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978-0-521-88968-1 - Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa

Richard Price

Excerpt

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1 Encounters in empire

I have called this book *Making Empire* because it tells how the British came to create a culture of imperial rule in Southern Africa in the first half of the nineteenth century. And the first words of its subtitle, *Colonial Encounters*, express the centrality in this process of the interaction between the British and the Xhosa peoples who occupied the eastern Cape frontier in that period. Indeed, the main narrative of the book flows from many stories of what happened when individual Britishers – missionaries, military men, frontier officials and others – had to deal with Xhosa people and Xhosa society. I have used these stories to enter into the imperial mind. What did the British make of the Xhosa as they struggled to figure out who the Xhosa were and what their relationship with the British empire should be? How did a culture of imperial rule emerge out of the encounter between the British presence and the indigenous people? How did the British develop a knowledge system about the Xhosa that enabled them to make sense of their politics and culture? By what means did the British actually establish their dominion over these African people? How did they explain this dominion, especially when it ran counter to the cultural values they believed themselves to represent? How was the belief that Britain’s empire was a “liberal” empire, an empire of freedom, reconciled with the very dark things that accompanied the creation of this empire in the early nineteenth century? And, finally, (and only lightly touched on in this book), what does all this suggest about the relationship between empire and British culture?

In the early nineteenth century the eastern region of Cape Colony was a distant frontier of empire. It was difficult to get to and it was not a place where fame and recognition were likely to be won. Indeed, more often it was a place where careers foundered and remained stuck. The principal town in the eastern Cape, Grahamstown, was over 500 miles from Cape Town and accessible only over difficult roads or by the equally difficult sea voyage to Port Elizabeth. Perhaps it is for this reason that the eastern Cape has not featured very large in the historiography of the British empire. Yet there are reasons to suggest that this absence is unwarranted.¹

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For one thing, Britain had the tie of kith and kin with the eastern Cape. It was part of British rather than Dutch southern Africa; and it remained so into the modern day. Even today, to see the layout of the main street of Grahamstown, with Rhodes University at one end and a grand Anglican cathedral at the other, is to be reminded of pastoral southern English country towns. The reason for this Britishness was that in 1820 the British government had sponsored an emigration scheme that sent 4,000 settlers to the eastern Cape to establish a new colony that was to be called "Albany." The idea was to create a replica of British pastoral and aristocratic society in the colony. Many of the settlers were grouped into "parties" headed by a sponsor who was to become the local landowning aristocrat, accompanied by a panoply of agricultural workers and artisans who would cluster around his patronage. This delightful little fantasy soon fell apart once the settlers hit the ground and discovered that their flimsy tents were no protection against the fierce weather of the region, that their seeds failed to take root, leaving them facing the threat of imminent starvation, and, to cap it all, that they were in the middle of a war zone between competing branches of the Xhosa polity.²

Thus, even though the strategic priority for colonial policy-makers in London was the Cape itself, the eastern frontier continued to intrude itself rudely into their line of vision. The problem was that the eastern Cape was the place where relentless white expansion finally met the deep resistance of the Xhosa peoples. The frontier was in a state of perpetual unrest. The British settlers chafed under the restraints of official policy which tried to maintain a line between British and Xhosa spheres of influence. There was tension between the British settlers and the Xhosa over cattle-rustling, in which each side was probably as bad as the other. The Xhosa were eternally disaffected with the progressive dispossession of their "ancestral" lands, as well they might be. Thus, for 100 years the frontier remained an unstable zone of contact. Nine wars were fought from 1779 to 1879, first against the Dutch and then against the British, before the final resistance of the Xhosa people to white domination was crushed.³

In this context it is rather surprising that the Xhosa remain relatively unknown to the British. Yet Nelson Mandela is a Xhosa, as is Thabo Mbeke; and the ANC is a Xhosa-dominated party. But it is not the Xhosa who represent black South Africans in the British imagination.⁴ It is the Zulu. The Zulu captured the British imagination from the very beginning of imperial contact. Unlike the Xhosa, the Zulu had the fortune to be observed by a small group of traders at Port Natal (what was to become Durban) in the early 1820s. For a variety of reasons these adventurers sent reports back to Cape Town of a fearsome, martial race ruled by a

