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Grahamstown versus Cape Town

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Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order. By TIMOTHY KEEGAN. Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1996. x + 368 pp. ISBN 0 86486 308 X.

Metonymically, the political and economic history of the Cape Colony during the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century could be seen as a contest between Grahamstown and Cape Town. This was not in the first instance a matter of ethnic divisions, of Dutch against English, although often enough it was portrayed in these terms. Rather, it was about the distinctions between, on the one hand, a settled colony with established, if changing, patterns of labour relations and a developed artisanate — the West — and, on the other, an area of relatively recent European settlement with uneasy and frequently hostile relations with still independent African polities close across the border — the East. The East was still expansive, not just east of the Fish river but also north of the Orange; the West scarcely. The East's relations with Imperial Britain were dominated by the regular activities of the British army against the Xhosa, which provided both security and opportunities for profit. The West, in contrast, primarily had to do with the civilian arms of government. The East was the area which provided the main export product of the colony, wool, while the West, whose economy was substantially larger in absolute terms, grew wheat and wine, largely for the internal market, and organized the finance of the colony. In the political crisis of the mid-century, Grahamstown supported the colonial authorities and generally agitated for a high franchise; Cape Town was the seat of opposition, and saw only advantages in the Cape Colony, receiving one of the most broadly elected parliaments of the time.

It would be dangerous to take this contrast too far. The two parts of the colony were always united by ties of finance, as Capetonians held mortgages over much of the Eastern Cape. The military and civilian arms of government were united in the person of successive governors, who for all but six of the forty-eight years after the second British conquest were also commanders-in-chief of the army. All the same, through much of the nineteenth century, there

were many in the Eastern Cape agitating for the partition of the Colony, although the Westerners were always able to defeat this proposal.

Not surprisingly, the historiography of the Cape Colony reflects this dichotomy. On the one hand, there is the Grahamstown tradition, which goes back at least the Sir George Cory, and in part at least to the beginnings of South African historiography in the first half of the nineteenth century.[1] In terms of its subject matter, this is the dramatic narrative of Cape history, including the Servants Revolt of the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the succession wars between the colony and the Xhosa, the vicissitudes of the 1820 settlers and the expansion to the north symbolised in the Great Trek. It is also the historiography in which the heroic strand of mission history takes it part, as missionaries agitated for the civil rights of the Khoikhoi and played their role in colonial conquest, whether facilitating and welcoming it,[2] or, as most notably with the French Protestants in Lesotho, hindering and delaying it by their diplomacy.[3] The 'Western Cape' historiography is quieter, more likely to be concerned with social and economic matters.[4] Its master narrative is harder to define, although very clearly it centres around slavery and, increasingly, the adjustments after emancipation, on the one hand,[5] and the administrative, political and constitutional development of the colony, on the other.[6] Its

1. Sir George Cory, *The Rise of South Africa*, 5 vols (London, 1913-1930); A. Bank, 'The Great Debate and the Origins of South African Historiography', *Journal of African History*, 38, 2 (1997), 261-82.
2. N. Majeke (Dora Taylor), *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest* (Johannesburg, 1952); A. Ross, *John Philip (1775-1851): Missions, Race and Politics in South Africa* (Aberdeen, 1986).
3. C.H. Perrot, *Les Sotho et les Missionaires Européens au XIXXe Siècle* (Abidjan, 1970).
4. Notably, recently, W. Dooling, *Law and Community in a Slave Society: Stellenbosch District, South Africa, c.1760 - 1820* (Cape Town, 1992) and W. Dooling, 'Agrarian Transformations in the Western Districts of the Cape Colony, 1838 - c.1900' (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1996).
5. N. Worden and C.C. Crais, eds, *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and its Legacy in the Nineteenth Century Cape Colony* (Johannesburg, 1994); N. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge, 1985); R.C.-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Hanover and London, 1994); A. Bank, *The Decline of Urban Slavery at the Cape, 1806 to 1843* (Cape Town, 1991); M.J. Rayner, 'Wine and Slaves: The Failure of an Export Economy and the Ending of Slavery in the Cape Colony, South Africa, 1806-1834' (PhD thesis, Duke University, 1986); J. Marincowitz, 'Rural Production and Labour in the Western Cape, 1838 to 1888, with Special Reference to the Wheat Growing Districts' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1985).
6. For example, D. Warren, 'Merchants, Commissioners and Wardmasters: Municipal Politics in Cape Town, 1840-1854', *Archives Year Book for South African History*, 55, (1992); K.W. Smith, *From Frontier to Midlands: A History of Graaff-Reinet District, 1786-1910* (Grahamstown, 1976); K.S. Hunt, 'The Development of Municipal Government in the Eastern Province of the Cape of Good Hope, with Special Reference to Grahamstown (1827-1862)',

