

# “THE WAR TOOK ITS ORIGINS IN A MISTAKE”: THE THIRD WAR OF DISPOSSESSION AND RESISTANCE IN THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE COLONY, 1799–1803

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## Abstract

The early colonial wars on the Cape Colony’s eastern borderlands and western Xhosaland, such as the 1799–1803 war, have not received as much attention from military historians as the later wars. This is unexpected since this lengthy conflict was the first time the British army fought indigenous people in southern Africa. This article revisits the 1799–1803 war, examines the surprisingly fluid and convoluted alignments of participants on either side, and analyses how the British became embroiled in a conflict for which they were unprepared and for which they had little appetite. It explores the micro narrative of why the British shifted from military action against rebellious Boers to fighting the Khoikhoi and Xhosa. It argues that in 1799, the British stumbled into war through a miscalculation – a mistake which was to have far-reaching consequences on the Cape’s eastern frontier and in western Xhosaland for over a century.

## Introduction

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial wars on the Cape Colony’s eastern borderlands and western Xhosaland (*emaXhoseni*) have received considerable attention from historians. For reasons mostly relating to the availability of source material, the later wars are better known than the earlier ones. Thus the War of Hintsá (1834–35), the War of the Axe (1846–47), the War of Mlanjeni (1850–53) and the War of Ngcayecibi (1877–78) have received far more coverage by contemporaries and subsequently by historians than the eighteenth-century conflicts.<sup>2</sup> The first detailed examination of the 1799–1803 conflict, commonly known as the Third Frontier War or third Cape–Xhosa war, was by George McCall Theal. George Cory, in his history of South Africa, for the

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most part closely followed Theal, but added his own unique racial slant to the conflict. More recent historians who analysed aspects of the war include Hermann Giliomee, John Milton, Noel Mostert and John Hopper. Suzie Newton-King and Candy Malherbe provided a penetrating revisionist analysis, focusing on the Khoikhoi, suggesting that rather than seeing the conflict as a rebellion, it could more appropriately be viewed as a war of independence.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Ehlers, in 1992, argued that internal conflicts in Xhosa society have been underplayed in analyses of wars up to 1820. Following Christopher Saunders, he correctly pointed to Theal's early use of race as the central unit of analysis influencing generations of historians. Recently, Martin Legassick provided a short history, linking the conflict to broader historical processes, but notwithstanding the chapter heading, "The 1799–1803 Xhosa–Khoi revolt and Bethelsdorp", the war received no more than two paragraphs. Even military histories have given the war only glancing attention. The National Army Museum's otherwise excellent military history of the British army in South Africa also does not deal with the conflict in any substantive way.<sup>4</sup> Tim Stapleton's recent military history of South Africa gives the 1799–1803 war less than two pages, generally following Milton without adding anything new. This is all somewhat unexpected since this was the first time regular British regiments engaged both the Khoikhoi and the Xhosa – something which was to preoccupy the British at the Cape for the next century.

In these histories, the macro issues of political economy – the importance of the Cape to the British in holding India, and the supposed significance of the Graaff-Reinet district in the production of meat and butter – are well served, but the micro narrative of the actual outbreak of hostilities, the tipping point, is less well-established.<sup>5</sup> A detailed examination of the actual mechanics of the slide into hostilities, what Nigel Worden called a "microhistorical" approach, suggests that neither the fragility of British power in the Eastern Cape at the time nor the apparently accidental turn events took have been adequately examined.<sup>6</sup> This article therefore seeks to provide fresh perspectives on how colonial processes played themselves out at local level. In particular, the study explores why the British moved from military action against rebellious Boers to fighting the Xhosa when, up to 1799, British policy had been one of avoiding conflict with African polities on the Cape's eastern borderlands.<sup>7</sup>

### **Dramatis personae**

The 1799–1803 war had all the elements of an epic historical drama in two acts – replete with a plot full of twists and turns, colourful characters, mystery, intrigue and betrayal. Pinning down the main protagonists and antagonists yields

some surprises as alignments and alliances shifted as the war unfolded. An understanding of the war lies in untangling six separate but inter-related themes:

- The fumbling attempts of the British to establish authority over the remote eastern parts of the Colony;
- The actions of rebellious Boers in the Graaff-Reinet district who rejected British authority;
- Tensions within Xhosa society;
- Attempts by Khoikhoi to escape from servitude and re-establish a measure of independence;
- The arrival of London Missionary Society missionaries; and
- The takeover of the Cape by the Batavian administration.

At the time of the outbreak of hostilities, different Xhosa polities were living in a broad swathe from the coastal region around the Sundays River, inland to Bruintjieshoogte, and eastwards to the Mbashe River.<sup>8</sup> For Xhosa living on either side of the Fish River, relations in this period were dominated by the rivalry between the young Rharhabe chief, Ngqika, and his uncle and Rharhabe regent, Ndlambe. In 1793, Ngqika inflicted a surprising defeat on Ndlambe. Taking him prisoner, Ngqika established himself as ruler of the Rharhabe. Xhosa polities west of the Fish River – the Gqunukhwebe under chief Chungwa in the coastal region, the Ntinde, the Mbalu, Mdange and Gwali further inland – tried to distance themselves from Ngqika and maintain a measure of autonomy. In 1800, Ndlambe escaped from the control of Ngqika and set himself up in the Zuurveld where he attempted to consolidate his power.<sup>9</sup>

The Gqunukhwebe initially forcibly resisted efforts by the British to expel them from the Zuurveld. Once they had reached an accommodation in 1799 that recognised their right to stay west of the Fish River, they assisted the British by routing a combined Boer and (reputedly) Ndlambe force sent to attack the Colony in August 1800.<sup>10</sup> During the war, the Mdange were particularly active in attacking Boer homesteads and waggons in the north-eastern parts of the district. They may have been influenced by Ndlambe. On the other hand, it is also possible that they may have been covertly encouraged by Ngqika, who still exerted considerable influence over them in this period. This would also be consistent with Ngqika's policy of stringing the British along whilst trying to bolster his power base.<sup>11</sup>

The Dutch-speaking burghers or Boers were the first domestic opponents the British administration at the Cape encountered. To the British, they were variously 'inhabitants', 'boors' and 'peasants'. British writers constructed a discourse of the Boers as the 'other' that depicted them as lazy, ignorant, dirty and cruel –

exemplified by John Barrow's depiction of frontier Boers. Not all Boers living in the Graaff-Reinet district supported the rebels, although when the war broke out it affected almost all. Those in the Stellenbosch and Swellendam districts were called upon for commando duty with varying degrees of success.

Boers of the Graaff-Reinet district who sought to evade British authority were happy to ally themselves with the Xhosa to achieve specific short-term objectives, but they did not do so on a basis of equality. The identity they constructed was premised on a sense of racial superiority, defining themselves as 'Christians' and others as 'heathens'.<sup>12</sup> Boer relations with Xhosa polities were fluid, based on pragmatism rather than principle. This led to paradoxical situations where the rebel Boers simultaneously condemned the authorities for conspiring with the Xhosa 'heathens' to massacre them and threatened to bring the Xhosa down on the government if the rebel demands were not accepted.<sup>13</sup> The Xhosa, in turn, were not overawed by the Boers and seem to have regarded them as simply another group to be incorporated and assimilated.<sup>14</sup> In later years, the Xhosa looked to the early contact somewhat nostalgically:

When our fathers, and the fathers of the Boors (*Amabulu*), first settled in the Zuurveld, they dwelt together in peace. Their flocks grazed in the same hills; their herdsmen smoked together out of the same pipes; they were brothers – until the herds of the Amakosa increased so as to make the hearts of the Boors sore.<sup>15</sup>

The Khoikhoi on the Cape's eastern frontier played a leading role in the 1799–1803 war. By the mid-eighteenth century, Khoikhoi around Graaff-Reinet were largely dispossessed and subjugated by the Dutch-speaking farmers. In the 1760s, some Khoikhoi were still in possession of land between the Gamtoos and Fish Rivers. These independent Khoikhoi communities came under increasing pressure from both the Xhosa and the Boers. Khoikhoi groups assimilated into Xhosa society were not confined to permanently subservient positions, but those absorbed onto Boer farms as servants and labourers were "reduced to a condition of degrading, grinding, and hopeless bondage".<sup>16</sup> In 1799, the dispossession of the Khoikhoi was still sufficiently recent for them to recall their age of freedom. Because of years of armed service with the Boers against the independent hunter gatherers and on Xhosa cattle raids, many were skilled horsemen and marksmen. Khoikhoi participated on both sides in the conflict – as part of the British forces in the Cape Regiment and irregulars recruited in the early stages of the war, and in the Khoikhoi confederacy fighting the Boers and British. Unlike some British regulars – at least 14 of whom deserted and found refuge with the Xhosa – Khoikhoi soldiers

in British service in the Cape Regiment were conspicuously loyal.<sup>17</sup> This was less so with the 100 or so Khoikhoi hastily recruited in the course of the campaign against the Boers. Khoikhoi loyalties were tested once hostilities broke out. At least three of these irregulars – Captain Willem Haasbek and two others – were arrested at Bruintjieshoogte for desertion. Cory quite erroneously stated that all but a handful of Khoikhoi from the Cape Regiment deserted Vandeleur in his hour of need.<sup>18</sup>

