



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Ambiguities of resistance and collaboration on the Eastern Cape frontier: the Kat River settlement 1829-1856**

Ross, R.J.; Abbink, J.; Bruijn, M.E. de; Walraven, K. van

### **Citation**

Ross, R. J. (2003). Ambiguities of resistance and collaboration on the Eastern Cape frontier: the Kat River settlement 1829-1856. In J. Abbink, M. E. de Bruijn, & K. van Walraven (Eds.), *African dynamics* (pp. 118-140). Leiden: Brill. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12892>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12892>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Ambiguities of resistance and collaboration on the Eastern Cape Frontier: The Kat River Settlement 1829-1856

Robert Ross

*This chapter attempts to unravel the complexities of resistance to, and collaboration with, the British colonizers of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, by the inhabitants of the Upper Kat River Valley. Since the Khoikhoi landholders of the valley had received their land as a result of British action against the Xhosa, and had generally accepted the precepts of mission Christianity, it could on the one hand be expected that they would fight on the side of the British against the Xhosa. On the other hand, they were subjected to racist attacks by the British settlers whose farms they defended, and by British officials. In addition, the ethnic distinction, on which the British acted, between Xhosa and Khoikhoi was more tenuous than they generally assumed. As a result, in the successive wars on the Eastern Frontier, the stance taken by the Khoikhoi was often uncertain, and finally led to a minority joining the Xhosa, and thus going into rebellion against the British.*

### Introduction

The conflict between the Xhosa and the Cape Colony, along what is conventionally described as the Eastern Frontier of the Cape but which could equally be seen as the Western Frontier of Xhosaland, involved the longest series of wars in the history of Africa's colonial conquest. For almost a century, from 1779 to 1880, the region was wracked by successive outbursts of violence

in what has been called Africa's 'Hundred Years' War'.<sup>1</sup> The violence varied in intensity and there were long periods of relative, even absolute, peace between those times conventionally considered to be war. Nevertheless, the threat of war, the experience of war and the recovery from war dominated the minds and lives of most of the frontier's inhabitants throughout the era, and certainly until after the end of Mlanjeni's War in 1853. This conflict clearly demonstrated that when the British Empire was forced to apply its full military might, it could not be contested by Africans. The conquest decisively led to the Cattle Killing Movement of 1857, the major breaking of Xhosa power.<sup>2</sup>

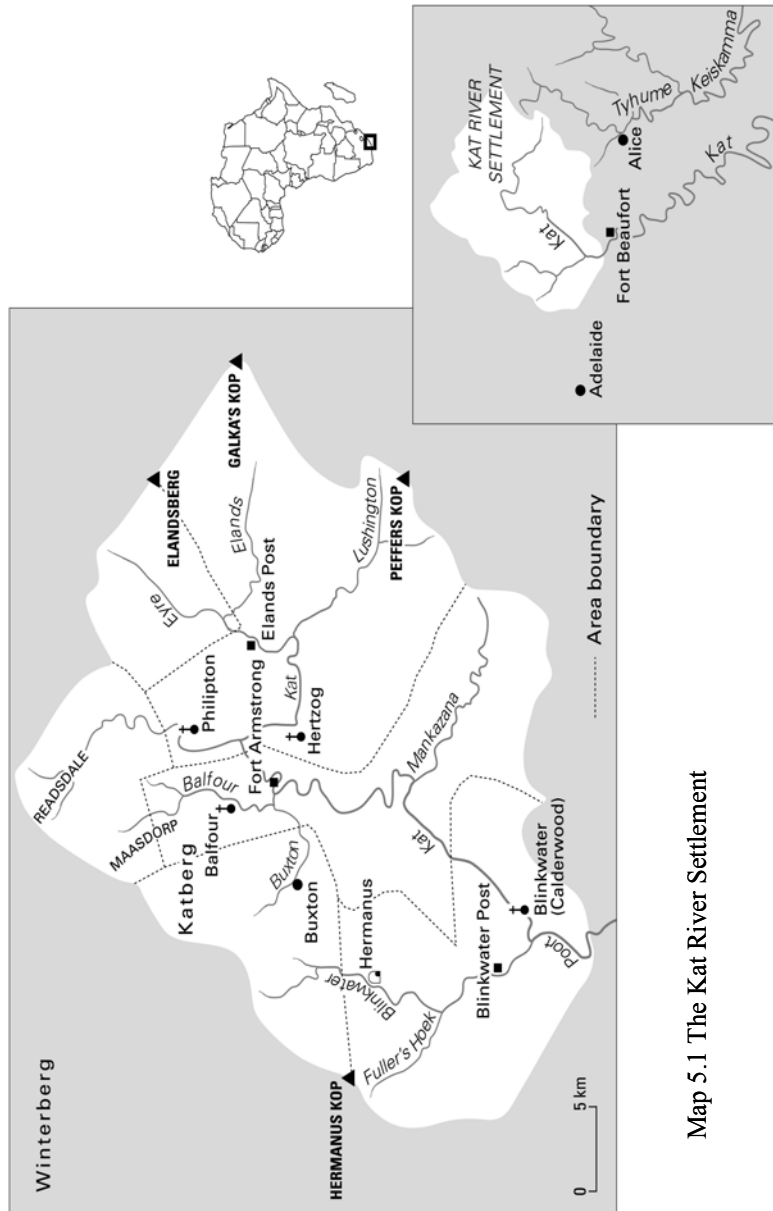
In the course of this contest, loyalties were never clear. It was never the case that there was an indubitable association between social position – ethnic or otherwise – and the political stance taken. Perhaps the only exceptions were some of the British who, imbued with a racial consciousness foreign (in the literal sense) to the shifting alliances of the Frontier,<sup>3</sup> complicated matters for themselves and even more so for the rest of the Frontier's inhabitants by attributing ideas and loyalties to others that they did not possess. For the rest, all those involved shifted their stance from time to time as the exigencies of personal advantage developed. In this chapter I discuss one specific case, that of the Kat River Settlement where, if the oxymoron is allowed, the murk and the confusion were even clearer than elsewhere. I give a preliminary account of the dilemmas faced by its inhabitants during three major wars which, in the first quarter of a century of the Settlement's history, affected the lives of the approximately 5,000 people living in the 800 square kilometres of the Upper Kat River Valley, and in effect doomed the experiment of the Settlement to failure.<sup>4</sup> In order to do so, it is necessary to give a short description of how the Settlement came into existence, and what its place on the Frontier was considered to be.

<sup>1</sup> C.C. Saunders, 'The Hundred Years' War: Some Reflections on African Resistance on the Cape-Xhosa Frontier', in D. Chanaiwa, *Profiles of Self-Determination* (Northridge CA, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> J.B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> On the frontier in general, see the classic article by M. Legassick, 'The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography', in S. Marks & A. Atmore (eds), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980); on the British, R. Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750-1870: A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge, 1999), esp. chapter III.

<sup>4</sup> This chapter is as yet a preliminary discussion because not all the archival materials in the Cape Archives and in the Public Record Office in London have been fully investigated.