religious history, where it exists, is about quiescence and acceptance, not conflict, or about the theologies of conservatism, not radicalism.[7] In general it is more likely to place matters of gender in the forefront of its writing.[8] As a chapter title in the *Oxford History* put it a generation ago, it is about 'The Consolidation of a New Society'.[9]

This contrast also exists in Afrikaans historiography. 'Grahamstown' could be seen in the innumerable studies of the Great Trek; 'Cape Town' in the economic histories of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in the studies of governors,[10] even to some extent in the early books by P.J. van der Merwe, which are as much, if not more, about the processes of colonial consolidation and the exploitation of the land as they are about the expansion of European settlement.[11]

For all that, this book by Timothy Keegan has the old St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town and Table Mountain on its dusk jacket, it is a book in the Grahamstown tradition. In a sense this is not surprising. In the course of his research career, Keegan has, as it were, moved south from the High Veld as he has moved back in time. He seems to have been drawn to the Cape by trying to

Archives Year Book for South African History, 24 (1961); (it may seem strange to place a work on the history of Grahamstown as part of the Capetonian tradition, but this merely goes to show that the distinctions I am making here have a purely heuristic value, if they have any).

7. H. Bredekamp and R. Ross, eds, *Missions and Christianity in South African History* (Johannesburg, 1995).
8. P.F. Scully, 'Liberating the Family? Labor and Sexuality in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823-1853' (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1993); P. van der Spuy, 'A Collection of Discrete Essays with the Common Theme of Gender and Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, with a Focus on the 1820s' (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1993); H. Bradford, 'Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and its Frontier Zones', *Journal of African History*, 37, 3 (1995), 351-70.
9. T.R.H. Davenport, 'The Consolidation of a New Society: The Cape Colony', in M. Wilson and L. Thompson, eds, *The Oxford History of South Africa*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1969), 272-333.
10. For example, H. Giliomee, 'Die Administrasietydperk van Lord Caledon (1806-1811)', *Archives Year Book for South African History*, 29, 2 (1966), and H. Giliomee, *Die Kaap tydens die Eerste Britse Bewind, 1795-1803* (Cape Town and Pretoria, 1975). Particularly the latter, of course, also pays considerable attention to the relations between the colony and the Xhosa.
11. P.J. van der Merwe, *Die Noordwaartse Beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek (1770-1842)* (The Hague, 1937); P.J. van der Merwe, *Die Trekboer in die Geskiedenis van die Kaapkolonie* (Cape Town, 1938); P.J. van der Merwe, *Trek* (Cape Town, 1945).

work out how the Free State came to be the sort of colonial society it was.[12] And, of course, the Grahamstown stories are more dramatic.

Keegan does not tell the Grahamstown stories in the standard ways. The strength of his account is that it is in its essence materialist, almost filthily materialist. He does not go in for high-faluting theologies about modes of production or whatever. Rather, his concern is about who got rich, how and at whose expense. This is not of the rhetoric of the *Graham's Town Journal*, but the Grahamstown of land speculation and exploitation, the Grahamstown which accumulated large tracts of land north of the Orange during the period of the Orange River Sovereignty. It is also the Grahamstown of war profiteering, of those people who were accused of fomenting conflict between the Cape and the Xhosa in the clear expectation of making a lot of money out of the contracts which British army officers were quite prepared to dole out to their friends. Jeff Peires once wrote that 'few contemporaries were prepared to risk libel suits by mentioning [the] names' of those who had made their fortunes from the profits of war.[13] Luckily for Keegan, one cannot libel the dead, although the court cases would be, to say the least, interesting, and the defence of 'truth and fair comment' almost certainly decisive.

