The Land Wars
The Dispossession of the Khoisan and AmaXhosa in the Cape Colony
Praise for *The Land Wars*

‘This book is an immensely readable and valuable account of a brutal process – the conquest and dispossession of the Khoisan and amaXhosa on the frontiers of colonial expansion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. John Laband has produced a work of elegant synthesis, fast moving and sharply detailed, incisive in judgement and infused with a deep sympathy for the tragic dimensions of the events described. Though the book displays Laband’s characteristically keen appreciation of military matters, this is far more than a traditional “trumpet and drum” military history. Its pages are populated by some of the most colourful characters in South African history, brought alive by vivid thumbnail sketches. But the narrative of their heroic or criminal deeds helps to illuminate the involvement of countless nameless South Africans who endured or perished in these violent times. Laband’s book will help his readers to a better understanding of this complicated and decisive period. Above all it is a timely reminder of the centrality of land as a source of power, wealth and conflict in South African society.’

– Nigel Penn, University of Cape Town

‘The story of South Africa is a story of war. And the eastern frontier is emblematic of that story. While earlier wars of the Dutch against the indigenous people of today’s Western Cape marked the origins of war, it was the eastern frontier which defined it as the British sought to extend their sphere of influence over the continent of Africa. That story would later be replicated across the country. The shaping of modern South Africa can only be fully understood if the story of the eastern frontier is remembered. Told from the perspective of loss of land, this book opens a new chapter in our reimagination of the past, illuminating the characters of resistance over a period of a hundred years, and making sense of today’s reality. This is truly an excellent book.’ – Tembeka Ngcukaitobi, author of *The Land Is Ours*

‘It is difficult to find words to express John Laband’s achievement in this book. He tells the story of complex brutality and misery with such grace
and elegant prose. As in his previous work, Laband demonstrates an unrivalled depth of historical knowledge. This book puts the current debates on land reform in South Africa in their proper historical – and bloody – context. It is a triumphant achievement from a master historian and a master storyteller.’

– Bongani Ngqulunga, University of Johannesburg, author of The Man Who Founded the ANC
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The Land Wars

The Dispossession of the Khoisan and AmaXhosa in the Cape Colony

John Laband
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Abbreviations

ANC: African National Congress
CMR: Cape Mounted Riflemen
Contralesa: Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa
EFF: Economic Freedom Fighters
FAMP: Frontier Armed and Mounted Police
KCB: Knight Commander of the Bath
LMS: London Missionary Society
NCO: non-commissioned officer
RE: Royal Engineers
RN: Royal Navy
VOC: Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company)
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The Land Has Died

In the presence of members of the Sandile Traditional Council, on 31 May and 1 June 2005 a team from the Department of Anatomy at the University of Pretoria respectfully exhumed a grave on remote farmland between the villages of Keiskammahoek and Braunschweig in South Africa’s Eastern Cape province, about thirty-five kilometres north of King William’s Town. The excavation required the initial removal of a granite slab placed over the grave, on top of which stood a memorial plinth crowned by a sculptured bust of an African man. An inscription on the monument reads: ‘In Memory of Paramount Chief Sandile, (A.A. Mgolombane) Son of Ngqika, Born in 1820, Died and Buried on the 9th June 1878.’ The monument had been erected in 1972 at the request of Paramount Chief Apthorpe Mxolisi Sandile, who insisted that his renowned ancestor, who had died while fighting British troops and Cape colonial forces, deserved a fitting memorial as a hero of Xhosa resistance against colonialism.¹

The exhumation had been prompted by the pervasive oral tradition that, before the British buried his body, Sandile’s head had been cut off and that Lieutenant Frederick Carrington had carried the skull away to England as a grisly trophy.² For many amaXhosa this narrative rang only too true. The barbarous and disrespectful decapitation of Sandile symbolised the many atrocities committed against their people in the colonial era, outrages that were accompanied by the dispossession of their land and the destruction of their way of life.

The investigating team found the skeletal remains in poor condition, but they were indubitably those of an African male in middle age, as Nkosi Sandile had been.³ He was known always to have walked with a limp, and what confirmed the skeleton as his was the abnormal left tibia (shinbone) which indicated a congenital weakness in the lower leg. Sandile’s skull was still in place, conclusively laying to rest the legend of its removal. The team
retrieved fragments of broken bottles on a stone cairn below the 1972 memorial, consistent with the cultural practice of placing food offerings on a grave. Cartridge cases were also uncovered, confirming the contemporary report that those who had buried Sandile fired a military salute over the grave.

Nkosi Sandile perished of a gunshot wound during the last of a series of nine wars that had been waged intermittently over the course of a century – from 1779 to 1878 – between the Xhosa people and the encroaching forces of colonialism, initially Dutch and then British. This sequence of conflicts succeeded and partially overlapped with another which began further to the west with the First Khoikhoi–Dutch War of 1659–1660. These wars that recurrently flared up over the space of two hundred years in what became the Cape Colony had one feature in common, a characteristic that remained constant over time and was not fundamentally modified by advancing technology or any other factor. All were wars of dispossession. During their course the colonial frontier steadily advanced north from Table Bay to the Orange (Gariep) River and east to the Kei River and the lands beyond. In the process, the indigenous peoples were defeated and driven from their territory, which colonists from Europe then settled. Their independent existence under their own rulers terminated, the survivors scattered into the interior of southern Africa, were sucked into the new colonial space as labourers, or were left to survive on sufferance in the cramped reserves set aside to accommodate and control them.

It is both inevitable and natural, therefore, that this bitter legacy of dispossession calls urgently for redress. As Lubabalo Ntsholo of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) has expressed it, ‘Land dispossession targeted a particular racial group, Africans, alienated them from their land which was a source of not only their livelihood, but a basis of their culture, spirituality and dignity.’ At its 54th national conference in December 2017, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) adopted a resolution concerning the current ownership of land in South Africa which was published on 26 March 2018. It read: ‘Expropriation of land without compensation should be among the key mechanisms available to government to give effect to land reform and redistribution.’ The government has accordingly moved forward to implement this resolution, and with the Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Bill of 2019 it has introduced the required legislation.
The purpose of this book is not to debate the current, continuing process of land restitution in South Africa. Rather, its intention is to examine how the indigenous inhabitants of one particular region, the Cape Colony (now the three provinces of the Northern, Western and Eastern Cape), were dispossessed of their land in the first place. In a sense their story is not unique. Right across the bloodstained span of history, and on every continent inhabited by humans, there have been countless defeated peoples who forfeited their land to their conquerors, along with their independence, and to whom the Latin tag *vae victis*, or ‘woe to the vanquished’, can justly be applied. Nevertheless, this truism can take nothing away from the specific pain and loss experienced by the dispossessed in each and every case, and so it was with the various indigenous peoples of the Cape.

As in each of history’s many sagas of human migration where the winners gained new lands at the expense of the losers, the process of dispossession in the Cape was more multifaceted and less straightforward than a lofty overview might suggest. Of all the peoples residing in South Africa today, only the San are considered to be autochthonous – that is, still living in the same region as their ancestors when they evolved into modern humans aeons ago. Everyone else involved in this story were settlers, people who came later, whether migrating from further north in Africa like the Khoikhoi and the Southern Nguni-speakers, or arriving by sea from Europe like the Portuguese, Dutch, French, British and Germans, or from Madagascar, the East Indies and elsewhere in Africa if they were slaves.

Before the Dutch encountered the amaXhosa, they clashed with the Khoikhoi and San who occupied all the vast tracts of land between the Cape of Good Hope and the Xhosa chiefdoms to the east. As early as 1488, passing Portuguese mariners had the very first armed brush with these people, but it was the Dutch who settled on the shores of Table Bay in 1652 who went on to defeat and dispossess them, incorporate them as labourers and menials, or drive them away north across the Orange River. And once the outriders of European settlement reached what would become the eastern frontier zone of the Cape, they found that the Khoikhoi and San who were living alongside the amaXhosa were being forcibly pushed back or assimilated by the Xhosa chiefdoms as they expanded westwards. Caught between two advancing fires, the Khoikhoi and San were forced to make strategic choices in the wars along the eastern frontier. Some joined the amaXhosa in resisting the encroaching forces of colonialism, or rebelled.
against colonial rule once it was imposed. Others, though, threw in their lot with the settlers, and formed a significant and generally loyal segment of the colonial armed forces. At times, even some of the amaXhosa allied themselves with the settlers against their African rivals.

That they did so should be no cause for surprise. It was typical of all wars of imperial conquest that some of the indigenous peoples considered their interests lay in cooperating with the invaders rather than in opposing them. And for their part, since the number of white troops and armed settlers deployed in the colonies was always small, the imperial powers depended on local levies and auxiliaries to beef up their military establishment. During the later wars on the eastern frontier, the amaMfengu played an especially prominent military role on the British side, making up the single largest element of their armed forces. Likewise, the abaThembu sometimes came out in support of the British, although on other occasions they fought against them. The wars in the Cape were therefore never a simplistic clash of races, nor a clear-cut case of colonial intruders ranged against the solid ranks of the indigenes.

Another twist was added to the Cape wars by competition between the would-be colonisers. Right across the globe, imperial powers regularly fought each other for control over the colonies to which they laid claim. It was no different with the Cape. Thus, the Dutch, who first took possession and ruled the Cape for a century and a half, were ousted by the British during the course of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. That particular act of imperial dispossession ensured that the fate of the northern and eastern frontiers and of all the people living there rested with the British and with no other colonial power, with their armed forces, with the shifting policies of their successive administrations in London, and with their evolving concept of empire.

Indeed, it is essential to place the violent colonisation of the Cape in its broader context, for the contested and ever-expanding frontier zone did not exist in a void. It was impinged upon by state-building and the disruptive migrations of people in the interior of southern Africa, and was directly affected by events in the wider world beyond the subcontinent. This was an age of competing, worldwide empires and of European migration and settlement that by the end of the nineteenth century had brought most of the world’s territories under Western domination. It was also an age of accelerating industrialisation and technological innovation that would
progressively shape how military operations were conducted. Ever more efficient firearms would be introduced, steamships would replace sailing ships and bring troops more rapidly to the front, and the telegraph would facilitate command and control.

Although the recurrent conflicts waged between the Dutch and the Khoisan from the mid-sixteenth to the late eighteenth century are described, the greater part of this book is taken up by the series of wars fought along the Cape eastern frontier between 1779 and 1878. What to call this sequence has shifted over time. In the nineteenth century the British called them the ‘Kaffir Wars’, a term that survived well into the following century. The British employed ‘Kaffir’ to refer to indigenous, dark-skinned Africans, and it followed that in the Cape the term was associated primarily with the amaXhosa, and that ‘Kaffraria’ was where they lived. However, the word has long come to be regarded as an opprobrious racial slur, and simply may not be used. Some historians today prefer therefore to refer instead to the ‘Wars of Dispossession and Resistance in the Eastern Cape’. That indeed is what they were, and there is much to be said for this formulation, as there is for another, more neutral and simpler one, the ‘Cape-Xhosa Wars’. Mulling over these alternatives, I have decided to go with yet another that has enjoyed some currency in the past, and throughout this work I refer to the ‘Cape Frontier Wars’. The reason I do so is because the indicative term ‘frontier’ is central to the interpretative approach I have adopted, one which (I trust) will make sense for the reader of a century of warfare that was complicated, if not bewildering in its complexity.

Alan Lester’s persuasive analysis of the Cape Frontier Wars has been my inspiration. He reminds us that the contested eastern Cape frontier was a permeable zone of interaction rather than a sealed barrier. This, however, was not how the Dutch and British colonial and military authorities saw it. They preferred to conceive of the frontier as a clearly delineated, strategic boundary that defended the vulnerable, thinly settled colonial population within its parameters, and rigorously excluded what were increasingly held to be the irredeemably savage amaXhosa beyond. Humanitarians and missionaries, on the other hand, saw the frontier very differently. They envisaged it as a progressively advancing region that would extend the benefits of Christianity and Western civilisation to the amaXhosa and lead ultimately to their cultural assimilation. For their part, the white settlers of the frontier zone, despite living in constant fear of a Xhosa attack, were
busily engaged in trade with them and in acquiring their labour for their farms. Consequently, colonists perennially sought to extend the limits of settlement eastwards for their own material advantage, while denying any Xhosa movement westwards – a frontier, as Lester has memorably expressed it, ‘with a one-way valve’. 8

All three of these competing colonial scenarios – impermeable boundary, zone of assimilation and region of exploitation – had one thing in common if they were to succeed: they needed to enforce Xhosa docility, and to discourage or destroy Xhosa military capacity to threaten the colonial order. Over the decades, colonial policy wavered unsteadily between these approaches, but the bottom line was that the frontier intermittently but inexorably advanced eastwards into emaXhoseni (which is how the amaXhosa referred to the place where they all lived), dispossessing the amaXhosa and prompting their fierce, persistent and increasingly desperate resistance. In the course of the wars, Xhosa military practices evolved to counter the colonial advance, and the nature of warfare became increasingly savage and merciless on both sides.

Ironically, it was precisely because the successive Dutch and British administrations of the Cape were unwilling and sometimes simply unable until the very last of the Cape Frontier Wars to exert enough military muscle to enforce their hegemony over the amaXhosa that the fighting went on for a century. The reason why neither colonial power decisively resolved the frontier issue was that it was low on their agenda. For both of them, the value of the Cape lay in its strategic naval significance on the route to the East Indies and India, and the distant eastern frontier with its fractious settlers was simply an irritating sideshow. The Cape itself, a poor colony lacking resources on any meaningful scale until the exploitation of diamonds commenced in the 1870s, did not have the military means to pacify the frontier by itself. It had always to rely on the imperial power to supply the necessary armed might and, until it was prepared to do so, the frontier conflict was doomed to fester on. The first three Cape Frontier Wars ended in stalemate, and although the following five all concluded with a Xhosa defeat, the British victories were partial and territorially incremental, leaving the amaXhosa with sufficient military capacity to continue resisting their dispossession. None of these wars, until the very last, was a sudden, comprehensive, knock-out blow that rendered all further resistance impossible, as was, for example, the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879.
Since this work is about how the indigenous peoples of the Cape were violently dispossessed of their land by the forces of colonialism, it is a book primarily about war. It deals not only with violence and cruelty, but also with heroism and sacrifice, with high ideals as well as base ones. And since, as in all conflicts, there was no straightforward, preordained path to victory or defeat, due account is taken of the role of contingency in historical developments, of the wayward impact of specific personalities on events, of vacillating policies and objectives, and of the unanticipated and disproportionate consequences of often trifling decisions and incidents.

As in every armed conflict, all sides – not just one – experienced suffering and loss, and in the course of the Cape Frontier Wars the fighting grew ever more brutal and pitiless. Combatants died painfully in battle or of disease, some experienced torture, others faced years of captivity, and the corpses of the fallen were frequently disrespected and mutilated. Time and again, non-combatants across the entire contested frontier zone were caught up in the fighting. They lost their homes, crops and other possessions to the flames, their livestock was driven off, and they were compelled to flee in search of safety, shelter and food. All too often they were callously killed, defenceless as they were, or dragged away as prisoners and captive labour. Inevitably, though, it was the defeated in the Cape Frontier Wars who bore the worst and lost the most, and it is their miserable fate that we must especially deplore.

When war broke out, the amaXhosa used to say that ‘the land has died’. For them, as for those other indigenous peoples in the Cape who first clashed with seaborne interlopers in 1488, and who from 1659 fought for two centuries against the colonial intruders to retain their land and independence, this expression ceased to be a metaphor. It became the literal truth.
The AmaXhosa and the San

The AmaXhosa believed themselves to be the common descendants of a legendary hero called Xhosa who lived many centuries ago. The land where they dwelt was accordingly known as emaXhoseni, the place of the Xhosa people. It was an extensive, summer-rainfall region, stretching along the southern seaboard of the African continent between the Mbashe River to the east and the Sundays River to the west. Looming mountain chains – the Amathole and Winterberg ranges – covered by a thick mantle of forest and bush, bounded it to the north, and to the south the lush coastal bush lapped the sweeping white beaches of the Indian Ocean. Numerous rivers and streams flowed erratically down to the ocean from the mountains and hilly uplands, and the amaXhosa preferred to settle in the river valleys that possessed the best soils and pasturage. It was along the westernmost, ill-defined marches of emaXhoseni that in the early eighteenth century the amaXhosa first came into conflict with another people whom they called the amaBhulu. They were pastoralists just like themselves with great herds of cattle, and had been steadily spreading out eastwards from the Cape Peninsula, pushing aside or subjugating the San and Khoikhoi who dwelt in the lands between. Where these Dutch settlers and the amaXhosa encountered each other became yet another of the many frontier zones around the world disputed between colonists from Europe and the indigenous people. It was a region destined to be blighted by a century of interminable warfare, and would witness the piecemeal but inexorable dispossession of the Xhosa people.

The recorded observations of passing European mariners and of those cast by shipwreck on the southern shores of Africa between 1552 and 1686, when combined with the oral traditions of the amaXhosa themselves, confirmed that by the sixteenth century at the latest, the amaXhosa were a
settled people living in their scattered homesteads that dotted the countryside, and that they were organised politically into chiefdoms. Moreover, archaeological evidence confirms that by the fifteenth century, if not earlier, the ancestors of the amaXhosa – who might not yet have called themselves by that name but were of the same culture and practised mixed cattle and crop farming – were already settled between the Great Fish River to the east and the Bushman’s River to the west – that is, in the environs of the modern town of Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown) in the Eastern Cape. This is worth emphasising because it was always the colonial contention – and one long reiterated in colonial and apartheid histories – that the white settlers and the amaXhosa arrived at the frontier region at the same time, which conveniently meant that the whites were not guilty of displacing a people whose forebears had, in fact, already been living there for at least three hundred years.

By the sixteenth century at the latest, then, if not long before, the scattered homesteads of the amaXhosa were already taking on the standard form that would persist for centuries. Each homestead accommodated the members of a family, along with their dependants, all living under the command of the married head. He derived his status and authority from his genealogical seniority, while his wealth came from his inherited herds of cattle. His power rested not only on his grander riches, but on his right to choose which fields to allocate to the members of his homestead for cultivation, on his decision concerning which of his cattle to lend them, and on his control of social relations such as marriage.

Hospitality was always generously extended to visitors and strangers. A homestead was typically sited facing the rising sun near the top of a ridge where it was both sheltered and well drained and conveniently close to the stream below. If a commoner’s, a homestead consisted of eight to fifteen domed, beehive-shaped huts. A chief’s might have as many as fifty. The huts were built of a framework of branches, plastered with clay and dung, and thatched with long grass. The disposition of the huts was important, for in polygamous Xhosa society, where about 20 per cent of men were of sufficient wealth and status to keep a number of wives, each married woman had her own hut, and her standing in the polygamous household was reflected in its placement. The mother of the head of the homestead (or his senior wife if his mother were dead) occupied the ‘great hut’ at the centre of the semi-circle of huts arranged in an arc around the cattle-byre.
The huts of the headman’s junior wives and the wives of the other men of the homestead were disposed in descending order of rank on both sides of it. The cattle-byre was made of mimosa thorn-branches, and this enclosure was the centre of the homestead’s social and religious life. Grain was stored in pits dug in the cattle-byre, plastered with mud and cow dung inside, and sealed with a stone. Unlike their northern cousins such as the amaZulu, the amaXhosa did not surround their homesteads with a palisade.

Gardens of millet, sorghum, maize (which was being cultivated from the late seventeenth century), beans, pumpkins, melons, sugarcane, dagga (*Cannabis sativa*) and tobacco (grown in great quantities from the eighteenth century) were protected by thorn fences and stretched downhill between the homestead and the water supply. On account of the relative lack of iron in the Xhosa country, the people cultivated with wooden digging sticks or hoes, and iron hoes were not common until trade increased with the white settlers.