Map 5.1 The Kat River Settlement

## The Settlement

The upper reaches of the Kat River Valley receive rain with too little regularity to allow agriculture without irrigation, and thus lie just to the west of the ecological border of Xhosaland proper. Nevertheless, they were long part of the regular pastures used by the western Xhosa on a transhumant basis, and from about 1800 onwards began to be settled more permanently by the followers of Ngqika, the head of the Rharhabe. Ngqika himself had his 'Great Place' in the Kat River Valley, and Maqoma, his most prominent son and the most impressive Xhosa of his generation, came to live there. After the war of 1819, the area was part of the region declared neutral territory and effectively extorted (if somewhat willingly) from Ngqika as the price of colonial support in his struggle for supremacy over the Western Xhosa, and particularly his uncle Ndlambe.

Of course there was little chance that any form of neutrality would prevail as both the Cape Colony and the Xhosa attempted to claim the region. It was, in fact, marked for settlement by Scots highlanders but this measure was rescinded, as much because of personal feuds within the Cape government as for any reason of policy. Thereafter, in 1822, Maqoma came to settle in the valley, initially with the tacit support of the Cape government. There were, however, others in the government who could not countenance a Xhosa presence in the valley, notably Andries Stockenström (who owned a large farm just to the east of the Kat River), at the time Commissioner-General of the Eastern Districts, and a man whose official career at the Cape would be long and fiery. Stockenström proceeded to pick a quarrel with Maqoma, which was not difficult in the unsettled state of the frontier. In 1829, Maqoma was expelled from the valley, ostensibly for conducting a war-cum-cattle raid against some of the Thembu to the north.<sup>5</sup>

This expulsion was opportune and allowed the lands to be given to Khoikhoi in the immediate aftermath of Ordinance 50 of 1828, which had abolished all legal discrimination in the Colony suffered by free people of colour. Within four years, 2,000 people of Khoi descent had moved into the valley, and over the next decades this number would grow rapidly. They came from a variety of places. Many had been to some extent under the influence of the London Missionary Society (LMS), and many of these, though not all, had been resident

---

<sup>5</sup> J.B. Peires, 'The British and the Cape. 1814-1834', in R. Elphick & H. Giliomee (eds), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840*, 2nd edition (Cape Town, 1989), 484; A. Stockenström, *The Autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström Bart*, C.W. Hutton (ed.), 2 vols (Cape Town, 1887), I, 300-324; J.C. Visagie, 'Die Katriviernedersetting, 1829-1839', PhD thesis, UNISA (1978), 34-36.

at missionary stations in the Eastern Cape, notably Bethelsdorp and Theopolis. Others came from the farms of the Eastern Cape, where they had either been effectively bonded labourers, or had a more independent status and more wealth, particularly if they were in some way linked to the farm owners by ties of kinship. Others again were living in Xhosaland but as they could claim to be Gona they were admitted to the Settlement.<sup>6</sup> Many spoke isiXhosa as well as Khoi – a dying language by this time but still occasionally used in the settlement – and Dutch, and had often lived among the Xhosa at some period in their lives. This was not surprising, since whether a man or woman was Xhosa or Khoi was frequently as much a matter of personal political choice and of the accidents of individual biography as it was determined by descent.

The Kat River Settlement was thus born out of the conflict between the Cape Colony and the Xhosa. It was also seen by those who founded it as part of the bulwark by which the Colony could be protected from the inroads of the Xhosa in subsequent wars. Its inhabitants were effectively granted their lands under military tenure, that is to say the able-bodied men were required to serve in the British forces as a militia in the event, all too frequent as it turned out, of renewed clashes between the Colony and the Xhosa.

In retrospect, Stockenström was ambivalent about the value of what he had done for the settlers in the valley. On the one hand, he quoted a governor's comments to him: 'Well, Captain Stockenström [sic], if I were the creator of this settlement, I should fancy that I had done enough for one man's life'.<sup>7</sup> On the other, in the aftermath of the rebellion of 1851-3, he told the Cape Parliament:

To benefit the forlorn remnants of the former possessors of South Africa, upon the basis of the 50th Ordinance, was undoubtedly one of my objects, but a secondary one. It was for the selfish purpose of turning the better and more efficient part of the [Khoikhoi] into a breastwork against an exasperated powerful enemy in the most vulnerable and dangerous part of the frontier that I decoyed them from those retreats where many of them were certainly not very comfortable, but where they were, at least, safe, and legally their own masters. By the bait of a speck of land in the vast territories of their fathers, I drew them into the slavery of constant watching, patrolling, half-starving upon 'veld kost', and the chance of any day getting their throats cut.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Botha to Governor Sir Harry Smith, 23 June 1850, printed in J.J. Freeman, *A Tour in South Africa* (London, 1851), 183.

<sup>7</sup> A. Stockenström, *Light and Shade as Shown in the Character of the Hottentots of the Kat River Settlement and in the Conduct of the Colonial Government towards Them* (Cape Town, 1854), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Stockenström, *Light and Shade*, 5.

Within this context, questions of loyalty became of paramount importance. At least in the beginning the lines were clear. Those who lived in the settlement had accepted their land and their chance of a respectable life by virtue of the colonial expulsion of the Xhosa. Many had acquired their land as a reward for service in the colonial army. Others had been recommended by the missionaries and may thus be assumed to have chosen a way of life coincident with loyalty to the British. But such simplicities never last. Eventually a minority of the Khoi inhabitants of the valley joined the Xhosa in their fight against the British and proved to be among the most determined and successful of the resisters. The explanation for this volte-face, which the British themselves could not comprehend,<sup>9</sup> lay in the combination of the impossibility of drawing a fixed line between the Xhosa and Khoi, the partial economic failure of the settlement partly as a result of its repeated destruction, and the assumption by many white colonists that the Kat River colonists were indeed disloyal or that they did not need to be treated with any consideration. Each of these processes became particularly apparent during the various wars of the settlement's tortuous military history.

The wars between the Colony and the Xhosa were ultimately about land though also to some extent about labour.<sup>10</sup> Both Dutch and, particularly, British colonialists were greedy for pastureland, and profligate with what they had, so always needed more. The *Drang nach Osten* was continual and the repeated assaults on the Xhosa were the results, in the last instance, of this pressure. However, the conflicts with the Xhosa and certainly the pressure on the Kat River Settlement derived as much from the animosity between black and white as from a crude desire for land. The deeper causes of that animosity may have lain in land hunger. Nevertheless, the viciousness of British settler hatred of the Kat River people was driven by the threat they formed to British perceptions of how the world should be, not by the hope of taking over what was admittedly a fertile piece of territory but which would have accommodated at most 25 standard-sized settler farms and that was even more vulnerable than most of the Eastern Cape to Xhosa attacks.

The Settlement was involved in three major wars between the Colony and the Xhosa, beginning in the austral summer of 1834-5 (Hints's War), in March 1846 (the War of the Axe) and in the summer of 1850-1 (Mlanjeni's War). In all of these battles, the Settlement was laid waste, most of its houses burnt to the ground and many of its agricultural improvements destroyed, at least temporarily. The majority of the settlers were required to abandon their

---

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Sir Harry Smith to Earl Grey, 12 June 1851, British Parliamentary Paper (hereafter BPP) 1428 of 1852.