This group of men, mainly 1820 settlers, often Methodists, under the informal leadership of Robert Godlonton, were able to a remarkable degree to steer the course of British imperialism in mid-nineteenth century South Africa. There were periods when this did not hold. One Governor, probably Sir George Napier, is said to have replied to an address of welcome and advice in Port Elizabeth that 'he was very much obliged to them, but flattered himself that he could govern the colony without their assistance, and wished them a very abrupt good morning'. His aide-de-camp was heard to wonder 'what tinkers and dealers in soap could know about government, and that sort of thing'.[14] But even Napier did not have much control over the patronage system, run by the Colonial Secretary, John Montagu, which was worked much to the benefit of the Grahamstown clique. Indeed, in general, particularly while the colony was governed by Sir Benjamin D'Urban, Sir Henry Pottinger and Sir Harry Smith, the contacts between the Grahamstown elite and the governmental top were very

12. Both T. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrialising South Africa: The Southern Highveld to 1914* (London and Johannesburg, 1986) (and numerous articles associated with this project), and T. Keegan, 'The Making of the Orange Free State: Sub-Imperialism, Primitive Accumulation and State Formation', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 17 (1988).
13. J.B. Peires, *The House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of the their Independence* (Johannesburg, 1981), 123.
14. A.W. Cole, *The Cape and the Kafirs: Or Notes of Five Years Residence in South Africa* (London, 1852), 65.

close, as Keegan rightly points out. The push towards the north, the harsher regime towards the Xhosa which developed after the War of the Axe and the disdain in which the Kat River Settlement was held, all derived from this relationship. And, after the mid-1830s such a relationship was generally tolerated by the Imperial Government in London. The settlers, who were after all British in origin, were the collaborators with whom the Colonial Office could hope to run the colony on the cheap. It was only with the appointment of Charles Darling as Lieutenant-Governor in 1853 that the British government came to realise that alliance with Cape conservative expansionists was not the way to save money. On the contrary, it only increased the cost of the Colony to the Imperial government.[15]

In this sense, then, 'Grahamstown' is a metaphor for that Cape conservatism which reached its high point in the 1840s. Conservatism was seen, both then and later, as in conflict with Cape liberalism, although both terms are so vague and change so much in their content over time that any sense of constancy in their clash is absent. In the later nineteenth century, Cape liberalism was shaped by its relation to the African peasantry and mission-educated elite of the Eastern Cape. Its Parliamentary representatives often got themselves elected with heavy support from such people.[16] At mid century, its support was rather different. In the first place, the prime concern of those who might be identified as liberals, notably William Porter and John Fairbairn, was to establish some form of representative assembly to allow control over the executive. There had been previous attempts to do this, which Fairbairn in fact had opposed, but they had failed because the Imperial Government was not prepared to allow a Parliament composed on slave-owners. This time round, it was necessary to ensure that the parliament enjoyed the greatest possible degree of support. Farm labourers (and, of course, women) were not going to be within the bounds of political participation; independent artisans and the residents of mission stations, on the other hand, were to be. Cape liberalism in its early phases was thus, much more than later, primarily concerned to establish what would in time come to be described as bourgeois democracy.[17] In this, those most obviously to be thought of as liberals were joined by the political leaders of the Dutch in the Cape. These people realised that the maximalisation of their constituency required that political participation be wide. If this required the enfranchisement

15. T.E. Kirk, 'Self-Government and Self-Defence in South Africa: The Inter-Relations between British and Cape Politics, 1846-1854' (DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1972), esp. ch. 12.
16. S. Trapido, '"The Friends of the Natives": Merchants, Peasants and the Political and Ideological Structure of Liberalism at the Cape, 1854-1910', in S. Marks and A. Atmore, eds, *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980).
17. H.C. Botha, *John Fairbairn in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1984); J.L. McCracken, *New Light at the Cape of Good Hope: William Porter, the Father of Cape Liberalism* (Belfast, 1993).

of significant numbers of 'coloureds', then the benefits would well outweigh any potential costs.[18]

The question that this raises, however, is the extent to which the inclusion of some 'coloureds' in the political community was seen as a cost. There were alternative explanations. One, most famously formulated by William Porter, was that political incorporation was a prophylactic against rebellion.[19] There were also cynical calculations. It was far from certain around 1850 how the political triangle of Dutch, English and 'coloureds' would work out in practice. Rural Dutch leaders might look to habits of deference and patronage to maintain their support. Many people could not have been unaware that the sharpest antipathies in the colony were between the English settlers and the mission coloureds of the Eastern Cape.[20] And there were certainly moments after 1853, notably in the clashes between the 'Clean' and 'Dirty' parties in Cape Town, when a simple split between Dutch and coloured did not come to be political reality.[21] It would be wrong to see the resolution of the mid-century crisis as anything other than a defeat, albeit partial, for 'Grahamstown'. If this had not been the case there would have been no political reason for maintaining the desire for separation between the East and the West.

