet that very European expansive force was also to grow out of the *existing* connections between the dynamics of the Western societies and the world of the colonial periphery, and became a development of it. Great Power rivalry, the changing balance of forces in Europe and the Middle East, the rise of imperialist enthusiasms in the societies of the metropolis – all the hallmarks of the New Imperialism<sup>17</sup> – were in fact non factors neatly and discretely isolated from the world beyond Europe. The Powers were drawn to participate in a Scramble for Africa, at least in part, because they were already increasingly involved in the undeveloped world. The map of Africa, even for Bismarck, did not really begin on the Rhine: it began, and was being redrawn, in Africa itself through agencies of the Great Powers, however 'informal' in character. As D. K. Fieldhouse has amply shown, it was because of lobbies of overseas traders, missionaries, emigration societies, land and shipping companies, geographical and medical researchers, that

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much of the public concern surrounding the colonial issue in domestic politics was initiated.<sup>18</sup>

In fine, it was because there had been an ‘age of reconnaissance’, followed by a progressive involvement of European agencies in the overseas world, that major events in international history could now find their source of animation around the great ocean rims of the globe.<sup>19</sup> The later nineteenth century was to see an intensification of this process, partly through the natural expansionist dynamic of European culture and capitalism, partly because after 1870 the continental balance of power was altering in radical and significant ways.<sup>20</sup> If imperialism was part of the age of nationalism, it was also an extension of the politics of the periphery. In the far flung localities of the globe, agencies of the West were increasingly in conflict with each other; increasingly active in reshaping the cultures of indigenous societies; and generally busy enmeshing their metropolitan states in the peripheries both by their lobbying at home, and through their expansive designs on the frontiers of conquest. The age of *weltpolitik* was thus also the age of frontier politics and expansion.

On the eve of the Scramble this is exactly what was happening in colonial South Africa. The area was already rife with European agencies of empire and expansion penetrating the remaining lands, markets, resources and authority of the African polities in the region. The aims of these groups could be couched in the terms of the strategic or economic expansion of the European states in the undeveloped world. More concretely, they can be traced directly to the quest to acquire more land and labour in the development of their own colonial polities of settlement and their private commercial houses. It was as a direct result of these *local* objectives that the frontier was so restive in the 1870s, as the settler states made their last great bid for resources. By the time the Germans appeared on the South-west African coast in 1884 – so potentially bringing Great Power rivalry to South Africa generally – the British had in fact already begun a series of important interventionist initiatives in the region. Frontier disturbance in South Africa, challenging British authority, had grown beyond tolerable limits. In Whitehall, and Cape Town, it was argued by Victorian officialdom that unless these military and expansive interventions were undertaken, the area would simply relapse into an almost endless series of border wars and internecine conflicts, stretching away into the future – a direct consequence of the activities of the local frontiersmen. Put very simply, before the New Imperialism the British had already responded to the phenomenon of ‘local crisis’. This intervention was, in truth, the deepest origin of the Scramble to come.

It therefore seems to me that it is absolutely true, as the revisionist

historians of free trade imperialism have argued, that the British played their central role in the Scramble for South Africa essentially because they were concerned to deal with a colonial region ‘growing beyond their control’.<sup>21</sup> It is also vitally important to grasp, however, that the ‘local crisis’ to which the Imperial Factor was responding was not a static problem, nor one focused around any specific political challenge. Between 1877 and 1895 – the crucial high phase of the White Partition of South Africa – the ‘local crisis’ underwent a considerable metamorphosis. It began as a problem of frontier disorder and general instability; it changed into a series of militaristic challenges to imperial authority; it then, after 1884, escalated into an international problem of accommodating Great Powers in a single sensitive region of empire; and it finally reached its crescendo, in the later 1880s, as the massive highveld ‘mineral revolution’ began to have its manifold effects on both the domestic and international Scrambles already proceeding in South Africa.

The British policy-makers sometimes gave the impression that all their problems in South Africa found their origins in the independent behaviour of the frontiersmen, notably the Boers of the highveld. But the ‘South African Question’ was not centred on a simple breakdown of the relationships between the Imperial Factor and the recalcitrant Calvinists of the interior republics – in company with sympathetic and alienated Cape Dutch in the Western Province.<sup>22</sup> It was in truth an infinitely more confused affair. And indeed in terms of ‘origins’, the Partition can be seen to have ante-dated the revolt of the Afrikaners in 1880–81. The Boers were undoubtedly fundamental to the Scramble, but to their particular role must be added the problems of general frontier stability in the 1870s – notably in the borderlands of the Cape, centred on the Sotho and southern Nguni – and the effects of international rivalry and capital inflow after 1884–86.

In trying to make some sense of the ‘tangle’, it is accordingly perhaps useful to see the Scramble for South Africa in the light of a concatenation of long- and short-term factors, and of international and local forces. The ‘local crisis’ of 1877–84, which really formed the prelude to Partition, was in fact not an isolated eruption of disorder which called for imperial response and intervention. Rather, it represented the incendiary conclusion to a long expanding and changing British presence in the region; and to decades of ‘sub-imperial’ pressure on African lands by local settler agencies of empire.<sup>23</sup> This element was to run right through into the decade of Partition after 1884, and was to act as a basic theme over which could be played the increasingly complex variations of more immediate and short-term initiatives by the forces of the New Imperialism.<sup>24</sup>

It is for this reason that monocausal explanations just will not do.