In stark contrast to the Europeans whom they would encounter in growing numbers from the sixteenth century onwards – people who concealed their bodies in clothes – Xhosa men went about essentially naked, the application of grease and herbs lending their skin a glowing, healthy sheen. Young girls mixed this grease with red ochre to beautify themselves; the ruddy mixture was also smeared on by male initiates to symbolise their re-entry into normal society; and warriors burnished themselves with it when going to war. Men’s everyday dress consisted only of a penis sheath, although the most westerly of the amaXhosa adopted the skin apron of the neighbouring Khoikhoi. (All clothing was made of skins, of both domestic and wild animals, and working in skin was a man’s craft.) The basic garment for a woman was a small skin apron, but married women, to indicate their status, always wore a skirt, which was often no more than a large skin apron covering the buttocks and a small one in front. The amaXhosa normally left the head bare, except when minor chiefs, military officers and men who had distinguished themselves in battle wore the feathers of the blue crane as a badge of honour. Women wore dressed skin caps, especially favouring those made of buckskin. Both men and women delighted in adorning themselves with ornaments. Necklaces were made of pieces of reed, wood, shell or root, beads of unbaked clay, metal or east-coast glass-trade beads and buttons, and, for men only, of animal claws and teeth. Iron, copper and brass bangles were common. Some Xhosa men
wore an ivory armband, which was highly prized since it would be a gift from his chief indicating that he stood high in his favour. On formal occasions, or when it was cold, the amaXhosa casually draped themselves in cloaks of well-worked, supple bullock-hide worn with the comfortable fur side inside and displaying the skin side coloured with red ochre.

The amaXhosa were keepers of fat-tailed sheep, the descendants of the Asiatic mountain sheep (*Ovis orientalis*) from the steppes of Central Asia, as well as goats, which had likewise originated in south-western Asia. They also owned indigenous dogs which had probably first been domesticated in North Africa in ancient times, and which were essential for hunting. But, above all, they were herders of cattle, and the domestic breed they brought with them to southern Africa were Nguni cattle with their spreading horns and multicoloured hides. The Nguni breed stemmed predominantly from the humpless, long-horned *Bos taurus* originally domesticated in either Egypt or West Africa, with a strong admixture of the humped, short-horned *Bos indicus*, first domesticated in the Near East and Indus valley about 7 000 years ago and then introduced to Africa through Arab settlements along the Horn and the Swahili coast. In the early nineteenth century the Xhosa cattle population west of the Mbashe River was estimated as far exceeding the human population: 360 000 cattle to 100 000 people.

Cattle were of enormous cultural significance to the amaXhosa. They were the living wealth of Xhosa men and owning them was indisputable proof of adult status. Senior men possessed hundreds or even thousands of them. They conferred political power through a system of pastoral patronage, with men of status ‘lending’ cattle to their subordinates, parcelling them out in separate herds with the widely scattered members of their clan as insurance against the vicissitudes of disease or war. Cattle were transferred to the woman’s family from the man on marriage, and were exchanged for goods or to cement political alliances. Above all, they were essential for ritual sacrifice to the shades of the ancestors (the *amathongo* or *iminyanya*) to ensure their favour.

As with all other Nguni-speakers, the Southern Nguni believed in a shadowy life after death and in a supreme god who was but a distant figure taking little interest in his creatures. It was the ancestral spirits, the *amathongo*, who formed the basis of Xhosa religion. Their approval or disapprobation of their descendants’ every action brought either well-being and success or illness and disaster. The consequent necessity for
maintaining the ritual observances, social norms and moral obligations pleasing to the shades has been adduced as the major reason why Xhosa society was so conservative in its customs.

Because amathongo were capricious, they needed to be regularly placated through the necessary rituals and sacrifices. Their wishes were made known through dreams, illness or the counsel of a diviner, a person who had been chosen for this special calling by the amathongo themselves, and who was in close contact with the world of the spirits who spoke through dreams. When atonement was required, the amaXhosa performed a ceremony they called idini. The amathongo were ritually called upon to be present, their praises were declaimed, and they were invoked with the recitation of their clan names. In their honour an ox was sacrificed in the cattle-byre with the ritual spear kept in each home and passed down from father to son. There was dancing and the singing of clan songs accompanied by the drinking of beer especially brewed for the amathongo. The sacrificial meat was placed on the branches of special trees for the amathongo to taste, and on the third day of the idini the bones of the sacrificial beast were burnt.

Cattle held so central a place in their world that the amaXhosa developed an extensive vocabulary to describe their every detail, and their praise poetry celebrated the surpassing shape of the horns, colours and virtues of their precious beasts. Their doting owners recognised them individually, developed close bonds with them, lovingly decorated their bodies, and bent their horns into shapes considered beautiful. No wonder that they were the most sought-after prize in warfare. For a society that so valued cattle, it is not surprising that the amaXhosa were skilled cattle herders, shifting their stock from one pasture to another according to the seasons and the growth of grass. In the summer their herds grazed on the inferior, coarse perennial grasses of the sourveld, and in the winter on the palatable annual grasses of the sweetveld. At the end of winter, the amaXhosa deliberately burnt the mountain grasslands to provide fresh grazing in the spring. Transhumance patterns transgress political boundaries, and difficulties arose once land ceased to be plentiful and herds were no longer free to follow the season’s best grazing. Competition for control of pasturage was the consequence, with the inevitable corollary of increasing violence.
Because of the enormous value attached to cattle, looking after them was men’s work and riding them their prerogative. Some were trained as racing animals (and Xhosa men would ride at a spanking pace) or as pack-oxen. In the gendered division of labour, women cultivated the fields, foraged, cooked and looked after the children. Above all, they were respected for their fertility. Although considered perpetual minors, with no official say in the running of the homestead and rigidly excluded from the councils held by men deliberating upon public affairs, they exercised considerable influence on the domestic affairs of the homestead and men were expected to show them consideration and respect.

Polygamy brought its especial problems. The various wives and their children in a rich man’s home formed independent households in the homestead, each with its own cattle and property. Consequently, there were frequent competitions between houses for status and inheritance, and accusations of witchcraft were commonly directed against rivals. It was believed that witches carried on their nefarious work of harming others by becoming invisible, or by despatching agents, such as animal familiars in the form of a hyena, snake or baboon, or one of a nightmarish array of fabulous creatures. Witches’ evil potions often included body parts, and ritual medicines were required to ward off their influence. The terrible thing about a witch was that he or she could be anyone in the homestead, so the punishment, if one was identified by a diviner, was a dreadful execution in the presence of the community he or she had betrayed.

These people established in emaXhoseni who exhibited their own distinctive culture had not always lived there, however. Like so many other people in Africa, they too were descended from settlers.

Late-nineteenth-century European scholars, who were the first systematically to study African languages, detected the enormous geographical spread of a large group of related tongues they dubbed the Niger-Congo group, which stretched right across sub-Saharan Africa from modern-day Senegal to South Africa. One of its widely diffused sub-groups comprises the ‘Bantu’ family of languages, so-named after ‘ntu’ (the common root for ‘person’) and ‘ba’ (the common plural prefix). What scholars also observed was that throughout the huge area of sub-equatorial Africa dominated by Bantu languages, there were pockets of isolated languages – in places such as contemporary Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa – which have in common clicking sounds, or implosive consonants,
derived from quite a different language family from Bantu-speakers, and which are found only very rarely in other languages. This strongly suggested that those parts of Africa where Bantu-speakers live today were originally inhabited by small groups of people who were hunter-gatherers, and not farmers or pastoralists as they were. Yet, while scholars today would generally accept this scenario, just how the Bantu-speakers displaced the original inhabitants of the land is more problematic.

Scholars once assumed that Bantu-speaking farmers advanced through sub-Saharan Africa in a deliberate, organised and aggressive mass migration, and that they simply killed or drove off the small bands of foragers already living there, forcing the survivors to take what refuge they could find in the forests, deserts and mountains. This theory accorded extremely well with the final stages of the colonial conquest and colonisation of Africa, and continued to be a mainstay of apartheid thinking for another century. Because, if Bantu-speakers were not the original inhabitants, but were themselves only recent conquerors, this gave them no more valid a claim to the land than the Europeans who had mastered them in turn. And in a baleful corollary to the mass migration theory, it seemed only natural to scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immersed as they were in the racial theories of the day, that the taller, strapping ‘Negroid’ people should subdue the physically smaller ‘Pygmies’ and ‘Bushmen’ they encountered. Therefore, if a ‘superior’ race like the Bantu-speakers could occupy vast territories at the expense of an ‘inferior’ one, was that not in itself a justification for their subjugation in turn by the even more racially superior whites?

The basic flaw in the theory of an aggressive, mass migration by Bantu-speakers is that – if only for logistical reasons – it would necessarily have had to have been accomplished within a concentrated timespan. However, the linguistic and archaeological evidence suggests that what actually took place was a slow, gradual expansion that began some 5 000 years ago when Bantu-speakers living in what are now the borderlands between Nigeria and Cameroon in West Africa began to drift, with many stops and starts, towards Central Africa: a series of ripples, in other words, rather than one great wave.

Although Africa is a vast continent which thousands of years ago was still largely uninhabited by humans, collisions between enterprising bands of Bantu-speaking settlers and the tiny communities of original inhabitants
would have taken place. For, despite its size, Africa is decidedly lacking in suitable places for human habitation. Water resources are generally scarce and much of it is desert or semi-arid scrubland. Where rain is plentiful and rivers flow the whole year through, there are dense forests – but these harbour virulent insect-borne diseases. Most of the soil thinly covering the continent’s ancient, rocky skeleton is lacking in nutrients and would have given the pioneering Bantu-speaking farmers a poor return for all their labour. Later on, when the Bantu-speakers acquired cattle, the search would also have been on for the best summer and winter grazing for their livestock. Consequently, desirable regions that were suitable for both farming and herding, and posed a low risk of disease, were restricted and patchily situated. And difficult as it is to imagine today after the unrelenting slaughter of Africa’s wildlife over the past two centuries, wherever people ventured out they were potential prey for great beasts such as lions and crocodiles, as were their livestock, while their fields were ravaged by elephants and hippos. All these pitfalls and dangers meant that great stretches of Africa were left uninhabited by farmers and pastoralists who naturally all concentrated in those prize areas where the going was better, if hardly ideal. In the process they opened up the continent, and in John Iliffe’s telling words, ‘Africans have been … the frontiersmen who have colonised an especially hostile region of the world on behalf of the entire human race.’

The diffusion of Bantu-speakers began long before they mastered the technology of smelting iron, but once acquired during their gradual advance through Africa, it gave them a twofold advantage over the foraging communities they encountered: their iron spears and arrow-tips gave them military superiority, while their iron, hand-held hoes and axes allowed them to clear the land and till the soil relatively intensively, which in turn supported their expanding population.

The Hittites of Anatolia were the first people to forge iron about 3500 years ago. To smelt it requires enormous heat, and it takes the charcoal of ten to fifteen trees to make but a single kilogram of iron. The process is therefore only possible where there is an abundance of timber. Knowledge of the Hittite technique, which they had tried in vain to keep secret, seeped into north-eastern Africa by about 1000 BC. Iron-making then spread southwards through Africa, reaching the Great Lakes region by about 250 BC, and making it to southern Africa by around 400 AD. A second major
route by which iron production was introduced into Africa was by way of the Phoenicians in North Africa. Spreading south by about 500 BC into what is now Nigeria, it then moved east and further south.

Archaeologists, who through their excavations map the routes iron-making has taken through Africa, have discovered an anomaly in this pattern. They have unearthed Iron Age sites between Lake Victoria and Lake Tanganyika dating back to 600 BC. This early date suggests a process of local innovation rather than a transfer of knowledge from outside Africa, especially since these East African smelters used a novel system of pipes and bellows in their furnaces that achieved very high temperatures. This is the system to be found among Iron Age metal workers in southern Africa.

Regardless of where their knowledge of iron-working originated, even with their iron hoes and axes Iron Age farmers found it hard to eke out a living from Africa’s poor soils, with its fickle rainfall and uncertain streams, and practised a labour-intensive system known as shifting cultivation. At that time almost all the land in sub-Saharan Africa was virgin soil, but too poor to be farmed continuously. Farmers first cleared the trees and brush from a field and then burnt it, thus releasing the nutrients into the soil and killing the weeds. The field was then tilled and planted. After a few years — two or three where the soil was really inferior, or up to ten where it was better — the exhausted field was abandoned and given time to recover, or simply left behind when the people moved on. Pastures were likewise easily over-grazed and necessitated the constant movement of livestock.

In their very gradual advance, Bantu-speakers had occupied the forests of equatorial Africa by about the first century AD. They then moved into the savannahs of East Africa where rainfall was much lower and more unpredictable than they were used to. The food crops such as the palms and tubers they had cultivated in the wet, humid forests did not flourish in this new environment, and they had to turn to the Cushite-speaking people who already lived in these regions to learn how to farm grain crops such as millet and sorghum. From the east coast some Bantu-speaking farming communities expanded southwards, always adding to their stores of food by hunting the abundant game.

By about 1100 AD Iron Age Bantu-speakers, already present in a great swathe from West Africa by way of the Horn of Africa to East Africa, were beginning to penetrate southern Africa. As elsewhere in Africa, their
territorial expansion through the southernmost regions of the continent was a slow diffusion of communities, not a rapid, orchestrated advance. When they arrived south of the Limpopo, the Bantu-speakers discovered that groups of small, yellow-skinned, Stone Age hunter-gatherers who neither domesticated animals nor planted crops were widely distributed throughout southern Africa. They spoke languages so different from each other that they were mutually unintelligible, but all were characterised by a distinctive system of clicks which combine to make more distinctly different consonants than in any other known tongue. These people were the aboriginal inhabitants of the land, and had been living in this region for over 70,000 years, ever since their ancestors evolved into modern humans. Some were artists of distinction, especially those living in the foothills of the Drakensberg and in the Cape Fold Mountains. Their rock paintings and engravings reflect the practices of the belief system that bound their communities together, and many illustrate shamans in some kind of trance, absorbing the power of animals to gain access to the spirit world. Organised into bands which fluctuated in size through the seasons in accordance with the food available, the San (as they are called today) thrived best in the more arid areas and in the high mountain grasslands where the buck on which they subsisted abounded. The slowly advancing Bantu-speakers sought the better watered regions, the less frostbitten grasses of the lower-lying localities and forest lands, all of which were more suitable for cultivation and grazing.

Ethnographers have divided Bantu-speakers in South Africa into two main groups, Sotho/Tswana and Nguni, and into two smaller groups, Venda and Tsonga. Sotho/Tswana-speakers were settling in the region around the Soutpansberg in the far north of the present-day Republic of South Africa from about 1300 AD. By the early eighteenth century, Sotho and Tswana chiefdoms were dispersed right across the great inland plateau, or highveld, but they were not as fortunate in their habitat as were the Nguni-speakers. The natural resources of the coastal lowlands of the eastern, Indian Ocean shore of southern Africa are superior to those of the highveld. It is a warm, fertile and well-watered region, much of it suitable for both pastoralism and agriculture.

According to archaeological finds, an Early Iron Age people (what they called themselves we do not know) had been living in the coastal lowlands since about 600 AD, and from about 1100 AD the ancestors of the Nguni-
speakers began to make the more northerly coastal reaches their home. Excavated evidence has confirmed that there was no cultural continuity between the Nguni-speakers and the prior, Early Iron Age inhabitants. Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries some of the Nguni-speakers then slowly advanced southwards, settling in the region between the Mzimvubu and Great Fish Rivers.

Inevitably, over time linguistic and cultural disparities began to open up between those Nguni-speakers who moved on and those who remained in the northern coastlands. Colonial administrators and ethnographers seized on this process to divide Nguni-speakers into the Northern and Southern Nguni, each of the two groups consisting of distinctly different, culturally unique ‘tribes’. According to this schema, the major ‘tribes’ north of the Mzimkhulu River (which marks the divide between the Northern and Southern Nguni) are primarily the amaZulu and amaSwazi; while those to the south are the amaMpondo, amaMpondomise, abaThembu and amaXhosa. This convenient classification was perpetuated and exploited in the apartheid era with its emphasis on racially and culturally unique groups. Nevertheless, the reality is that all Nguni-speakers still share essentially the same closely related language despite distinctive regional variations and dialect groupings. Moreover, they have in common the same basic culture despite various local differences that have developed over time.

Prior to the entry of the Southern Nguni, the San, whom the amaXhosa called the abaThwa, had alone occupied the region between the Mzimvubu and Great Fish Rivers where the interlopers put down their roots. For centuries the San and the Nguni-speakers lived in a sort of symbiotic relationship. The amaXhosa in particular, who were the southernmost Nguni-speakers, absorbed elements of the San language, especially its hallmark click consonants; the San and Nguni-speakers intermarried; and the San traded the products of hunting such as ivory, feathers and eggshell beads for Nguni iron, grain and, later on, tobacco. The Iron Age Nguni-speakers used the San as woodcutters for their smelting furnaces. Recognising their special occult powers as the original inhabitants of the land, the Nguni depended on them as rainmakers, borrowed many elements of their religious and healing systems, and paid them in cattle and crops for their services as diviners. But the San and Nguni ways of life were essentially irreconcilable. The pastureland and fields of the Nguni herders and farmers (whose population kept on growing thanks to their secure food
supplies), impinged ever more intrusively on the traditional hunting-
grounds of the San. Deprived of sufficient game to hunt for their survival,
the San turned increasingly to raiding Nguni livestock. The San were not
easy to combat. As late as 1775 the amaXhosa were reported to be ‘much in
dread’ of the San, who were a match for them at a distance with their
poisoned arrows – even if they could not use their bows in rainy weather –
and whose ‘insidious mode of warfare’ and intimate knowledge of the
terrain left the amaXhosa flatfooted.6 Even so, the Nguni-speakers
relentlessly squeezed out the small bands of aboriginal hunter-gatherers as
they advanced, sometimes doing their conscious best to exterminate them,
sometimes incorporating them, and most often driving them further away
into the interior.

The expanding Nguni-speakers along the eastern and southern coastlands
of southern Africa settled in their scattered homesteads under their
headmen, but they were also tied into various groupings by their clan
affiliations. A few words are necessary here to explain the concepts of
lineage, clan and segmentation so fundamental to Nguni – and hence Xhosa
– social organisation. A lineage consisted of the descendants over six or
more generations of a common ancestor in the male line, usually living
together in the same homestead. A clan (which might vary greatly in size
from a few hundred members to several thousand) was composed of several
lineages that had arisen when homesteads had proliferated over the
generations through segmentation. Segmentation regularly – and quite
naturally – occurred when the grown-up sons of a household left to
establish their own households on unoccupied land. Or the process might
have been forced on some people when overpopulation and a scarcity of
natural resources, coupled perhaps with environmental stresses like
prolonged droughts, or specific catastrophes, such as the devastation of
warfare, caused them to leave home to find new, better or safer arable land
and pasturage. But no matter the reasons for their dispersal, such people all
remain linked by their believed-in common descent from the same founding
ancestor – real or putative. His name would be given to the clan and be
taken by its members who were all bound together by common kinship,
traditions, customs and praises. Members were also exogamous, meaning
that they did not marry within the clan.

At some early but indefinable point, certain of the Southern Nguni clans
began to expand through this process of segmentation, and through the
assimilation of outsiders through conquest, marriage or voluntary adherence. Consequently, on account of this process of incorporation, as sociologists would call it, no clan in fact ever consisted entirely of people of genuinely common descent. Likewise, a chiefdom did not necessarily consist of only one clan, and through incorporation and conquest might be made up of any number of clans or elements of clans. All of these components recognised their chief as the leading member of the senior lineage of the dominant clan in the chiefdom, and he was therefore the person through whom their vital, ritual connection with the supernatural was channelled. His actual powers might differ from one chiefdom to another, but in everything he did he was acting for the collective of household heads that made up his chiefdom. The territorial extent of a chiefdom, therefore, was measured by the actual homesteads who acknowledged the authority of a particular chief. Any homestead head might decide to defect and offer his allegiance to another chief if his own proved oppressive or incompetent; while the natural, unstoppable process of segmentation also played its part in the frequent waxing and waning of every chiefdom’s size and power.