One of the corollaries of Cape liberal incorporationism was that it had to be very much on colonial terms. It was a jealous creed. Keegan is right to stress that the administration of Sir George Grey, considered to be the high point of Cape liberalism, was particularly harsh towards those Xhosa who were for the first time being placed under regular colonial government. In nineteenth-century, if not twentieth-century terms, this did not make it any less liberal. The distinction between incorporation and domination was always very fine. Nevertheless, it did quite definitely exist.

This has implications for the core of Keegan's arguments. In crude caricature, he is claiming that structures of racial domination within South Africa came out of the desire of settlers for enrichment, the easiest way to which was seen as through the dispossession of Africans from the land and from the fruits of their labour. He also sees the impetus to the Cape constitution of 1853 as coming from the belief that the new colonial state, freed from the trammels

18. A. du Toit, 'The Cape Afrikaners' Failed Liberal Moment, 1850-1870", in J. Butler, R. Elphick and D. Welsh, eds, *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect* (Middletown, Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1987), 43-7.
19. Speech of 9 Mar. 1852, *Further Papers Relative to the Establishment of Representative Assembly at the Cape of Good Hope*, British Parliamentary Paper 1636 of 1852-1853, p. 220.
20. J. Roozendaal, 'Tussen Loyaliteit en Verzet: Reakties van de 'Kleurlingen'-Bevolking in Oostkaapland op Koloniale Overheersing, 1828-1853' (MA thesis, Leiden University, 1994).
21. V. Bickford-Smith, *Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town: Group Identity and Social Practice, 1875-1902* (Cambridge, 1995).

of imperial control, would guarantee speculations. The humanitarian ideas of missionaries like John Philip, which he discusses at some length, lost out to increasing racism within the missionary societies, symbolised by that tarnished icon, Robert Moffat. Material considerations, for instance, are thought to have impelled Fairbairn's change of opinion from his condemnation of colonial activity during Hintsa's war to his virulent denunciations of the Xhosa during the War of the Axe. He would have had no truck with metaphorical ideas about the establishment of representative institutions being the demonstration of the colony's maturity.[22] For Keegan, colonial politics was about individual bank balances (see, in particular, various passages on p. 282).

Now, Keegan is obviously right, in part. The question is, how large is that part? Refreshing though Keegan's materialism is, and healthy though his cynicism is, it is not merely unfashionable to reject the arguments of the time, the discourse, as obfuscation; taken to extremes, it is wrong. And that discourse, the debates about the franchise which provide the sharpest arguments on the levels of incorporation, were held during and in the immediate aftermath of the Kat River rebellion and the Western Cape panic. They were quite openly about the place in the new order of those communities, some members of whom had gone into rebellion, in the East, or who had erroneously been thought to be about do so, in the West.[23]

There is another problem with rhetoric. Even if those who spout it may not believe it, there is the danger that those who hear it may believe it. Keegan's plot, a debunking of liberal pretensions in favour of self-interest and the establishment of a racial order, does not allow for the survival and spread of liberal ideals among those who believed that they had been promised incorporation and equality. The mission converts of the period before 1850 might have been disappointed and disillusioned. The line from them, and from the early missionaries, to the African elite of the late nineteenth century, and thence to the African National Congress, is clear. If the racial order was established in the demands for conquest in the early nineteenth century, so ultimately were the ideological forces for its destruction.

22. K. McKenzie, 'Gender and Honour in Middle-Class Cape Town: The Making of Colonial Identities 1828-1850' (DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1997), 311-49.
23. See the debates in the Legislative Council of March 1852, printed in British Parliamentary Paper 1636 of 1852-1853, pp. 211-80.