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powerful, tyrannical leader, Shaka, who was busy using his military prowess to create a powerful state. This image of the Zulus as a warrior race in the process of nation-building appealed to the British. As a conquering race themselves, they appreciated the qualities of military prowess and nation-building. It was an image that was confirmed by later engagements, such as when in 1838 the Zulu king Dingaan murdered Piet Retief's party of Boer trekkers while parlaying under (what they thought) was a flag of truce; or, most famously, of course, when a British army was overwhelmed by the Zulu *impis* at Isandlwana in 1879. There is nothing like military defeat at the hands of uncivilized natives to raise their estimation in the mind of the imperialist. And from then on the Zulus were Britain's favorite Africans.⁵

But the predominance of the Zulu in the British imagination was purely a metropolitan construction. For most of the nineteenth century, the Zulu offered little trouble to the British. The British were much more preoccupied with the Xhosa than they were with the Zulu. They fought three serious wars against them, in 1834–5, 1846–7 and 1850–3, each of which stretched the local capacity of the British army almost to breaking point. Unlike the Zulu, the Xhosa were an enemy who did not fight in the way the British thought fitting. They quickly learnt to avoid the set-piece battles that were common to both European and Zulu military strategy. They were among the first guerrilla fighters in Africa, and as such they inflicted many a setback to British arms. But since such calamities were not admitted as defeats – as all the world could see Isandlwana was – they did not get registered in British culture or history as the debacles they often were.⁶

This relative neglect of the British encounter with the Xhosa is surprising for another reason, too: *the Xhosa were the first African people whom the British had to decide how to rule*. The eastern Cape was the place where the foundations of Britain's modern African empire were laid. The Xhosa were quite obviously not the first Africans to feel the cold steel of British power, or the fervent importuning of its missionaries. But the Xhosa *were* the first to experience the full panoply of British civilization arrayed before them – its missionaries, settlers and soldiers, imperial governors and politicians – each offering different promises and threats. The history of how the British came to decide to rule the Xhosa was tortured and complicated. But if we are interested in asking how and by what processes a culture of imperial rule is developed out of British culture, the encounter with the Xhosa on the eastern Cape frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century is a good place to take up scholarly residence.

For much of the period under consideration, the British preferred to try to control the Xhosa at arm's length. The underlying strategic concept the British employed was the notion of a buffer zone that would separate the

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zone of British settlement from the Xhosa. This was a familiar imperial ploy. Van Riebeeck had planted a hedge around the early Cape settlement in an attempt to keep the Dutch community and the local Khoesan people apart – parts of the hedge can still be seen in Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in Cape Town. The British had tried similar policies in Ireland and North America with equally little success. But ideas die hard in imperial culture, and the notion of separation and distinct development of both colonists and indigenes was an inspiration for the conception of British Kaffraria as a solution to the unstable frontier of the eastern Cape. It was the records of this effort to establish British Kaffraria that had caught my eye that January day in the Cape Archives building.

An initial attempt was made in 1835 to create a homeland for the Xhosa that would stabilize the frontier and allow the British to keep a watch on their movements. Following the end of the sixth frontier war in August 1835, Sir Harry Smith and Benjamin D'Urban established Queen Adelaide Province. This venture lasted nine months, killed by the opposition of the Colonial Office. And until 1847 the main aim of frontier policy was to maintain the peace by a system of mediation between the British and the chiefs using resident agents whom the British appointed to sit with the tribes. But in 1847 the idea of such a territory was revived and British Kaffraria was created. British Kaffraria was designed as a security buffer. As a political entity it lasted until 1866, when it was absorbed into the Cape Colony. British Kaffraria occupied a peculiar constitutional status. The governor of the Cape possessed virtually unlimited and undefined power as High Commissioner of British Kaffraria. He was the sole and virtual ruler of the territory. He was responsible only to the British Government, and they were thousands of miles and many months away. He did not even have to listen to the rowdy voices of the Grahamstown political public if he chose not to, and they certainly felt unattended to in this regard.

But British Kaffraria was not solely designed as a security buffer zone. It had other purposes, which allow us to observe in close detail how a culture of imperial rule grows. The eastern Cape was one of the main sites of the great missionary evangelizing effort of the early nineteenth century. The Wesleyans, the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians were all there by the 1820s. The Wesleyans had arrived with the 1820 settlers and rapidly became associated with settler culture. But in the early years the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society shared a lot of the same values and experiences as the leading missionary group in the Cape Colony, the London Missionary Society. Indeed, for the latter society the region was second only to Polynesia for the effort that it expended in seeking out the Christian potential of the heathen in order to civilize them through

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conversion. The missionary presence in the eastern Cape was important for the encounter between British culture and the Xhosa. Until the later 1850s, the only representatives of British culture permitted to have close contact with the Xhosa were those who embodied its highest humanitarian virtues. That meant missionaries and representatives of the imperial state. White settlers were not permitted beyond the colonial boundary for fear of contaminating the Xhosa with the less desirable attributes of western civilization. Thus, British Kaffraria was a place where missionaries resided with the tribes, along with various agents of the imperial state and the odd trader.