European mariners of the Early Modern period reported that the Southern Nguni were organised politically into chiefdoms, and that power and wealth in these polities was demonstrably concentrated in the grasp of royal lineages. East of the Kei River the Thembu, Mpondomise and Mpondo kingdoms were certainly established by the mid-seventeenth century, if not before. The Xhosa kingdom to their west probably rose somewhat later and was still expanding westwards when (as we shall see) it ran into Dutch settlers moving eastwards.

Although extensive, none of these Southern Nguni kingdoms was strongly centralised. In this they differed from the Northern Nguni polities that began a cycle of conquest and consolidation in the late eighteenth century. Eventually, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, the Zulu kingdom of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona succeeded in conquering and absorbing its Northern Nguni neighbours except for the amaSwazi, creating a militarily aggressive state centred in the region between the Phongolo and Thukela Rivers, but exerting its sway over much of what is now the province of KwaZulu-Natal, and periodically raiding the neighbouring Southern Nguni kingdoms.7
Fatally for their ability to mount a unified armed response against the forces of colonialism, the amaXhosa never developed into a unified state akin to that of the amaZulu or amaSwazi. The senior members of their royal house headed individual, autonomous chiefdoms. A chief’s homestead was indicated by a standard, an elephant’s tail attached to a pole. As the guardian of his people, he was expected to ensure that all commoners (that is, everyone except members of the chiefly lineage) had access to the land and that they were safe from their enemies. He also resolved internal disputes, and ritually initiated the agricultural cycle with rainmaking and first-fruits ceremonies. In return, his adherents tendered him tribute, and submitted to the fines and levies he might impose. Ideally a chief stood out from his adherents, not only on account of the brass armband worn on his right wrist, his necklace of special red beads, and his leopard-skin cloak worn with the spotted fur inside but revealed in the turned collar and edgings, but because of the aristocratic bravura and dignity of his deportment. Yet, despite the considerable respect accorded a chief which protected him from violence, even on the battlefield, he exercised his authority only by consensus. His councillors, marked out by the headdress of a single crane feather worn as an indication of their rank, were always senior men of commoner lineages with followings of their own. They drastically limited a chief’s freedom of action because he had always to bear in mind that dissidents could force his resignation or even desert with their adherents to another chief if he proved ineffective or unpopular.

The Xhosa paramount, instead of being a powerful, centralising monarch such as the Zulu king, was merely the accepted figurehead of the Xhosa nation and the most senior member of the recognised royal house. His position vis-à-vis his chiefs was analogous to their relationship with the leading commoners in their chiefdoms. He confirmed new chiefs once they had their adherents’ approval, adjudicated disputes that resisted settlement at the chiefly level and, above all, declared war on behalf of the nation. Besides that, he possessed little real authority over the chiefs and had to consult with them before taking any important decision. Lacking anything like a central bureaucracy or standing army, his status was that of *primus inter pares*, or, as the amaXhosa expressed it, of their ‘oldest brother’. A Xhosa paramount chief was consequently never responsible for every action taken by other chiefs who recognised his tenuous authority, but (as shall be
seen) this was a limitation never properly grasped by whites with their centralised form of government.

Before the early eighteenth century and their first encounters with the Dutch settlers, segmentation had been a safety-valve for the loose Xhosa polity, spurring its expansion and limiting conflict within chiefdoms. As we have seen, the practice of segmentation allowed a chief’s more ambitious and aggressive sons (most usually the eldest son born of the Right-Hand House of the chief’s first – but not senior – wife) to depart with their followers to carve out for themselves new, genealogically related chiefdoms; while the eldest son of the senior wife of the Great House remained home as his father’s heir. The most reliable of a new chief’s followers would be those who had been initiated into adulthood with him and were now part of the same age-set. Indeed, in emaXhoseni, as in so many other African societies, the institution of age-sets was basic to the organisation and control of society.

For Xhosa males, circumcision was integral to initiation as it was also to the closely related Thembu and Mpondomise people to the north of them, although by the eighteenth century the practice had been dropped by the Northern Nguni-speakers. The initiates or *abakwetha* (singular *umkwetha*), youths between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one, left all childhood conduct behind them as they entered the initiation hut, built in a secluded spot far from any chance of ritual contamination. Diviners performed ritual ceremonies to endow the initiates with the courage and strength to resist all evil influences in this life. For three to six months following the excruciating pain of circumcision with a spear blade, *abakwetha* were put through further ordeals to probe their courage and endurance and were instructed on how to speak and act with the wisdom, dignity and restraint of a man. During this period their bodies were covered in white clay to indicate their transitional status. Periodically they would emerge from their seclusion wearing kilts and concealing headdresses of palm leaves and shoots to perform extravagant ritual dances before the young women who would become their first brides soon after their emergence as full adults. In early times, *abakwetha* recently released from their circumcision lodge wore a headdress consisting of a band of hide around the forehead with bunches of blue-grey wing-feathers stitched to either side.

Even though segmentation by restless age-groups of young men was meant to limit discord, this proved to be ever less the case in the historic
period, and fissures and consequent migrations could be deliberate, politically driven, and intense over the short duration. The quasi-historical founder of the royal Xhosa lineage was Tshawe, who is assumed to have lived in the mid-sixteenth century. He overthrew his elder brother, Cirha, and established the amaTshawe as the royal clan of the amaXhosa. Chiefly status in the Xhosa kingdom was thereafter limited to members of the royal clan, and heads of subordinate clans were regarded as ‘Great Councillors’, but never chiefs. The Xhosa kingdom was founded considerably later than its neighbouring Southern Nguni kingdoms. The Thembu kingdom to the north-west was founded four generations earlier, that of the amaMpondomise to the north-east two generations earlier, and that of the amaMpondo (the oldest of all) nine before. It took the amaXhosa three generations to move slowly south-west from their original homeland on the Mthatha River to the upper Great Fish River.  

In the later eighteenth century, a major fissure occurred within the Xhosa paramountcy. Its lineaments are frustrating to discern through the swirls of oral tradition, although there is no doubt that its principal protagonists were the rival sons of the paramount, Phalo, a shadowy figure whose Great Place was west of the Kei River, and who died in about 1775. Gcaleka was the heir of Phalo’s Great House, and Rharhabe was his Right-Hand son. Rharhabe lost in battle to Gcaleka and retreated west across the Kei with his followers to the region known later to white colonists as the Ciskei. Rharhabe set about establishing himself as the dominant chief in the Ciskei through interminable struggles against the other Xhosa chiefdoms, Khoikhoi pastoralists, the San, and neighbouring people such as the abaThembu. For his part, Gcaleka remained with his father, Phalo, in his stable polity east of the Kei, in what later became known as the Transkei.

Thus, a breach opened between what were now becoming known as the amaRharhabe and the amaGcaleka (within the Xhosa kingdom people identified themselves in terms of their immediate chief, but in relation to foreigners they identified themselves as amaXhosa). Gcaleka succeed Phalo as paramount, but outlived him for only three years, dying in 1778. His heir and successor as paramount was Khawuta, a weak ruler and widely considered not a patch on his father. Then, in about 1782, the indefatigably bellicose Rharhabe perished in battle at the Xura River alongside his heir, Mlawu, fighting against the amaQwathi, vassals to the Thembu king, who rejoiced that they had ‘caught an old dog that has long destroyed our
nation’. Rharhabe’s heir was Ngqika (c. 1778–1829), Mlawu’s son, but since he was a minor, Khawuta appointed Ngqika’s uncle Ndlambe, the second son in Rharhabe’s Great House and Mlawu’s full brother, as regent. Khawuta himself died in 1794. His heir as chief of the amaGcaleka and the designated Xhosa paramount was his son Hintsa. But the child was only five years old, and until he came of age, his senior councillors would rule in his name. Consequently, in the final years of the eighteenth century, not only were the amaXhosa split into two factions, but the rulers of the amaGcaleka and the amaRharhabe were both minors who, when they came of age, would have trouble asserting themselves over the former guardians. These internal vulnerabilities came at a particularly unfortunate time for the amaXhosa because they coincided with an escalating conflict that was already afflicting the westernmost borderlands of emaXhoseni.
The Khoikhoi and the AmaXhosa

It was only in the Ciskei, where during the 1770s Rharhabe, the son of Phalo, was intermittently at war with them, that the pastoralist Khoikhoi made regular contact with the Bantu-speaking peoples. Elsewhere, the barren lands of the Karoo formed a barrier between the Khoikhoi and the summer-rainfall regions where the ‘Kobuqua’, their name for Bantu-speaking people, preferred to settle. Linguistic evidence suggests that interaction between the Khoikhoi and the amaXhosa must have been of considerable duration, from at least the seventeenth century, certainly long enough for the Khoikhoi language to have made a profound mark on the phonetic system of isiXhosa and to have exported many click consonants into it. Moreover, the amaXhosa took on many Khoikhoi terms for geographical features as well as for elements of religious belief. The last reflects the Xhosa respect for the Khoikhoi’s ritual ability to protect the land in which they had been the earlier inhabitants, and the Khoikhoi actively participated in Xhosa society as diviners to prevent natural destruction, to protect against witchcraft, heal the sick, bring rain, and maintain the general welfare of the Xhosa chiefdoms. Yet, despite this evidence of fruitful interaction, and the increasing assimilation of the Khoikhoi by the amaXhosa, dealings between the two peoples must also have been recurrently violent, for ‘Xhosa’ is derived from the Khoikhoi verb stem meaning ‘to destroy’, and the Khoikhoi referred specifically to the amaXhosa as //kosa, ‘angry men’, or ‘the men who do damage’.

Who were these Khoikhoi who lived along the western marches of the Xhosa world? Like the amaXhosa, the Khoikhoi were transhumant nomadic pastoralists who raised cattle and sheep and who assessed their wealth and power in terms of the livestock they owned. Although they worked copper, they did not smelt iron. They were organised into
patriarchal clans, under chiefs, and called themselves by the name of their chiefdoms.

The amaXhosa considered the Khoikhoi to be a people of essentially the same physical type as the San. As we have seen, for aeons southern Africa had been occupied by small, aboriginal groups of Stone Age hunter-gatherers who neither domesticated animals nor planted crops. They were the original inhabitants, autochthones, sprung from the earth. Having evolved for tens of thousands of years in relative isolation, they were lighter in skin pigmentation than Bantu-speaking Africans and had developed their unique languages bristling with click consonants. Then, about 2 000 years ago, the simple, egalitarian social system of some of these hunter-gatherers in what is now northern Botswana was profoundly changed by the acquisition of livestock. It is thought that they obtained their fat-tailed sheep from Nilotic people to the north, and that subsequently they procured their cattle from Bantu-speaking people to the east.

The new herders, these ancestors of the Khoikhoi, growing progressively taller on their nourishing diet of milk and meat, began to move south in search of fresh pastures. In a reprise of the debate over the southwards drift of the Bantu-speakers, the great, unresolved question that continues to exercise archaeologists and anthropologists is whether this was by a slow process of diffusion, by a series of migrations whose routes can be traced, or by a combination of the two. Those favouring the migration hypothesis would argue that somewhere near the confluence of the Vaal and Orange Rivers, the pastoralists dispersed into several groups. Some moved west towards the Atlantic, establishing themselves up and down the coast, while others went south towards the Indian Ocean shore, and then west along the coastal plain to the Cape of Good Hope. But whether by diffusion or by migration, by the time European sailors first came into contact with them in the late fifteenth century, the pastoralists had spread around the coastal lands of south-western Africa from below the mouth of the Orange River in the west, to the Great Fish River in the east where they were interspersed among the Iron Age Nguni-speaking people settled there. Probably numbering about 50 000 people by the mid-seventeenth century, and inhabiting the vast area of about 337 000 square kilometres south of the Orange River, their greatest concentration, numbering in the tens of thousands, was in the well-watered pastureland of the south-western Cape.
Geographically, this area of settlement was one of winter rainfall which becomes increasingly exiguous up the west coast from the Cape Peninsula, and which towards the east shades into the summer-rainfall region in the vicinity of the Gamtoos and Sundays Rivers. The rainfall, then as now, was notoriously irregular from season to season, with periodic droughts, but there is no doubt that nowadays it is steadily diminishing thanks to marked climate change, and that this territory was once far better watered than it is currently. The region is bounded to the north by the great parallel chains of the tortured Cape Fold Mountains with their fantastic peaks. The long valley of the semi-arid Little Karoo and the plains of Camdeboo lie between two of these ranges, and on the farther side of the northernmost one is the Great Karoo, a semi-desert land inimical to human habitation. To the south of the Cape Fold Mountains is the low coastal plateau, heavily excised by river valleys and gorges, where trees flourish. Much of the region is characterised by a natural, dense selection of evergreen shrubs, bushes and succulents taking the form either of fynbos or renosterveld. It is not a region especially favourable for grass growth, and the extent and quality of pasturage is variable and the carrying capacity limited. (The Little Karoo is an exception in providing extensive winter grazing, as do the plains of Camdeboo and some favoured areas in the far south-western Cape.) Nevertheless, this mixed vegetation once supported vast herds of migrating ruminants, including many species of antelope, zebra and the now extinct quagga, buffalo, rhinoceros, hippopotamus and elephant, along with their meat-eating predators such as lion and leopard.

Inevitably, the pastoralists came into conflict with the hunter-gatherers when they began to lay exclusive claim to the grazing and water resources the latter had always held to be the common property of the community. Tensions mounted when the great herds of wild game the hunter-gatherers had always relied upon for food began to dwindle as the domesticated livestock denuded their pastures. And so – as with the San and the Bantu-speakers – a cycle of raid and counter-raid began that lasted for hundreds of years, right into the early nineteenth century, with the hunter-gatherers terrorising the herdsmen with their poisoned arrows, and stealing or simply slaughtering their herds and flocks. The consequences were far-reaching for both communities. The pastoralists began to organise themselves into larger political groups to withstand the raiders; while the hunter-gatherers retreated to the mountains and desert places, continued to prey on livestock
as robber bands, or gave up and entered the society of the pastoralists. There they intermarried and were gradually assimilated.

By the time the Dutch first settled in Table Bay in the mid-seventeenth century, a clearly discernible social distinction existed between those who were pastoralists and those who were not. The former called themselves the Khoikhoi, or ‘men of men’, and gave those people without stock of their own the derogatory name of ‘San’, meaning those who ‘picked up from the ground’, or foraged. The Dutch initially lumped them all together as ‘Hottentots’, their indiscriminate name for the indigenous inhabitants of the Western Cape as opposed to Nguni-speaking people. They did so because they could not distinguish between them on physical grounds, and disregarded the fact that the Khoikhoi and San language groups were quite unrelated despite both being characterised by implosive consonants. (While the Khoikhoi all spoke one language with closely related dialects, the San spoke a number of highly divergent, mutually incomprehensible tongues.) It was not long, though, before the Dutch began to differentiate between the herders and hunter-gatherers in terms of their diverging ways of life, calling the San ‘Bosjesmans’ (Bushmen): literally those who lived in the ‘bush’. And it does seem that the Khoikhoi could become San if they lost their cattle wealth and reverted to hunting and gathering, and that successful San could advance into the ranks of the cattle-owners, thus leaving it a matter of some debate as to whether the San of historic times were indeed the descendants of the aboriginal, pre-Khoikhoi population. It is on this account that the portmanteau term ‘Khoisan’ has been coined by scholars to describe both groups collectively, although it is not one necessarily favoured by those who consider themselves descended specifically from either the San or the Khoikhoi.

The principal food of the Khoikhoi was the milk from their cattle, kept in wooden pots or skin bags and drunk once it had thickened. Women did the milking, but men were responsible for all other work relating to their livestock. They trained oxen for riding and carrying burdens, and guided them with a bridle fastened to a stick through the cartilage of the animal’s nose. It fell to women to gather wild fruits and vegetables to augment their diet. Meat was a luxury, available when the men had been out hunting with their dogs. Domestic animals were not killed for food, but might be eaten if they died. The Khoikhoi dressed entirely in cured and softened skins:
sheepskins, oxhides, and the pelts of dassies (rock hyraxes), seals, jackals and wild-cats. Men wore a loin-skin and donned a small kaross (a blanket of animal skins sewn together) when it was cold, women a well-ornamented apron with larger karosses before and behind. Both sexes adorned their hair with copper trinkets and smeared their bodies with ochre and fat. Women also favoured shell ornaments, glass and coral beads acquired through trade, and sewed leather strips round their legs, while men often wore armlets of ivory or copper.

They lived in beehive-shaped huts made of reed mats covering a framework of slender wooden poles planted in the ground, bent inwards and joined together by cross-pieces (whalebone replaced poles on the barren, treeless Atlantic coast). In winter the huts were lined with skins for warmth. When the Khoikhoi moved on in search of grazing for their livestock, these huts were easy to take apart, to transport on the backs of oxen and to reassemble. A ‘camp’, always occupied by men of the same small patrilineal clan, together with their wives and children, dependants or clients, was made up of a circle of on average thirty of these huts, usually surrounded by a fence of thorn bushes. The open space in the centre, where most daily activities took place, served at night as a kraal for the sheep and for the cattle, which were trained to lie within the circle whether there was a fence or not. The Khoikhoi communities were normally widely dispersed in their ‘camps’ near water and where the grazing was good, and ranged frequently around territory that was recognised as belonging to their chiefdom.

The Khoikhoi’s first loyalty was always to their clan, but clans were nevertheless the building blocks of chiefdoms. By the time the Dutch encountered them in the seventeenth century, larger groupings of Khoikhoi clans had evolved into approximately twelve chiefdoms – what the Dutch called ‘nations’. Although it had a kinship base, a chiefdom was never exclusively a kinship group. As in most African societies, chiefdoms (as well as clans) were in a constant state of flux as they segmented or shifted their allegiance to other groups. The chiefdoms were under chiefs (whom the Dutch referred to as ‘captains’ or ‘kings’) who were assisted and restrained by a council of clan heads that made sure they did not overstep their authority. Chiefs, who might owe their rank to heredity or simply to outstanding ability and strong personality, indicated their elevated status by
living in larger huts, wearing prized animal skins such as those of otter and badger and – unusual among the Khoikhoi – taking a number of wives.

Although self-sufficient for their daily needs, the Khoikhoi highly valued two items that were not available to them and for which they were willing to barter their livestock: metals and dagga. Copper, from which they fashioned their ornamental bracelets, bangles, beads and chains, they obtained from the Little Namaqua (who were also Khoikhoi), Damara and Tswana peoples living to the north of them. Iron, which enabled them make much more effective tips for their fire-hardened wooden arrows and spears, they obtained from the amaXhosa living to the east of them beyond the Great Fish River. It was from the latter, who were practised agriculturalists, that the Khoikhoi obtained their dagga for herbal remedies and as an intoxicant. Before visiting European sailors introduced pipes and smoking, the Khoikhoi chewed their dagga or drank it in an infusion.

With the arrival of seafarers at Table Bay, the Khoikhoi began to exchange their livestock for copper, brass and prized scrap iron, as well as novel commodities such as tobacco, beads, knives and alcohol. These were also products desired by the amaXhosa, and in the mid-seventeenth century a trade connection opened up between the amaXhosa and the Khoikhoi chiefdoms geographically closest to the Dutch. The Khoikhoi Inqua chiefdom, situated between the headwaters of the Sundays and Gamtoos Rivers, which obtained copper from the Batswana to the north, operated at the apex of this three-way exchange system which persisted well into the eighteenth century when it was disrupted by the advance of the Dutch into the interior.