The British, newly arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in the first British occupation in 1795, had no clear policy towards the Xhosa other than to try to avoid expensive entanglements and cultivate their friendship. Soon after the occupation of the Cape, the governor was surprised by a visit from a Xhosa chief and two companions who had travelled to Cape Town “to see the new nation, which they understood was now in control of the Cape”.<sup>19</sup> When J Barrow and FR Bresler, representing the new British administration, visited the eastern parts of the Colony and Xhosaland in 1797, they were pleased to establish relations with Ngqika as a ruler who was apparently the principal leader of the Xhosa. Ignoring the complexities of separate Xhosa polities living west of the Fish River and Ngqika’s own indications that he had no direct authority over these Xhosa, the British extracted an agreement from him that his subjects would not cross over into the Colony, nor would they have any dealings with the colonists.<sup>20</sup>

This was simply an uncritical continuation of the Dutch policy of declaring the Fish River the boundary and expecting Xhosa west of the river to move. It overlooked the inconvenient fact that Gqunukhwebe had long lived west of the Fish River and did not recognise Ngqika’s direct control over them. It also ignored Ntinde, Gwali, Mbalu and Mdange Xhosa living around Bruintjieshoogte. In 1797, the British made ineffectual attempts to exercise authority over the Xhosa by requiring permits from those entering the Colony and demanding Boers employing or having Xhosa clients on their farms to “liberate & discharge” them within one year and find other servants.<sup>21</sup> Even so, there was at least tacit acceptance in some quarters of the right of the Xhosa and Khoikhoi to the land as far as the Gamtoos River.<sup>22</sup>

The British administration contained its own stresses and instabilities. Coordination between the civil and military government of the Cape was complicated by tensions between Major General Sir Francis Dundas (as military commander) and the venal governor, Sir George Yonge.<sup>23</sup> From 1799 to 1802, the governorship of the Cape changed from Lord Macartney to Dundas (as acting governor), to Sir George Yonge, and after his ignominious recall, back to Dundas. The events of 1799–1803 occurred against a backdrop of the Napoleonic wars and a

British administration at the Cape grappling with a scarcity of food stocks, a shortage of specie in the money supply, a mutiny in the navy at Simon's Town, a fire at the Cape Town barracks, which destroyed large quantities of stores and most dragoon horses, and balancing committing military resources to the eastern parts of the Colony against maintaining sufficient forces at Cape Town in the event of an attack by the French.<sup>24</sup>

The 1799–1803 war was the first time the British encountered the Xhosa and the Khoikhoi as enemies. The British had no clear picture of the Xhosa and the Khoikhoi and had not yet developed a discourse on the Xhosa. They also had no experience and little knowledge of Xhosa weapons and tactics. Once hostilities commenced, Vandeleur found himself hampered by a lack of reliable intelligence. So desperate were the British for dependable intelligence, they pardoned deserters who had some local knowledge from living amongst the Boers and the Xhosa.<sup>25</sup> In later wars, a clear military discourse emerged of the Xhosa “merciless barbarians” and “treacherous savages” which, amongst other things, justified their dispossession and subjugation.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore instructive to examine the early depictions of the Xhosa. Although there were earlier narratives of visits to the Xhosa, such as Lieutenant William Paterson's 1779 journey, what little intelligence decision-makers at the Cape had was mainly based on Barrow's 1797 tour of the Zuurveld and visit to Ngqika.<sup>27</sup> For Barrow, so antipathetic towards the Boers, the Xhosa were the embodiment of the noble savage in the mould of Greek gods.<sup>28</sup> In 1797, Governor Macartney drew a distinction between savages and non-savages on the basis that the latter had an ordered society and, significantly, had sufficient power to damage colonial interests. He placed the Xhosa definitively in the non-savage category.<sup>29</sup> For the ordinary British soldier, the distinction was less obvious:

The savage [Xhosa] exults in ... appalling sights; gaping wounds, and the pangs of the dying, are to his dark and infatuated mind the very acme of enjoyment. This barbarous race, when they have succeeded in any of their murderous exploits, appear to be so excited to ecstasy, that they will jump about in a sort of phrenzy [*sic*] ...<sup>30</sup>

Either through sheer arrogance or naivety, the British did not think Chungwa's Gqunukhwebe would respond to threats and blustering with force, “it never entered our calculations that he would be rash and imprudent enough to commence an attack against a large body of regular troops”.<sup>31</sup> Xhosa tactics and their skill in warfare also came as something of a shock:

The [Xhosa] may unquestionably be considered as a formidable enemy. They are inured to war and plunder, and most of them are

such famous marksmen with their darts, that they will make sure of their aim at sixty or eighty paces' distance. When you fire upon them they will throw themselves flat upon their faces, and thus avoid the ball; and, even if you hit them, it is doubtful whether the ball would take effect, the skins worn by them being considered to be ball-proof. Added to this, as they reside in woods, in the most inaccessible parts of which they take refuge on being hard pressed by their enemies, an offensive warfare against them is inconceivably arduous. Before they deliver the darts with which they are armed, they run side-ways; the left shoulder projected forward, and the right considerably lowered, with the right hand extended behind them, the dart lying flat in the palm of the hand, the point near the right eye. When discharged from the grasp, it flies with such velocity that you can scarcely see it, and when in the air it looks like a shuttle-cock violently struck.<sup>32</sup>

In close-quarters work, the Xhosa broke off the long shafts of their assegais to make efficient stabbing weapons. The type of guerrilla tactics which the Xhosa later perfected against technologically superior forces was already evident in the defeat suffered by a 21-man patrol of the 81<sup>st</sup> Regiment under Lieutenant Chumney in 1799:

This officer had been detached towards the seacoast, and was returning to camp at Bosjeman's River, when his party was surprised among thickets by a large party of [Xhosa], who attacked them hand to hand with the iron part of their Hassegais, the wooden shaft being previously broken off. This young officer defended himself bravely till sixteen of his party were killed. The remaining four, with a Dutch boor [*sic*], got into a waggon that accompanied the detachment, and arrived safe at camp. Poor Chumney was on horseback, and when the waggon set out had three Hassegais sticking in his body.<sup>33</sup>

The officer in command during the campaign in the eastern parts of the Colony, Brigadier General TP Vandeleur, claimed fighting the Xhosa would add "little lustre to the British arms", but the reality was that they were not up to the task.<sup>34</sup> No less a figure than the governor admitted,

some partial Conflicts with [the Xhosa] showed it to be exceedingly doubtfull [*sic*] whether the superiority of our Troops could maintain a long Conflict against daring Savages in an impenetrable Country,

neither unused to Fire Arms nor terrified with our Artillery and shewing a desperate invincible Courage on every occasion.<sup>35</sup>

The missionaries of the London Missionary Society and officials of the Batavian Republic starred in significant supporting roles in the war. Missionary activity was in its infancy in South Africa, with the Moravians providing the mission work to indigenous peoples until the arrival of representatives of the London Missionary Society in 1799. JT van der Kemp and J Edmonds initially sought to establish themselves amongst the Ngqika Xhosa.<sup>36</sup> Yonge, in particular, misunderstood Van der Kemp's activities and erroneously saw him as instigating the Boer unrest.<sup>37</sup> When his Xhosa mission proved unsuccessful, Van der Kemp set up shop in Graaff-Reinet with displaced Khoikhoi. His endeavour to minister to the Khoikhoi there was one of the contributing factors to the Boer unrest in 1801. In November 1801, Van der Kemp and James Read obtained a grant of land, Botha's farm, from Dundas to establish a mission settlement for the Khoikhoi near the Swartkops River. This mission settlement near Fort Frederick became an important node of influence during the interregnum between the departure of the British and the arrival of the new Batavian administration.

With the conclusion of a peace treaty between Britain, France and their allies in 1802, the British withdrew from the Cape in 1803. This brought to the stage representatives of the Batavian Republic. The Batavian role in the drama was little more than a cameo appearance, but an important one nonetheless. They inherited a colony in the midst of a war. It fell to Governor-General JW Janssens to conclude a peace settlement. He also based policy for the Cape's eastern frontier on an understanding that the Fish River was the boundary, but was forced to recognise the reality that many Xhosa lived west of this line and the Batavians lacked the military power to expel them. In this, the Batavian government was assisted by disunity amongst the Khoikhoi, one of the consequences of mission activity.<sup>38</sup> To a considerable extent, the British withdrawal from the Cape and arrival of the Batavians saved the British from a humiliating conclusion to the war.