The missionary interest in the Cape was one link in an important imperial network that tied together metropole and colony. Indeed, in the early part of the century, the missionary interest in South Africa played a major role in determining the course of evangelical politics in Britain itself. What happened in the Cape fed directly into humanitarian politics in Britain. This was largely thanks to the part played by Dr. John Philip, who from 1817 until his retirement in 1850 served as the superintendent of the London Missionary Society missions in the Cape. Philip was an organizer rather than a missionary himself. After bringing order to the early London Missionary Society effort in the Cape, Philip set about influencing the course of the missionary discourse in British politics. He had an unmatched access to key members of the anti-slavery lobby in London, the Buxtons and Gurneys in particular, and he used that access to influence humanitarian politics and metropolitan policies. His book, *Researches in South Africa* (1828), for example, was published to influence an important debate in Britain about frontier policy and to project a view of missionary work and influence that confirmed the claims of humanitarian politics.⁷

Although the focus of this book is on how the British responded to the encounter with the Xhosa, it is obviously impossible to tell this story simply from the British side. By its very nature, the colonial encounter was a place of inter-relationships and hybridity where each participant was conditioned in some way by the behavior of the other. Although the Xhosa left behind no archives to match those of the colonial archive, their imprint is stamped on almost every page of the records of the colonizer. This was not just a matter of a record of what the Xhosa were seen to be doing – their cultural customs, or their response to particular British initiatives. The Xhosa imprinted themselves in the minds of the British as they struggled to make *sense* of what they observed and encountered. This was true of missionaries who went to the eastern Cape expecting to find embryonic black Christians in waiting. It was true also of the soldier Sir Harry Smith, who believed that all it would take to make the Xhosa into

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proper Englishmen was the strength of his own personality, but who found himself mired in a complex game of evasion and negotiation that he could not begin to understand. It was less true (or true in different ways) of Sir George Grey, the governor from 1855 to 1861, who went to South Africa with a plan of action already in mind. But it remained true for the imperial officers on the frontier who were tasked with carrying out Grey's policies.

The heart of this book, then, is an exploration of the dynamics of the encounter between the Xhosa and the British. The encounter was an experiential process, composed of countless instances for each party. But these moments reveal larger themes which I have come to see as describing the phenomenon of empire more generally, and which have informed my treatment of the colonial encounter. These were themes that leapt from the pages of the records of the British occupation of the eastern Cape and Xhosaland. The reader will find them running through many parts of this book, so it is as well to identify and describe them at this point.

First, empire was and is a utopian project. It rests on a series of assumptions that involve enormous leaps of faith, hope and sheer invention. The idea that a colonizer can know what is best for another people – that he or she can create a program of change which the colonized can then be persuaded to accept – involves a breathtaking vision. In the case of Britain's relationship with the Xhosa, this utopian dream was very close to the surface of the British actors in the drama. It was to be found at its most ecstatic among the missionaries, until they encountered Xhosa reality. But it was part, also, of the more hard-headed mentality of imperial officers, like Charles Brownlee and Sir Harry Smith, who will figure large in the subsequent pages.

Because of exaggerated expectations about what empire can achieve – that it can ignore, for example, the history of those it rules and bring them immediately into the orbit of the imperial culture – empire is inherently fragile. Indeed, as I worked through the records of Britain's adventures and misadventures in the eastern Cape, one of the first things that struck me was just how *fragile* this whole enterprise was. I have already alluded to the ambiguities that underlay the success of British arms. But the social, cultural and even the psychological fragilities that ran through imperial culture equally impressed me. We shall see how empire constantly *destabilized* those who claimed its territory; how the conditions of existence and the content of the encounters with the Xhosa were not navigated with the assurance and ease that the cultural superiority of the colonist had led them to expect.