From the seventeenth century there was continual interaction between the Khoikhoi and amaXhosa between the Kei and Gamtoos Rivers. No defined frontier existed between the two societies, which were bound to each other by trading links and kinship ties between their leading lineages which regularly intermarried. Both societies were used to incorporating aliens, and this further blurred the edges between the two. Khoikhoi who entered Xhosa society might originally have done so from economic need or through conquest, but they were not held to be socially or racially inferior, and within a generation they would be fully integrated.

In the mid-1600s the amaXhosa, still living in the vicinity of the Mbashe River, went through a process of major segmentation when several
chiefdoms hived off from the paramountcy. By the early eighteenth century these offshoots, the amaNtinde, amaGwali, amaMbalu, imiDange and amaGqunukhwebe, were located between the Kei and Keiskamma Rivers. During this period of rapid westward expansion, previous peaceful contact with the Khoikhoi was overlaid by conquest and incorporation. The Khoikhoi Gonaqua chiefdom between the Kei and Keiskamma Rivers was incorporated in the early 1700s into the westernmost of the Xhosa chiefdoms, the amaGqunukhwebe and, to a lesser extent, the amaNtinde. The remnants of the Gonaqua clans regrouped themselves west of the Keiskamma. Perhaps because of the number of Khoikhoi it had incorporated – and who retained their own culture, not adopting the Xhosa practice of circumcision at initiation and continuing to employ the traditional Khoi bow and arrow (weapons never used by the Xhosa) – the amaGqunukhwebe were thereafter considered distinct from the other chiefdoms by the amaXhosa, and probably as inferior too, because its chief was not of royal Xhosa lineage. The amaGqunukhwebe continued their westwards drift, and by the 1760s had reached the domain of the Khoikhoi Hoengeyqua chiefdom between the Great Fish and Sundays Rivers. In return for cattle, the Hoengeyqua granted the amaGqunukhwebe territory between the Great Fish and Bushman’s Rivers.

Since the middle of the seventeenth century, by allying with one Khoikhoi chiefdom or another against their rivals, the amaXhosa had acquired a loose political ascendancy over most of those living along the southern coast as far west as the Breede River. In return for lending military assistance in these local squabbles, the amaXhosa expected their Khoikhoi allies to help them fight Khoikhoi chiefdoms that defied them and refused to pay tribute. Some of their western Khoikhoi neighbours bore the brunt of more concerted Xhosa aggression, and at the beginning of the eighteenth century the powerful Inqua chiefdom of Hinsati at the foot of the Sneeuwberg mountains in Camdeboo was shattered and then assimilated as three Xhosa clans.

By the mid-eighteenth century, in the region between the Bushman’s and Gamtoos Rivers, three Khoikhoi chiefdoms, the Hoengeyqua (the most powerful of the three), Gonaqua and Damasqua continued to resist further westward Xhosa expansion in a sort of loose confederacy. But their lack of political cohesion weakened them, and opened them up to mounting San raids that fatally depleted their once numerous herds. As their societies
unravelled under the strain, some newly destitute Khoikhoin joined the amaXhosa as suppliant clients, while other scattered remnants joined together, living like the San as hunter-gatherer bands, and raiding other Khoikhoin who still possessed cattle.

Xhosa pressure on their westerly Khoikhoi neighbours continued to mount. As we have seen, in about 1775 there was a split in the Xhosa paramountcy when Rharhabe was defeated by his brother Gcaleka in the succession conflict. Rharhabe retreated westwards in a series of spasmodic movements back and forth across the Kei River in the direction of the Great Fish River. As he went, growing in cattle wealth and prestige, his expanding following identified ever more closely with him as a generous, energetic and brave leader, and began to call themselves the amaRharhabe, the people of his new chiefdom. But many amaXhosa did not accept his sway. Rharhabe claimed authority over the Ntinde, Gwali, Mbalu, Dange and Gqunukhwebe Xhosa chiefdoms that had split away the previous century, but they disputed his right to rule them and resisted as best they could. The San he encountered fared even worse, and it is clear that he hunted them like wild animals, ruthlessly clearing them out of the lands where he settled for a time. Rharhabe also came into conflict with the Khoikhoi chiefdoms. When he and his host attempted to cross the Kei River they were unsuccessfully opposed by a large Khoikhoi army. The defeated Khoikhoi chief’s widow, Hoho, continued to resist fiercely. Fighting his way forward, and under constant harassment by the San, Rharhabe eventually made peace with Queen Hoho. In return for a payment of cattle she allowed Rharhabe and his followers to settle on land around the Amathole Mountains, and her people were incorporated as another Xhosa clan.

In taking possession of this territory, Rharhabe was establishing himself in an impenetrable natural fortress and place of refuge that would play a pivotal part in many of the wars to come. The Amathole Mountains rise abruptly to the north of the grassy plain between the Keiskamma and Buffalo Rivers. Because of the way in which they bulked above the surrounding plain, the amaXhosa called them the ‘Calves’, or Amathole, for their resemblance to a herd of young cattle grazing in a grassy field. The Amathole range is about thirteen kilometres wide, some sixty kilometres in circumference and twenty-five in diameter. Within this daunting circle of spurs, intersecting ridges and vegetation-choked ravines, all covered in a thick mantle of forest and muffled by snow in winter, many streams flow
down to form the headwaters of the Keiskamma River. The river wanders across the plain and finally forces its way through a natural gap to the west in the encircling Amathole, and flows out south towards the sea.

After Rharhabe’s death in 1782, relations between the amaXhosa on one side and the San and Khoikhoi on the other became less bellicose, and during the reign of the paramount Khawuta (1778–1794), the Khoikhoi Hoengeyqua were absorbed in turn as another Xhosa clan. By then, active Khoikhoi resistance to the amaXhosa had effectively faded away. It did so because not only were the Khoikhoi chiefdoms being pressured and absorbed by the amaXhosa advancing from the east, but they were under even greater pressure from the west where Dutch stock farmers were sweeping across the countryside, driving the dispossessed Khoikhoin before them and over the Gamtoos River. Pressured between these two inexorable forces approaching from opposite directions, the dispossessed Khoikhoin were left with little choice but to take service with the Dutch settlers, or to seek refuge among the amaXhosa. Either way, they were finished as an independent people.
The Cape of Good Hope

On the northern tip of the low, malaria-ridden little Island of Mozambique lying in the broad mouth of a river estuary on the Swahili coast facing the Mozambique Channel, the Portuguese erected a trapezoidal fortress with four massive, angular bastions and walls twelve metres high. When it was completed in 1558 after twelve years of building, the daunting hulk of Fortaleza da São Sebastião was the largest inhabited structure in Africa south of the Sahara. This formidable stronghold guarded one of the more than forty far-flung feitorias – or Portuguese trading stations – dotted at strategic points along the coasts of Africa and Asia from Sofala to Nagasaki. These feitorias alone constituted the Estado da Índia, the Portuguese empire east of the Cape of Good Hope. For this was not a territorial empire, but a maritime one. Profitable, monopolistic seaborne commerce in valuable commodities ranging from spices to slaves was its goal, not the maintenance of colonies of settlement.

Others cast envious eyes on the Estado da Índia’s lucrative trade, none more so than the Dutch. Portugal and its empire became embroiled in the United Provinces of the Netherlands’ struggle for independence from Spanish rule – the Eighty Years’ War, which lasted from 1568 to 1648 – when King Felipe II of Spain enforced his claim to the Portuguese throne in 1580. The days of the Estado da Índia were numbered when on 20 March 1602 the States-General of the Netherlands granted the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), or the Dutch East India Company, its charter. The VOC was a joint-stock company under a board of seventeen directors, the Heeren XVII (Lords Seventeen), with its headquarters in Amsterdam. The charter, besides granting the VOC the Dutch monopoly to trade in Asia, endowed it with quasi-governmental powers. It was authorised to wage war, negotiate treaties, coin money and establish colonies. These privileges,
when combined with the energetic economic acumen of the Heeren XVII, propelled the VOC into conducting itself as a major maritime power in its own right – and made its shareholders very rich.

The VOC did not content itself with merely disrupting the Portuguese trade in the Indies. Rather, it set about systematically capturing the Portuguese forts and feitorias so as to drive its rival out of the Indian Ocean altogether. The Dutch early identified the strategic and commercial significance of the island of Moçambique. It lay at the point where the already 3,000-kilometre voyage around Africa from Portugal entered the ancient, seasonal system of Arab monsoon navigation. In the summer, the prevailing winds blew north-east to the Indies, and reversed their direction in the winter, bringing back the fleets laden with Asian riches. But if they arrived from Portugal at the wrong time of year, fleets had to linger at Moçambique until the monsoon was blowing in the desired direction.

With Moçambique singled out as a major objective, in 1604 a VOC fleet of twelve vessels unexpectedly tacked into its narrow harbour. The Dutch were soon deterred by fire from the walls of Fortaleza da São Sebastião and made off again, carrying away the cargo of ivory they had plundered from a Portuguese vessel captured in the port. On 29 March 1607, the Dutch came back with a fleet of nine ships determined to seize the island. But for all their efforts, they failed to capture the great fortress. They raised the siege on 16 May, but not before they had sacked the town and destroyed the church and convent and all the Catholic images they could find on the island, for this was also a holy war waged by Protestants against Roman Catholics and the Pope, whom they referred to as the ‘Bishop of Rome’.

The Dutch were not yet beaten, and just over a year later, on 28 July 1608, the crews from thirteen ships renewed the siege. Frustrated by the determined Portuguese defence, on 17 August the Dutch commander, Admiral Pieter Verhoeven, lined up six Portuguese captives, their hands tied behind the backs, in the broad square below the walls of the fort. Addressing the garrison, he threatened to execute the prisoners if it did not surrender. When its commander, Dom Estevão de Ataíde, steadfastly refused to parlay, the Dutch execution squad duly shot down the six victims. Horrified but more determined than ever, the Portuguese defenders still refused to yield. Thwarted, Verhoeven abandoned the siege, but only after he had vindictively ordered all the trees on the island to be cut down
and the dwellings, partially rebuilt since the last Dutch attack, to be set on fire.

The three unsuccessful Dutch attacks on Fortaleza da São Sebastião were quite small beer as far as sieges go, but for our story they were of considerable significance. For one thing, they confirmed how the prevailing military culture of the Dutch, hardened as they were by decades of interminable warfare against the Spanish, had become both relentless and merciless. And secondly, if the Dutch had succeeded in finally storming Fortaleza da São Sebastião and seizing Moçambique Island, they would not have been compelled to establish an alternative refreshment station on the way to the Indies. They might then never have settled at the Cape of Good Hope, and the history of South Africa, and of the indigenous people living there, would have taken a very different course.

As the Portuguese had early recognised, the coast of southern Africa is not favourable for seaborne traffic. Long stretches of sandy beach alternate with rocks and cliffs and perilous headlands. There are only a few bays, and these are wide and open to the winds and heavy seas, affording little shelter for shipping without the construction of extensive breakwaters. Not a single river mouth is deep enough to admit seagoing vessels. Saldanha Bay on the dry west coast is the only real harbour available, but its potential as a site for settlement was ruled out by low rainfall and lack of fresh water. That left only the Cape of Good Hope on the south-western tip of Africa. It was given its name, *Cabo da Boa Esperança*, by King João II of Portugal because it heralded the opening of the sea route to the Indies. But originally, the skilled Portuguese navigator Bartolomeu Dias, who first sighted the Cape Peninsula dominated by its enormous flat-topped mountain on 12 March 1488, had dubbed it *Cabo das Tormentas*, the Cape of Storms. For it is a quarter notorious for its violent gales, and the heavy rollers off the shallow Agulhas Bank are among the highest waves in the world. There, too, the warm Agulhas Current and the cold Benguela Current intermingle, creating erratic weather conditions and thick fogs, extremely dangerous for sailing ships. Nor do Table Bay on the northern shore of the Peninsula, or the aptly named False Bay on its opposite, south-eastern side, offer particularly safe anchorage.¹

Yet, despite these many obvious drawbacks, the Cape of Good Hope had the important advantage for the Dutch that it lay almost exactly halfway
between the Dutch East Indies and the Netherlands. Moreover, it was well watered and seemingly fertile. Besides, since Moçambique Island had been ruled out as a base, it offered the only apparently viable site for a refreshment station along the entire South African coast.

There was, however, something else to be wary of in contemplating a settlement at the Cape. People were already living there. At the very outset of their world-changing incursion into the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese had made contact with the human communities dwelling along the southern shores of Africa. It was inevitable that the indigenes and the unbidden interlopers must interact, sometimes peaceably, and sometimes not.

Contact did not begin well. In February 1488 Bartolomeu Dias, in command of a little flotilla of three caravels – absurdly small vessels to modern eyes – made landfall at what is today Mossel Bay. Having been driven southwards along the Namibian coast under a furious gale, Dias had finally steered eastwards to make landfall. When he did not, he guessed that his flotilla must have rounded the southernmost tip of the continent without knowing it: the first European ships ever to have done so.² Steering northwards to find land, the Portuguese came across a bay with a sweeping beach of white sand, overlooked from afar by high mountain ranges shimmering blue in the summer haze. Dias dubbed the bay Bahia dos Vaqueiros after the herds of Nguni cattle grazing there.

Dias and a party of sailors landed by boat on the beach and tried to open communication with the astounded herdsmen lingering on the shore, some of whom rode fat oxen on saddles made of reeds. Recovering from their initial alarm, and resolved to drive off the pale intruders who were busy filling casks with fresh water from a spring close to the seashore, they started to shower Dias and his companions with stones and projectiles. Dias reacted furiously and transfixed one of the attackers with a bolt from his crossbow. Dismayed, the others immediately fled. Thus, the very first encounter between Europeans and Africans east of the tip of Africa was marked by bloodshed. It was a dreadful omen of things to come.

Nevertheless, despite this and even more bloody subsequent encounters, tentative trade opened up between the local people and the crews of the ships calling ever more frequently at Table Bay, regardless of its insecure anchorage. Fat-tailed sheep and cattle were bartered for copper, iron and brass in an edgy atmosphere of distrust and incipient violence that would
periodically break out when heavily armed ships’ crews simply rustled the
livestock they required, and men died on both sides in these affrays. All
these encounters, whether peaceful or hostile, were of short duration since
the visiting ships sailed on just as soon as they were resupplied. But this
was to change. As the power of the Estado da Índia steadily declined in the
first half of the seventeenth century, rival French, Danish and English
commercial companies contending for the profitable Indian Ocean trade
alongside the VOC discerned the Cape of Good Hope’s possibilities as a
future refreshment station. It was the VOC, though, that would plant its red,
white and blue standard, emblazoned with the monogram of the Company,
below the iconic Table Mountain that looms over Table Bay.

On 25 March 1647 a Dutch East Indiaman, the Nieuw-Haerlem, was
driven ashore at Table Bay by a tempestuous south-westerly gale. The
commander of the fleet ordered Leendert Jansz, an assistant merchant (his
rank in the VOC), and fifty-eight of the shipwrecked crew to remain on
shore to salvage what they could of the valuable cargo, promising that they
would be picked up by the return fleet of 1648. For their own protection,
Jansz and his men built an earthwork fort on the beach, strengthened by
timbers from the wreck, and named it Fort Zandenburgh (Sand Fort). While
waiting for the return fleet, they went exploring, hunting and trading for
cattle with the indigenous people.

Once back in Amsterdam, Jansz submitted a report to the Heeren XVII
on 26 July 1649, recommending that the VOC construct a permanent fort at
Table Bay and plant a garden to supply passing ships. The Heeren XVII
accepted the report on 22 August 1650. Jansz was too junior to be given
command of the new settlement, and in December 1651 the Heeren XVII
appointed Jan van Riebeeck as commander and commissioned him to
establish a fortified refreshment station at Table Bay. Van Riebeeck was an
experienced Company servant, but not without a skeleton in his cupboard.
Like many other Company servants, he had in the past broken VOC rules
by trading on his own account to supplement his low pay, and had been
fined and recalled from a post in Japan.

It was not ever the intention of the Heeren XVII that the settlement at the
Cape of Good Hope should be the first stepping-stone to the colonisation of
the hinterland. Just like any Portuguese feitoria, its sole purpose was to
promote the profitability and smooth running of the VOC and its trade
monopoly by providing a safe haven for its storm-tossed ships with their
precious cargoes of merchandise, and by serving as a source of fresh food and a place of recuperation for their wearied, disease-ridden crews.

Such might have been the aim of the Heeren XVII. But when Van Riebeeck, at the head of an expedition of three ships and some ninety men, women and children, waded ashore at Table Bay on 6 April 1652, he already knew that the successful establishment of the embryo refreshment station depended in large part on how comfortably he could coexist with the people on the shore warily watching him land. He would have referred to them as ‘Hottentots’ and dismissed them as semi-naked savages, but he knew enough about the Khoikhoi way of war to understand that he should not provoke them unnecessarily.

The Khoikhoi Van Riebeeck and his party first encountered were the westernmost of the people the amaXhosa were already engaged with – sometimes peaceably, and often not – 700 kilometres away to the east. None of the Khoikhoi chiefdoms maintained a standing army or had a war-leader other than their chief, but they all nevertheless engaged in frequent wars against each other, the San and the amaXhosa. Wars were triggered by disputes over grazing, by raids on cattle under cover of night, by homicides, and by the abduction of women of status. All too often these conflicts were not settled decisively, but morphed into vendettas that would be pursued over generations. When full-scale war (as opposed to opportunistic raids) broke out, the Khoikhoi aimed at fighting a decisive pitched battle, not lasting more than a day, in which they skilfully wielded their spears, bows and arrows, and short sticks used as darts, and hurled stones with great accuracy. A singular feature of their mode of warfare was their massing together of oxen to form either a defensive rampart or, when moving onto the attack, a stampeding wedge to gore and trample the foe. As was customary across much of Africa, women and children normally gathered at a safe distance to watch the encounter. The winners would normally execute their prisoners, plunder and burn down the losers’ huts, drive off their livestock and take their women captive.

Mariners of all nations (including Van Riebeeck) who were considering going ashore at Table Bay would have been familiar with the fate of Dom Francisco de Almeida, the celebrated governor of the Estado da Índia and victor over an international Muslim fleet in the battle of Diu on 3 February 1509, which had established Portuguese dominance in the waters of the Indian Ocean. De Almeida was on his way home to a hero’s welcome in
Portugal. In February 1510 his fleet dropped anchor in Table Bay to replenish their water. On 1 March de Almeida authorised a punitive cattle raid against the Khoikhoin. While part of his men marched off to execute his orders, he waited with the rest near the beach, close to the mouth of the Salt River. But the Portuguese raiding party had met more than they had bargained for. The Khoikhoin fought back fiercely with spears and stones and, as was their normal tactic, used their massed oxen as a shield. They drove the interlopers, many of whom were wounded, back to the beach where de Almeida was stationed. But the Portuguese boats were waiting beyond the line of heavy breakers and it was some time before they could come in close enough to rescue their increasingly desperate compatriots. Floundering in the deep sand, and weighed down by their armour and unwieldy accoutrements, sixty-five Portuguese, including members of some of the noblest families in the kingdom, died at the hands of the agile, unburdened Khoikhoin. De Almeida himself, who had been wounded by a stone and was being carried along the beach, perished miserably with a spear through his throat. The Portuguese reckoned that 170 Khoikhoin had worsted an almost equal number of Portuguese, and this at a time when it was unheard of for ‘savages’ to win a battle against Europeans when the odds were even.