### **The 1799 campaign: A very great reverse of fortune**

The British administration, when it assumed temporary control of the Cape, pursued a lacklustre policy to establish its authority throughout the furthest reaches of the Colony. An initial Boer rebellion in 1795 subsided without military action. Matters again came to a head in 1799 when one of the leaders of the 1795 rebellion, Adriaan van Jaarsveld, was arrested for forgery. He was rescued by like-minded Boers, precipitating a rebellion.<sup>39</sup> About 180 rebellious Boers, with their armed Khoikhoi retainers and slaves, surrounded the Graaff-Reinet drostdy and threatened



to hang Landdrost Bresler and shoot the detachment of dragoons, which prepared to fight. They also threatened to take Bresler into Xhosaland. Coenraad de Buys tried to have his earlier declaration as an outlaw overturned and to establish himself as the only intermediary between the Colony and the Xhosa. Bresler was coerced into signing a declaration pleading for clemency for Van Jaarsveld, calling for a halt to the movement of British forces against the rebellious Boers and for the right to recover runaway Khoikhoi workers and slaves from the Xhosa.<sup>40</sup>



Map 1: Mapping a myth<sup>41</sup>

The administration in Cape Town could ignore neither a challenge to its authority and legitimacy nor an interruption in the supply of meat. A contingent of British and Khoikhoi infantry (two companies of the 91<sup>st</sup> Regiment and the Cape Regiment) were hastily despatched by ship to Algoa Bay whilst the main force

under Vandeleur marched overland. The British deployed their most powerful weapon: cutting off supplies of gunpowder and lead to the frontier districts. A possible Boer alliance with the Ngqika Xhosa worried the British army contingent at Graaff-Reinet as the Xhosa were perceived to be –

... remarkable [*sic*] strong and quite convenient, and pay no regard to small arms or Dragoons or anything except cannon or small mortars to throw shells, on which account nothing would be more necessary than to send some artillery here with such implements.<sup>42</sup>

The rebellious Boers, who mostly came from the Agterbruintjieshoogte and Zuurveld areas, failed to obtain support from Boers in the Sneeuberg area and withdrew their blockade of the drostdy. Under the leadership of Gerrit Rautenbach (whose *nom de guerre* was ‘Freedom’s Child’), an armed party set off for Algoa Bay to prevent the troops landing. Others were stationed on the road to Graaff-Reinet to oppose the troops marching overland.<sup>43</sup>

The British army detachments and Cape Regiment soldiers sent by sea began landing unopposed at Algoa Bay on 2 March 1799. Six days later, Vandeleur arrived with the overland force. On finding that disaffected Boers in the eastern parts of the Swellendam district threatened his rear and lines of communication, Vandeleur had the wife and children of the suspected instigator, Rautenbach, taken as hostages to force his surrender.<sup>44</sup> Vandeleur, possibly not sure of the extent of the rebellion and fearing to provoke further disaffection, proceeded timidly. He initially only advanced about 20 miles (approximately 32 km) inland towards Graaff-Reinet.<sup>45</sup> The tactical choice he faced was whether to accede to Bresler’s appeals and march 200 miles (approximately 322 km) to Graaff-Reinet as a show of force, or to detour through the Zuurveld and Agterbruintjieshoogte dealing directly with the rebellious Boers. His difficulty was exacerbated by poor intelligence and the need to restrict the scale of the conflict in the face of reports that Xhosa were crossing the Fish River in large numbers.<sup>46</sup> He decided to send detachments to strategic points in the Zuurveld to guard the escape routes into Xhosaland whilst marching his main force to the seat of government at Graaff-Reinet. Once Vandeleur got going, reaching Graaff-Reinet on 19 March, the Boer rebellion began to fizzle out. Vandeleur then undertook operations against the Boers at Agterbruintjieshoogte and in the Zuurveld.<sup>47</sup> On 6 April, 150 of the insurgent Boers surrendered and the ringleaders were seized. As far as the acting governor of the Cape was concerned the rebellion was over.<sup>48</sup>

At this point, the objective of the campaign shifted. For reasons which are explored below, Vandeleur then turned his attention to the Xhosa west of the Fish

River, and the Colony was plunged into war.<sup>49</sup> Vandeleur directed operations against Chungwa's Gqunukhwebe in and around the Sunday's River valley. He seems to have approached this in three stages. Initially he met with Chungwa to urge him to move eastwards across the Fish River. Thereafter he perambulated around the Zuurveld picking up the detachments of soldiers that had been stationed at key drifts to try to prevent rebel Boers escaping to the Xhosa. He tried to enforce his demands by seizing Gqunukhwebe cattle and taking them eastwards in the hope that the owners would follow. When this failed, he returned to Chungwa to enforce demands that they vacate the Zuurveld.<sup>50</sup>

In the interim, the coercive system holding the Khoikhoi in servitude, weakened by the Boer rebellion, collapsed. The precedent of the rebellious Boers was followed by large numbers of Khoikhoi who, after long years of oppression, took the opportunity to flee from forced labour and settle accounts with their former masters. The Khoikhoi also seem to have been encouraged by the sight of the soldiers of the Cape Regiment – their own – in British uniforms standing up to the Boers. From the outset, the British had realised that Khoikhoi troops in British uniforms would serve a political purpose in intimidating Dutch-speaking burghers.<sup>51</sup> Now it also had an unforeseen effect on the Khoikhoi.

The Boers were particularly vulnerable. Their supplies of ammunition were cut off, the rebel Boer leadership was either in custody or in hiding in Xhosaland, and their aura of superiority and invincibility – so crucial to the maintenance of their power – had been severely dented. Some of the Khoikhoi banded together to plunder Boer farmhouses. Vandeleur, on the march through the Zuurveld, met up with a large party of Khoikhoi under Klaas Stuurman. Others, less trustful of the British, fled to the Gqunukhwebe. If the British were unclear on their war aims, Stuurman was unambiguous, “Restore the country of which our fathers have been despoiled by the Dutch, and we have nothing more to ask.”<sup>52</sup> They had at that stage, claimed Stuurman, only taken what was due to them in lieu of wages and had injured no-one, “though we have yet a great deal of our blood to avenge”.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, they were seeking the protection of the British against Boer reprisals.<sup>54</sup>

That the Khoikhoi wanted to recover their lost lands and avenge themselves for years of oppression and abuse threw the British into a quandary. To try to prevent the Khoikhoi making common cause with the Zuurveld Xhosa, Vandeleur persuaded the Khoikhoi to surrender their arms, and sent them under Barrow's command to the encampment near the Swartkops River. To his dismay, Barrow found hundreds of Boers who had fled their farms also congregated there seeking the protection of the British.<sup>55</sup> The conflicting objectives inherent in Vandeleur's

conduct of operations resurfaced. Still conceiving of the Boers as the primary enemy, he was motivated more by the potential pool of useful military recruits the Khoikhoi offered than by any concerns about their welfare,

We had little doubt that the greater number of the [Khoikhoi] men, who were assembled at the bay, after receiving favourable accounts from their comrades of the treatment they experienced in the British service, would enter as volunteers into this corps.<sup>56</sup>

It appears that the Khoikhoi leaders Klaas Stuurman and Willem Haasbek were briefly included in the Khoikhoi irregulars recruited by Vandeleur.<sup>57</sup> But here, too, the British bungled. Barrow resorted to mounting a swivel gun between the two antagonistic groups and placing a naval guard to try to keep them apart. When the Khoikhoi saw the direction events were taking, they melted away and took matters into their own hands.

In the meantime, Vandeleur had provoked the Gqunukhwebe into open conflict. A column of troops was attacked in a narrow defile. Concentrated musket and artillery fire saved them from disaster. This was followed by an attack on a patrol of 21 men, which was practically annihilated, with only four men escaping.<sup>58</sup> Far from settling affairs on the frontier, Vandeleur had, if anything, tipped over a hornet's nest. In the absence of reliable intelligence, the British erroneously blamed the rebel Boers for instigating the Gqunukhwebe against them. It is more likely that the Gqunukhwebe and others in the Zuurveld were provoked into taking up arms by Vandeleur's rash conduct. Without a clear indication that they would be protected from Boer vengeance, Stuurman's Khoikhoi were driven into an alliance with the Gqunukhwebe. They were joined by other Khoikhoi leaders, Hans Trompetter and Boesak, and moved through the Zuurveld plundering and burning farmsteads. Vandeleur, still not reading the situation properly, despatched the bulk of his force back to Cape Town. With most of his troops gone, he found himself beleaguered in Algoa Bay and was forced to ask the acting governor to raise a commando amongst the Boers. In panic, the Zuurveld Boers retreated into the Swellendam district. The victorious Khoikhoi and Xhosa followed, crossing the Gamtoos River and ranging far and wide. To the north, the Mdange Xhosa seized the opportunity to deal with the Boers around Bruintjieshoogte and penetrated close to Graaff-Reinet.