<sup>10</sup> In the case of the Kat River, labour played a minimal role.

dwelling and congregated in what can only be described as South Africa's (and the world's) first concentration camps, in conditions of great and frequently fatal hardship. They were set up by the British during the first two wars around Fort Armstrong, a position of natural strength in the centre of the settlement, and later at Eland's Post, the modern town of Seymour. At the same time, most of the adult male population were enlisted into the British forces. Ninety per cent of the Kat River men fought in the War of the Axe, as opposed to 3 per cent of the white men in any of the country's districts.<sup>11</sup> They fought well and their arrival was primarily responsible for preventing the British army's defeat at Burn's Hill, when it had lost all its baggage. More generally, they, together with their regular fellows in the Cape Mounted Rifles, possessed the skills of irregular light infantrymen and cavalymen which were needed in the bush warfare of the Eastern Cape,<sup>12</sup> and which the heavily laden, red-coated British regiments singularly lacked.

### Hintsa's War

Despite the above-mentioned actions, the loyalty to the colony of at least some of the Kat River settlers was called into question, first during Hintsa's War when they were falsely believed to be resisting the British forces. There were two reasons for this, neither of which were the responsibility of the Khoi. First, once the Xhosa had decided to launch an attack on the Colony, which only occurred in the weeks immediately preceding the invasion,<sup>13</sup> their leaders, notably Maqoma, began spreading information that the Khoi had agreed to join them.<sup>14</sup> While this was primarily designed to strengthen the resolve of their own

---

<sup>11</sup> Berkeley to Pottinger, 23 March 1847 in B. Le Cordeur & C. Saunders, *The War of the Axe, 1847: Correspondence between the Governor of the Cape Colony, Sir Henry Pottinger, and the Commander of the British Forces at the Cape, Sir George Berkeley, and Others* (Johannesburg, 1981), 89.

<sup>12</sup> C.L. Stretch, *The Journal of Charles Lennox Stretch*, edited by B. Le Cordeur (Cape Town, 1988), 55; Read to Kitchingman, 9 May 1847, in B. Le Cordeur & C. Saunders (eds), *The Kitchingman Papers* (Johannesburg, 1976), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Statement by the Rev. John Ross of the Glasgow Missionary Society cited in N. Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London, 1992), 653; depositions by the Glasgow missionaries James Weir, John Bennie and William Chalmers, by the Xhosa chiefs Tyhali and Bhotomane, and the Khoi Klaas Plaatje and Louis Arnoldus, in BPP 503 of 1837, 76-77, 80-83, 237-38.

<sup>14</sup> R. Godlonton, *A Narrative of the Irruption of the Kafir Hordes into the Eastern Province of the Cape of Good Hope, 1834-1835* (Grahamstown, 1836), 14-15. Here, Godlonton discounted the rumours as Xhosa propaganda; thirty pages later, 46-47, he claimed that 'the fears [of Khoi disaffection] entertained at the time were perfectly well



followers, the chiefs knew that the rumours would soon reach the Colony and spread dissension among their opponents. This duly happened.

Second, these rumours were taken up on the colonial side by Captain Armstrong, commandant of the fort that bore his name. While he initially dismissed the idea,<sup>15</sup> on 17 January 1835 he wrote to the commandant of the Frontier, Lieutenant-Colonel Harry Smith (later governor) of 'an intrigue which is suspected to have been carried out with extreme subtlety between some of the people of the Kat River Settlement' and the Xhosa. His argument, as he himself admitted, was based on a number of surmises and not on any observable occurrences during the first weeks of the war. The suggestions of Xhosa forbearance towards the Khoi were contradicted by the fact, as Armstrong admitted, that his prime suspects had lost property and had shot at least one raiding Xhosa.<sup>16</sup> Rather the surmises are extrapolations from a number of facts in the past, as construed within Armstrong's imagination. These were, first, that there had been considerable conflict within the Settlement in the previous year, in particular in regard of the government's proposal to introduce a Vagrancy Ordinance; secondly, that the division between the supporters and the opponents of the Vagrancy Ordinance was conceived along racial lines, between the 'Bastards' and the Khoikhoi in the Settlement;<sup>17</sup> thirdly, that many of those in the Settlement were people of Gona extraction; fourthly, that the LMS missionary James Read, with his son (of the same name), had been active in the protests against the Vagrancy Ordinance; and fifthly that some of the Gona and James Read had both had regular contact with Maqoma in the past.<sup>18</sup>

The extrapolations which Armstrong made from these facts were threefold, and all very problematic. The first was that the genuine fear that many in the Kat River felt at the introduction of a Vagrancy Ordinance would manifest itself in rebellion against the British and allegiance with the Xhosa. Armstrong's view

---

founded'; deposition by April, a 'Bechuana', 9 February 1835, Cape Archives (hereafter CA), LG 9.

<sup>15</sup> Read Jr to Kitchingman, 31 December 1834, in Le Cordeur & Saunders, *Kitchingman Papers*, 148.

<sup>16</sup> Armstrong to Smith, 9 January 1835, BPP 503 of 1837, 89.

<sup>17</sup> See S. Trapido, 'The Emergence of Liberalism and the Making of "Hottentot Nationalism" 1815-1834', in *Collected Seminar Papers of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London: The Societies of Southern Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 17 (1992); R. Ross, 'The Kat River Rebellion and Khoikhoi Nationalism: The Fate of an Ethnic Identification', *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, 24 (1997); E. Elbourne, 'Freedom at Issue: Vagrancy Legislation and the Meaning of Freedom in Britain and the Cape Colony, 1799 to 1842', *Slavery and Abolition*, 15 (1994), 133-45.

<sup>18</sup> See two letters from Armstrong to Smith, 12 January and 14 January 1835, both printed in BPP 503 of 1837, 84-86.

on the matter was moreover jaundiced by the fact that he had put pressure on the Kat River settlers to sign the memorial in favour of the Ordinance.<sup>19</sup> The second derived from his failure to understand the complicated politics of identity and language common on the Eastern Frontier, and indeed throughout Southern Africa. For Armstrong, as for most Britons at the time, one was either Xhosa or Khoi – the possibility of having dual nationality did not occur to them. The Gona therefore presented a problematic taxonomic anomaly. As Armstrong described it:

The Gonahs are a race between a [Xhosa] and a [Khoi]. At one time the [Xhosa] took a number of [Khoi] into their service; they compelled the [Khoi] women to live with them. The children are Gonahs, entertaining partly a [Xhosa] and partly a [Khoi] feeling.<sup>20</sup>

They were however ‘aliens’ who were illegally in the settlement as a result of Read’s intrigues.

There were many people in the Kat River whose personal biographies crossed the vague but hardening boundaries of the Eastern Cape and many were bilingual in Xhosa and Khoi. By the mid-1830s, if not much earlier, they would have added Dutch to their linguistic repertoire and were probably beginning to lose their Khoi. Andries Stoffels, for instance, the most famous of the LMS’s converts, first came into contact with the missions when he arrived at Bethelsdorp in the company of a number of Xhosa chiefs for whom he was to act as interpreter.<sup>21</sup> Many of the Kat River Khoi had kin among the Xhosa, just as there were many with kin among the boers. The two groups were not mutually exclusive. In the racist<sup>22</sup> vision of men like Armstrong, this made the former group suspect. It could, however, be argued that by leaving, or not going to live in Xhosaland and taking up residence in the Kat River, these people had made a conscious political choice as a result of which their loyalty to the Colony would be firmer, not weaker.