After this disastrous defeat, the Portuguese ceased to call at Table Bay for fear of the inhabitants. Van Riebeeck, when he landed in 1652 with orders to establish a refreshment station, was well aware that he would have to secure his party against the potential hostility of the self-same people.
Van Riebeeck landed at Table Bay carrying the Heeren XVII’s strict orders to preserve peace with the Khoikhoin and to open trade with them for cattle and sheep. As the Heeren XVII again expressed it in their injunction to Zacharias Wagenaer, who succeeded Van Riebeeck as commander of De Kaap (as the settlement was named) in May 1662, ‘neither war nor any other troubles will do us any good there, nothing unreasonable should be required of them [the Khoikhoin] and they should be protected from all injustice’. Still, just in case, protection would be required against the indigenes (as well as against seaborne rivals), and in the Heeren XVII’s original instruction to Van Riebeeck he was commanded ‘to erect a little defensive fort’ the moment he landed, and only then to proceed with laying out a market garden. Within a week of landing, construction of the Fort de Goede Hoop began on a site near the Liesbeek River. It was not completed until the following year, after difficult and continuous work in severe winter conditions that taxed the endurance of Van Riebeeck’s men, mainly illiterate or semi-literate peasants and labourers, with a sprinkling of criminals on the run. It was an earthwork, the walls being constructed of soil taken out of the surrounding moat. Built in the form of a square, it followed the precepts of the art of fortification the Dutch had developed during the course of the Eighty Years’ War and was provided with diamond-shaped bastions at each corner to enfilade the walls in between. A hornwork (a freestanding fortification with angular points) at the rear of the fort enclosed the cattle kraal and stable, while a double-storey stone building within the inner square provided accommodation.

The first Khoikhoin Van Riebeeck’s party encountered were the Goringhaicona, a small, destitute community without cattle eking out a living along the beach and called accordingly Strandlopers, or Beach...
Walkers. Also living on the Cape Peninsula and the surrounding countryside were the Goringhaiqua and the Gorachouqua, numbering about 6,000 people and known to the Dutch as *Kaapmans*, or Peninsulars. They generally lived at peace with each other, but sometimes warred with the more powerful Cochoqua, who were rich in cattle. The Cochoqua dwelt to the north of them in the Swartland, the fertile, undulating plain about fifty kilometres north of Table Bay which Van Riebeeck dubbed *Het Zwarte Land* (‘The Black Land’) because the endemic renosterbos takes on a dark appearance after rain.

At first, the small number of Dutch at the fort presented little threat to the Peninsulars, who eagerly engaged in trade with them and bartered the livestock from which the VOC’s own flocks and herds would be bred and steadily increased. The Cochoqua, not wishing to lose out, began moving closer to the fort and – provocatively – grazing their herds on pastures that the Peninsulars regarded as their own. The pressure on land in the vicinity of Table Bay increased when in February 1657 Van Riebeeck released nine of his labourers-cum-soldiers from Company service and granted them land along the Liesbeek River as *vrijburgers*, or ‘free burghers’. The reason he did so was that the Cape settlement was not proving self-sufficient, and the Heeren XVII (although in principle opposed to *vrijburgers* because they were far less easily controlled than Company servants who were closely bound by the regulations) believed that free burghers would have the incentive on their own farms to improve yields for their personal profit and to raise cattle. Within a year, Van Riebeeck allotted land to yet more free burghers. Thus, imperceptibly, the refreshment station of De Kaap began to be transformed into a colony of settlement, although one still governed by a commercial company. The problem, of course, was that the land was not the VOC’s to grant in this way. Rather, it was the long-standing pasturage of the Peninsular Khoikhoi along with their watering places, and to turn it into privately owned farmland seriously interfered with their patterns of transhumance. Already under pressure from the Cochoqua, the Peninsulars were now being further squeezed out by free burghers who, released from the VOC’s discipline, did much as they pleased.

Van Riebeeck required ever more livestock to feed the garrison at De Kaap and the growing number of VOC ships entering the bay. But the Peninsulars, beset as they were by the growing threats to their grazing land, became increasingly reluctant to part with the precious herds and flocks that
constituted their wealth. Indeed, it was not long before they had changed their minds about the Dutch presence and, as disputes over livestock and charges of theft began to proliferate, begun to view it as both unwelcome and provocative.

Into this increasingly fraught situation stepped a Goringhaiqua called Doman. He was not of chiefly rank, but the Dutch, considering him a good potential interpreter, had shipped him in 1657 to Batavia (now Jakarta), their capital in the East Indies. There he witnessed first-hand the power and pomp of the VOC and was thoroughly impressed, opportunistically declaring his loyalty to the Dutch and intimating that he desired to become a Christian. However, once he returned to De Kaap, where he acted as an intermediary between the Dutch and the Khoikhoin, he could not ignore the plight of his people. He became an outspoken critic of Van Riebeeck’s policies, especially the commander’s seizure in 1658 of several Khoikhoi leaders as hostages for their people’s compliance. Concluding that the Dutch must be driven out before it was too late, he attempted to persuade Gogosoa, the elderly paramount chief of the Gorachouqua and Goringhaicona (whom the Dutch called ‘the fat captain’) to capture the fort, without which the Dutch would be defenceless. But the prudent Gogosoa was unwilling to act without first securing the aid of the more powerful Cochoqua. They refused to be drawn in, however, and Gogosoa decided that the fort was in any case impregnable. Undeterred when Gogosoa finally decided not to take up arms, Doman persuaded some of the younger, more warlike Khoikhoi leaders to join him in what he regarded as his war of liberation.

Doman, who had been able to gauge first-hand the effectiveness of Dutch military tactics and firearms in Java, deliberately waited until the rainy Cape winter in May 1659 before he struck. The reason was that he knew Dutch firearms could not fire with damp powder. Many of his followers had seen enough of firearms at De Kaap to have reached the same conclusion. When the Dutch first landed, the Khoikhoi had been terrified by the unfamiliar weapons with their flashes of fire, ear-shattering detonations, dense clouds of dirty white smoke and invisible, death-dealing projectiles, but by now they had become quite used to them. And while they had seen for themselves that firearms were more effective than spears for hunting – not least against the great predators, like lions, that still roamed near Table Bay – they could also appreciate that they had decided shortcomings.
The VOC’s soldiers and sailors were armed with both matchlock and flintlock muskets as well as pistols, although it is not known how many of each variety they owned. The matchlock, still the most widely used firearm in the mid-seventeenth century, was a variety of muzzle-loading musket weighing up to nearly six kilograms. Its smoothbore barrel was 1.2 metres long, and its wooden stock a further 0.3 metres in length. So heavy and cumbersome was it that it had to be fired with its barrel resting on a forked support. The firing mechanism was barely adequate. A priming pan which was filled with fine black gunpowder poured from the powder flask or horn was attached to the right side of the barrel. The powder was ignited by a smouldering metre-long length of matchcord (rope soaked in a solution of saltpetre) kept glowing by being constantly blown upon. It was attached to an S-shaped hook (the serpentine) that flipped forward when the trigger was pulled. The sparks from the exploding priming powder in the pan went through a small hole in the side of the barrel and ignited the coarser powder that had been poured down the barrel, followed by the lead ball and the wadding which was then pushed down firmly with the ramrod. Too little powder in the barrel and the fired shot fell short; too much powder and the barrel could blow up. Needless to say, in wet weather the matchcord could easily go out and the powder in the pan fail to ignite. And the smouldering matchcord was a danger in itself. It was kept alight at both ends in case one went out, and could inadvertently ignite the powder in the firing mechanism before loading was complete, or detonate the pouches of powder charges dangling from the firer’s shoulder strap.

Nor was the matchlock an accurate weapon beyond about fifty metres. Without rifling (grooves inside the barrel) no predictable spin was given to the bullet, and the lead ball itself was often not entirely spherical. As a result, it tumbled inaccurately through the air. The matchlock took, moreover, between thirty seconds and a minute to load, a procedure requiring twenty-eight distinct actions and considerable training. An attacker had time to run ahead between shots and engage the vulnerable matchlockman hand-to-hand. For that reason, armies of the period had learnt to fire in volleys by successive ranks of troops who loosed their shot and then ‘countermarched’ to the rear to reload while the rank that had been behind took its turn in the front line. Bayonets had not yet been invented, so matchlockmen were interspersed for their protection with soldiers carrying pikes, a thrusting pole weapon at least three metres long. Of course, this
formal system of warfare was more suited to the battlefields of Europe than to the irregular warfare of southern Africa against warriors who did not attack in ordered ranks but ducked and dodged to avoid the fire directed at them.

By the time Van Riebeeck reached the Cape, the flintlock was replacing (but not entirely superseding) the unwieldly matchlock mechanism for firing the musket, which, in its turn, was becoming shorter, lighter and easier to handle. In a flintlock the trigger connects to a hammer, or cock, that holds a flint. When the trigger is pulled the cock springs forward and strikes and pushes forward the L-shaped frizzen – or metal plate – which covers the pan that has already been primed with powder. The friction causes a spark that ignites the powder in the pan and causes the flash that ignites the charge already in the barrel. This procedure was still slow, and the flintlock musket remained vulnerable to wet weather. But it was easier and more reliable to load and fire than the matchlock, taking only seven distinct drill movements, which meant that well-trained troops could fire up to three rounds a minute. It was no more accurate than before, however, and the ball it fired still bounced down the sides of the smooth barrel, making it accurate at no more than seventy metres. Nevertheless, the flintlock in its various models remained the standard military firearm until well into the 1830s.

A musket ball had not nearly the destructive, bone-shattering effect of a high-velocity bullet shot from a modern rifle, but it could still drop a lion or a hippopotamus. A high-velocity bullet leaves a massive exit wound once it has smashed through the body, whereas a ball was turned easily aside from its straight flight on encountering a bone, or might even run along its length. Thus, if it did not simply lodge in the body, it might make its exit through a modest hole at a considerable angle from its point of entry. The worst danger for the victim was that on its destructive course it might sever an artery or pierce a vital organ. If it did not, there was some hope of recovery. But in an age before anaesthetics many a person who had received a musket ball died of shock, if not from loss of blood. Since there was as yet no knowledge of germs, no precautions were taken against infection, and there was always a considerable chance that the wound would become contaminated – especially if cloth or dirt had been driven into it – and the victim would die of infection.
In the ensuing fighting during what has come to be known as the First Khoikhoi–Dutch War (1659–1660), Doman’s followers, who enjoyed the initial success of surprise, attacked in groups several hundred strong, carrying their traditional weapons. For fear of retaliation they were careful not to kill the vrijburgers, but contented themselves with burning their crops and rustling their cattle and plough-oxen. They calculated that by bringing agricultural work in De Kaap to a standstill they would compel the Dutch to abandon their settlement. The Khoikhoi knew enough of muskets and their shortcomings to confine their attacks to rainy weather, to stay out of effective range and to take their opportunities when the Dutch were fumbling to reload. The freeburghers were duly driven off their land and took shelter in the fort.

Yet, since the Khoikhoi jibbed at attacking the impregnable-seeming earthwork – increasingly derelict as it might have been (one of the bastions had collapsed in 1654) – a stalemate was reached. Doman’s hopes of rallying the Cochoqua to join in his war of liberation dissipated when their chief, Oedesoa, decided to take the prudent course and moved his people further into the interior and out of harm’s way. For their part, the Dutch, who were inhibited by no scruples about shooting the Khoikhoi on sight, began making retaliatory raids against the Peninsulares. They were able to inflict very few casualties, but the Peninsulares, with their lucrative trade with the fort at a standstill, and sick of being repeatedly forced into the hills to evade Dutch raids, decided to bring the year’s desultory fighting to an end. Doman protested, but in vain, because his influence over the Peninsulares had progressively waned ever since the war had turned against them. (His erstwhile followers would only continue to tolerate him until his death in 1663 because they still needed his skills as an interpreter.)

Duly, in April 1660 after months of negotiations, peace was restored. The Khoikhoi of the Peninsula returned to their homes and the Dutch did not require the restoration of their looted livestock. During the negotiations the Khoikhoi had pertinently complained, as Van Riebeeck noted in his journal on 4 April 1660, that the Dutch were ‘taking every day … land which had belonged to them from all ages and on which they were accustomed to depasture their cattle’, and had raised the cry common to all people being colonised, enquiring whether ‘if they were to come into Holland they would be permitted to act in the same manner’ as the Dutch were in their land.³ Van Riebeeck’s uncompromising response was that
‘they had now lost the land as a result of the war and had no alternative but to admit that it was no longer theirs’, and that ‘we intended to keep it’.4

This standoff was in reality a Khoikhoi defeat. They had failed in their primary objective, which was to drive out the Dutch. On their side, the Dutch set about consolidating their position. Fortified posts were constructed on the fort’s landward side and almond hedges planted to mark the settlement’s perimeter and to prevent cattle from straying and being rustled by the Khoikhoi. These steps defined the VOC’s territory with a demarcated boundary, but, already – and this would be the continuing scenario as European settlement spread out from De Kaap – it was impossible to separate the Dutch from the Peninsulars and, willy-nilly, a plural society was beginning to take shape. The settlement needed the Khoikhoi to come and sell their cattle and to offer their labour as herdsmen, while the Khoikhoi required grazing land in exchange, and access to the liquor and tobacco to which they were becoming addicted.

Following the end of hostilities, steps were taken to improve the earthwork fort at De Kaap, which continued steadily to deteriorate under the heavy Cape winter rains. Zacharias Wagenaer, Van Riebeeck’s successor as commander in 1662, proposed that a pentagonal stone structure with five bastions at each angle, surrounded by a moat and designed according to the best pattern of Dutch military architecture, be built to replace it. Accordingly, work on the Castle of Good Hope (as it became known) began on 2 January 1666. Work proceeded slowly, but by 1674 the garrison was able to move in, and the bastions were finally completed two years later. Simon van der Stel – who became commander in December 1679 and was appointed the first governor in June 1691 – built a fine, decorative new gateway in 1684, topped by a bell tower. In 1691 he erected de kat, a transverse defensive wall across the central courtyard. Being the seat of the VOC’s government at the Cape, within a few years a fine residence was built for the governor against de kat. Further buildings were erected against the surrounding walls of the Castle, including a chapel, bakehouse and accommodation for De Kaap’s expanding complement of administrators and officials.

If the solidly constructed, well-designed Castle provided the town and harbour at De Kaap with all the protection it needed, whether from hostile European vessels or the Khoikhoi (vide the crucial role played by the
Fortaleza da São Sebastião in securing Moçambique), a recent import from the Dutch East Indies was as vital as fortifications and muskets in tipping the balance of military preponderance at De Kaap firmly in favour of the Dutch.

The horse, as opposed to other species of the genus *Equus* like the zebra and quagga, is not indigenous to southern Africa. It had been prevented from migrating south across the Sahara on account of horse (or stallion) sickness endemic to central Africa caused by the trypanosome parasite injected by the bite of the tsetse fly. Van Riebeeck’s men at De Kaap rapidly found they required horses because Khoikhoi oxen were untrained for pulling carts or ploughs, although (as we have seen) they were broken in for riding by the Khoikhoin – a practice which did not attract the Dutch, accustomed as they were to riding horses. In 1653 Van Riebeeck imported the first four ‘Javanese’ ponies, arguably of Arab-Persian stock, from the Dutch East Indies. But it was no easy matter keeping horses alive in the Cape environment with its alarming array of parasitic and other diseases, including horse sickness, brought south by the migrating cattle herds from the north. Moreover, horses had to become accustomed to grazing the poor grasses available, and initially were vulnerable to predators like lions. During the First Khoikhoi–Dutch War, Van Riebeeck imported more horses from the East Indies specifically – along with a pack of hunting dogs – to sow fear among the raiding Khoikhoin. Along with the musket, the horse immediately became a symbol of Dutch power, both real and symbolic, over those who did not possess them, an attribute of civilisation that marked out the settler from the native inhabitant.

Inevitably, the colonists created a breed of horse that suited their utilitarian purposes of transport needs and military pursuits. The original Indonesian ponies received an injection of bloodlines from around the world. This fusion of breeds finally produced the iconic *Boerperd* or Cape pony. The Boerperd was no English Thoroughbred (later popular with the English at the Cape for horse-racing and smart equitation). Rather, these compact, short-legged ponies with their undistinguished heads and shaggy coats were extraordinarily hardy, possessing a strong constitution and an ingrown resistance to local diseases. By the eighteenth century the farmers who rode them had developed their own style of riding and, eschewing the trot or even the walk, schooled their horses in a slow, comfortable canter, known as a *trippel*. 
This is to look ahead. In the shorter term the horse greatly increased the military mobility of the Dutch, allowed them to patrol their settlement at De Kaap more effectively, and encouraged them to mount expeditions ever further away from the Castle. In turn, that allowed them to establish trading contacts with more distant Khoikhoi chiefdoms, thus reducing their reliance on the herds and goodwill of the Peninsular Khoikhoi.

Accordingly, following the conclusion of the First Khoikhoi–Dutch War, parties of Dutch hunters and traders began to explore ever further east and north of De Kaap. To the east, beyond the pinnacles of the Hottentot Holland Mountains, lay the spreading coastal plains grazed by the plenteous herds of the Chainouqua. East of them were the Hessequa, who controlled the rich pasturage south of the Langeberg from just west of the Breede River to Mossel Bay. To the north, in the spreading coastal lands of the Atlantic shore, were many small Khoikhoi chiefdoms that also owned livestock. All these Khoikhoi chiefdoms were eager to barter cattle with the Dutch, but as their herds were progressively depleted in return for European commodities, they began to raid and fight each other to replace their livestock. From the early 1660s, fighting between the Chainouqua and the Cochoqua under their chief, Gonnema, became endemic. Dutch farmers and hunter-traders found themselves caught up in the violence. In response, by 1667 fifty mounted men on watch-duty were patrolling the borders of De Kaap. In 1670 the first small, horse-based military unit was formed to undertake frontier policing actions, a forerunner of the commando which was to bulk so large in the military history of future years.

In 1672 and again in 1673, the Cochoqua, seeking to re-establish control of their pasture lands, attacked Dutch hunting parties entering their territory. Their Khoikhoi rivals were only too eager to point out the Cochoqua to the Dutch as responsible, and the Dutch were more than prepared to believe them. The Second Khoikhoi–Dutch War of 1673–1677 was the upshot.

On 18 July 1673, when Isbrand Goske was commander, the Company opened hostilities with a sudden mounted attack on Gonnema, pursuing the Cochoqua into the mountains and seizing their herds and flocks. With most of the other Khoikhoi chiefdoms siding opportunistically with the Dutch and taking their share of booty, in 1674 the Company mounted a further punitive raid, followed by two more in 1676. The Cochoqua adopted the defensive strategy of dispersing into the bush with their livestock when a Dutch attack threatened. The war dragged on, with the Cochoqua losing
thousands of cattle and sheep to the VOC. Finally, in June 1677, the new commander, Johan Bax van Herenthals, accepted the thoroughly worsted Gonnema’s pledge that he would in future live at peace with the VOC and pay an annual tribute of thirty cattle.

With the VOC’s military hegemony now firmly established over the Peninsulars, and the most powerful of their chiefs humiliated, the western Khoikhoi ceased to resist. They followed Gonnema in adopting a policy of collaboration, working as best they could with the dominant Dutch. By 1693 even the Chainouqua, once notably rich in cattle, had succumbed to VOC meddling and punitive raids. Along with other chiefdoms already doing so, they agreed to pay the VOC tribute in cattle against assurances that they would no longer be attacked by raiding parties.