It is true that the agents of British culture came armed with coherent and complete discourses and programs about how they could influence and interact with the Xhosa. But these knowledge systems were quickly

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undermined and even displaced by the experience. This was true sometimes at the personal level where all sorts of conventions and boundaries crumbled under the conditions of the frontier. More importantly, it was true also at the level of empire as a system. This frontier of empire was a place where hegemony was constantly being negotiated and defended, and, in the case of the eastern Cape, where it was ultimately secured only by the accidental intervention of a cattle plague and the ruthless violence of Sir George Grey. Empire was *constantly* problematic for those who were attempting to maintain it; empire could never be assumed to be a hegemonic formation. Only in the metropole itself could the idea of empire as a hegemony be real – and even then, there were times when the Colonial Office at least was aware of its fractures and fragilities.⁸

And it was the subalterns of empire, its subjects, who were the principal agents of this fragility, not because they necessarily possessed an oppositional political consciousness, but because of the presence of their own deep-rooted cultural practices and values. I have already suggested what a large part the Xhosa will play in this story. It is important to emphasize here what will become obvious very soon, that their relationship with the British was a complicated and tangled knot. The Xhosa interacted with the British at many levels. Their relationship with the British was mutual and reciprocal; cooperative as well as contentious. These bonds of mutuality served to erode the separate autonomy of Xhosa society as much as the physical assaults of the British. The Xhosa had joined with the British from the moment they appeared on the horizon. Their chiefs made alliances with the British against their own internal enemies; they sought the presence of missionaries; they allowed the British to think that they accepted their sovereignty; they took gifts; they asked for tools; they accepted money from the imperial state. All of these things may have had different valences for the Xhosa, but taken together they wove a web of mutuality that contributed to their ultimate demise.

From the British side, the Xhosa posed a never-ending series of riddles. They blew hot and cold on the message of Christianity. They were evasive when it came to settling disputes. They talked endlessly when they were negotiating, and were so effective in argument that the British very quickly came to regard them as characterologically lawyer-like. They were not a martial race like the Sikhs or the Maori, although they fought persistently and with cunning. They were not masculine, therefore, but neither were they feminine. Yet the British needed to find a place for the Xhosa within the terms of their own cultural framework. This led them to create a knowledge system about the Xhosa that served to resolve and settle all the contradictory evidence about the Xhosa that the British saw around them. This was a knowledge system that settled those contradictions, that

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squashed them and reconciled them into a set of precepts that made sense for the British, and which, in addition, provided a secure basis of information they could use to rule the Xhosa.

I see this knowledge system as flowing as much from the dynamic of the encounter itself as from the cultural baggage that the British brought with them from the metropole. In other words, I do not see imperial culture as simply another kind of “orientalism” that is invented in the metropole and then carted out to empire to prove a ready-made do-it-yourself handbook on to how to rule the natives. It was not something that was predetermined the moment the first representative of British culture crossed the frontier to meet the Xhosa. Indeed, such a knowledge system could be constructed only after the ideas and values that the British missionaries (in particular) had brought with them were destabilized by the Xhosa encounter.

But the creation of an imperial knowledge system is complicated. What was the colonizer to do with the evidence of Xhosa humanity and civilization, for example? How were they to accommodate within their frame of reference evidence that the Xhosa possessed an intelligence that could match and perhaps surpass their own? They could navigate these mental turns only by strategies that may be described as *colonial reasoning*; that is, ways of thinking and reconciling cognitive contradictions that allow the imperialists to maintain their belief in their own supremacy and superiority. A central feature of colonial reasoning is *reversal* of logic. It was very common in discussions of the Xhosa for the power equation between the British and the Xhosa to be inverted. Everyone knew that the British were, in fact, much more powerful than the Xhosa; everyone saw that even if they did not have enough soldiers in place at a particular moment, they could eventually mobilize their resources to bring overwhelming power to bear. But in discussing the condition of the British interest in the eastern Cape, and even the Cape Colony, it was quite common for the British to tag themselves as the weak victim and the Xhosa as the strong aggressor.⁹

The reversals of colonial reasoning extended also to reconciling the sharp disjunctions that empire posed for a “civilized” culture like the British. It was a way of allowing the contradictions between the rhetorical claims of empire and the dark realities to be explained. The claim of empire (and not only in southern Africa, of course) was that it brought progress and civilization. Its proponents still make that claim.¹⁰ But even if we were to grant its legitimacy (and it is, of course, a claim that *entirely* misses the point about empire), the reality was that too often the methods of despotism were used to bring about those gains. The British quite shamelessly manipulated their own standards of law and due process to pack weakened and desperate men off to Robben Island. To these men, British law

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was an instrument of repression and tyranny, not the harbinger of progressive civilization. And how were those who were in the business of implementing the law to explain the tension between their own values and their political acts? The answer to that question was complicated, and operated at many levels. But it remains a critically important question if we wish to understand how Britain developed an ideology that portrayed its empire as a “liberal empire,” as a humanitarian “trust” and not as a brutal instrument of domination.