The third problem with Armstrong’s analysis was the assumption that the contacts which Read and Stoffels, among others, had with Maqoma had to be in some way connected with plans against the Colony. In the first place, contacts need not necessarily have entailed conspiracy or incitement. In the second, the likelihood is that Maqoma’s decision to launch the attacks were only taken in

---

<sup>19</sup> Stretch, *Journal*, 88.

<sup>20</sup> Footnote in Armstrong to Smith, 14 January 1835, BPP 503 of 1837, 85.

<sup>21</sup> E. Elbourne, ‘Early Khoisan Uses of Mission Christianity’, in H. Bredekamp & R. Ross (eds), *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Johannesburg, 1995), 88.

<sup>22</sup> In the broadest sense.

December 1834, and there is no evidence that anyone from the Kat River visited during this crucial period.

The whole episode derived from panic on the part of Captain Armstrong, whom Read described as 'the most timid man ever seen', and who in the days around Christmas 1834 had to be restrained by the Kat River settlers from abandoning the Settlement entirely and withdrawing to the comparative safety of Fort Beaufort.<sup>23</sup> He would not have been the only British soldier in the nineteenth century to take the credit where none was due, in this case for snuffing out potential rebellion by resolute action.

There was also considerable animus against James Read in colonial circles. His consistent non-racialism, both in theory and even more discomfortingly in practice, was always a potential challenge. It gave him contacts and friendships outside colonial circles that were at once an affront and a threat to both his fellow clergymen and to the white society in general. As a result, he was continually suspected of involvement in all sorts of nefarious practices, and on 20 January 1835, together with the rest of his family, he was ordered out of the Kat River Settlement.<sup>24</sup> He would not return for three years, although his absence was extended by a visit to Great Britain.

As Le Cordeur and Saunders pointed out some years ago,<sup>25</sup> it should have been obvious that it was not in the interests of the Kat River settlers to join the Xhosa. They would have been aware that the main demands of the Xhosa included the restitution of territory, most notably the valley in which they were now settled, and which they were transforming into agricultural land by arduously digging irrigation furrows.<sup>26</sup>

## The War of the Axe and ethnic cleansing

In the War of the Axe, no such implication of treachery in matters military was made and although the Kat River men were considered first-class soldiers, they were not treated as such. The distinction between themselves and the whites alongside whom they fought, was all too clear. They were not paid – though this was largely at their own volition so as to give them more command over their

<sup>23</sup> Read to Philip, 3 January 1835, cited in J.G. Pretorius, 'The British Humanitarians and the Cape Eastern Frontier, 1834-1836', *Archives Year Book for South African History*, (hereafter AYB), 51, I (1988), 49.

<sup>24</sup> Smith to Armstrong, 20 January 1835, in G.McC. Theal (ed.), *Documents Relating to the Kaffir War of 1835* (London, 1912), 27.

<sup>25</sup> Le Cordeur & Saunders, *Kitchingman Papers*, 149.

<sup>26</sup> D. Campbell, 'Detailed Report on the Progress and Present State of the Settlement at the Head of the Kat River, District of Albany', 7 June 1833, CA CO 2742.

own services.<sup>27</sup> They did not receive clothing, soap or coffee;<sup>28</sup> and their dependants' claim to rations was countermanded by the governor, Sir Henry Pottinger.<sup>29</sup> They did not receive their full share of the booty;<sup>30</sup> and the governor tried to impose even stricter conscription on the Khoi at a time when there were in fact no men capable of service who were not already under arms.<sup>31</sup> By voicing their displeasure at the treatment they received, they were accused of being in a state 'bordering on rebellion', and were only kept quiet by the issuing of rations they needed to stay alive.<sup>32</sup> The racist assumptions of colonial society, perhaps fuelled by the Khoi success in the war, were being imposed ever more stringently on the Khoi.

In the years after the War of the Axe, the British administration of the Settlement became more intrusive and oppressive. For the first time, a magistrate was appointed to oversee the district, a position awarded to a confirmed enemy of the Kat River settlers, T.J. Biddulph. After protests about his actions, he was transferred elsewhere but his position was taken over by T.H. Bowker, a man of much the same ilk. Between them, they did much to alienate the Kat River settlers from the colonial government.

Paradoxically, they did so by measures that at first sight might have been seen to favour the Khoi. In the years following its foundation, considerable numbers of Xhosa and Mfengu<sup>33</sup> had come into the valley. The most notable of these was Hermanus Matroos, alias Ngxukumeshe, the son of an escaped slave and a Xhosa woman, who had worked on a white farm in his youth and as an interpreter for the British since at least 1819. He fell foul of the Xhosa chiefs at the time of Maqoma's expulsion from the Kat River Valley, and later was

---

<sup>27</sup> Read to Directors, LMS, 23 March 1847, Archives of the Congregational Council for World Mission (LMS), School of Oriental and African Studies, London, Incoming Letters South Africa (hereafter LMS-SA) 23/1/C. They could also not be certain that they would actually receive their pay. In 1851, the men of the mission station at Bethelsdorp did not respond to the call of the civil commissioner that they again enlist because 'they had been defrauded of their very pay by two of their Captains' during their service in the War of the Axe. *Port Elisabeth Telegraph*, 23 January 1851.

<sup>28</sup> Remonstrance of the Council of Loyal Burghers, Philipton, 20 February 1851, in LMS-SA 26/4/A.

<sup>29</sup> Le Cordeur & Saunders, *War of the Axe*, 82-83.

<sup>30</sup> J. Read, *The Kat River Settlement in 1851* (Cape Town, 1982), xiv.

<sup>31</sup> Le Cordeur & Saunders, *War of the Axe*, 77-92.

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum by Sir Henry Pottinger, *Accompaniment G to Despatch 154, Sir Henry Pottinger to Earl Grey, 20 October 1847* (Grahamstown, 1847), 24-25.

<sup>33</sup> The Mfengu were Xhosa speakers, many of whom were originally from Natal, who had in effect chosen the side of the British in the long conflict on the Eastern frontier.

dismissed by the British, who suspected him of being untrustworthy.<sup>34</sup> After some time wandering in the Eastern Cape, he received permission to settle on the Blinkwater River in the Settlement, even though he clearly did not belong to any of the categories for whom the land was reserved. It seems to have been largely his service on the colonial side during Hintza's War that led to this permission being granted.<sup>35</sup> At any rate, by the late 1840s he was well established in the Middle Blinkwater as a Xhosa headman with four wives, one of whom had been a dependent of Maqoma's,<sup>36</sup> and with considerably more followers than the sixteen who had originally accompanied him. In the War of the Axe, he fought on the colonial side against the Xhosa, although his initial application to join had been refused by Sir Andries Stockenström who did not want him fighting against his own countrymen, and who had a long-standing distrust of the man who had managed to worm his way into the settlement. This decision was later overturned, but not to the extent that Hermanus was paid the money the Colony owed him for his services, as had been promised.<sup>37</sup>

The other Xhosa and Mfengu who came into the valley were less prominent and less independent but their relationship with the settlers was by no means uniform. Where the relationship between the settlers and the incomers was tenuous or competitive, the settlers attempted to have the newcomers expelled. There were petitions for the removal of illegal squatters in Fuller's Hoek in the mountains of the south-west of the valley,<sup>38</sup> and protests against the government allowing Mfengu to pasture their cattle in the Mancazana Valley. On the other hand there were many Mfengu who lived as clients of the settlers, herding stock and growing sorghum and maize on the commonage. The vagueness of the distinction between Xhosa and Khoi survived, as there were many Gona living around Buxton in particular, who seemed to have maintained a material culture which was largely Xhosa, but who were nevertheless clients, and often kin, of the settlers.