During these years when the Peninsulars and neighbouring Khoikhoi chiefdoms were being ‘pacified’ (as colonial terminology would have it), the nature of the settlement at De Kaap was changing in a number of significant ways. Van Riebeeck had been forbidden by the Heeren XVII to enslave the Khoikhoi, but he nevertheless felt the need for slave labour. While land was apparently abundant, labour remained scarce because the Khoikhoi pastoralists still had their livestock to live upon and saw no need to work for the Dutch. Then, on 28 March 1658, the ship *Amersfoort* anchored at the Cape with a cargo of slaves and Van Riebeeck purchased several. There was no looking back. By 1808, when the British ended the slave trade at the Cape, some 58 500 slaves had been imported for private owners, and another 4 300 for the VOC. Of these, 24.6 per cent came from Africa, 25.1 per cent from Madagascar, 25.9 per cent from the coasts of India, Ceylon and Burma, and 22.7 per cent from the Indonesian archipelago. Eventually, an equal number were born into slavery, mainly in the second half of the eighteenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century they would overtake the European population at the Cape, numbering approximately 25 000 slaves to 20 000 settlers. Slaves, coming as they did from so many disparate places of origin, inevitably began to form a distinctive creole, mixed-race society of their own, and to develop a slave patois with which they communicated with each other and with their masters, and which was the forerunner of the Afrikaans language.

Slaves were owned by the VOC itself, by its officials and by *vrijburgers*. They were set to every form of servitude in De Kaap and surrounding farmland as general labourers, artisans, household domestics, workers in the
market gardens, fields and vineyards, hunters, and even policemen. It should be noted, though, that individual slave holdings were never large. If almost every burgher household had at least one slave, most burghers owned fewer than ten, and those who possessed thirty or more were a tiny, rich minority.

Slave owners might have relied on the labour of their slaves, but they unavoidably lived in constant fear that they would rise up against them. Consequently, slaves existed under the strictest control, with the administration of a flogging being the routine response to the most minor of misdemeanours. The law limited more severe punishments being meted out to privately owned slaves, but for major transgressions (the killing of a slave owner being considered the worst) slaves were subject to horrendous punishments such as branding or mutilation, culminating in torture and execution. Life as a farm labourer was the harshest for a slave, while domestic servitude offered the easiest conditions. Household slaves developed the closest relationships with their owners, especially when they served as wet-nurses and nannies. They were incorporated into the extended family of slave owners, and were especially favoured if they had been ‘born into the house’ (not infrequently as the by-blow of sexual relations between a slave woman and the slave owner or his sons). This situation reminds us that no matter how good personal relations might have seemed between slave and owner, the slave always remained a chattel, bound without recourse to do what was required of him or her. Even as an adult, a slave continued in a state of perpetual dependence in the extended family, akin to that of a child bound to obey its elders.

Thus, from its inception De Kaap was a slave society in which all public and private institutions were permeated by slavery, and in which the highest status was reserved for those who themselves were free, kept slaves and did no manual work. This racial division of labour shaped colonial identity for centuries to come, and it was one (as we shall see) carried with them by settlers when they pushed ever further into the interior of southern Africa.

Besides the importation of slaves, which gave a singular cast to society at De Kaap, a change in a particular aspect of VOC policy was to have another profound effect. Until the termination of the Second Khoikhoi–Dutch War, burghers had cultivated small plots in the close environs of the Peninsula to meet the needs of the passing fleets. But with the elimination of any threat or competition from the Peninsulars, Cochoqua, or even the Chainouqua, it
now became feasible for *vrijburgers* to settle on the arable eastern slopes of
the Peninsula and on the spreading plains beyond the sandy Cape Flats west
of the great chain of mountains.

This expansion received the blessing of the VOC, and in 1679 the newly
arrived commander, Simon van der Stel, carried with him the Heeren
XVII’s orders to extend De Kaap by opening up new territory for settlement
and to encourage immigration. Van der Stel immediately founded a new
settlement to the east of De Kaap on the banks of the Eerste River under the
shadow of the Simonsberg and Helderberg, and named it Stellenbosch after
himself. By 1682 Stellenbosch had grown sufficiently to become the seat of
the local government of the district of Stellenbosch, a vast area of 25 000
square kilometres. At the district’s heart were the freehold farms laid out
along the Eerste River that strategically controlled the region’s water
supply. Further farms were opened up nearby below the Drakenstein
Mountains and in the Paarl valley. To the north of De Kaap, more farms
were granted on the shale hills of the Tygerberg, in the Swartland, in the
Land van Waveren (now Tulbagh) and in the Wagenmakersvallei (now
Wellington). By 1717, when this freehold system was brought to an end
because the government considered the plains west of the great chain of
mountains running from north to south to have been settled, some 400
farms had been granted. Indeed, the Dutch settlement at the Cape was
becoming something of an anomaly in the VOC’s empire because it was
one of the very few places where European colonists were concentrating on
agricultural production of their own, rather than on procuring produce from
indigenous farmers for export.

Farmers initially gave over their new agricultural grants to stock-keeping,
and through the years imported Holstein and then Jersey cattle to improve
the quality of their herds. By the later seventeenth century, however, they
began cultivating crops not previously grown in De Kaap, their heavy
ploughs drawn by up to twelve oxen cutting deep furrows in the virgin soil.
Wheat and grapevines for wine would become the staple and money-
spinning crops of the region (two million vines in the 1720s increased to
seven million by the 1770s). By the 1730s a class of landed gentry had
emerged, lording it over their spreading, prosperous estates. Finding
themselves in possession of considerable disposable wealth, they began to
indulge in the conspicuous and expensive lifestyle that was the essential
hallmark of elevated status during that period of European civilisation.
Gracious, gabled manor houses soon dotted the landscape and were filled with fine furniture, delicate porcelain and elegant silverware. Their owners dressed stylishly in sumptuous fabrics imported from the East, drove smart equipages and outfitted their slaves and servants in flashy liveries. Up to a third of the burghers lived in Cape Town itself (as De Kaap was beginning to be called) engaged in trade and commerce. The more prosperous among them built fine town houses (a very few of which still survive) and maintained a genteel style of life, their social life revolving about the Castle with its VOC officials and garrison. Otherwise, the town was a rambunctious, multiracial, multilingual place with its slaves and visiting sailors, seedy boarding houses and rowdy taverns.

Many of those who were granted farms and put them under cultivation represented a new and different wave of European immigration. In 1688 some 180 French-speaking Huguenots, Calvinists who were fleeing religious persecution in Roman Catholic France and the Spanish Netherlands, landed at the Cape. The majority had been farmworkers or artisans in their native land. Van der Stel settled most of them in the eponymously named Franschhoek (‘French Corner’) in the Drakenstein valley, as well as in the Paarl valley. They did not fashion a separate cultural community, however. The VOC was determined to maintain the Dutch character of De Kaap and pursued a policy of forced cultural assimilation with these immigrants. By the second generation the Huguenots, who were enterprising and successful settlers, had become absolutely Dutch in language and identity, only the French surnames of many Afrikaner families today betraying their roots. Because many of the Huguenots were already married and diligently sired many children, they significantly enlarged the pool of white women available for marriage, and male settlers consequently ceased to take as many slave women as mistresses or even, on occasion, as wives. Indeed, the white settler population grew substantially in these years, increasing from 288 in 1682 to 1 559 in 1705 to 2 627 in 1731. If the Huguenots made their mark on colonial society, many rising to positions of prominence, the same cannot be said of the German sailors or soldiers, almost all single men, who were the VOC’s main source of recruitment as immigrants to the Cape during the early eighteenth century. On the whole, they tended to drift into the lower ranks of colonial society. Immigration slowed down considerably from the middle of the eighteenth century, and
the settler population from the 1730s until the early nineteenth century was mainly born and raised in the Cape.

The Dutch and Huguenot farmers of the greatly expanding region of white settlement began to put down roots and prosper, taking possession of the land literally and symbolically. Not only did they remake the landscape with buildings, fields and all the other aspects of their material culture, but they gave their own names to the hills, mountains and rivers.\(^5\) In doing so they were dispossessing and subjugating the Khoikhoin of the Stellenbosch district, namely the Chainouqua and Hessequa south of the Langeberg, and the Guriqua and Little Namaqua (the most widely dispersed Khoikhoi group) up the Atlantic coastal lands. The telling point has been made that what was most distinctive about De Kaap was not the violence which, as we have seen, the Dutch directed against the Khoikhoin almost from the outset – and which was typical worldwide of the process of colonial conquest – but the fact that the Dutch preferred if possible to employ the Khoikhoin and acculturate them rather than to exterminate them or to drive them away – as was the dire fate, for example, of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, the North American continent and Australia.

Nevertheless, the Khoikhoin of the south-western Cape’s progressive loss of their livestock, grazing lands and access to water resources was disastrous for a pastoral society, seriously impoverishing it and depriving the Khoikhoin of their economic independence. Farmers in the new district of Stellenbosch, who owned fewer slaves than those on the Peninsula, began to hire semi-destitute Khoikhoin, who had the requisite herding skill, to tend their flocks and herds. In due course they were trained in the agricultural skills required in the cultivation of wheat fields and vineyards, and took on other aspects of farming such as driving wagons and ploughing. It has been suggested that since impoverished Khoikhoin had long been accustomed to seeking work under better-off Khoikhoin, none of this was a truly novel development, and that is the reason why many were prepared to remain in the familiar countryside that had once been their own, rather than to retreat into the interior. It was probably this readiness to accommodate to settler society that lay at the root of the Khoikhoin’s spasmodic and feeble resistance to the Dutch. Not that accommodation came without a price. Going into the employ of white farmers was crucially different from serving other Khoikhoin. It meant abandoning many aspects of Khoikhoi life and culture, including individual clan identities and traditional dress, and
entailed falling under the jurisdiction of Dutch courts rather than under Khoikhoi chiefs as before. And as the surviving Khoikhoi began mingling with the slave population, they even lost their language.

Then, on 13 February 1713, nine VOC ships from Batavia anchored in Table Bay. Smallpox was rife on board, and when infected linen and blankets were brought ashore to be washed by slaves, a major epidemic swiftly took hold right across the south-western Cape, but sparing the northern and eastern interior. The Khoikhoi were particularly hard hit because, unlike many Europeans or Asians, they had developed no natural resistance to the disease. Their mortality rate remains a matter of debate, but at the very least a third of the Khoikhoi population in the region was wiped out in a single blow. Coming on top of the substantial loss of their grazing lands, water resources and herds, as well as the partial collapse of their political and social arrangements, there is little doubt that the smallpox epidemic dealt the Khoikhoi within the boundaries of the VOC’s territory at the Cape a final, devastating blow.6
The Expanding Frontier: Trekboers, Commandos and the Khoisan

In 1714 the VOC made a decision with fateful, far-reaching consequences. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the Cape settlement between the Atlantic to the west and the mountain ranges to the east was self-sufficient in meat, wheat and wine. Considering this region fully settled (in 1717 a temporary halt was put to further European immigration), the government permitted the loan farm (or leningplaat) system to develop beyond the easterly mountain chain. For a very small fee, a farmer was given the use of at least 6 000 acres on which to graze his cattle for a specific period of time. This scheme was ideal for stock farmers, who could lease two such farms and allow one to lie empty long enough for the grazing to recover. For poor, landless burghers unable to compete with the rich clique of wheat and wine farming gentry, and for the many younger sons of enthusiastically progenitive farmers without the prospect of a farm of their own, a leningplaat beyond the mountains seemed to offer the best chance of a livelihood. The raising of livestock there required less capital outlay than agricultural farming and was less labour-intensive. Many adventurous and optimistic men seized the opportunity and began to trek north and east into the interior to take up their leningplaatsen. Like the immigrants from Europe of an earlier period, they were simply going where opportunity and the prospect of a livelihood beckoned.

Unintentionally, however, the government at the Cape had set in motion the unsystematic colonisation of the interior by these trekboere (trekboers or migrating farmers), and a paper-thin layer of colonists spread over a vast area, driven ever onwards by the increase in their herds and the search for unexhausted pastures. By the end of the eighteenth century the area of European occupation had grown almost tenfold since the beginning of the
century, encompassing an area of 286 000 square kilometres. Yet in the
colony as a whole there dwelt only two settlers per square kilometre, with
their greatest density in the agricultural lands between Cape Town and
Stellenbosch. In the pastoral hinterland, occupied by only a thousand male
settlers and their families, there was at most only one settler per ten square
kilometres.

A leningplaat gave a trekboer legal occupation of registered land, and in
1732 the VOC introduced a new system, guaranteeing the farmer
occupation for at least fifteen years. But to occupy a farm on these terms
was restrictive and cost money in rent, and the temptation for a trekboer
simply to move on and occupy land beyond the boundaries of the settlement
and its irksome controls was overwhelming. For in a prevailing culture
where capital was scarce but extensive (and wasteful) land use was the
norm, the option was never to increase the carrying capacity of the land, but
simply to occupy new land when it became necessary. So, the trekboers
continued to move on towards the seemingly limitless horizon, and the
VOC had no option but to follow in their wake, setting up new
administrative posts to ensure that its laws were obeyed and its taxes paid.
In 1743 the huge new district of Swellendam (named after Governor
Hendrik Swellengrebel) was proclaimed, followed by that of Graaff-Reinet
in 1786 (named for Governor Cornelius Jacob van de Graaff). Tiny, slowly
growing villages carrying these names became the seats of the
administration of these new districts. While the governor and other top
VOC officials in Cape Town formed the Council of Policy and continued to
direct policy, in these far-flung districts local government rested on a
Company official, the landdrost, assisted by several heemraden, who were
prominent local burghers.

It must not be imagined that travel inland was easy for the trekboers.
When they ventured forth over the unknown landscape, they followed the
paths trodden by the great herds of game or the tracks made by Khoikhoi
pastoralists. Gradually, as the seasonal migration of their own herds became
set and these tracks turned into regular, if very rudimentary roads, the
network was extended to incorporate key settlements.

In the relatively civilised environs of Cape Town, travellers rode on
horseback, in horse-drawn light carts or in more elegant two- or four-
wheeled chaise carriages. But for longer journeys over many days or even
months, the ossewa, or ox-wagon, was normally the choice of explorers,
hunters, traders, farmers, missionaries and soldiers since it doubled as a mobile home. Travellers subsisted on what food they carried, on the wild game they shot, and on the hospitality of the occasional farmer along the route. The basic design of the ox-wagon was established by the late seventeenth century, although it naturally went through various modifications over the next two centuries in which it was in use, its evolving design nearly trebling the weight of the load it could carry.\footnote{1} Basically, it was a sturdily built wooden wagon on four spoked, iron-rimmed wooden wheels, and was drawn by oxen harnessed in pairs. Most of the load-carrying and living area was covered in a canvas canopy supported on wooden hoops. The driver sat in front, in the open, on a wooden chest (\textit{wakis}) and drove the span of eight to sixteen oxen by calling to each by name or by urging them on with a long whip. The two most powerful oxen were yoked either side of the shaft, or \textit{disselboom}, and the rest were yoked in pairs to a long chain or rope (a \textit{trektou}) attached to the \textit{disselboom}. A young Khoikhoi or African boy (the \textit{voorlooper}) led the front pair of oxen by a thong attached to their yoke, and the rest followed. By the 1860s the driver was no longer sitting on the wagon, but walked beside the oxen, urging them on with calls and a whip.

Oxen had to be regularly rested and given time to graze during the day, which meant that journeys were often undertaken by night. A day’s journey averaged about twenty kilometres, so that (for example) it took almost two weeks to travel from Cape Town to Swellendam, and by the end of the eighteenth century it might take two months to reach the far distant eastern frontier. The spacing of outspans (or \textit{uitspanne}) – resting places on frequented routes where water and grazing were known to be available – depended on how well the oxen were reckoned to be able to negotiate the road. And the way could be daunting. The sandy, deeply rutted tracks were appalling, doing great damage to a wagon’s wheels. There were no bridges, so a river had to be crossed at a negotiable \textit{drift}, or ford, or (on rare occasion) on a pontoon. The mountain ranges inevitably presented the greatest challenge, wagons making their perilous and exhausting way over fearsomely steep and rugged passes, or through beetling gorges along the rocky banks of rivers.\footnote{2}

The trekboers who lived east of the mountains rapidly built up their herds both by bartering and (as we shall see) simply raiding livestock from the Khoikhoin, and were soon satisfying the requirements of the colony’s meat
contractors who supplied the passing ships. Yet these stock farmers, in their characteristic flat-crown hats with enormously wide brims, continued to lead the simple life. Close interaction with the Khoikhoi and San of the interior led to cultural borrowing. Trekboers stored milk in skin sacks, dried strips of game as biltong, and often wore clothes of animal skin. A trekboer was based in his opstal, a simple homestead of two rooms with walls of clay, roof of reeds and floor of dung and clay. Inside were a few sticks of furniture, and servants and guests slept on the floor for lack of beds. His wife and workers attached to the opstal tended the small surrounding garden which produced just enough vegetables and fruit for his household’s needs. While some of the more successful trekboers eventually built better and larger houses and acquired additional items of furniture, others never bothered with an opstal at all. They preferred to stay on the move and to live in their wagons all year round, extending their cramped accommodation by erecting canvas awnings alongside.

With Khoisan retainers or slaves to tend his flocks and herds, a trekboer was often downright idle. He was therefore at liberty to spend much of his time hunting, with the easy advantages his horse and his musket afforded him, not merely for the pleasure of the sport and to secure meat for the table or to protect his livestock from predators, but also to acquire valuable ivory and skins. In the process, the trekboers inexorably pushed the hunting frontier ever further north and east with never a thought for preserving game stocks for future generations, thus depriving the San of the wild game on which they (and to a lesser extent the Khoikhoi) depended, and casually emptying the landscape of the abundant fauna that had once roamed its great spaces.

On a hunting expedition a trekboer would employ both Khoikhoi and San as trackers and shooters, since for them – as for the white frontiersman – hunting was part of their culture and an affirmation of their masculinity. The arming of some Khoisan hunters with muskets to kill game presented a dilemma. On the one hand, it was prudent for colonists to keep firearms out of the hands of the indigenes; on the other, it sometimes suited colonists to arm them and, as we shall see, this applied especially when allies and auxiliaries were required in their wars against other African societies.

A trekboer made his laborious annual pilgrimage to De Kaap in his wagon to trade his hunting trophies of tusks, horns and skins, sell his livestock and its by-products like soap, tallow and butter, stock up on the
absolutely vital lead and gunpowder for his musket, purchase farm implements like axes and spades, and secure a few luxuries such as coffee, tea and sugar, which were considered staples in a trekboer’s diet.

A trekboer’s life on the pioneer frontier was undoubtedly tough and lonely, but it was better than being reduced to working as a common labourer on a wine or wheat farm back west of the mountains. The problem, though, was that with the nearest church or school often a month’s journey away, there was always the lurking danger that trekboers could become thoroughly Africanised and cast off their European civilisation. Trekboers were nevertheless determined to remain within the cultural pale of De Kaap. They did their best to remain literate and to read their Bible, abiding by its teaching in the most fundamentalist manner, and travelling great distances to ensure that their children were properly baptised and confirmed by a Dutch Reformed Church minister. And although to the casual eye their lifestyle might often appear little different from that of the Khoikhoi, they maintained their belief in the inherent inferiority of the indigenous people among whom they mingled.

Historians have long been in the practice of enquiring whether later forms of racial oppression in South Africa, culminating in apartheid, had their roots in the Cape of the VOC. What seems clear is that it was social structures, rather than political interventions (as with the apartheid government), that shaped attitudes. The ownership of slaves and the control of the Khoikhoi labour force created a multiracial, highly stratified society in which whites were always at the top of the tree as the representatives of what they believed to be superior Western civilisation that had Christianity – the only true religion in their eyes – at its core, albeit in its exclusively Calvinist form. During the period of Company rule there was barely any missionary work among the Khoisan, and no educated, Christian community emerged among them. To the Dutch of the time, therefore, it was the savagery, licentiousness and godlessness of the heathen blacks of the Cape that distinguished them from civilised Europeans, rather than their dark pigmentation as such. For burghers and trekboers who took their Bible literally, Noah’s curse on Canaan, the son of Ham, that ‘a servant of servants shall he be’, was the divine explanation for those born with a black skin and a justification for their subordination or enslavement. It should be noted in parenthesis that the pseudo-scientific concept of a hierarchy of races that justified the domination of whites over blacks was a
late-nineteenth-century aberration based on a perversion of Darwin’s theories, and that it played no part in the formulation of the racial attitudes of the trekboers.