The first news of the scale of the colonial disaster began to emerge in July, with desperate reports of the deaths of Boer men, women and children:

With regard to Stephanus Scheepers we have made inquiries and unfortunately found 8 Individuals to be dead, viz., Stephanus

Scheepers, Senior, Stephanus Scheepers, Junior, Lucas Scheepers, Lucas van Vuuren, Pieter Heyveld, the Widow of Jacobus Scheepers, Senior, the Wife of Stephanus Scheepers and a Daughter of Jacobus Scheepers; 20 Individuals are missing, viz. 6 men and 14 women with children; all the buildings are entirely destroyed and burnt down ... The Banditti have taken away from the Farm 40 lbs. Powder, a considerable quantity of Lead, 40 Muskets, 3,000 Sheep, 700 head of Cattle, 8 Waggon, 50 Horses, and all the Clothing of the Family, so that I am now for the third time to request you will send succour ...<sup>59</sup>

By the end of July, it was reported that no more than two or three Boer families were left in the Swangershoek and Agterbruintjieshoogte areas. Without news of Vandeleur, Bresler was panicking that even his drostdy at Graaff-Reinet was not safe. Similarly, the Langkloof field-cornet within the Swellendam district reported that nothing had been heard of Vandeleur for a fortnight and “we are in the midst of the [Xhosa] and Murderers, and there is much bloodshed”.<sup>60</sup>

From the Sundays River to the Kammanassie and Cango area as far as the Oliphants River, the Colony was in retreat.<sup>61</sup> Requests for assistance became ever more plaintive, “Dear Cousin, These serve to let you know that the Rogues are already very near. They have already murdered several families in the Winterhoek ... I friendly request [*sic*] you will hasten to my assistance with armed men to oppose the murders. Pray do not lose any time,” and “Cousin Piet, pray come speedily to our assistance for it is high time.”<sup>62</sup>

In dire straits and unable to count on anyone else, the Boers tried to rally support amongst themselves, but were hampered by the shortage of ammunition and lack of organisation,

We are entirely destitute of Powder and Lead. Should you have no ammunition at hand, then I should think that the Burghers each of them might supply us with some of theirs, that we may not continue to be murdered without being able to make any defence. Sir, there is no time to be lost, assist us with the utmost expedition ...<sup>63</sup>

A Boer commando of some 300 men which took to the field fared little better. It suffered defeat at the hands of only 150 Khoikhoi near the Sundays River, losing five men. The triumphant Khoikhoi and Xhosa captured 100 saddle horses and 60 saddles to add to over 300 horses already captured.<sup>64</sup> The situation in which Captain Campbell and 40 British infantry found themselves in July 1799 is a further

indication of the confusion and powerlessness of the British forces. In trying to march from their outpost at Bruintjieshoogte along the Sundays River to join up with Vandeleur, they encountered Gqunukhwebe warriors and were forced to make an enormously long detour via the Langkloof. For 18 days, all communication was cut off with Vandeleur who, imagining they had retreated to Graaff-Reinet, fumed at their failure to link up with his column.<sup>65</sup>

For his part, Vandeleur restricted himself to his camp at Ferreira's farm near the Swartkops River and fell to lamenting his lot. He bemoaned the absence of a blockhouse to inspire confidence in British might, criticised Bresler for keeping him in the dark, blamed the Boers for 'deserting' him and accused Captain Campbell and his 40 troops of not joining him as ordered. He was reduced to appealing to Dundas to come to his aid,

My situation here is rather critical, as the desertion of the Boers from their houses has allowed the [Xhosa] and [Khoikhoi] to possess themselves of the Woods contiguous to the Ford of the Camtoos river [*sic*]..., which in a great measure cuts off communication between this and the Lange Kloof.<sup>66</sup>

His only tactical response to the situation was to hunker down on the defensive, request a blockhouse, appeal for provisions and make plans to go back to Cape Town by ship to explain the situation personally to the Governor, "I am convinced one hour's conversation will give you more insight into the affairs of the Colony than a month's writing."<sup>67</sup> Due to poor planning, there was however not even a ship in the bay to take him back to Cape Town or to convey despatches back to the acting governor. By early August, there were only two Boer families east of the Gamtoos River. Vandeleur and his force of 40 grenadiers of the 91<sup>st</sup> Regiment, 30 dragoons and the Cape Regiment infantry concentrated at the bay were completely cut off by sea and land from Cape Town. In despair he admitted, "This has been a very great reverse of fortune."<sup>68</sup> Dundas, as acting governor, set off to take charge personally and to drum up Boer commando support in the Stellenbosch and Swellendam districts and negotiate peace. When communications were re-established and with so comprehensive a defeat, he ordered Vandeleur to try to make peace, something which Vandeleur thought would not be achieved in the circumstances as the Khoikhoi and Xhosa were flushed with victory.<sup>69</sup>

On 10 August, the Xhosa and Khoikhoi raided the livestock at Vandeleur's camp. In a sharp engagement, the captured livestock as well as some 20 horses were recovered and the Xhosa and Khoikhoi put to flight.<sup>70</sup> This small victory was soon offset by another lapse in judgement by Vandeleur. Having finally received further

reinforcements and the prefabricated blockhouse he needed, he handed over command to Major Le Moine and foolishly set off for Cape Town overland with a small escort.<sup>71</sup> In one of the less publicised aspects of the war, he narrowly avoided death or capture when his small party was ambushed near the Gamtoos River. His servant was killed, another soldier was severely wounded, and the baggage horses (with his clothes and official papers) were lost. Under covering fire of their pistols, and thinking only of self-preservation, the small detachment fled. Somewhat unnerved by his close encounter, Vandeleur pleaded with Dundas not to try to cross through the Gamtoos River valley without a large military force.<sup>72</sup>

Fortunately for both Dundas and Vandeleur, the informal Khoikhoi/Gqunukhwebe alliance had begun to disintegrate, ostensibly over the division of spoils and the shortage of gunpowder. The former landdrost of Graaff-Reinet, HCD Maynier, was brought in to try to broker peace. The first phase of the war ended with an agreement that left the Gqunukhwebe still in possession of the land around the Bushmans and Sundays Rivers, and the Mdange and others in the Bruintjieshoogte area. The British offered Klaas Stuurman and his Khoikhoi protection and undertook to ensure fair wages if they returned to service with the Boers. Some of the Khoikhoi returned to service; others congregated at Graaff-Reinet where Van der Kemp of the London Missionary Society began ministering to them.<sup>73</sup> Many Khoikhoi under Klaas Stuurman and other leaders maintained an independent existence around the Sundays River. The first act ended with the Xhosa and the Khoikhoi as clear victors, but the drama was far from over.

### **The 1801–03 conflict: A climax of confusion**

The peace reached in 1799 excluded the rebellious Boers, who continued to agitate against British authority. In August 1800, De Buys and rebel Boers, apparently with the assistance of Ndlambe (but possibly covertly supported by Ngqika), attempted an invasion of the Graaff-Reinet district from Xhosaland. They were routed by Chungwa's Gqunukhwebe, who were keen to preserve the peace and demonstrate their good intentions after the initial agreement reached with the British in 1799.<sup>74</sup> In July 1801, rebellious Boers appeared in arms before the Graaff-Reinet drostdy. After British re-enforcements from the 91<sup>st</sup> Regiment were marched from Algoa Bay under Lt JC Smyth, the Boers withdrew and assembled beyond the Bamboesberg to await developments.<sup>75</sup> Maynier pursued a cautious approach. He had at his disposal in 1801 a military force that included an officer, 21 light dragoons, 19 men of the Cape Regiment, 80 Khoikhoi irregulars, four artillery pieces and a few Boer supporters.<sup>76</sup> He declined to establish a military blockhouse at Graaff-Reinet or to recruit large numbers of Khoikhoi, believing the Boers would

interpret this as proof of their concerns and cause those who were neutral to flock to the rebels.