The advice which the governor received from one of its officials, Charles Brownlee, was to send out of the settlement all [Xhosa] who had come into the settlement after the war [of the Axe] and who were suspected of having fought against the colony, whilst the Gonas and [Xhosa] who had resided in the Settlement before the war and

<sup>34</sup> Bell to Somerset, 3 April 1829, CA CO 5111, cited in J.C. Visagie, 'Die Kat Riviernedersetting, 1829-1839', PhD thesis, UNISA (1978), 63.

<sup>35</sup> R. Godlonton & E. Irving, *A Narrative of the Kaffir War, 1850-1851*, facsimile reprint (Cape Town, 1962), 144.

<sup>36</sup> Armstrong to Hudson, 15 August 1837, CA 1/BBF 6/1/1/1.

<sup>37</sup> Stockenström, *Light and Shade*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Read to Freeman, 31 January 1850, LMS-SA25/2/B.

had assisted in repelling and conquering the enemy should be promised farms either at Kat River or elsewhere.<sup>39</sup>

In practice those who suffered were the clients of the leading settlers and the missionaries, the first being a number of Mfengu who were acting as cattle herders for James Read Jr and the Rev. Arie van Rooyen, a man of Khoi descent and originally from Theopolis, who had been ordained as minister for Tidmanton in the Lower Blinkwater a few months earlier. In September 1849, the civil commissioner of Fort Beaufort, N.J. Borchers, who was shortly afterwards to commit suicide as a near-bankrupt,<sup>40</sup> led a party of police to burn a number of Mfengu huts around Tidmanton, even though the huts were there legally and there had never been any complaint against these families from settlers living in the neighbourhood.<sup>41</sup>

This, though, was only the beginning. Through the first half of 1850, the campaign by the local officials of the colonial state against the residents of the Blinkwater Valley and later in the adjacent area of the Upper Buxton River became steadily heavier. They had, in their own eyes, reason for their actions. There were certainly considerable numbers of Xhosa who had come into the area since the War of the Axe and were squatting in Fuller's Hoek and the Koems Valley to its north who were a threat to the cattle of the farmers in the Koonap Valley across the mountains. Nevertheless, the relationship between the officials and the Koonap farmers was too close for propriety. As James Read Sr wrote: 'An Albany farmer will not do for magistrates for the [Khoikhoi], they are full of prejudice and will not rest until this is an English settlement.'<sup>42</sup> Certainly, Bowker had been levying fines upon the Gonas under Andries Botha (on whom more below) for what he claimed were stock offences, but had done so illegally. As a result, he earned a reprimand from the governor and was ordered to repay the fines, although he tried to put off doing so for as long as possible.<sup>43</sup> At the same time there is clear evidence of corruption, of the use of office for personal pecuniary gain, on the part of one of Bowker's subordinates at least, which further raised the level of tension.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Read Jr to Freeman, 20 June 1850, LMS-SA 25/4/B; a copy of Charles Brownlee's report, dated 5 May 1850, is enclosed in Brownlee to Read, 22 June 1850, LMS-SA 25/4/B.

<sup>40</sup> Read to Freeman, 29 January 1850, LMS-SA 25/2/A.

<sup>41</sup> Read to Freeman, 6 March 1850, LMS-SA 25/2/B.

<sup>42</sup> Read to Freeman, 20 June 1850, LMS-SA 25/4/B.

<sup>43</sup> Freeman, *Tour in South Africa*, 190.

<sup>44</sup> A man called Cobb, who had been appointed in somewhat dubious circumstances as superintendent over the Mfengu of the Blinkwater, claimed land in the middle of the Tidmanton commonage as his own, and then began impounding cattle which strayed

Whatever the motives, in the winter of 1850 in a week of rain, wind and even snow, a party of Xhosa police in colonial service, led by a British officer, proceeded through the western part of the Settlement eliminating the homesteads of those they described as Xhosa 'squatters'. Their first targets were the Xhosa in Fuller's Hoek and the other kloofs on the western boundary of the Kat River Settlement. Some were relatively independent or at least the subjects of Xhosa chiefs, including Bhotomane. One of the leaders, a certain Mali, was known to have fought against the colony during the War of the Axe. Others claimed to be followers of Hermanus but were living outside the restricted area he had been allocated. The party then moved on to Buxton where they found more squatters than in any other place among the followers of Field Cornet Andries Botha. The men, women and children were then shepherded off to Fort Hare, together with their goats and cattle. In total, more than 300 huts were burned, and 145 men, 350 women and an unknown number of children were driven off the land, together with nearly 2,500 head of cattle and 1,400 goats.<sup>45</sup>

There were many offensive aspects to this campaign. The missionaries, and probably many of the settlers in the Kat River, disapproved of the police continuing their work of destruction on a Sunday. The expulsion of men, women and children in the dead of a Cape winter without warning and without any real provision for their future residence was widely seen as brutal, harsh treatment, although it might be argued that, unlike Maqoma and his followers 21 years earlier, this meant that they did not have crops standing in the fields waiting to be harvested. But, as he complained of the matter to his old commander, Sir Andries Stockenström, Andries Botha took exception above all to two matters: those who destroyed the houses, and those whose houses were destroyed.

The Xhosa police force had been formed in the aftermath of Hints's War and its numbers had been more than doubled during and after the War of the Axe. In wartime, the police had had a dubious reputation as spies and scouts, while in peacetime they were primarily engaged in the fruitless task of preventing cattle thefts and smuggling. Not surprisingly, both colonists and the other Xhosa distrusted them. At the outbreak of Mlangeni's War though, the majority took up arms with their fellow Xhosa, taking with them several

---

across the unfenced boundary and charging substantial fees to have them released. See for example, Stockenström to Montagu, 11 July 1850, printed in *The Trial of Andries Botha* (Cape Town, 1852), (reprinted Pretoria, State Library, 1969), 237-39. In this letter, Sir Andries was recording the complaints made to him by Andries Botha. Also, Stockenström in *Light and Shade*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Davies to Mackinnon, 20 June 1850, printed in Freeman, *Tour in South Africa*, 176-79.



