

# HARRY SMITH'S LAST THROW – THE EIGHTH FRONTIER WAR, 1850–1853

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*Keith Smith*

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In the period 1802 to 1893, the Eastern Cape witnessed the clash of two cultures with the expansion of European colonialism, first under the Dutch and later the British Empire with the indigenous people. The result was nine frontier wars that disposed the Xhosa people of large tracts of land and left them with a fraction of their former possessions in reserves and as British subjects.

These wars have been described in publications such as A.L. Harrington's, biography of Harry Smith, *Sir Harry Smith – bungling hero* (1980), T.J. Stapleton's, *Maqoma – Xhosa resistance to colonial advance* (1994) and the chapter on Paramount Chief Maqoma in Ian Knight's – *Warrior chiefs of Southern Africa* (1995). More comprehensive works such as J. Milton's *The edges of war – A history of the Frontier Wars, 1702–1878* (1983), and the monumental work by N. Mostert, *Frontiers – The epic of South Africa's creation and the tragedy of the Xhosa people* (1992), analysed these conflicts in more depth.

Keith Smith's book is a welcome contribution to the historiography of this period as he focuses on the longest and most intense of the wars, the 8<sup>th</sup> Frontier War of 1850–1853. The history of this war has been neglected if one considers that only the Anglo-Boer/South African War, 1899–1902 encompassed a comparable period and this is the first publication that specifically analyses the Frontier War, compared to the multitude of publications on the latter.

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Smith describes how Sir Harry Smith's appointment in 1847 as the new British governor and military commander-in-chief in South Africa started a chain of events that

would lead to open resistance by the Nqgika Xhosa and a substantial number of Khoi people serving in the Cape Mounted Rifleman (CMR), rebelling against their colonial masters. Smith's arrogance and inflated self-confidence made him send half of the British troops in the Eastern Cape back to Britain, while at the same time going out of his way to humiliate the Xhosa chiefs and settling more ex-soldiers on land previously owned by the Xhosa people. When he sent a column of soldiers to arrest Paramount Chief Sandile for his failure to attend a meeting, it led to the ambush in the Boomah Pass and the start of the war.

The long-term causes of the war against the background of South African history since 1652 are well described and are followed by the different stages in the war in which Smith and his successor, George Cathcart, conducted different campaigns in a war that rapidly escalated. The Thembu and the Gcalecka Xhosa under Paramount Chief Sarhili north of the Kei River were also drawn into the conflict and eventually substantial reinforcements, as well as a brutal scorched earth strategy were needed to win the war.

The strong point of the book is the detail in which military actions are described and substantially supported by direct quotations from primary sources, providing the personal experiences from the British side. An example of this is the republished book by John Bisset, *Sport and war: Or recollections of fighting and hunting in South Africa from the years 1834 to 1867*, initially published in 1875. Smith's book is extensively illustrated with maps and photographs. However, certain aspects of the war are not well described.

The description of the Xhosa military system provides insight into how they could defy the might of the British Empire for nearly three years, although the use of oral sources in the same manner that John Laband and Paul Thompson rewrote the history of the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879, from the Zulu perspective would have added to the value of Smith's work. The section on the British Army is disappointing, providing little information of crucial aspects such as the type of muskets, artillery and tactical doctrine. I had to delve in H. Strachan's *From Waterloo to Balaclava – tactics, technology and the British Army, 1815–1854*, to understand the shortcomings that would make it difficult for British regular troops to fight against the Xhosa-Khoi Alliance in the difficult terrain such as the Amathola Mountains and the Fish River Valley. The characteristics of weapon systems such as the artillery used, is vital information so that the reader comprehends the ineffectiveness of artillery fire in thickly wooded sites such as the Horseshoe, Fuller's Hoek and the Tenth Pass. The lack of detail descriptions of the type of weapons used is also

irritating when reading the descriptions of the battles. Some British regiments were later in the war issued with Miniè bullets, that provided them with a substantial advantage over the Xhosas armed mainly with flintlock muskets. This is not even mentioned in the description of actions, only that British firepower was more effective.

The author focuses mainly on the daily experiences of the ordinary soldier as well as the quality of the officer corps, but this is not substantiated by referencing. A particularly irritating example is the statement that sodomy was unofficially condoned, a controversial comment that is not corroborated by any source (page 6).

The main weakness of Smith's book is the seemingly inability of the author to analyse the bigger picture in the conduct of the war. Tactics describe the actual fighting on the ground, but it is directed by strategy. Maps depicting this aspect would have enabled the reader to comprehend the events within theatre context and in several instances, it is difficult to find place names mentioned in the text on available maps. Maps depicting the routes and objectives of respective British columns during the different campaigns specifically would also have contributed to a better understanding of the events.

Vital aspects of the war are not described, and these had to be found in other works such as Mostert's *Frontiers*. An example of this is population strength that would determine the potential manpower for military purposes, when the Gcaleka Xhosa and substantial numbers of Khoi living in the Eastern Cape were also drawn into the war. Nowhere could the number of CMR that rebelled against the British be found, a vital strategic aspect, taking into account that these men were armed and trained by the British Army, thus serving as a force multiplier in the rebel cause.

Smith is an Australian computer analyst interested in South African history. It is clear that the author did comprehensive research, but the final product is difficult to read. There is no logical flow of discourse between the different levels of war and too much focus is placed on the personal experiences of individuals. Add to this the lack of geographical features depicted on maps and you have a confused reader. This book is a good first contribution to describe the war of 1850–1853, but cannot serve as the final answer in research on this topic.

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