This second round of hostilities was sparked off by Boer reaction to Commissioner Maynier at Graaff-Reinet, the quartering of Khoikhoi troops in their church building, Van der Kemp's use of the building to preach to the Khoikhoi, his conversion of the Khoikhoi to Christianity and teaching them to read and write. Instructing the Khoikhoi in reading, writing and religion would, it was claimed by the rebellious Boers, place them "upon an equal footing with the Christians". Their demands included that their church be vacated and the seats be washed.<sup>77</sup> Having apparently learnt nothing from the consequences of the events they precipitated in 1799, in October 1801, rebel Boers besieged Maynier at Graaff-Reinet. The garrison and the Boers engaged in a desultory exchange of fire that lasted from the evening of 22 October to the following evening, without any casualties.<sup>78</sup> Some observers saw the rebels as having "imbibed the cursed French Principles of Liberty and Equality", but there is no evidence this was seriously seen as a cause of the conflict.<sup>79</sup> More importantly, the new round of Boer unrest occurred at the time of the annual *opgaaf* (tax) when they were expected to be enumerated and to pay their quit-rents to the government.<sup>80</sup>

After the October 1801 challenge to British authority, Dundas was again compelled to send a military force to Graaff-Reinet. Once more, even with military reinforcements at their disposal that included a six-pounder gun and 300 men, the British felt it prudent to act in a conciliatory manner. Major F Sherlock, the commander, sent an emissary to the Boer camp, requesting a list of grievances and offering full pardons.<sup>81</sup> To appease the Boers, Maynier was suspended on the basis of a wide range of allegations. A subsequent investigation cleared him of all charges, but his recall was sufficient to mollify them. Quite why the British followed such a cautious approach soon became clear. Although they had despatched more than 300 soldiers to the district, lessons had been learnt from the 1799 conflict. One of these was to minimise the use of regular troops against the Xhosa and Khoikhoi and utilise Boer commandos more actively in their stead. In May 1802, Boers from the Swellendam and Graaff-Reinet districts were called out on commando, under the overall direction of Major Sherlock.<sup>82</sup>

For a second time, Boer insurrection and the British response provoked wide unrest. The Khoikhoi, believing the Boers would be given a free hand to exact retribution, once more took up arms. The Khoikhoi confederacy under Klaas Stuurman, Hans Trompetter and Boesak again ranged far and wide raiding Boer farms.<sup>83</sup> A large commando including loyal Boers from the Swellendam district was



raised under Commandant Tjaart van der Walt. In January 1802, they fought a 36-hour battle against Stuurman's Khoikhoi, who forced the Boer commando to abandon cattle and retire. A bigger Boer commando was raised by Dundas, but this was also forced to retreat after the commander, Van der Walt, had been killed. In September and October 1802, the Khoikhoi and Xhosa raided deep into the Swellendam district. Land communications between Algoa Bay and Cape Town were again cut off.<sup>84</sup> The Boers fled in panic and the fighting reached all the way to 'Outeniqua Land' as far west as what is now George.<sup>85</sup>

The second lesson that the British had learnt was to intensify diplomatic contact with Ngqika to try to minimise Xhosa involvement. But the attitude of Ngqika, whom the British had recognised as Xhosa king in 1795, continued to puzzle and frustrate them. He appeared to be under the sway of De Buys, who was living at his great place.<sup>86</sup> This was epitomised by Ngqika's demand that, before he would agree to a treaty with the Colony, the British had to pardon De Buys and free the rebel Boers incarcerated in the Castle.<sup>87</sup> In reality, during this phase of the war, De Buys' influence over Ngqika had waned. Van der Kemp, who also lived in Xhosaland for a while and was dependent on De Buys as a translator, intermediary, protector and provider of draft oxen, found De Buys' position tenuous and that Ngqika's attitude towards him vacillated.<sup>88</sup> Generally, Ngqika seems to have followed a policy of not committing himself until he could extract maximum advantage in his renewed struggle with Ndlambe. Later, with the arrival of the Batavians, De Buys again emerged in a powerful position as an intermediary with Ngqika.<sup>89</sup>

The initial hostilities were between the Boers, British and Khoikhoi. Up to May 1802, Dundas consistently reported that there was no conflict with the Xhosa.<sup>90</sup> Xhosa involvement in the second phase of the war seems to have increased largely due to Ndlambe and his followers moving westwards into the Colony and the opportunity this provided to build up herds at the expense of the Boers.<sup>91</sup> What motivated Chungwa and the Gqunukhwebe to abandon their peace agreement and renew hostilities is not clear. It may be that they were provoked by Boer commandos indiscriminately attacking their villages in the Zuurveld.<sup>92</sup> By the time the war ended, Ndlambe and the Xhosa west of the Fish River had made common cause against Ngqika.<sup>93</sup>

The British left the stage before the drama had reached a climax, although they made a triumphant return in the sequel – the Second British Occupation of the Cape in 1806. In preparing to hand the Cape back to the Dutch, the British withdrew their troops from Fort Frederick and the eastern parts of the Colony on 1 October

1802.<sup>94</sup> Initial attempts to get a Dutch fleet at Simon's Town to land soldiers to garrison the eastern district failed.<sup>95</sup> Fort Frederick was left in the hands of a handful of Boers, Van der Kemp and the Botha's farm Khoikhoi. In this interval, something of a power vacuum arose. The withdrawal of the British forces from Fort Frederick exacerbated the situation. Not only was the mission settlement and Van der Kemp resented, but their cattle and the large quantity of stores given to them by the departing British proved attractive to the other Khoikhoi. Some of Stuurman's Khoikhoi twice attacked the Khoikhoi at the mission settlement. The Khoikhoi at the settlement successfully defended the settlement before fleeing to Fort Frederick where they joined the Boers who were sheltering there. One of those killed in the first attack was Andries Stuurman, a brother of Klaas Stuurman.<sup>96</sup> To add to the chaos, the Boers at Fort Frederick, disappointed that the missionaries and their congregation would not join forces with them, burnt the homes of the mission Khoikhoi to ashes.<sup>97</sup>

In March 1802, Van der Kemp became an intermediary in peace negotiations between Stuurman and Dundas. Stuurman was trying to consolidate his gains and obtain land for his people in exchange for peace, the effect of which was to split the Khoikhoi confederation. The Colony insisted on the return of captured colonial cattle in exchange. Stuurman's attempts to comply led to conflict with other Khoikhoi leaders, especially Boesak. Klaas Stuurman was attacked and stripped of his weapons, cattle and followers, and he fled to Chungwa for protection.<sup>98</sup> Van der Kemp was blamed, not without some justification, for influencing Klaas Stuurman and splitting Khoikhoi unity.

The dénouement came with the new Batavian Republic administration when it effectively took control of the Cape in February 1803. A detachment of Batavian soldiers eventually occupied Fort Frederick on 18 April 1803. Governor-General Janssens arrived in May to negotiate peace.<sup>99</sup> He met with Klaas Stuurman to reassure him that the new administration would protect the rights of the Khoikhoi. After the death of Klaas Stuurman, Dawid Stuurman was eventually given land on the east bank of the Gamtoos River and formal recognition as an independent Khoikhoi leader. By now, Ngqika and the Xhosa west of the Fish River were engaged in their own war. Janssens was forced to negotiate with them separately. Although Janssens tried to insist on recognition of the Fish River as the eastern boundary of the Colony, Chungwa, Ndlambe, Mnyalaza and Tshatshu collectively came to an understanding which effectively meant they remained where they were. The combined Xhosa leaders insisted that all Xhosa children captured by the Boers be returned. They also insisted that De Buys be made to leave Xhosaland and return to the Colony. Ngqika initially tried to enlist the aid of the Batavian administration

in a joint attack on the Xhosa west of the Fish River. Thereafter he agreed to a peace agreement that included confirmation of the Fish River as the boundary and that all whites in Xhosaland would be compelled to return to the Colony. Janssens urged on Ngqika the importance of either reducing the Xhosa west of the Fish River to obedience or establishing peaceful relations with them. As far as the London Missionary Society was concerned, the farm Roodepan, near Botha's farm, was granted for a mission settlement, which became Bethelsdorp.<sup>100</sup> The second act of the war thus ended in what, for all intents and purposes, was again a victory for the Xhosa and Khoikhoi. The Batavian government at the Cape generally attempted to pursue enlightened policies towards the Khoikhoi, but in practical terms they were committed to sustaining a social order where the minority white settlers dominated politically and economically.<sup>101</sup>

### **The mystery of the hushing**

One of the fundamental issues of the 1799–1803 war is exactly who issued the momentous order to the British column to expel the Xhosa living west of the Fish River. The official colonial archive is peculiarly elusive on precisely who gave the order.<sup>102</sup> Those historians who have looked at the issue have either uncritically followed the official reports or have added their personal biases to the matter. Theal and Cory both blamed the Xhosa.

Theal claimed Ndlambe's forces initiated hostilities by invading the Zuurveld, "As the horde under Ndlambe advanced, all who were in or near the line of march took to flight." Vandeleur "had no intention of employing British soldiers against the Xosas [*sic*], and he did not anticipate that they would commence hostilities against him without provocation".<sup>103</sup> In a feat of historical sleight of hand, Theal moved from blaming Ndlambe to accusing the Gqunukhwebe of initiating hostilities on the basis of a misunderstanding that they were to be driven over the Fish River. Cory, the first part of whose account matches Theal's description almost word for word, maintained that in February 1799, Ndlambe escaped from Ngqika and with many hundreds of followers crossed the Fish River into the Zuurveld. He occupied the coastal regions, where the western Xhosa (except for the Gqunukhwebe) supported him, which forced the latter further westwards to the Sunday's River area.<sup>104</sup> As early as 1944, JS Marais cast doubt on Theal's interpretation and drew attention to the tendency of historians to follow his views uncritically.<sup>105</sup> Deliberately or otherwise, Theal and Cory confused the chronology to fit their argument. At the time of the outbreak of hostilities, Ndlambe was still living in Xhosaland, only removing himself from Ngqika by mid-February 1800.<sup>106</sup> Going beyond Theal, and completely ignoring Vandeleur's attempts to evict Chungwa from the area, Cory blamed the Gqunukhwebe for misunderstanding the

situation, “These people, ignorant of the reason of the presence of the armed force in the country, and perhaps thinking there was an intention to drive them eastward, attacked the soldiers while they were passing through a thicket.”<sup>107</sup>

Contemporary published sources are only slightly more helpful. Barrow, in the first of his two-volume work, asserts that the British column, which just happened to be passing through Chungwa’s country on the banks of the Sundays River, came across large numbers of Gqunukhwebe Xhosa and their cattle –

As the position he now occupied not only encroached very much upon the territorial rights of the colony, but was also far within the line actually inhabited by the Dutch boors we deemed it expedient to endeavour to prevail upon him to move towards the eastward; ...<sup>108</sup>

In the second volume of his book, Barrow changed his story, casually claiming that since British troops had been sent to the eastern parts of the Colony to deal with the rebellious Boers –

and the [Xhosa] having been instigated by promises and presents from the boors to enter into hostilities against the British troops, coercive measures were found to be unavoidable in order to endeavour to drive these people out of the colony, and to break the connection that subsisted between them and the peasantry.<sup>109</sup>

This statement obscured two significant facts:

- the Boers were attempting to enlist the support of Ngqika and not that of his opponents, the Gqunukhwebe; and
- conflict with the Gqunukhwebe broke out after Vandeleur had seized their cattle and attempted to intimidate them into abandoning their lands, and not before.