Nonetheless, their pervasive attitude of racial superiority, founded on social dominance and scriptural justification, played a crucial role in determining the sheer brutality with which the trekboers of the expanding Cape frontier dealt with the Khoisan already occupying the territory they intended to claim as their own. And what made possible the trekboers’ gradual but successful encroachment into other people’s grazing and hunting lands to the north and east of the already settled Western Cape, and pressured the original inhabitants either into leaving or into remaining as their dependent clients before morphing into captive labour on white farms, was the employment – or merely the threat – of organised armed violence through the commando system.

The military strength of the VOC at the Cape in the eighteenth century was made up in the first instance by the standing garrison in the Castle of about 500 Company soldiers. They were stationed there to defend De Kaap from possible seaborne attacks by rival European powers, just as the Dutch themselves had frequently assaulted the bases of their competitors. Secondly, there was the burgher militia raised to protect against local enemies on land. When Van Riebeeck formed a burgher corps in 1659, he had insisted that vrijburgers own a musket in good working order as their civic obligation. Indeed, at that time the bearing of arms was considered one of the basic virtues of a republic – as it would be, for example, just over a century later, in the newly fledged United States of America (where, controversially, it remains so today).

If ever there was a gun society, it was that of the Cape under the VOC. By the early eighteenth century every burgher household, with the exception of those headed by widows, was armed with muskets, sabres and pistols. The Company required burghers to attend militia practice which included drilling and shooting. After 1672 the militia was organised into local commandos comprising all able-bodied burghers between the ages of sixteen and sixty. When called out, they were responsible for supplying their own horse and saddle along with enough provisions for about a week. They served without pay, but the government continued to supply them with muskets and ammunition until the British stopped the practice in 1806, after which members of a commando had to find their own. A burgher on
commando had no military uniform, but continued to wear his ordinary clothes.

Since the officers of a commando were elected by their own men, nothing much could be done to ensure obedience without the voluntary acquiescence of the burghers themselves. Consequently, men knew that they could leave service with a commando and go home without much fear of punishment when they had simply had enough, or when they disagreed with the way their officers were conducting the campaign.

The final authority in the chain of command of each commando was the governor, but in effect the members of a commando would only ever accept the authority of the local landdrost of their district, and even then, only when it suited them. The commando officer who impacted most closely on their lives was the veldwachtmeester, later called the veldkornet (or field cornet). This officer was elected by the burghers, and they invariably chose an already prominent and charismatic figure in frontier society. Along with his other administrative duties, the veldkornet was responsible for raising and calling out men for the commando in his wyk (ward) of a district. From 1774 a veldkommandant (field commandant) coordinated the activities of the commandos in each district and reported to the landdrost. When embodied, the commando was of indeterminate size. A mere twenty men were considered in many circumstances a sufficient force to perform their quasi-police, quasi-military role effectively. In any case, no commando in the eighteenth century was a large force. For logistical and recruitment reasons the practical limit for a commando’s strength was no more than about 250 men, and to raise even this number required the cooperation of several districts.

The commando system, as it had evolved by the early eighteenth century, was associated with tactics that combined those two pillars of burgher military supremacy: the musket and the horse. The lightly encumbered commando made rapid and unexpected thrusts against the enemy thanks to the mobility and resilience of the men’s sturdy ponies. Once scouts had located the enemy and reported back, the commando would take a circuitous route, keeping out of sight of the adversary until ready to attack. When the foe was in sight, the armed horsemen formed a line and charged. Once they were in effective musket range, but themselves still out of range of the enemy’s spears, arrows or stones, they dismounted (their horses were trained to stand without being held) and fired a volley. They then remounted
and fell back to reload, and the procedure was repeated. If two ranks of horsemen had been formed, when the first retired to reload, the second took its place and fired its volley, thus keeping up a pretty continuous fire. In this sense, a commando fought like mounted infantry, not cavalry, only employing their horses to bring the firing-line into position. Without sabres or lances, they were reluctant to charge home and engage hand-to-hand with their spear-carrying adversaries as cavalry would have done, as this would have put them at a distinct disadvantage.

The ironies and complexities of the paternalistic relationship between white burghers and their black servants allowed for the latter to bear arms on commando alongside their masters. Indeed, to make up for scant numbers, the VOC positively encouraged burghers to bring along their Khoikhoi servants or their ‘Bastaard Hottentotten’ (men whose fathers were slaves and mothers Khoikhoin), or to send them along in their stead as substitutes – a concession taken advantage of by many a farmer reluctant to endure the hardships of a campaign.

There was nothing unusual in the annals of colonial conquest about employing Khoikhoi in a military role. The colonial recruitment of locally raised forces was a very old practice, dating back in sub-Saharan Africa to the first arrival in the early sixteenth century of the Portuguese in the kingdom of Kongo, in what is now northern Angola. Likewise, from the very outset Khoikhoi and slaves served as an integral part of the commando system in the Cape, sometimes even outnumbering the burghers they accompanied and always making up a substantial proportion of the force. These agterryers (or ‘after-riders’) served in two different capacities, although any distinction between the two overlapped or dissolved as circumstances dictated. In one role they offered menial support to the firing line, driving the commando’s wagons, herding its draught animals and horses, slaughtering and cooking livestock, and tending the sick and wounded. In their other, purely military role they were the equals of the frontier farmers, riding fully armed beside them on their punitive expeditions, guarding ammunition stores and, by the end of the eighteenth century, helping them defend their wagon laagers.

‘Collaborator’, meaning a traitor who works with the enemy, is a highly pejorative epithet, hurled with good reason by the losers in the Cape wars of colonial conquest against those Africans who sided with the conquerors. Yet
the term ‘client’ might often have been the more appropriate one, for it applies where an individual (or, indeed, a community) that is destitute, socially adrift or politically vulnerable seeks the protection of a patron and serves him in return for security and a livelihood. Indeed, whether called ‘collaborator’ or ‘client’, the motives of such a person are not difficult to fathom.

Furthermore, there were always those who opportunistically saw the common sense of aligning themselves with the demonstrably winning side when resistance was no longer feasible, and of taking whatever rewards were on offer. From the first days of VOC rule in the Cape, ‘loyal’ Khoikhoi ‘captains’ were granted copper staffs of office and official recognition in return for services and military cooperation. Besides, there were many in Africa as a whole – and not just in the Cape – who, when they found themselves under colonial rule, perceived how they could maintain their warrior traditions and uphold their concepts of masculine honour through military service alongside their new masters. And there was always the motive of revenge against those who had harmed the client before he had taken service with his patron, or while he was working for him. Such a consideration would have been in the minds of the agterryers who rode out on commando against their fellow Khoikhoin and the San of the Cape interior after having been the victims of their ruthless raids, and would have fuelled their often-reported zeal on commando. They would have been encouraged, moreover, by the knowledge that the stock captured on a commando raid was always divided, and even if their share was less than a burgher’s, it was nevertheless a substantial one for an impoverished people who still counted their wealth in livestock. As an additional inducement, during the frontier wars of the later eighteenth century, captured San women and children were allocated to them – essentially as slaves – as a routine reward.

For the majority of the Khoisan peoples of the interior, however, the expansion of the trekboers, always backed up by the threat of violence by a commando, ultimately wrecked their economy, disrupted their long-established trading networks, destroyed their social system, obliterated their political structures and robbed them of their independence. Earlier, in the course of the two Khoikhoi–Dutch Wars and their aftermath, culminating in the establishment of the Stellenbosch district, the Peninsulars, Cochoqua, Chainouqua, Hessequa, Guriqua and Little Namaqua had all been subdued
and deprived of their livestock. By the end of the seventeenth century they were being absorbed into the settler system, becoming acculturated and losing their previous identity. Now, with the trekboer advance, it was the turn of the more distant, loosely cohesive Khoikhoi chiefdoms to be subdued, along with the San bands in the more arid lands to the north between the Cape Fold Mountains and the mountainous escarpment at the southern edge of the great plateau of the southern African interior. Crucially, the trekboers had learnt the strategic advantage of gaining control of the available water resources in the interior, much of which is arid country. Control of water meant control of pasturage as well, and the Khoisan found it even harder to resist because (as we have seen) by the eighteenth century the settlers had developed a sufficiently effective military machine to underpin their expansion, and the belligerent mentality to go with it.

From the 1690s, violence mounted along the ever-expanding edges of white settlement as trekboers and their Khoikhoi allies plundered the more distant Khoikhoi communities of their cattle. An ever more frequent cycle of raid and counter-raid spiralled during the eighteenth century as the Khoisan victims of commando raids retaliated in revenge against white farmers. To make matters worse, with the loss of their livestock and their means of livelihood, some desperate Khoikhoin turned against others who still possessed flocks and herds, so fighting also erupted between the Khoikhoin themselves. As a consequence of these bloody disruptions that left communities ruined, many Khoikhoi reverted to a hunter-gathering way of life, joining the San proper and becoming indistinguishable from them. That is why the Dutch began to describe the roaming bands plundering their cattle as ‘Bosjesmans-Hottentotten’ (or what we would call Khoisan), and invested that sobriquet with the negative connotation of ‘bandit’ and ‘robber’.

In 1700–1701 the Little Namaqua and Guriqua with their San allies began raiding the north-western corner of the Stellenbosch district, causing the settlers considerable losses. They mounted even more widespread and effective raids in 1715–1717. It was during this crisis, in 1715, that the Company first sanctioned a commando consisting entirely of burgher volunteers under burgher officers to go out to recover stolen cattle without any regular soldiers from the garrison at De Kaap being part of the force. A precedent was established that would be the norm thereafter. Not only was
the VOC spared the expense of deploying its soldiers on the far distant frontier, but it allowed the settlers living there to mount a rapid counterthrust to any threat. Ominously, this arrangement suited the frontiersmen well in another way too, because it gave them greater latitude to act at will against the Khoisan without interference by the government’s restraining hand.

It was not only in the north-west that the Khoisan were challenging the Dutch. In 1719 the Guriqua and Attaqua to the east mounted a very successful raid along the Riversonderend River before being driven out of their territory and retreating north towards the sources of the Gouritz and Olifants Rivers. Nevertheless, it was in the north-west during the 1720s and 1730s that Khoisan counter-raiding continued to be the most active and determined. Even the Great Namaqua from beyond the Orange River were caught up.

During this struggle – which came to be known as the Bushman War – the great Khoisan assault of 1739, which extended in a great arc from the Piketberg in the north-west to the valley of the Langeberg in the south-east, was the largest and most extensive to take place up to that time. Settlers had to abandon no fewer than fifty-nine cattle stations. The Khoisan specifically declared that the objective of their retaliatory raiding was to ‘chase the Dutch out of their land as long as they live in our land’. Alarming for the Dutch, some of the raiders were armed with muskets. These were Khoikhoi servants who, for a multitude of reasons, were dissatisfied with serving their white masters and had absconded with their horses and muskets. The Dutch particularly feared them, not only because they were adept at their own commando style of warfare, but because they understood their ways and habits, and were familiar with the layout of their farms and homesteads. No fewer than four commandos had to be sent out against the successful marauders before the raiders were finally beaten back, with massacres and atrocities perpetrated by the Dutch.

After the great scare of 1739, the Company made commando service compulsory for every burgher owning property in the outlying districts. Even so, spasmodic attacks and counter-attacks continued in the region throughout the 1740s and 1750s. The bloodshed was made worse in the new Swellendam district when trekboers moving further eastwards attacked fresh Khoikhoi communities, breaking them up and driving them
northwards to the sanctuary of the Swartberg mountains. Renewed outbreaks of smallpox in 1755 and 1767, along with a toxic assortment of animal diseases that afflicted their already diminished herds and flocks, further demoralised and impoverished the Khoikhoin and unravelled what little still remained of their cohesion as a people.

Meanwhile, during the 1770s the trekboers pushed east and north through the Little Karoo between the great ranges of the Cape Fold Mountains, over the Swartberg into the desiccated Great Karoo, and then into the vast plains of Camdeboo that stretch from the foothills of the Sneeuwberg mountains in the north to the rugged wilderness of the Baviaansberge in the south. Apparently meaning ‘green hollow’ in the Khoikhoi tongue, Camdeboo was lusher then than it is today. The western parts of the district were quite dry, but its shrubs and succulents offered good pasturage for sheep, while the eastern parts were covered by sweetveld. The shrubs in this latter region grew in a soil of neutral acidity, which meant that livestock could safely graze there the whole year through. The rich plains were consequently home to teeming wildlife, as well as to the livestock of the Inqua Khoikhoin, who had been renowned for their riches in cattle but who (as we have seen) had been fragmented by the amaXhosa earlier in the century. The region was also the abode of various well-established groups of San who roamed the plains hunting the great herds of game whose numbers seemed inexhaustible – at least until the coming of the trekboers with their muskets.

This northern region of the Cape was a frontier zone of intense volatility. The San fiercely resisted the encroachment of the trekboers onto their hunting grounds on the Roggeveld and Nieuweveld escarpment, and deplored the enormous numbers of game they wantonly killed, merely for sport. As one San chief robustly enquired of a farmer: ‘What are you doing in my land?… Why did you not stay where the sun goes down, where you first came from?’ That query succinctly expressed the objective the Khoisan were to pursue over decades of bitter fighting: the expulsion of the Dutch from their territory.

During the long course of what has been called the Northern War, which broke out in 1772 and which was centred in the Roggeveld and Namaqualand, the scale of bloodshed, the level of devastation and sheer ferocity were as yet unprecedented in the colonial history of southern
Africa. Escaped slaves, white deserters and absconding Khoikhoi servants joined the Khoisan in resisting the Dutch in what would soon be the new district of Graaff-Reinet. The violence spilled over south and west into the Swellendam and Stellenbosch districts too. The motivated and ruthless Khoisan war bands were hundreds strong and had the advantages of knowing the terrain intimately. Every year they captured literally thousands of cattle and many more thousands of sheep from the Dutch farmers. They wantonly maimed or slaughtered the livestock they could not eat or drive away, including the horses. The luckless Khoikhoi herders looking after the farmers’ livestock were the first to be attacked, and dozens were killed and mutilated annually. In nine years alone, between 1786 and 1795, the Khoisan carried off 19 161 cattle and 84 094 sheep, and killed 276 herdsmen. Farmhouses and outbuildings were put to the torch, and ripening fields of corn set alight. Most farmers on the north-eastern frontier were ruined by these depredations. They were also exhausted and demoralised by unremitting service in the commandos, which were constantly out in the field during the last three decades of the eighteenth century. At times the Khoisan succeeded in driving the Dutch temporarily out of much of the Graaff-Reinet district, and the commando system was pushed to the utter limits of its ability to stem the incursions.

Yet, hard-pressed as they were, the Dutch farmers hung on. And they did so by becoming ever more ruthless in their retaliatory commando raids. In the heat of the crisis these raids sometimes took on an explicitly genocidal dimension – even though trekboers were usually more concerned to exploit indigenous labour than kill it off. Over the course of decades of fighting the burghers and their Khoikhoi comrades-in-arms on commando succeeded in killing many thousands of Khoisan whose arrows and handful of muskets were no real match for them. During the years 1786 to 1795 the commandos killed 2 480 San alone. The San came off worse than the Khoikhoi because the commandos showed the men no mercy whatsoever, killing them off as if they were no better than vermin. But the San women and children they captured were put to work on the farms or allocated (as we have seen) to the burghers’ Khoikhoi commando comrades. By the end of the eighteenth century, commandos were being called out specifically to take captives for bonded labour, and thousands suffered this fate.

Eventually, the Khoisan of the northern frontier were simply worn down by the scale of their casualties and the numbers they had lost as captives.
Besides, the interminable conflict and the shooting out of the herds of wild game destroyed their age-old way of life. Many were reduced to subsisting as predatory bands, relying on plunder to stay alive. Others moved away up the escarpment to the north and onto the highveld of the interior. Even so, the Dutch never fully succeeded in gaining control of the northern frontier from the die-hard Khoisan. It would only be the arrival of British troops in the early nineteenth century that would tip the balance of power irrevocably in favour of the colonists.

Those Khoisan no longer prepared to resist became menials of the white farmers, earning little more than their keep, the occasional head of livestock and cast-off clothing. Many succumbed to hopeless apathy and the enfeebling addiction to dagga, tobacco and alcohol. When they found their circumstances intolerable and resisted, farmers resorted to harsh, physical punishments to keep them in line. To ensure that their disaffected farm labourers did not abscond – and many did succeed in doing so – farmers adopted further measures. Indentureship, a practice of long standing on the farms of the Western Cape, but which was only formalised in 1775, was extended to the frontier districts because it gave the farmers increased formal control over their Khoisan servants. In the Western Cape, the indenture system originally applied to the offspring of a slave man and Khoikhoi woman working on a farm. Such a child (known, as we have seen, as a ‘Bastaard Hottentot’) had to work, if a boy, for the farm-owner until the age of twenty-five; or, if a girl, until she reached twenty-one. The rationale was that their tied labour was in compensation for the cost to the farmer of raising them. However, in the frontier districts this system of ‘apprentices’, or inboekelinge, was handily expanded to cases where both parents where Khoikhoin.

Khoikhoi servants were tied even more securely to the farmer for whom they laboured – or were ‘apprenticed’ – when the Swellendam and Graaff-Reinet districts introduced the pass system. Thereafter, if a labourer left a farm without his master first issuing him with a pass, a commando was authorised to hunt him down and return him for condign punishment. All Khoisan, whether ‘tame’ servants who went wandering, or so-called ‘wild’ ones who were reluctant to assimilate and did not yet work on a farm, ran the risk of being taken up as ‘vagabonds’ by a commando and thrashed, or simply shot on sight. It is hardly surprising that in these circumstances a general climate of mutual mistrust and fear pervaded the frontier districts.
What were the options for this captive labour force if they wished to escape from bondage? On one occasion at least, some were swept up by a millenarian fantasy of deliverance. In 1788 some 200 Khoikhoi servants in the vicinity of Swellendam burnt their Dutch clothes, killed their white animals, prophesied the end of the world and threatened to kill all the white settlers, after which they intended to take over their possessions.

Less dramatically, there was also the option of escape beyond the limits of white settlement. The disaffected could flee northwards over the Orange (Gariep) River, where groups of Khoisan intermingled with people of mixed slave and Dutch extraction to form new social and political entities. There were the Korana, descended from Khoikhoin whom the Dutch had pushed out of the south-western Cape in the late seventeenth century, and who had settled in the lush valley of the lower Orange River where they intermarried with the wandering bands of San and the cattle-keeping Batlhaping people to the north. The Korana adopted elements of the culture of their enemies, peppering their speech with Dutch words, adopting Dutch names and wearing items of Dutch clothing. Most significantly of all, they took to riding horses and carrying muskets, and exploited them to become highly efficient and mobile raiders, preying on neighbouring settled communities.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century another group of colonial outcasts settled in the same region as the Korana. They were people of mixed-race origins, the offspring of white male colonists and Khoisan women or female slaves. They spoke a dialect that was a simplified form of Dutch and a precursor of Afrikaans, and wore only European-style clothing. They were equipped like the Boers with muskets, horses and wagons, and were known as the Oorlams, a name derived from the Dutch East Indies implying seasoned, well-travelled and not entirely trustworthy people. Although they had lived at first among stock-farming Boers on the far northern margins of the Cape, these dark-skinned versions of the colonists found themselves squeezed out, and they too sought their fortunes north of the Orange River. Sometimes called drosters, meaning ‘deserters’, these gangs lived in semi-nomadic communities, raiding widely for cattle and slaves from other communities on the highveld. When raiding, they operated just like Boer commandos and were mightily feared. Several main bands emerged, the Oorlams proper, the Bergenaars, the Hartenaars and the Basters. In 1813 the latter changed their rather too explicit name to Griqua, derived from the Khoikhoi Guriqua clan from which the former Basters
were partly descended. During the course of the nineteenth century they established several short-lived, independent little states of their own in the borderlands of the highveld.

