KHOESAN AND THE FOUNDING OF THE CAPE COLONY

Up until at least the late 1960s, histories of South Africa invariably started in 1652 with the arrival of the settlement established by the Dutch East India Company, under the leadership of Jan van Riebeeck.

This tendency was established by George McCall Theal in his five-volume *History of South Africa, 1652-1860* (Swan Sonnenschein, London, 1897-1904) and followed by another five-volume work, George Cory's *The Rise of South Africa* (Longman Green, London, 1910-30). Cory's publishers soon realised the marketable limitations of a work of such relentless length, and before Cory had finished his final volumes, they commissioned the South African historian Eric Walker to write a single volume work on the same subject, though from a slightly less imperialist standpoint. The result was Walker's *A History of South Africa* (1st edition, Longman Green, London, 1928) and this established the pattern of South African historiography. If the indigenous inhabitants were considered at all, it was primarily as a background to the relentless march of white control. The Khoesan-speaking people whom the new intruders first encountered at the Cape were generally portrayed as few in number, and destined to rapid decline, due to the smallpox pandemic of 1713 and the general inferiority of their socio-economic culture in comparison with that of the white colonists. In this way, what was to become the nineteenth-century Cape Colony was considered, south and west of the Orange and Fish Rivers, to have been virtually 'empty land', freely available for white settlement. It was only when the colonists came up against the Bantu-speaking Xhosa, whose resistance limited the further eastward expansion of the colony from the late 18th century, that colonial historians were prepared to acknowledge African involvement in the history of South Africa. [See the *mfecane* Additional Debate here for more on this.]

The *Oxford History of South Africa, Volume I* (L. Thompson and M. Wilson, eds., OUP, Oxford, 1969) went some way towards addressing this imbalance, but left the full story of what happened to the indigenous inhabitants of the south-western Cape for future historians. A good introduction to the attempted genocide of the Khoesan and the true level of their resistance was brought to a wide audience of African history by Shula Marks in her article 'Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries'(*Journal*

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of African History, 13 (1972), pp.55-80). Her evidence was found through close scrutiny of the documents published in *The Record*, edited by D. Moodie (Cape Town, 1960). Marks's work was followed by an in-depth study of the Khoekhoen of the south-western Cape by Richard Elphick, published first as *Kraal and Castle* in 1977, second edition published as *Khoikhoi and the founding of White South Africa* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985).

Elphick revealed that there had been up to 50 000 Khoekhoen pastoralists living within 100 kilometres of the Cape Peninsular at the time of the Dutch arrival in the mid-seventeenth century. It was clearly not an empty land and the wars that followed degenerated into an attempted genocide on the part of the colonists.

Nigel Penn, in his *Forgotten Frontier* (2005) reveals the story of one shocked magistrate on the northern frontier district of Namaqualand who collected evidence of this genocide and tried to bring the matter to central government attention in order to get it stopped, only for his reports to be brushed aside.

[NOTE: **Khoesan (Khoisan)** is a modern composite term to denote the indigenous hunters and herders of this region who spoke what are classified as Khoesan (as distinct from Bantu) languages. Specifically in the south-western Cape, the **Khoekhoen** (formerly Khoikhoi) herders of this period are distinguished from the hunter **San**, though once their clans are broken up by colonial intrusion the distinction becomes more problematic, and the composite term **Khoesan** is generally preferred].

The best general coverage of the Khoesan experience during the establishment of the Cape Colony up to 1800 is to be found in Robert Ross's chapter in the *Cambridge History of South Africa, Volume I*, 'Khoesan and Immigrants: the emergence of colonial society in the Cape, 1500-1800' (Cambridge UP, New York, 2010).

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