Andries Botha

Photo courtesy of the Cape Town Archives Repository, reference number M1056



thousand rounds of ammunition.<sup>46</sup> Most recruits after 1847 were probably men impoverished during the war. Certainly, relatively few had fought with the British then, unlike Botha, of whom Stockenström wrote: 'Her Majesty has not in her dominions a more loyal subject, nor braver soldier'. The police relished the reversal of roles, shouting 'exultingly' – but probably in isiXhosa so that their officers, unlike Botha, could not understand when they said, 'To-day we burn Botha out of the Blinkwater as he burnt us out of the Amatola last war'.<sup>47</sup>

Nowhere is it made clear how the police force decided who were squatters and who should be expelled. The boundary between Xhosa and Khoi was always vague, especially when Gona were involved. Botha himself was identified by the Xhosa police as 'a Ghona Kaffir',<sup>48</sup> but a man with the office of field cornet, a regularly granted erf and a rectangular wattle-and-daub house could not be considered a squatter.<sup>49</sup> It might have been that those whose homes were destroyed had made the mistake of maintaining a round, beehive-style isiXhosa hut. According to Botha, many were among his friends and perhaps his kin who had come to the settlement from Xhosaland in 1829. Those who had settled in Balfour had received erfs immediately, and some of those who went to Philipton later got land, largely in the Lower Blinkwater. However, very few of those who had gone to Buxton or to the neighbouring settlement of Wilberforce in the Upper Blinkwater Valley, a more pastoral region where irrigated agriculture had failed, had been granted title to land, and many had since become adults. As was commented at the time:

They have always been expecting to get erfs, according to promise, but it was not done, and as they were among the friends, and no complaints, we did not urge their leaving; thus they have remained among their friends until now. They were ready for any duty, paid regularly the taxes as long as we paid, went on patrols against the [Xhosa], and fought two wars.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, according to a list drawn up by the Reads, of 36 Gona 'burnt out' at Wilberforce and Buxton, 29 had been in the settlement for twenty years, i.e. since its foundation, five since the 1835 war, one (whose name would suggest that he had relatives among the others) for three years and for one no period of time was given. There were also ten Mfengu families who had come to the settlement in the wake of Hintsa's War and six who had been policemen and

<sup>46</sup> K.I. Watson, 'African Sepoys? The Black Police on the Eastern Cape Frontier: 1836-1850', *Kleio*, 28 (1996), 62-78.

<sup>47</sup> Stockenström to Montagu, 11 July 1850, in *Trial of Andries Botha*, 237.

<sup>48</sup> Freeman, *Tour in South Africa*, 178.

<sup>49</sup> On the shape and material of Botha's house see CA 1/UIT 14/37, case 1.

<sup>50</sup> Botha to Smith, 23 June 1850, printed in Freeman, *Tour in South Africa*, 183.

were afraid to reside among the other Xhosa who had entered the Colony in 1842, in part because they had fought with the Colony in the War of the Axe.<sup>51</sup> There were also those who worked as servants for the Kat River Settlers, including at least one case where the labour contract, for a year, had been registered by Bowker only four months before the labourer in question had his hut burnt.<sup>52</sup> The repulsion which Botha, as the leader of the Buxton and Wilberforce community, felt at what had happened is understandable and, though it is not expressed in the historical record, that of the younger inhabitants of the area was as great, if not greater. The fact that the inquiry into this affair brought Bowker a reprimand and led to his being replaced as magistrate of the settlement did little to mollify them.<sup>53</sup>

The pressure on the inhabitants of the Blinkwater did not end with the burnings and the dismissal of Bowker. A stream of complaints of cattle and sheep thefts from the farmers of the Koonap against the followers continued unabated. As a result, the government appointed a commission to investigate the matter. It was scarcely impartial. One of its four members was Robert Godlonton, the editor of the *Graham's Town Journal* and an inveterate enemy of the Kat River settlers. Another was Major J. Blakeway, whose family had made the most vocal complaints against Hermanus and the Fuller's Hoek squatters and who was believed to be attempting to buy part of the Fuller's Hoek commonage. Nevertheless, at Godlonton's request, the commission was accompanied by James Read Jr and the Rev. Arie van Rooyen.<sup>54</sup> For six days in November 1850, they poked around the huts and houses of the Blinkwater, trying to find evidence of stolen cattle. One was even reported to have put his hand inside cooking pots to discover whether they were still greasy. One of the places which they investigated was a cattle post belonging to Oerson Magerman, a Kat River settler James Read described as 'one of the most respectable men of the Blinkwater', who, together with Andries Botha's son, had commanded one of the Kat River parties invading Xhosaland during the War of the Axe. Magerman arrived while they were doing so and complained that his servants were being interrogated while 'he was master of the place and would answer everything that might be asked of him'. This led to a

---

<sup>51</sup> This list is to be found in LMS-SA 25/4/B.

<sup>52</sup> Contract between Louis Hendrik and Mahe, before Bowker, Resident Magistrate of Stockenström, 8 February 1850, in LMS-SA 26/4/C.

<sup>53</sup> A.E. du Toit, 'The Cape Frontier: A Study of Native Policy with Special Reference to the Years 1847-1866', AYB, 17 (1954), 50.

<sup>54</sup> Significantly, the commission referred to the latter as 'the Missionary, Mr van Rooyen', as if it was unable to give him the title of 'Reverend'.

confrontation in which blows, or at least shoves, were exchanged.<sup>55</sup> The incident can only further have soured the fragile relations between the settlers and the government.

### Mlanjeni's War and the Rebellion

At the end of December 1850 after a period of mounting tension, war once again broke out between the Xhosa and the Colony. It was to be the longest and bloodiest war fought in South Africa in the nineteenth century. To the Xhosa, it is known as Mlanjeni's War, after the prophet whose doctoring was believed, erroneously, to give them protection against British bullets. This time, in contrast to the previous wars, a number of the Khoikhoi from the Kat River Settlement joined the rebellion against the British and fought alongside the Xhosa.

The trigger for the involvement of Kat River men on the Xhosa side was the defection of Hermanus Matroos. At some stage, probably after the assaults on the Blinkwater Xhosa in the winter of 1850, he had made his peace with the Xhosa chiefs and was privy to their plans to attack the Colony. He too began slaughtering his dun-coloured cattle, as Mlanjeni had ordered, sending their hides to the merchants at Fort Beaufort and to the shop in Tidmanton. His followers also did not cultivate that year, missing the opportunity to profit from the good rains.<sup>56</sup> Certainly, he was aware of Xhosa plans to attack the Colony, which they did on Christmas Day 1850 after what they saw as an unsuccessful attempt to arrest the Ngqika chief Sandile. Thereafter Hermanus Matroos revolted too, although not until after he had been issued with guns and ammunition from the British armoury in Fort Beaufort.<sup>57</sup> He collected all the men he could around him and forced the Khoi in the neighbourhood to join him. Deprived of their arms and with only 90 Khoi surrounded by 900 Xhosa, there was little they could do to oppose him. The Rev. Arie van Rooyen, the LMS minister at the Blinkwater, tried to persuade Hermanus not to impress the men

<sup>55</sup> Godlonton *et al.* to Montagu, 28 November 1850, in *Proceedings of and Evidence Given before the Committee of the Legislative Council Respecting the Ordinance to Prevent the Practice of Settling or Squatting on Government Lands* (Cape Town, 1852); J. Read Jr to Thompson, 28 November 1850, LMS-SA 26/4/C; Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, xiv, xvii-xix.

<sup>56</sup> Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 18-19; Read Sr to Freeman, 13 April 1851, LMS-SA 26/1/C; on the harvest, Read to Tidman, 12 July 1851, LMS-SA 26/2/B.