The first hint of official evasion as to who actually precipitated the conflict with the Xhosa in 1799 begins to emerge in the official archive in two letters written on Dundas’ instructions by the colonial secretary and deputy secretary, respectively, to the Secretary for War and Colonies. In trying to explain why there was now a major conflict in the eastern parts of the Colony after the acting governor had previously reported the Boer rebellion had been quelled, the first letter ingeniously conflated the Boer rebellion, the Khoikhoi uprising and the involvement of the Xhosa.<sup>110</sup> The second letter extemporised further,

When these Farmers laid down their arms, it unfortunately happened that one or two of the principal leaders conscious of their

unpardonable degree of guilt, fled and sought shelter among a numerous horde of [Xhosa], who under the Dutch Government had encroached on the borders of this Colony and established themselves on the banks of the great Fish River. These [Xhosa] had lived in a state of mutual predatory war with the Dutch farmers for some years, and from the length of time of their having been allowed to occupy ground on this side of the fish river [*sic*], which is considered the boundary, they became independent, and no longer acknowledged their own king. Soon after the escape of some of our Rebels these [Xhosa] increased their depredations and penetrated farther into the Colony, but it remains as yet uncertain whether this was at the instigation of the Rebels or of their own accord, from the circumstance of their having observed the defenceless situation in which the farmers had abandoned their possessions near the Fish River during the period of their assembling in arms. Be this as it may, in all probability the [Xhosa] would have confined their warfare to the stealing of cattle, but unfortunately at this period they were joined by a number of discontented [Khoikhoi].<sup>111</sup>

No mention was made of Vandeleur's aggressive action against the Gqunukhwebe and the first letter overlooked the fact that the rebel Boers took refuge with Ngqika, not Chungwa. The second letter, moreover, falsely claimed it was only after the Xhosa and Khoikhoi had begun their attacks that Vandeleur was compelled to check their depredations "and if possible by peaceable means to induce them" to return to the Fish River.<sup>112</sup> Vandeleur's clumsy attempts to force the Gqunukhwebe over the Fish River were presented as a reaction to Xhosa attacks, rather than as the cause.

In his official correspondence, Acting Governor Dundas was initially evasive on how Vandeleur came to be embroiled in conflict with the Xhosa, until he admitted some responsibility in February 1800. Dundas blandly reported to the new governor, Yonge, that following the quashing of the Boer rebellion, "the public disorders were soon after renewed" by Xhosa and Khoikhoi in the Colony. This conflict, he admitted, resulted from "the violent and injudicious attempts" made to drive the Xhosa over the Fish River. The admission, however, was also an effort to shift the blame to Vandeleur –

I was prevailed upon to direct that by means of a negotiation, or by giving some of the customary presents to the [Xhosa] those should be induced who it was supposed had left their own country to return

to it; but unluckily in carrying my intentions into effect a petty warfare between His Majesty's Troops and the Savages took place.<sup>113</sup>

Did Dundas order the Xhosa to be forced over the Fish River or did Vandeleur misunderstand and bungle his instructions? The perception in Cape Town, if Lady Ann Barnard (who delighted in reporting negatively about Dundas) is anything to go by, was that Dundas was responsible for the fiasco,

General Dundas thought it expedient that General Vandeleur should insist on their [i.e. the Xhosa] retreating behind [the Fish River], and to force them to do so General Vandeleur drove away their cattle to its banks, knowing they must follow ... It seems natural, however, to expect that the [Xhosa] would resist ... They of course refused and hostilities begun.<sup>114</sup>

Subsequently, after a meeting with Vandeleur, she more explicitly blamed Dundas for ordering the misguided attack on the Xhosa, gossiping that Vandeleur only reluctantly carried out the order from Dundas.<sup>115</sup>

Confirmation of the real cause of the actual outbreak of hostilities with the Xhosa was found by Giliomee in private correspondence of the former governor, Lord Macartney. In a private letter dated 5 May 1799, Dundas admitted he had issued an instruction to Vandeleur for “*gently hushing* the [Xhosa] back into their own country on the other side of the Fish River”.<sup>116</sup>

## **Conclusion**

What did contemporaries think of the defeat of the British and Boer forces at the hands of the Xhosa and Khoikhoi? Barrow, who had so much to say on so many things, was conspicuously silent on Dundas' peace-at-any-price policy. Lady Ann Barnard, in her private and somewhat intimate correspondence with the Secretary of State for War and Colonies, displayed greater perspicacity, “What a pity they [i.e. the Xhosa] were ever annoyed by forcing them out of a territory where they were doing no harm!”<sup>117</sup>

By early 1800, Dundas admitted that provoking the war had been an mistake and that they had been misled into believing the Xhosa had no claim on land west of the Fish River, “[It] is to an error respecting the situation of those [Xhosa], with the violent and injudicious attempts which were made for the purpose of driving them over the Great Fish River our late contests with them are to be ascribed; ...” Dundas further emphasised, “I think it proper to repeat that as the late [Xhosa] War took its

origins or foundation in a mistake and was contrary to our interest, true policy required us to put an end to it.”<sup>118</sup> Behind this admission was an acute awareness that they had only been fighting the Xhosa west of the Fish River. Should a general war break out involving “the Great [Xhosa] Nation” they would be severely embarrassed, “The duration of a new War with the [Xhosa] should such a War happen, could not be estimated, and it is more than probable that it would bring along with it disappointment and disgrace.”<sup>119</sup> The admission that there was no legitimate basis of considering the Fish River a genuine boundary accords well with Jeff Peires’ meticulously researched analysis of the exact foundation of the Dutch establishment of the Fish River as the boundary of the Cape Colony.<sup>120</sup>

It was, however, a mistake that was to have far-reaching consequences. If the 1799–1803 war was a drama, it was a tragedy that was to cast a long shadow over the Cape’s eastern borderlands and western Xhosaland for over a century. Once they had made the initial commitment to securing the eastern frontier of the Cape Colony, subsequent British administrations, after the re-occupation of the Cape in 1806, continued to base their policies on the notion that the Fish River was the boundary with Xhosaland. Notwithstanding the 1799 and 1803 peace arrangements which acquiesced in the Xhosa living in the Zuurveld, it became a colonial article of faith that the Xhosa had no legitimate claim to be west of the Fish River. Successive British administrations were sucked into increasingly harsh military interventions and expensive commitments to impose their version of peace. The misery, hardship, dislocation and disruption occasioned by these attempts to stabilise the frontier and subjugate the Xhosa in the subsequent wars built on this mistake.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers of *Scientia Militaria* for most helpful comments in the preparation of this article. Appreciation also goes to Jeff Peires and Gary Minkley for encouragement, guidance and support. Financial assistance for this research from the NRF (SARChI) through the University of Fort Hare is also gratefully acknowledged. A special word of thanks goes to Natie Greeff of the Castle Military Museum for comments on earlier drafts. Author’s email: [denverawebb@gmail.com](mailto:denverawebb@gmail.com)
- <sup>2</sup> E.g. Peires, JB. *The dead will arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa cattle-killing movement 1856–7*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1989; Stapleton, T. *Maqoma: Xhosa resistance to colonial advance*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1994; Spicer, MW. “The War of Ngqayecibi 1877–8”. MA thesis.

