

“Get money – honestly if you can – but get money”: a bicentenary tribute to the British settlers of 1820

By Prof Jeff Peires

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Asked to commemorate the bicentenary of the 1820 settlers the author was pressed to identify its significance: ‘it is safe to say that were it not for the presence of the Settlers Monument presiding over our annual festival, very few residents other than their biological descendants would remember them at all. The challenge for the historian attempting to assess the significance of the 1820 settlement ... is to explain not its impact, but its transience and ultimate demise’.

Truth to tell, the COVID-19 pandemic spared the Makana Council some small anxiety by obviating any need to commemorate the bicentenary of the 1820 settlers. Not that feelings were running high on either side of the political and racial divides of our small city. What little historical consciousness we still have is completely absorbed by the name-change controversy (Grahamstown versus Makhanda) which, in turn, is determined by our respective perceptions of the Fourth (1811-12) and Fifth (1818-1819) Frontier Wars, bloody conflicts which preceded the arrival of the settlers in 1820. Indeed, it is safe to say that were it not for the presence of the Settlers Monument presiding over our annual festival, very few residents, other than their biological descendants, would remember them at all.

It nevertheless remains true that the settlement of about 5,000 English-speaking colonists, which boosted South Africa’s white population by more than 10 percent, was a significant

imperial intervention and should not simply be ignored. Politically, its most important consequence was the implantation in southern Africa of an Anglophone culture, otherwise alien to its existing inhabitants, both white and black. Without the 1820 settlement, the Cape of Good Hope would most probably have followed the examples of Mauritius and Sri Lanka, colonies subjected to Great Britain at the same time, but where, despite its official status, English never rooted itself among the local population.

Language apart, however, most of the important innovations associated with the British occupation – the abolition of slavery, for example – originated from the metropole and would have extended to the Cape in due course, regardless of the presence or absence of British settlers. The challenge for the historian attempting to assess the significance of the 1820 settlement, therefore, is to explain not its impact but its transience and ultimate demise. Such indeed is the purpose of this article. >>

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The historical significance of the 1820 settlers resides therefore not so much in their role as purveyors of racism but as agents of merchant capital.

To begin with a brief overview: The 1820 settlement originated not in the defensive needs of the Cape Colony but in the political needs of a mother country attempting to mitigate the economic depression and popular disturbances which shook Great Britain in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. They were settled on small farms in “Lower Albany” (formerly Bathurst/Port Alfred, now Ndlambe) district, on lands from which the Xhosa had formerly been dispossessed but which were no longer located on the immediate colonial border. In agricultural terms, the settlement was a failure, with 75 percent of the settlers abandoning their farms within the first five years. When the next Frontier War broke out 14 years later, many of the younger settlers joined the British army “Corps of Guides,” one of them, George Southey, distinguishing himself by shooting dead the Xhosa king Hintsa, others compounding the crime by mutilating his body. In the wars which followed, however, the settlers played a lesser role, leaving most of the fighting to the regular British army and its African auxiliaries, and confining themselves mainly to defending their farms and hiring out their wagons at inflated prices. As Thomas Stubbs, embittered bankrupt militia captain, described the settler elite:¹



I could if I wished, enumerate a great many who owe their present positions [to] the Caffer wars. They are all men who never ran any risk by going out to assist in the wars, but who had their eyes fixed on the Commissariat Chest or any other place where money was to be had. They kept up the old saying, “Get money – honestly if you can – but get money.”

Though profiting in many ways by the dispossession of the Xhosa and the Free State Sotho, settler land hunger was driven by speculation rather than agriculture. By the time that responsible government was implemented at the Cape in 1872, the 1820 settlers had long ceased to be an identifiable or coherent force.

Apart from such triumphalist accounts as Sheffield’s *The Story of the Settlement* (1884) and Sir George Cory’s multi-volume *The Rise of South Africa* (1910-30), surprisingly few attempts have been made to grapple with the settler legacy.² Guy Butler, usually seen as the doyen of settler historiography, is a more complex figure who has been somewhat unfairly misunderstood.