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The Scramble for South Africa was to be the expression of intense metropolitan, colonial and African politics intersecting within the decades of the 1870s and 1880s. It is in terms of context and sequence alone that we can discern motivation, pattern and meaning in the Southern African Partition.

Because the Scramble for South Africa evolved not only sequentially but cumulatively over the years 1877–95, and developed through what were relatively distinct ‘phases’ of Partition – each having its own particular characteristics and each shaping the nature of expansion to come – it has seemed sensible to arrange this analytic narrative around that natural historical structure. The aim has been to provide a simple lucid account of the Scramble while at the same time passing comment on the significance of events as they unfolded.

After this Introduction there is a section devoted to the first phase of Partition, covering the years 1877–84, the immediate prelude to the general Scramble for South Africa. It attempts a consideration of the political forces at work in ‘frontier South Africa’ at the end of the 1870s; and this is immediately followed by a linked chapter on the expansion of empire and local settlement, up to 1884.

The second section covers the relatively short but important phase of 1884–86. It is largely devoted to showing the consequences of Bismarck bringing the New Imperialism of international rivalry to South Africa; and, in particular, of the ways in which this expansion by metropolitan Germany quickened the already ongoing process of local Partition, as the New Imperialism intersected with Boer expansion towards the coastlines. British ‘pre-emptive imperialism’ symbolised the response of the Imperial Factor as overlord to these challenges to the *Pax Britannica* in South Africa of the mid 1880s.

The crucial years 1886–90 – the very heyday of the Scramble south of the Zambesi – are dealt with in the next section. This was a ‘crisis period’ for the British authorities. Not only did they now have to adjust to the presence of the Germans in South-west Africa, but they had to attempt to restructure their hegemony in the light of an economic revolution on the highveld which gave a dramatic new power to the republican Boer states of the interior. It is a period therefore delineated by the mineral discoveries in the Transvaal, the consequent frenetic local Scramble for resources, territory and supremacy, as peripheral and metropolitan factors came together with a vengeance working for a final White Partition of the region.

A concluding section considers the ‘aftermath’. Interstate diplomacy and division now became conquest and exploitation ‘on-the-ground’, 1890–95. Where the politics of the New Imperialism had often meant the staking out



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of strategic claims, and the defence by the British of traditional interests, so now the older local imperialism of the frontier societies of South Africa advanced to incorporate, rule, settle and exploit these African lands and resources. The overthrow of the remaining independent and semi-independent African political communities of South Africa, in the mid 1890s, is considered in a chapter on the ultimate triumph of the settler and white entrepreneur – in Rhodesia, Swaziland, Zululand, Pondoland and Thongaland. The section is completed with a brief discussion of the closing of the last frontiers of expansion in 1895.

Connecting these several phases and surges of expansion in the Scramble for South Africa – and also connecting the sectional division of this study – was the very obvious role of the British Imperial Factor attempting to defend its authority and its interests as the great overlord power, in a vital region of empire; and also the less obvious but also fundamental force of local expansion by settler societies of frontier South Africa. In this way the real legacy of the Scramble is not to be expressed merely in terms of European or new colonies upon the map. What mattered most of all was that the *local* balance of power had tilted permanently against the authority of the African political communities in favour of the Europeans; that the peculiar modern political-economy of the region had been formed; and that the settlement patterns – particularly those of territorial segregation and the ‘right to the land’ – were ultimately decided.

The fact that South Africa entered the twentieth century not merely as a colonial territory but as a ‘white man’s country’ was due in so many ways to the frontier legacy of the New Imperialism, and particularly the Scramble years 1877–95.

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## Prelude 1877–84:

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### frontier and expansion

‘... at first the white man came and took part of this land [the Eastern Cape]; they then increased and drove them further back, and have repeatedly taken more land as well as cattle. They then built houses [i.e. missions] among them for the purpose of subduing them by witchcraft ... during his stay at Graham’s Town the soldiers frequently asked what sort of country the Zoolus had ... that he had heard a far white people intended to come first and get a grant of land ... they would then build a fort, when men would come, and demand land, who would also build houses and subdue the Zoolus, and keep driving them back as they have driven back the frontier tribes.’

Hlambamangi to Dingane, 1831 (reports by Nathaniel Isaacs)

‘Though we abuse the Kafir, we want his service, and we want ... this land.’

*Anthony Trollope, ‘South Africa’ (1878)*

‘The great land question lies at the bottom of ... [frontier] policy.’

Rev. J. S. Moffatt, 5 October 1882

‘The chiefs well knew that ... once the die was cast [to rebel, in 1878–79] race hatred would blaze up, and that the blacks would strive to overwhelm the whites and drive them into the sea.’

Resident magistrate, E. Pondoland 1881

‘Government does not say to me like a man, I am going to take this and that privilege, but one by one my rights are stolen from me in the dark. Government is a wolf.’

Chief Manthanzima of the Xhosa, 1884