<sup>57</sup> Evidence of the Rev. H. Renton, BPP 635 of 1851, 419. The British commanders had been warned of Hermanus's obedience to Mlanjeni's commands before they handed out the arms.

and sent messages requesting assistance to both the magistrate of the Settlement, J.H.B. Weinand, and Commandant Groepe in Fort Armstrong. Neither could spare forces to relieve or give assistance to the Blinkwater Khoi, a fact that was to exacerbate the spread of the rebellion. This message was carried by Oerson Magerman, the man who had been gravely insulted by the Blinkwater commission a couple of months earlier and who would later join the rebellion – although as yet I do not know under what circumstances.<sup>58</sup>

Hermanus began by capturing the fortified farmhouse belonging to W. Gilbert, who had been one of the Blinkwater commissioners, near Fuller's Hoek. Then after a few days, he launched an attack on the British forces in Fort Armstrong. The British, however, were forewarned, largely because James Read had sent a message to the army that rumours of such an attack were circulating in the valley. Hermanus was killed in the streets of the town and the attack beaten off. Nevertheless, a number of those who had been pressed into accompanying him continued the rebellion, even when they had the opportunity to escape to the missionaries (and thus the British) in the coming weeks.

The rebellion began to attract adherents from outside the Kat River Settlement. Within the first week, considerable numbers of farm labourers and tenants from the Winterberg and the Koonap to the west of the Kat River Valley began to take advantage of their employers' isolation and to react to the aggression which the farmers were showing towards them. There had been attempts before the rebellion begun to persuade the farm labourers in the area to join the rebellion.<sup>59</sup> Indeed when the Winterberg farmers went into laager, their Khoi servants accompanied them but then went over to the rebels taking with them the guns they had received for the defence of the camp.<sup>60</sup> By 2 January, they had come to the rebel camp in the Blinkwater, with some of the spoils of their actions. James Read Jr went out with one of his deacons to meet them there in an attempt to persuade them to leave the rebellion. He found that the camp was in a carnival mood.

Now we saw the fatherlander sheep browsing – one slaughtered (sometimes two) in each house, pots boiling, meat roasting, and bread, cakes, and pancakes baking in abundance, while the whole scene seemed frantic with mirth and good cheer; and yet

---

<sup>58</sup> Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 8, 82; BPP 635 of 1851, 474; Cape Parliamentary Paper G18 59, 40; Oerson Magerman was in Philipton on 25 February when General Somerset marched into the place (see below) *prima facie* suggesting that he was at that time loyal.

<sup>59</sup> Elbourne, 'Race, Warfare and Religion in Mid-Nineteenth Century Southern Africa: The Khoikhoi Rebellion against the Cape Colony and its Uses, 1850-1858', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 13 (2000), 21.

<sup>60</sup> I. Staples, *A Narrative of the Eighth Frontier War of 1851-1853* (Pretoria, 1974), 13.

there was a pensive but wrought-up solemnity – so characteristic of the [Khoi] – but which occasionally broke loose in unbounded laughter.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, there were a number of Khoi from within the settlement who joined in the rebellion, either immediately or later. The Reads, who saw the rebellion, correctly, as ruining their lives' work, tended to portray the participants as giddy young men – not surprisingly as the young are always likely to be the most radical – while the loyalists were the established, respectable farmers.<sup>62</sup> Statistically there is considerable support for this. On the basis of the Reads' figures, it can be calculated that 22 per cent of those in possession of an erf joined the rebellion, as opposed to 45 per cent of the Khoi inhabitants of the valley who did not own an erf.<sup>63</sup> The rebel erfholders, most common in the west of the valley where they had been pressed by Hermanus, had suffered most from government actions in 1850 and in general, they had been less likely to recover from the depredations of the War of the Axe. There were also many rebels among the people in those parts of the north of the valley that were laid waste by the British army and the white settler militias in February 1851.<sup>64</sup>

Such sociological comments cannot disguise the fact that among the rebels a substantial number of the established figures of the Settlement had joined the rebellion, and that others, including the two most prominent military figures, Field Commandant Christian Groepe and Field Cornet Andres Botha, were suspected of, at the very least, not being totally committed to its suppression.<sup>65</sup> There were a number of reasons for this. Certainly both Botha and Groepe were held back by the presence of one or more of their sons among the rebels,<sup>66</sup> and the shearing loyalties of civil war in a close, small community must have been difficult for many on both sides.<sup>67</sup> More generally, British settlers in the militia

<sup>61</sup> Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 23.

<sup>62</sup> Andries Botha commented that 'All is up; my sons and all the young people have left me, and I, my wife and the old people are all that are left'. See Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Calculated on the basis of Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, Appendix, 3.

<sup>64</sup> See below.

<sup>65</sup> Botha was tried and convicted of high treason as a result of his actions, not a verdict I would endorse, on the basis of the evidence led in his trial, *Trial of Andries Botha* (Cape Town, 1852); for Groepe, see 'Answer to an Address of the House of Assembly to the Lieut. Governor', dated 20 July 1854, for the Reports of the Commissioners Appointed for Investigating into the Causes of the Kat River Rebellion', Cape Parliamentary Paper (1854), 2.

<sup>66</sup> D. Williams, *When Races Meet: The Life and Times of William Ritchie Thomson* (Johannesburg, 1967), 148-49, and above note 60.

<sup>67</sup> Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 59.

and the British army were driven by the widely articulated belief that Mlanjeni's War was a struggle between black and white, with no room for the greys (or browns) of the Kat River,<sup>68</sup> and were unable, or more probably unwilling, to distinguish friend from foe. There were certainly loyalists who were killed by British forces in the belief that they must have been rebels.<sup>69</sup> A party of loyalists from the Kat River was fired upon by the inhabitants of the town while escorting the magistrate into Fort Beaufort, exacerbating the anti-colonial feelings of those involved. These included Andries Botha, who exclaimed later that 'he would join the rebels...take Fort Beaufort and convince the inhabitants that they had a different man than Hermanus to deal with'.<sup>70</sup> Later, as General Somerset together with units of the army and the white militia swung through the Settlement, their forces took the opportunity to impose themselves on the Khoikhoi and the missionaries who had threatened their vision of the true order of the world. Some of the 'Gentlemen Settlers', as James Read Sr ironically called them, had marched up the valley flying a red flag with the word 'extermination' affixed to it. The burgher militia burnt the houses and crops of the loyalists in Readsdale, Bruceton, Wilsonton and among the Groepes, for instance, as readily as they destroyed those of the rebels. The schoolhouses of the LMS seem to have been marked out for specific treatment in this regard, both out of prejudice against the mission and no doubt in protest against their potential role in removing the Khoi from dependence on the whites.<sup>71</sup> Andries Botha, afraid of being lynched, spent several nights in the bush before giving himself up to army commanders, an action that was to lead to his being condemned to death for high treason.<sup>72</sup> He was certainly not the only one of the

---

<sup>68</sup> Elbourne, 'Khoikhoi Rebellion', 26-27.

<sup>69</sup> Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 48.

<sup>70</sup> Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 61-62. The quotation comes from the evidence of John Green, a hostile witness, in *Trial of Andries Botha*, 65; if it was not a fabrication of Green's imagination (which I do not believe, though I have no evidence either way), it was merely the explosion of momentary anger. See also *Trial*, 72-73, 233.

<sup>71</sup> Read to Freeman, 13 April 1851, LMS-SA 26/1/C; Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 79-80, 97; Evidence of the Rev. H. Renton, BPP 635 of 1851, 427.