His intention, in such works as *The 1820 Settlers* and the Settlers Monument itself, was to represent the 1820 settlement as the commencement of an admittedly new but nevertheless meaningful tradition, compatible with indigenous African traditions but distinct from, and better than, the British Imperial or the African nationalist. In so far as he was willing to face the racial contradictions of the frontier, he drew comfort from the Quaker, Richard Gush, who averted a Xhosa attack on Salem town by literally breaking bread with an invading chief and his councillors. “The Settlers,” Butler explained, “were simple people, ordinary as bread; but, like bread, they could be transformed.”³

Far more sophisticated is Clifton Crais who, considering the 1820 settlers in the light of “Lacanian psychoanalytic theory,” concludes therefrom that “in the transition from an imaginary order – the settler ‘sees’ or ‘imagines’ himself in the African – to a symbolic one, the Other emerged as a signifier around which a colonial discourse was born.”⁴ His argument, as far as I understand it, runs something like this: far from harbouring negative prejudices against Africans, “wealthy British settlers initially viewed blacks with positive enthusiasm.”⁵ This was

because they had mostly immigrated with their own white labourers, and were seeking to recreate in southern Africa, the squirearchy of rural England, replete with a “mansion on the hill”.⁶ When, however, the settlement failed and the lower class of whites broke free from their control, they turned to black labour, stepping up their “call for imperial expansion and the intervention of the colonial state”.⁷ Hand in hand with this process went the “ideological construction of the Other ... a stage where all that was repulsive in their own culture was projected as intrinsic features in the character of the African. This “discourse” eventually produced its own reality which “justified the promulgation of coercive legislation and ultimately legitimated the development of a racial capitalism”.⁸

Ingenious, perhaps, but incorrect. British racism did not begin in 1820, as Joseph Williams discovered in 1816 when British officers, deriding his mission to the Xhosa, warned him that “nothing but powder and ball would do to bring such savages to their senses, and that after a good lot of them had been shot that then would be the time to go and preach salvation to them, and not before”.⁹ More important, a “mansion on the hill” was far from the thoughts of almost all the 1820 settlers. Only 12 out of the 60 settler parties were headed by “proprietors,” bringing out their own employees from England. The vast majority of settlers were urban mechanics and small traders who never from the first had any intention to farm. The impeccable research of M.D. Nash has shown that the misery of the English working classes in 1819 was so great that the government’s offer of an assisted passage to the Cape was many times over-subscribed.¹⁰ Only 36 percent of the men registered as farmers or unskilled labourers, and some of these were most probably lying to get their applications through. Small wonder that three-quarters of the settlers decamped at the earliest opportunity, heading

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for Grahamstown, never intended as the settler capital but, at that point in time, the Eastern Cape’s first and only commercial hub, hoping thereby to make money by means other than the sweat of their brows. Nor did they find this difficult. As the settler, J.W.D. Moodie, explained:¹¹

Anyone of the class of mechanics or artisans who possess industry and steadiness may easily raise himself to a higher situation in society; for, as soon as he has acquired a little capital he may readily obtain credit with the merchants of Cape Town, who will give him goods to sell on commission; and he soon acquires the means of carrying on business on his own account.

Both Africans and Afrikaners conducted most of their business by barter or direct exchange of services, and enterprising settler traders had no difficulty exchanging cheap but attractive goods such as cloth, knives and tinder-boxes for valuable commodities such as cattle-hides and ivory which fetched high prices on the export market.

The historical significance of the 1820 settlers resides therefore not so much in their role as purveyors of racism but as agents of merchant capital. For the uninitiated, the impact of merchant capital has been well explained as follows:¹²

Merchant capital can function in any mode of production so long as a significant part of the product takes the form of commodities. To this extent its existence does not require a proletariat ... Nevertheless the development of commodity production which merchant capital must necessarily foster inevitably corrodes the pre-capitalist social formations in which it operates. The monetisation of the economy that necessarily follows in its wake undermines existing systems of property relations and introduces new criteria into the process of production itself ... Property relations that have been accepted for centuries become an obstacle to the new rationality ... that merchant capital seeks to impose, and relations of private property spring up in their place. These changes do not lead directly and inevitably to the formation of a proletariat.