Rhodes University, 1978; Stapleton, TJ. “Maqoma: Xhosa resistance to the advance of colonial hegemony (1798–1873)”. PhD thesis. Dalhousie University, 1993; Smithers, AJ. *The Kaffir Wars 1779–1877*. London: Leo Cooper, 1973; MacLennan, B. *A proper degree of terror: John Graham and the Cape’s Eastern Frontier*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1986; Smith, K. *The Wedding Feast War: The final tragedy of the Xhosa people*. London: Frontline Books, 2009; Smith, K. *Harry Smith’s last throw: The Eighth Frontier War 1850–1853*. London: Frontline Books, 2012. The names of these wars and, indeed, the exact number are some of the many aspects requiring reconsideration. In general, this article contributes to redressing imbalances by utilising the Xhosa names for the wars where they are known, combined with the years. Elsewhere, I argue that there were more than nine wars. See Kuse, WF & Webb, DA. ‘*Unoqengqelekile utyesh’ ombi kanye*’: *Stokwe kaNdlela & imfazwe kaStokwe, 1880–81*. Pretoria: National Heritage Council, 2013, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Theal, GM. *Records of the Cape Colony. From February 1803 to July 1806*, Vol. V. London: Government of Cape Colony, 1899, 32–114; Cory, GE. *The rise of South Africa*, Vol. I. London: Longman, Green & Co., 1921, 67–130; Milton, J. *The edges of war: A history of the Frontier Wars (1702–1878)*. Johannesburg: Maskew Miller, 1983, 43–57; Mostert, N. *Frontiers: The epic of South Africa’s creation and the tragedy of the Xhosa people*. London: Pimlico, 1992, 289–335; Giliomee, H. *Die Kaap tydens die eerste Britse bewind 1795–1803*. Cape Town: HAUM, 1975, 281–336; Giliomee, H. *The Afrikaners: Biography of a people*. London: Hurst, 2003, 75–79; Hopper, JA. “Xhosa-colonial relations, 1770–1803”. PhD thesis. Yale University, 1980; Newton-King, S & Malherbe, VC. *The Khoikhoi rebellion in the Eastern Cape (1799–1803)*. Cape Town: UCT, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Ehlers, R.S. “‘This land is ours!’ The shaping of Xhosa resistance to European expansion along the Cape Colony’s Eastern Frontier, 1770–1820”. MA thesis. University of Florida, 1992; Legassick, M. *The struggle for the Eastern Cape 1800–1854: Subjugation and the roots of South African democracy*. Johannesburg: KMM, 2010, 5; Boyden, PB, Guy, AJ & Harding, M (eds). ‘*Ashes and blood*’: *The British Army in South Africa 1795–1914*. London: National Army Museum, 1999, 10; Stapleton, T. *A military history of South Africa: From the Dutch-Khoi wars to the end of apartheid*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010, 5–6.

<sup>5</sup> Crais, CC. *The making of the colonial order: White supremacy and black resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770–1865*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand



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University Press, 1992, 67. See Newton-King, S. “Commerce and material culture in the Eastern Cape Frontier, 1746–1812”. Unpublished paper. Wits History Workshop, 1987, 1–3 for a summary of the SD Neumark/Leonard Guelke debate on the frontier economy.

- <sup>6</sup> Worden, N. “After race and class: Recent trends in the historiography of early colonial Cape society”. *South African Historical Journal* 62/3. 2010. 549.
- <sup>7</sup> Theal, GM. *Records of the Cape Colony: From December 1796 to December 1799*, Vol. II. London: Government of Cape Colony, 1898, 98, Macartney, Instructions for the Landdrost of Graaff-Reinet, 20 June 1797 (all Theal references after the first full publication details henceforth given as *RCC* and the volume number).
- <sup>8</sup> For a recent re-examination of the location of the Xhosa in the pre-colonial and early colonial periods, see Peires, J.. “‘He wears short clothes!’: Rethinking Rharhabe (c. 1715 – c. 1782)”. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38/2. 2012. 333–354 and Peires, JB. “The other side of the black silk handkerchief: The Van Plettenberg Agreement of 1778”. *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa* 62/1. 2008. 9–35.
- <sup>9</sup> Peires, JB. *The house of Phalo: A history of the Xhosa people in the days of their independence*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1981, 51–53.
- <sup>10</sup> Theal, GM. *Records of the Cape Colony: From December 1799 to May 1801*, Vol. III. London: Government of Cape Colony, 1898, 213, Examination of Christopher Botha, 15 August 1800.
- <sup>11</sup> *Transactions of the Missionary Society*, Vol. I. London: T Williams, 1804, 467, “History & c. of Caffraria”.
- <sup>12</sup> Barrow, J. *An account of travels into the interior of Southern Africa*, Vol. II. London: T Cadell and W Davies, 1804, 77–79, 96–100.
- <sup>13</sup> *RCC*, II, 392, 395, Journal kept by Landdrost Bresler.
- <sup>14</sup> Peires, *The house of Phalo ... op. cit.*, pp. 53–54.
- <sup>15</sup> Pringle, T. *Narrative of a residence in South Africa*. London: Edward Moxon, 1840, 99.
- <sup>16</sup> Giliomee, *The Afrikaners ... op. cit.*, p. 65; Pringle *op. cit.*, p. 81.
- <sup>17</sup> Malherbe, VC. *The Cape Regiment in peace and war 1781–1817*. Cape Town: Castle Military Museum, 2012, 48–50; *RCC*, II, 384, Letter, McNab to F Dundas, 12 March 1799; *Ibid.*, p. 399, Letter, McNab to F Dundas, 21 March 1799; *Ibid.*, p. 475, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, 22 August 1799; Barrow, J. *Travels into the interior of Southern Africa*, Vol. I. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). London: T Cadell and W Davies, 1806, 402; Wilkins, WH (ed.). *South*

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- Africa a century ago: Letters written from the Cape of Good Hope 1797 to 1801 by Lady Anne Barnard.* London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1901, 271.
- <sup>18</sup> *RCC*, II, 446, Letter, Bresler to F Dundas, 29 July 1799; Cory *op. cit.*, p. 92.
- <sup>19</sup> Theal, GM. *Records of the Cape Colony: From February 1793 to December 1796*, Volume I. London, Government of Cape Colony, 1897, 354, Letter, Craig to H Dundas, 12 April 1796.
- <sup>20</sup> Barrow, J. *An account of travels into the interior of Southern Africa*, Vol. I. London: T Cadell and W Davies, 1804, 195–196.
- <sup>21</sup> *RCC*, II, 107, Proclamation by Macartney, 27 June 1797.
- <sup>22</sup> Barrow, *Travels into the interior ...* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 392.
- <sup>23</sup> *RCC*, III, 131, Private letter, F Dundas to Yonge, 10 April 1800; *Ibid.*, pp. 140–143, Private letter, F Dundas to Yonge, 12 April 1800; Theal, GM. *Records of Cape Colony: From May 1801 to February 1803*, Vol. IV. London: Government of Cape Colony, 1899, 221–274, Report of commissioners appointed to investigate certain charges against Sir George Yonge, 16 March 1802.
- <sup>24</sup> *RCC*, I, 464, Letter, Craig to H Dundas, 1 October 1796; *RCC*, II, 40, Letter, Craig to H Dundas, 14 January 1797; *Ibid.*, pp. 69–72, Letter, Craig to H Dundas, 2 April 1797; *Ibid.*, pp. 132–133, Letter, Burgher Senate to Macartney, 25 July 1797; *Ibid.*, pp. 302–303, Letter, F Dundas to H Dundas, 2 December 1798; *Ibid.*, p. 161, Letter, Pringle to Nepean, 13 October 1797; *Ibid.*, p. 202, Letter, Macartney to H Dundas, 12 November 1797; *Ibid.*, pp. 48–50, Proclamation by Major General JH Craig, 30 January 1797; *Ibid.*, pp. 61–64, Letter, Craig to H Dundas, 27 February 1797; *RCC*, III, 362–365, Proclamation, Sir George Yonge, 4 December 1800.
- <sup>25</sup> *RCC*, II, 389, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, n.d.; *Ibid.*, p. 375, Proclamation by Acting Governor F Dundas, 26 February 1799, offering pardon to deserters; Barrow, *An account of travels ...*, Vol. II *op. cit.*, p. 100.
- <sup>26</sup> Arndt, J. “Treacherous savages and merciless barbarians: Knowledge, discourse and violence during the Cape Frontier Wars”. *Journal of Military History* 74/3. July 2010. 710–711.
- <sup>27</sup> Paterson, W. *Narrative of four journeys into the country of the Hottentots, and Caffraria: In the years one thousand seven hundred and seventy-seven, eight, and nine.* London: J Johnson, 1789, 77–97.
- <sup>28</sup> Barrow, *Travels into the interior ...* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 120.
- <sup>29</sup> *RCC*, II, 98, Instructions given to Landdrost Bresler by Governor Macartney, 20 June 1797.