Over the course of the late eighteenth century to the last third or so of the nineteenth century, the image of empire changed in British culture and politics. It morphed from a problematic construct to a benign concept; the notion of empire was purified. Questions about the morality and justice of imperial rule in Ireland, North America and India dominated British politics into the later eighteenth century. But the French Revolution swept them away. The period covered by this book (*c.* 1820–60) is a transition period when the notion of empire as morally problematic gives way to the idea that the British empire was a force for liberal progressivism around the globe. How this happened is a huge question for British historiography. It must be said as an aside that this is a question that has not received the kind of concentrated attention that it deserves. But it is clear that by the middle part of the nineteenth century, doubts about the morality of empire had been resolved. When the morality of empire was raised, as it was by Gladstone around the “Bulgarian agitation” and the election of 1880, it was not to question the idea of empire, but rather to question its methods and purposes.¹¹

One reason why it was possible for the British empire to be categorized as a liberal empire in the later nineteenth century was through another device of colonial reasoning: silence and denial. Not long into the research for this book, I began to gather a file of evidence of brutalities and atrocities that marked the history of Britain’s relations with the Xhosa. These incidents ranged from the small-scale humiliations that could be visited on Xhosa of all ranks, to the scandal that surrounded the death of Chief Hintsu in May 1835. The frontier wars in particular were marked by pretty rough tactics on the British side. But such histories do not figure much in the imperial historiography. Yet, judging by the history of British–Xhosa relations, the failure to enter the various strategies of violence that were in the culture of empire is a serious absence. It perpetuates the image of the British empire as a liberal and progressive empire.¹²

The idea of British imperialism as a “liberal” empire does not necessarily describe the reality of empire, although it may have some purchase at the more rarified levels of policy. The idea of the liberal empire is important as a description of the ideology that underlay imperial culture

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in the metropole and that served to depict the empire in public discourse in Britain. Of course, the empire contained some of the more comforting practices of liberalism. But the real question about the “liberal” empire is how the values of liberalism were reconciled with the darker arts that were also prevalent in empire. In this respect, it is of particular importance to recognize that the image of empire that prevailed in British culture was an ideological construct that had to be maintained and fostered. The empire as it was imagined in Britain was not the same empire that was to be found at the frontier of imperial power.

This book is about the latter, not the former. It is more about what happened to British culture in the empire than about what happened to the empire in British culture. The role the empire played in shaping the course of British history has long been recognized. Empire has been particularly constitutive of that history in the realms of political economy and of politics (at certain times), and in international relations.¹³ Likewise, traces of the empire may be seen in the culture of Britain at all times in its modern history, from the self-fashioning of the eighteenth-century collector of Indian artefacts, to the advertising themes of the later nineteenth century, to the nostalgia for the end of empire at the close of the twentieth century. But it is important that we remain sensitive to the different valance of empire at different time periods and to the *relative* weight of empire as against other determinants within the culture such as class. In particular, when we speak of empire in the national culture of Britain, we need not only to attend to the traces of empire that were deposited – the curries, the bungalows, the definitions of feminism, the interconnections with scientific development, the imperial heroes and the like – but also to ask *how* the culture of empire was constructed and broadcast in Britain, and by what means and for what purposes the images of empire were left in British culture. In writing this book, I have been impressed time and again with the huge gulf that separated the empire as it was experienced at the frontier and the empire as it was represented in British culture. We know, for example, that missionary literature in Britain tended to gloss over the tensions the imperial encounter created for missionary culture. The model of the missionary project that existed in Britain was tailored to serve the purposes of missionary subculture within Britain. And to that extent it was a home-grown project whose connections with empire were structured to serve the purposes of a *domestic* culture of empire.¹⁴

The most important group on the British side to interact with the Xhosa in the early years were the missionaries. They also left behind the richest archive of the encounter. Thus, the first part of the book is an extended study of what happened to missionary culture as it met the Xhosa people.