Hintsa, the Xhosa king shot dead by a settler during the 1834-35 war, may not have expressed himself in quite these terms, but he certainly appreciated the dangers of uncontrolled commercial penetration. “Who gave that man permission to go about my country showing the people his goods?” he asked. “Tell them that I took [these goods],” he proclaimed on looting a trading store. “You need not hide it >>

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because they have taken my country from me.”¹³

In the Eastern Cape as everywhere else, merchant capital, once introduced, proved unstoppable. From their original base in lower Albany, settler traders fanned out in all directions, producing in different places different results:

a. *The hinterland of Port Elizabeth:*

One of the very few settlers committed to capital intensive agriculture was one Richard Daniell of Sidbury, who imported merino sheep from Australia. Commercial wool farming accelerated rapidly as enterprising settler farmers like the Southneys, Bowkers, Colletts and Rubidges occupied the extensive lands of the Great Karoo vacated by the departing Voortrekkers. Wool exports from the Cape to Britain nearly quadrupled in a decade, increasing from 1,429,000 lbs in 1842 to 5,447,000 lbs in 1851.¹⁴ By the 1850s, both imports and exports through Port Elizabeth outstripped those through Cape Town, leading the Standard Bank, established in London in 1863, to base its South African



“To commemorate the landing here of the British Settlers in the year 1820” inscription on the campanile, Port Elizabeth, a memorial bell tower built in 1925 to recognise the centenary. John S Young, the deputy mayor and chairman of the Monument Committee, said on the occasion of the opening: “The monument is worthy of this City, of this great country, and of the 4 000 settlers whose fortitude in danger, perseverance against almost overwhelming disaster and steadfastness in carrying forward the traditions of our race, will ever be held in affectionate remembrance by those who speak the tongue of Shakespeare and keep the faith that Milton sang.” (Undated newspaper article from the JS Young Papers)

operations in the former city. Economically, therefore, the Port Elizabeth/Graaff-Reinet axis was well positioned to make the transition from merchant to industrial capital. Politically, however, it never was able to escape the domination of the Western Cape seat of the colonial government. Revenue from the sale of Eastern Cape “vacant lands,” for instance, was deployed to fund a breakwater at Cape Town harbour (essential when shipping upgraded from sail to steam) by 1870 while Port Elizabeth had to wait until 1922 for the equivalent facility. Railway tariffs, to take another example, were likewise manipulated in Cape Town’s favour to offset Port Elizabeth’s greater proximity to the mining centres of the Witwatersrand.¹⁵

b. *The hinterland of East London:* Settler dreams of another Natal

were abruptly choked off in 1866 when the Cape government, on instructions from London, absorbed the Crown Colony of “British Kaffraria,” thereby confining settler land hunger to the territories west of the Kei River.¹⁶ In its place, mercantile capital transformed the old settler stronghold of King Williams Town into a centre of what Stanley Trapido called the “little tradition” of Cape liberalism, white merchants and black farmers allied in support of a rising black peasantry, intellectually spearheaded and symbolised by J.T. Jabavu’s *Imvo Zabantsundu*, an independent isiXhosa-language newspaper, capitalised by white businessmen for the purpose of advertising in its pages.¹⁷ The fate of the peasantry, made famous by Colin Bundy, is too well known to warrant repetition,



but here we see, as in the case of Port Elizabeth, a hopeful nascent capitalism arising from a merchant base, aborted, in this case not by local jealousies but by the insatiable demand of the mining complex for African migrant labour.

- c. *Grahamstown*: Having shed its most enterprising white inhabitants, to either its west or to its east, the old settler centre of Grahamstown never matured out of its initial dependence on the Imperial Connection. Fattened on the profits of war profiteering and land speculation, settler grandes like Robert Godlonton and William Cock reached the apogee of their influence during the governorship of Sir Harry Smith (1847-1852) and, following his dismissal, could think of nothing more entrepreneurial than “Eastern Cape Separatism,” a euphemism for establishing a local seat of government which they could plunder at will.¹⁸ Bitterly jealous of Port Elizabeth, they disdained the coming of the railway and pinned their hopes on establishing a port of their own at the mouth of the Kowie river. They even renamed its little fishing harbour “Port Alfred” in honour of the pending visit of Queen Victoria’s second son. But, symptomatic of their declining importance, Prince Alfred did not even bother to show up.