<sup>72</sup> The court that condemned Botha in what was perhaps South Africa's first political trial saw matters differently, believing that he had connived with the rebels during the days in which his movements were unaccounted for. On reading the evidence, I am more persuaded by the arguments of the defence, which I am here recounting, than by those of the prosecution. See *Trial of Andries Botha*, *passim*. Botha's sentence was commuted and he was released after a short stay in gaol. This might seem to suggest that the prosecuting counsel, William Porter, had convinced himself somewhat less fully than he had convinced the jury that Botha was guilty. As Attorney-General, he would have had some say in Botha's release.

Khoi to take such an action.<sup>73</sup> Though he did not condone all the actions of the men under his command, Somerset took no measures to restrain them. Certainly he accepted their ideas as to the responsibility for the uprising, writing in an official despatch that Philipton, the residence of the Reads and the main mission settlement,

...so proverbially stated to be loyal, had in fact been the focus of almost all the disaffected in the settlement. ...I found, upon undoubted evidence, that from this body of people detachments had been furnished to support the rebels in their desultory attacks on the farms in the colony; in fact that the most disgraceful deception had been carried on to an incredible extent.<sup>74</sup>

This sort of taxonomic lumping did much to drive doubters into the rebel camp.

All the same, the rebellion was driven on, in part at least, by a Khoikhoi ethnic consciousness that was certainly not called into existence by the actions and categorizations of the Europeans. As has been shown elsewhere,<sup>75</sup> it had a history in the Kat River Valley that went back at least to the 1830s, and it was used to mobilize and justify the actions of the rebels. The Xhosa certainly played on it in an attempt to persuade the Khoi to join them. At one meeting, held at Sandile's 'Great Place', the Ngqika chief proclaimed:

I shall re-establish the Kingdom of Chama [one of the old Khoi chiefs, James Read noted]. Do you know of any of the heirs of the old [Khoi] dynasty? If so, I shall give my sanction to their again assuming the rank of their fathers. I see that notwithstanding all the assistance you have given the Government to fight against us in every war, and all your toil for the white man, you are still very poor... If you will join me, ...you may trust my word, that you shall be completed with cattle and all that a man should have; and farther, the first cattle that shall be taken will be distributed to the children of Chama.<sup>76</sup>

The Khoi themselves articulated such ideas, for instance in two of the letters written by rebel leaders to urge others to join their cause. In the first, Speelman Kieviet wrote in the first days of the rebellion:

---

<sup>73</sup> Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 80. This, it should be pointed out, was written before Botha was arrested and charged.

<sup>74</sup> Somerset to Smith, 28 February 1851, BPP 1352 of 1851, 13.

<sup>75</sup> Trapido, *The Emergence of Liberalism*; Ross, 'The Kat River Rebellion and Khoikhoi Nationalism'; Elbourne, 'Race, Warfare and Religion'.

<sup>76</sup> J. Read Sr to Freeman, 13 April 1851, LMS-SA 26/1/C; Read, *Kat River Settlement in 1851*, 41.

Our circumstances as the Hottentot nation...are now become very melancholy and on this account we have put our hands to a work from which we have no wish to retreat. We have done this without acquainting all of you who belong to our nation, and in this we have acted very improperly...but with this we take the liberty to acquaint you, as our nation, that we have commenced war with the settlers (meaning the English), and to call upon you as our nation to assist us. Break the bands of indecision or [sic] come at once with all speed to assist us in this great and important matter. Time is important. It is a national cause and can you as a nation remain inactive? Arise courageously and work for your motherland and freedom. ...The world is against us and who will be for us.<sup>77</sup>

Five months later, Willem Uithaolder, commander of the rebel forces in the Amatola Mountains, had a letter written to Adam Kok III, Captain of the Philippolis Griquas, in which he called upon Kok to:

Rise manfully and unanimously as a nation and children of one house to engage yourselves in this important work, a work which concerns your mother country, for not a single person of colour, wherever he may be, will escape this law. Trust, therefore, in the Lord (whose character is known to be unfriendly to injustice), and undertake your work, and he will give us prosperity – a work for your motherland and freedom, for it is now the time, yea, the appointed time, and no other.<sup>78</sup>

For both Kieviet and Uithaolder, and for most of their followers, the nationalism they propagated was a very Christian nationalism, building on a long tradition of socially engaged mission Protestantism, which went back to the establishment of the LMS mission in the Eastern Cape. At the same time it was highly ethnic. Ethnicity, as ever, was a way to think about matters beyond the existential which it propounds on the surface, thus not just ‘Who am I?’ but also ‘Why is this happening to me?’ The rebellion was explicitly not just an assertion of Khoi ethnicity: it was a protest against the threats of settler rule, which the Khoi saw, not unjustly, in the proposed establishment of the Cape Parliament. At one extreme there were those who hoped for the establishment of a Khoi state – a monarchy or republic – in the Eastern Cape.<sup>79</sup> Those who were somewhat more realistic saw their protests primarily aimed at the European settlers in the Colony, and particularly at the possibility, which had been mooted by various of the farmers, of the reintroduction of measures that it was believed would reduce the Khoi once again to bondage, notably a Vagrancy

---

<sup>77</sup> BPP 1635 of 1853, 171, Speelman Kieviet to [Peffer], 10 January 1851.

<sup>78</sup> BPP 1635 of 1853, Willem Uithaolder to Adam Kok. 11 June 1851. (The original is in the Free State Archives, HC 1/1/3.)

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Godlonton & Irving, ‘Narrative’, 176, from *The South African Commercial Advertiser* (they do not give the date).



Act.<sup>80</sup> The hopes and fears were enough to make them risk what they had built up in the hope, forlorn as it turned out, that they would be able to reconstruct their lives.

## Conclusion

By the end of the nineteenth century, the whole of what was to become South Africa was under colonial rule. A couple of years later it was all under British rule. This is not surprising. British power was vastly superior to that of all other South African groups and when it was called upon it could, eventually, steamroller them. Moreover, the British, or at least some of them, had an almost teleological sense that they would master the sub-continent. It was a decision based on ideas of racial supremacy and racial difference, or at the very least on an ethnic consciousness which the British assumed for themselves and which they imputed to all the others with whom they came into contact. In the course of this process of ethnic labelling, they decided, effectively, who were to be their opponents.<sup>81</sup>

Matters seem very different and certainly more complicated when the point of view shifts to that of the non-British. As the history of the Kat River Settlement shows, the British perspective was usually based on an accurate assessment of the true motives and intentions of people to whom the British attributed hostility. Ethnicity, in particular, was not necessarily as evident a motive as the British assumed. It was not unusual for those who had thrown in their lot with the British to be rejected by them because of their association, in the eyes of the British though not in their own, with people who, at that moment, the British assumed to be their enemies. Many Kat River settlers rebelled because they were declared to be rebels, and even then many of those who were considered to be disloyal to the Cape Colony struggled as hard as they could to preserve their loyalty and to hold to the course they had chosen. What was called 'loyalty' was, in its way, just as much 'resistance' as was taking up arms. Loyalty was resistance to the increasingly racialized bifurcation of colonial South African society, while fighting, paradoxically, was an affirmation of that division.

---

<sup>80</sup> Elbourne, 'Fit for Freedom'; Memorandum by John Montagu, Colonial Secretary, 2 February 1852, BPP 1636 of 1852-3, 109.

<sup>81</sup> For an analogous case, see S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906-8 Disturbances in Natal* (Oxford, 1970).