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- <sup>30</sup> Shipp, J. *Memoirs of the extraordinary military career of John Shipp, late a Lieutenant in His Majesty's 87<sup>th</sup> Regiment*, Vol. I. London: Hurst, Chance & Co., 1829, 86–87.
- <sup>31</sup> Barrow, *Travels into the interior ...* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 411.
- <sup>32</sup> Shipp *op. cit.*, pp. 87–88.
- <sup>33</sup> Barrow, *Travels into the interior ...* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 415.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.
- <sup>35</sup> RCC, III, 89, Letter, Yonge to H Dundas, 29 March 1800.
- <sup>36</sup> For the activities of the missionaries in this period, see Elbourne, E. *Blood ground: Colonialism, missions, and the contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853*. Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2002.
- <sup>37</sup> RCC, III, 391, Private letter, Yonge to H Dundas, 8 January 1801.
- <sup>38</sup> Elbourne *op. cit.*, p. 146.
- <sup>39</sup> RCC, II, 338–339, Proclamation, 17 February 1799.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 364–365, Letter, Bresler *et al.* to F Dundas, 19 February 1799 and 369, Letter, Irwin to Dickson, 24 February 1799.
- <sup>41</sup> The Barrow map is reproduced by permission from the Afriterra Foundation ([www.afriterra.org](http://www.afriterra.org)). Portion of Barrow's 1800 map of the Cape Colony showing the main theatre of conflict of the 1799–1800 war. The Xhosa living west of the Fish River have been replaced by "Populated by rhinoceroses and hippopotami". The coastal area between the Fish and the Keiskamma rivers is wishfully depicted as the "Country of the emigrant chiefs now dwelling in Zuurveld". See Afriterra Foundation, No. 275.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369, Letter, Irwin to Dickson, 24 February 1799.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380, Letter, Faure to F Dundas, 5 March 1799.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 387–389, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, n.d.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383, Letter, McNab to F Dundas, 12 March 1799.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 388, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, n.d.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 403–404, Letter, Vandeleur to Barrow, 27 March 1799.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425, Letter, F Dundas to H Dundas, 14 May 1799.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 481, Letter, Barnard to H Dundas, 13 September 1799.
- <sup>50</sup> Barrow, *An account of travels ...* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 126.
- <sup>51</sup> RCC, I, 354, Letter, Craig to Henry Dundas, 12 April 1796.
- <sup>52</sup> Barrow, *Travels into the interior ...* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 403.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 383–394.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 395, 413–414.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.
- <sup>57</sup> Malherbe *op. cit.*, p. 50.

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- <sup>58</sup> Barrow, *Travels into the interior ...* Vol. I *op. cit.*, pp. 412, 415.
- <sup>59</sup> *RCC*, II, 445, Letter, De Jager to Bresler, 27 July 1799.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 446–227, Letter, Bresler to F Dundas, 29 July 1799; *Ibid.*, pp. 448–449, Letter, Ferreira to All Fieldcornets Oudeveld and Outeniqualand, 31 July 1799.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467, Letter, F Dundas to Ross, 13 August 1799; *Ibid.*, p. 69, Letter, Landdrost Swellendam to Landdrost Stellenbosch, 13 August 1799.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349, Letter, Lindeque to Van Rooyen, 31 July 1799; *Ibid.*, p. 450, Letter, Oosthuyzen, n.d.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 450, Letter, Ferreira to Landdrost Swellendam, 31 July 1799.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 453, Letter, Van Rooyen to Landdrost Swellendam, 31 July 1799.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 452, Letter, Van Rooyen to Landdrost Swellendam, 31 July 1799; *Ibid.*, p. 456, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, 3 August 1799.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 453–454, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, 31 July 1799.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 454, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, 31 July 1799.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, 3 August 1799.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 457, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, 3 August 1799.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 467–468, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, 13 August 1799.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, 13 August 1799.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474, Letter, Vandeleur to F Dundas, 22 August 1799.
- <sup>73</sup> *Transactions* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 480, “Transactions of Dr. Vanderkemp in the year 1801”.
- <sup>74</sup> *RCC*, III, 213, Examination of rebel Boer, Christopher Botha, 15 August 1800.
- <sup>75</sup> *RCC*, IV, 51–52, Proclamation by Dundas, 31 July 1801; *Ibid.*, pp. 53–54, Letter, Smyth to Dundas, 10 August 1801.
- <sup>76</sup> *Transactions* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 483, “Transactions of Dr. Vanderkemp in the year 1801”.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 482–483, “Transactions of Dr. Vanderkemp in the year 1801”.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 493–494, “Journey to Caffraland”.
- <sup>79</sup> *RCC*, II, 493, Letter, Barnard to H Dundas, 21 September 1799.
- <sup>80</sup> *RCC*, IV, 66, Letter, Dundas to Hobart, 9 September 1801.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98–101, Letter, Sherlock to Dundas, 30 November 1801.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 330–331, Proclamation by Dundas, 7 May 1802.
- <sup>83</sup> Malherbe *op. cit.*, p. 55. The term ‘confederacy’ was used by Maynier.
- <sup>84</sup> *RCC*, IV, 442, Letter, Curtis to Nepean, 8 October 1802.
- <sup>85</sup> De Kock, WJ (ed). *Reize in de Binnen-Landen van Zuid-Africa Gedaan in den Jaare 1803 door W.B.E. Paravincini di Capelli*. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck

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Society, 1965, 227. Paravincini di Capelli provides a lengthy list of burnt-out farmsteads he encountered on his trip.

- <sup>86</sup> *Transactions* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 395, “Second attempt to enter Caffraria”; *RCC*, III, 427, Letter, Yonge to H Dundas, 18 February 1801.
- <sup>87</sup> *RCC*, II, 212–213, Report by Maynier and Somerville on mission to Ngqika, 14 August 1800.
- <sup>88</sup> *Transactions* Vol. I *op. cit.*, pp. 394–395, 398, 403, “Second attempt to enter Caffraria”.
- <sup>89</sup> De Kock *op. cit.*, pp. 246, 248.
- <sup>90</sup> *RCC*, IV, 117, Letter, Dundas to Hobart, 12 December 1801; *Ibid.*, p. 278, Letter, Dundas to Hobart, 5 April 1802.
- <sup>91</sup> Peires, *The house of Phalo ... op. cit.*, p. 59.
- <sup>92</sup> Elbourne *op. cit.*, p. 142.
- <sup>93</sup> Lichtenstein, H. *Travels in Southern Africa, in the years 1803, 1804, 1805, and 1806*, Vol. I. London: Henry Colburn, 1812, 306, 314, 323.
- <sup>94</sup> *RCC*, IV, 442, Letter, Curtis to Nepean, 8 October 1802.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339, Letter, Mellissen to Dundas, 21 August 1802.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- <sup>97</sup> *Transactions of the Missionary Society*, Vol. II. London: Bye and Law, 1804, 89, “Extract from the journals of Dr. Vanderkemp and Mr Read”.
- <sup>98</sup> Elbourne *op. cit.*, pp. 141–142.
- <sup>99</sup> De Kock *op. cit.*, p. 234.
- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 235–236, 240, 241–242, 246, 248–249; Lichtenstein *op. cit.*, pp. 312–314, 325–326.
- <sup>101</sup> Freund, W. “The Eastern Frontier of the Cape Colony during the Batavian Period (1803–1806)”. *Journal of African History* 13/4. 1972. 643, 645.
- <sup>102</sup> Theal’s official *Records of the Cape Colony* contains no specific order to engage the Xhosa. Barrow, as Milton points out, is ‘curiously vague’. Milton *op. cit.*, p. 43.
- <sup>103</sup> *RCC*, V, 50. Unlike other volumes of Theal’s *Records of the Cape Colony*, volume V contains a historical narrative by Theal in which he interprets the documents.
- <sup>104</sup> Cory *op. cit.*, pp. 87–88; *RCC*, V, 49.
- <sup>105</sup> Marais, JS. *Maynier and the First Boer Republic*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1962, 104–105.
- <sup>106</sup> *Transactions* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 415, “Transactions of Dr Vanderkemp in the year 1800”.
- <sup>107</sup> Cory *op. cit.*, p. 88.

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- <sup>108</sup> Barrow, *Travels into the interior...* Vol. I *op. cit.*, p. 404.
- <sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- <sup>110</sup> *RCC*, II, 481, Letter, Barnard to H Dundas, 13 September 1799.
- <sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 485, Letter, Ross to H Dundas, 14 September 1799.
- <sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 486, Letter, Ross to H Dundas, 14 September 1799.
- <sup>113</sup> *RCC*, III, 50–52, Letter, F Dundas to Yonge, 20 February 1800.
- <sup>114</sup> Wilkins *op. cit.*, p. 223.
- <sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268, 270.
- <sup>116</sup> Giliomee, *Die Kaap tydens ... op. cit.* p. 284; Kimberley Africana Library, MS43, Private Letter: Dundas to Macartney, 4 May 1799. I am indebted to the helpful staff of the Africana Library for locating this.
- <sup>117</sup> Wilkins *op. cit.*, p. 239.
- <sup>118</sup> *RCC*, III, 50, 56, Letter, F Dundas to Yonge, 20 February 1800.
- <sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56, Letter, F Dundas to Yonge, 20 February 1800.
- <sup>120</sup> Peires, “The other side of the black silk handkerchief ...” *op. cit.*, pp. 9–35.