I trust that this brief review has shown why, though of critical importance at the time, the 1820 settlement has disappeared without a trace, always excepting, of course, the Settler Monument which still looms over Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown). I have necessarily concentrated on the economic aspects, to the neglect, perhaps, of the human dimension. And so to close, let me



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quote the words of Sir George Cathcart whose accession to the governorship, following Sir Harry Smith, marked the beginning of the settler decline:¹⁹

The fact is that peace is ruin to them [the white settlers] and the expenditure of public money during the war has been the making of their fortunes, in war prices for their goods, contracts for waggons and provisions etc. In short the expenditure of a million of British sovereigns in this otherwise miserable place. As to the losses by the way, they bear no comparison to the gains. I am heartily disgusted and sick of these mean, dishonest people; the [Xhosa] is much the finer race of the two.

I couldn’t have put it better myself.

ENDNOTES

1. W.A. Maxwell and R.T. McGeogh (eds). 1978. *The Reminiscences of Thomas Stubbs* (Cape Town: Balkema), p.136.
2. Despite its unpromising title, the best book by far on the 1820 settlers remains M.D. Nash’s *Bailie’s Party of 1820 Settlers* (Cape Town: Balkema: 1982). Nash’s research also provided the basis for Karel Schoeman’s greatly expanded but sadly undigested three-volume opus, *Bailie’s Party*, published by Protea Book House of Pretoria in 2019. The best of the traditional histories remains Guy Butler’s coffee table *The 1820 Settlers* (Cape Town: 1974).
3. G. Butler 1982. *Richard Gush of Salem* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller), p.xxv. Butler’s play is based on a real historical incident of the 1834-35 war recorded by the Quaker traveller, James Backhouse, in 1844.
4. C.C. Crais. 1992. *The Making of the Colonial Order: White Supremacy and Black Resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865* (Wits University Press), pp. 128-9, 242 fn13-14.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 128
6. *Ibid.*, pp.88-90
7. *Ibid.*, p.139
8. *Ibid.*, p.149.
9. London Missionary Society Archives, SOAS, microfiche 76. Journal of Joseph Williams, 2 November 1816.
10. Nash, *Bailie’s Party*, especially Chapter 2.
11. Quoted in T. Keegan. 1996. *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Cape Town: David Philip), 68-69. See also J.B. Peires. 1989. “The British and the Cape, 1814-1834,” in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee. *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840*, 2nd ed (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman), pp.475-476.
12. Geoffrey Kay. 1975. *Development and Underdevelopment: a Marxist Analysis* (London: Macmillan), quoted in S. Marks and A. Atmore. (eds). 1980. *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London: Longman), fn 16, p.39. My attention was drawn to this passage by Dr Shula Marks, whose volume, just cited, provides several more examples of the important role played by merchant capital in the economic transitions of nineteenth-century southern Africa.
13. J. Peires. 2003. *The House of Phalo*, 2nd ed (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball), pp. 115-6, fn 70, p.263.
14. For the development of the wool industry, T. Kirk, “The Cape economy and the expropriation of the Kat River Settlement, 1846-1853,” in Marks and Atmore. 1980. p.51.
15. A. Mabin. 1986. “The Rise and Decline of Port Elizabeth, 1850-1900,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 19; J. Peires. 2011. “How the Eastern Cape lost its Edge to the Western Cape,” in G. Ruiters (ed), *The Fate of the Eastern Cape* (Scottsville: UKZN Press).
16. C.C. Saunders. 1976. “The Annexation of the Transkeian Territories,” *Archives Yearbook for South African History*, pp 12-14.
17. S. Trapido. 1980. “The friends of the natives’: merchants, peasants and the political and ideological structure of liberalism in the Cape, 1854-1910” in Marks and Atmore; C. Bundy. 1979. *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London: Heinemann Educational), esp. pp.32-43.
18. J. L. Stead. 1984. “The Development and Failure of the Eastern Cape Separatist Movement,” *Archives Yearbook for South African History*; J. Cock. 2018. *Writing the Ancestral River*. (Wits University Press), pp. 89-97.
19. Quoted in J. Peires, 2016. “‘The Expenditure of a Million Sovereigns in this Otherwise Miserable Place’: Frontier Wars, Public Debt and the Cape’s Non-Racial Constitution,” *Theoria* 147 (June), p.25. **NA**