Retiring north into the interior of southern Africa was not the only option for those Khoisan trying to make their way out of the range of white settlement and all the loss and oppression that it entailed for them. They could make their way eastwards and be absorbed into the mixed population of Khoikhoi and Xhosa people living along the fluid and amorphous western frontier of Xhosa settlement where the amaXhosa were busy absorbing the last of the still independent Khoikhoi chiefdoms. Unfortunately for the Khoikhoi and amaXhosa alike, by the late eighteenth century the trekboers were casting their acquisitive eyes on Xhosa territory as the preferred goal of their further expansion.
The First and Second Cape Frontier Wars, 1779–1781 and 1793

The persistent westward drift of the amaXhosa along the southern coast of South Africa was eventually slowed down by the nature of the land itself. Rainfall in the open, undulating grass-covered lands west of the Great Kei River becomes increasingly erratic, and periods of extreme drought are more frequent, making it more difficult to sustain a way of life developed in the wetter and more fertile coastlands the people had left behind. Nor, as we have seen, was the less hospitable land empty of people, for groups of foraging San and communities of Khoikhoi pastoralists, the original inhabitants of the land before the coming of the Nguni-speakers, were already well established there. Nevertheless, by the late seventeenth century the amaXhosa were moving steadily over the Great Kei River into the region bounded to the west by the Great Fish River, and were assimilating the Khoikhoi into their chiefdoms. By the early eighteenth century the amaXhosa had secured the cattle-country between the Fish and the Sundays Rivers which flow into Algoa Bay. They had no interest in turning north, for there lay the dry lands of the Karoo. Instead, their advance parties were probing westwards towards the valley of the Gamtoos River through the increasingly dry savannah with its dense, stunted bush of thorn trees and rich growth of aloes with their spectacular candle-flowers. There the summer-rainfall region starts to give way to a winter-rainfall, Mediterranean-like climate unsuitable for the subtropical crops the amaXhosa were accustomed to cultivating.

More than geography, however, was destined to throw up a barrier against the amaXhosa’s westward drive. For it was in the vicinity of the Gamtoos River valley that they encountered the advance guard of another people who, like them, were hunters, migrating pastoralists and habituated
cattle raiders, and who were likewise probing the lands that lay before them.

The first recorded armed collision between the Dutch and the amaXhosa took place in 1702 on the eastern banks of the Gamtoos River. Forty-five buccaneering young *vrijburgers* with an equal number of their Khoikhoi retainers were on a prolonged, far-ranging cattle raid that ultimately netted them 2 000 head of cattle and 2 500 sheep. Just before dawn, when the freebooters’ encampment was beginning to stir, some 500 amaXhosa (whom the Dutch knew as the ‘Chobona’) swept down upon it. The Dutch had just enough time to fire a volley, consternating and scattering the amaXhosa, who had never faced musket-fire before. Nevertheless, the warriors gathered up their courage and returned to the attack, keeping up a series of fresh assaults on the camp for the next three hours before they finally broke under the musket-fire. Exalting at their success and determined to enhance their victory, the Dutch and their Khoikhoi *agterryers* sallied out on horseback and on foot in pursuit of the fleeing amaXhosa, not giving up the chase until evening. This remorseless pursuit made a tactical point that would be confirmed again and again in the wars to come: once a Xhosa assault against a settler position faltered and broke, any organised resistance to a determined counter-attack rapidly collapsed, and those in flight were at the mercy of their pursuers. This time, on the banks of the Gamtoos, about twenty amaXhosa perished in the affray. And, in a chilling foretaste of horrors to come, Khoikhoin who had been fighting side by side with their Dutch masters subsequently obeyed their orders and beat several Xhosa prisoners to death. Only one burgher died in the fight, stabbed in the back by a Xhosa spear as he squatted by his horse, its bridle looped around his right arm. He was Herman Janz, the first of many settlers and soldiers who would perish fighting the amaXhosa in the years ahead.

Nevertheless, after the encounter of 1702 there were increasing, if cautious, contacts between the Dutch hunter-traders and the amaXhosa, punctuated by isolated, bloody incidents. One such occurred in 1737 when the amaXhosa slaughtered a party of elephant hunters under Hermanus Hubner encamped close to Phalo’s Great Place near the Kwenxurha River just west of the Kei. When the amaXhosa set the hunters’ thirteen wagons laden with trade goods alight, they inadvertently exploded a store of gunpowder and suffered many casualties themselves. Despite such occasional occurrences, trade was mutually beneficial, with livestock and
animal products changing hands for manufactured goods and luxuries, including alcohol. However, the permanent settlement of amaBhulu (which is what the amaXhosa called the Dutch farmers, or Boers) in territory that amaXhosa considered their own preserve, was quite another matter.

As we have seen, the trekboers in their extended family units were the most venturesome of the Dutch settlers, dispersing ever deeper into the interior to lay claim to vast farms and subjugate the indigenous peoples they came up against. When the amaXhosa first encountered them, the trekboers had moved effectively out of the control of the distant government at the Cape some 700 kilometres behind them. They were consequently free to enter into tentative, informal relations with the amaXhosa, characteristic of the situation along an open frontier where two communities live uneasily side by side. With no single recognised authority set over them, and where, in these ambiguous circumstances, interactions involving trade, coercive labour relations and disruptive cultural contacts are accompanied by increasing competition for resources and power, episodes of escalating violence are typically the upshot, leading eventually to outright conquest.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, small parties of the trekboers – who numbered not more than a thousand all told, including their Khoikhoi servants and a few slaves – were pushing east along the coast across the Sundays River towards the Great Fish River. The government at the Cape, anxious to avoid conflict with the amaXhosa, and also determined to maintain its monopoly on the lucrative cattle trade that provided fresh meat for the passing ships, did its best to limit contact by forbidding trekboers to settle east of the Gamtoos. Nevertheless, by 1772 some farmers were already settled beyond Bruintjieshoogte in the valley of the Fish River.

What drew them there is manifest. This is a well-watered region, about eighty kilometres wide and bounded to the north by the Zuurberg and Fish River mountain chain, known to the trekboers as the Zuurveld, or sourveld. The soil on the plains of the Zuurveld (as the name implies) is of high acidity. It produces fast-growing vegetation, most of which is harmful – if not fatal – to cattle and sheep during the autumn and winter months. By contrast, the river valleys of the Zuurveld, with their dense, semi-succulent thorny scrub thickets and sweetveld grasses, provide good grazing all year round. When the trekboers entered the Zuurveld, the amaXhosa already occupied the valleys and rotated their livestock between the winter pastures there and the summer pastures on the plains. They also moved their stock
raised in the Zuurveld north to the plains of Camdeboo for the winter grazing. Also to the north, but closer to the Zuurveld, is the well-watered region of Bruintjieshoogte (close to modern-day Somerset East), which is covered by sweetveld grasses and shrubs which make for good grazing throughout the year. In other words, the successful raising of livestock in this region depended on transhumance, the essential rotation of livestock between sourveld in the summer and sweetveld in the winter. This was possible when the Zuurveld was not densely settled, and when there were no set boundaries impeding the free movement of livestock.

Unfortunately, by the later eighteenth century the Zuurveld was home not only to small groups of San and residual Khoikhoi chiefdoms, but to several Xhosa chiefdoms, as well as to the latest arrivals, the trekboers. Mixed up together in a confined territory, they jostled each other increasingly angrily to secure the summer and winter grazing all of them (except the San) required for their livestock. Cultural ignorance concerning each other’s understanding of the nature of land ownership made things worse. Colonists, with their sense of private property and with their leningplaatsen accordingly laid out with defined boundaries (of a sort, at least), regarded their farms as exclusively their own. In contrast, the amaXhosa saw land as communal property with its usage to be allocated by a chief. And where all the cattle-owning parties saw their herds (and flocks too) as their main capital asset and indicator of wealth, the temptation was there to supplement their livestock through raiding, or to recoup their losses by the same violent means. Consequently, in the endemic frontier conflict about to break out, neither the settlers nor the amaXhosa were, as Jeff Peires put it, ‘wholly innocent or wholly culpable’.

For the present, the amaXhosa and trekboers held back from any bellicose incidents because the hunters and traders on both sides were benefiting from their transactions. Although the VOC repeatedly forbade any commerce with amaXhosa under pain of dire punishment, this did nothing to dampen the bustling, if illicit trade carried out along well-trodden paths into the Xhosa country. The Boers were in search of cattle and of the ivory that the amaXhosa hunted from the great herds of elephants that still abounded. In exchange, the amaXhosa wanted copper sheets, brass wire, pieces of iron, knives, tobacco, brandy, looking glasses, glass beads, flints and tinder boxes. Above all, they desired muskets and horses. As the trekboers discovered, the amaXhosa were no pushovers when it came to
trade. They quickly learnt the value of the goods they were exchanging, and refused to do any further business with palpably dishonest traders. The amaXhosa in the Zuurveld also began selling their labour to the white farmers as herdsmen, domestic servants and gardeners. Being short of labour, the farmers could not avoid employing those amaXhosa prepared to work for them, but they were not subservient like the broken Khoikhoin in the trekboers’ employ, and a harsh and unjust master could expect a warning visit by a band of Xhosa warriors. Such occurrences were alarming enough, but the farmers were particularly wary about the large parties of amaXhosa wandering about the Zuurveld begging for ‘presents’. They did not understand that it was Xhosa custom for a poor man to ask for food and for the more prosperous man to supply it as an insurance, so to speak, against the day when he in turn might be short of sustenance and have to beg. What made this misunderstood custom particularly alarming for the settlers, thinly scattered as they were on their isolated farms, was that it was often accompanied by a degree of menace, so that begging effectively morphed into exacting tribute.

Their very vulnerability only hardened Boer attitudes towards the amaXhosa. They maintained the notion long held by the Dutch settlers in the Cape with regards to the Khoisan that as Christians they were culturally superior to the savage, treacherous heathens among whom they found themselves. Consequently, there was no place for the amaXhosa in the Dutch farmers’ social lives, kinship network or political structures. In other words, they were to be excluded, rather than integrated. In contrast, Xhosa society (as we have seen) was traditionally open and it was the norm to incorporate others. Thus, while the amaXhosa of the Zuurveld had reason to distrust the Boers, and to dread them too on account of their superior armaments, they factored in their own superior numbers to dismiss the possibility of being dominated, and anticipated that they would eventually absorb the Boers as they had the Khoikhoi. After all, the trading relations and labour services they were engaged in with the Boers were the normal precursors to fuller social integration, such as intermarriage, when dealing with another society. An alliance might follow, and eventually the outsiders would accept the leadership of a Xhosa chief and pay tribute as a sign of subordination. But the Boers were having none of that. They were determined to drive the amaXhosa out of the Zuurveld and keep it for themselves, not only because there was not enough pasturage there for both
Boer and Xhosa livestock, but because they saw the amaXhosa as undesirable outsiders.

Discerning in this the potential for conflict along the eastern edges of the Kaapkolonie, or Cape Colony (as they now referred to it), the government in Cape Town took action. It was already embroiled in fighting the Khoisan in the Northern War, and since 1771 the Cape had been plunged into a deep economic depression from which it would not recover until 1781. Supposing that an emphatically defined boundary separating the Dutch from the amaXhosa would head off a border conflict – and conceding that they should be realistic in taking into account the territory the trekboers had already settled – in 1775 the governor, Baron Joachim van Plettenberg, and his Council of Policy in Cape Town defined a new eastern boundary for Kaapkolonie. Starting at the upper reaches of the Little Fish River in the north and following it to its confluence with the Great Fish, they then drew a line south to the Bushman’s River and along that to the sea. But in 1774 Van Plettenberg had already granted several refugee families of Boers from the Sneeuwberg district to the far north, who had buckled under the strain of contending against San resistance, permission to settle in the upper reaches of the Fish River, east of the new boundary. They included three families of closely related Prinsloos, a clan that, under the aggressive leadership of their hard-nosed patriarch Willem Prinsloo, virtually maintained their own law in their new district, and did their best to see off the amaXhosa also settled along the upper reaches of the Fish River.

What made it possible for Prinsloo and his ilk to operate like robber barons was the unstable state of the amaXhosa chiefdoms they encountered. As we have seen, after the death in 1775 of Phalo, the Xhosa paramount, Rharhabe, his Right-Hand son and the loser in the succession conflict, had retreated west across the Kei and was attempting to exert his authority over the amaXhosa living there. Handling them as if they were his subjects in revolt, he ordered the members of the westernmost Xhosa chiefdoms that had crossed the Great Fish River and settled in the Zuurveld – the amaGqunukhwebe (which had absorbed a great number of Khoikhoi, and was not always considered a real Xhosa chiefdom in consequence), amaGwali, amaMbalu, imiDange and amaNtinde – to come back across the river and place themselves under his rule. Although these chiefdoms clinging to the very edges of the Xhosa world were weak, all of them nevertheless refused to obey Rharhabe’s summons. Rharhabe did not
immediately have the means of forcing them to comply, but they nevertheless knew that they had earned his ire and feared the future repercussions. The Prinsloo clan, meanwhile, picked a quarrel with the amaGwali over charges of cattle rustling, using it as an excuse to disrupt Xhosa settlement in the Zuurveld and to push them out.

Realising how volatile the situation on the eastern border had become, Van Plettenberg himself visited the frontier in 1778 to try to stabilise the situation, and to set up several beacons marking the boundary beyond which no white man might pass. He had barely arrived at the frontier before Willem Prinsloo with his many sons and their companions overwhelmed him with urgent complaints that the amaXhosa were busy establishing homesteads on what they believed was their territory. With the intention of sorting out this dispute, Van Plettenberg tried to arrange a meeting with Rharhabe, but when the Xhosa chief failed to turn up, he made do with meeting Khoba, the son of Titi, the chief of the amaGwali. Khoba agreed to honour the existing boundary line along the Little Fish River, as did other minor chiefs Van Plettenberg fell in with. These negotiations were the first time a high official of the Company had entered into a formal agreement with the amaXhosa about the boundary. The problem was that Van Plettenberg had parlayed with lesser chiefs who had no authority to bind other, greater chiefs, let alone the Xhosa paramount. The Dutch never grasped this, and would time and again wax indignant that the supposedly treacherous amaXhosa were incapable of abiding by an agreement. Nor would the British in their turn be any more successful in tracking down that chimera, a supreme chief whose word was universal law among the amaXhosa, and who could negotiate with them on behalf of all his people.

Van Plettenberg had barely returned to Cape Town when in 1779 Willem Prinsloo, under the pretext that a Xhosa man had stolen one of his sheep, shot him dead. The amaGwali, of whom the murdered man was a member, had taken enough of such provocation, and this time they decided to teach the amaBhulu a lesson. A war party attacked several farms in the vicinity of Bruintjieshoogte and lifted a reported (but doubtless exaggerated) 21,000 head of cattle. There is no question, though, that they burnt down Willem Prinsloo’s house and drove away all his livestock.

The late-eighteenth-century amaXhosa who conducted this raid against the Prinsloo clan, and who would very soon be facing the armed response of the roused Dutch colonists, were not notably warlike, and nowadays do
not share the amaZulu’s ferocious warrior reputation. Nevertheless, theirs was also an indubitably honour culture, the difference being that a man’s high reputation or even fame could be gained through cultivating the domestic virtues of the homestead as a complement to his military heroism. Men of rank in particular prided themselves on their gentlemanlike behaviour, on their unruffled grace and courtesy, and on the sagacity of their counsel. Nevertheless, they were acutely sensitive to slights and defamation, and put a premium on their proven male virility, physical prowess and military courage. From an early age their competitive aggression was deliberately fostered in combative exercises and the hunt, which prepared them for combat. (The amaXhosa hunted for food and skins, but above all they did so for sport. They went out in large, jolly hunting-parties accompanied by their dogs, and attempted to surround their prey and to bring the animals down with showers of hurled spears. Before the coming of white hunters and their firearms, hunted game consisted not only of antelope but of still plentiful and dangerous big creatures that severely tested a hunter’s courage and skill: elephant, rhino, hippo, buffalo and lion.) Stick-fighting groups competed fiercely under the supervision of elders preparing them for circumcision. Boys could be killed in these tough bouts, but the survivors exhibited their duelling scars with pride. Once initiated at around eighteen years of age, young men were on constant call to serve their chief, but after marriage adult warriors were expected to restrain their aggression except when called out for war service. Then they received names of honour for their valiant deeds and composed their own praises to vaunt their prowess in public.

In the early years of the eighteenth century, Xhosa warfare still retained something of the character of a tournament fought at an agreed time and place between two sides throwing spears from a distance. Cattle raids and counter-raids were the norm, but full-blown wars were much rarer, and there was usually an attempt to smooth things over through diplomatic missions before committing to hostilities. By the time the amaXhosa came into serious conflict with the trekboers in the late eighteenth century, their warfare was already acquiring a sharper edge on account of the bitter conflicts between the sons of Phalo. At this stage they employed only their traditional arms. Only during the course of the nineteenth century did they add firearms and horses to their arsenal.
Their national weapon was the spear with an iron blade. The amaXhosa certainly smelted their own iron ore, but it was not plentiful in their country, and they were long in the habit of trading cattle for iron with their neighbours. There were eight kinds of throwing-spear for hunting or war, some serrated or barbed towards the base, and all had specific names. Straight-bladed ones could double as an awl in leatherwork or as a surgical instrument for circumcision. Hafts were on average 1.5 metres long. The typically scattered formation of a Xhosa army gave a warrior the necessary freedom to throw a spear with a sharp flick that imparted a quivering motion which helped its accuracy in flight and made it vibrate in the wound, giving it better penetration. An exceptional cast could transfix a body at fifty paces or more. It was customary to pick up spears thrown by the enemy and cast them back. Besides the bundle of throwing-spears that he carried with him in a quiver or held in his left hand during battle, a warrior might also heft one of the two types of broad-bladed stabbing spear and likely a stout knobkerrie as well. He used the latter as a throwing-stick when out hunting, but in battle its head, the size of a man’s fist, cracked skulls. Most fighting was at spear-cast range, but when a battle was proving indecisive, a commander might give the order to ‘get inside’. Then these weapons (or a throwing-spear with the haft broken off short) were essential for combat at close quarters.

In the eighteenth century the amaXhosa also carried a compact, oval cowhide shield. Later, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, they briefly adopted the larger, Northern Nguni shield. But the amaXhosa soon learnt that it could stop a bullet no better than a small one, and that its size was impracticable when fighting in thick bush. So, shields went increasingly out of fashion, and by the 1830s warriors more often wrapped their cloak around their left arm for protection against cutting weapons.

Because the amaXhosa – in common with the other Nguni-speaking people living south of the Mzimkhulu River – had no centralised military system like the amaZulu, with age-grade regiments (amabutho) serving the king, there was no state army as such, and the Xhosa paramount had to rely on his subordinate chiefs to provide warriors. As soon as he declared that ‘the land is dead’, meaning in a state of incipient war, he sent out heralds carrying oxtails to rally the chiefs while women spread the word by emitting their distinctive, shrill cries from hilltop to hilltop. No chief could actually compel his adherents to muster at his great place in time of war.
But, if they were to preserve their honour, they were unlikely to ignore the call, and knew, moreover, that they risked having to pay a cattle-fine if they stayed home. Nevertheless, they would not commit to marching off on campaign until their chief had harangued them, explained the causes for the war and persuaded them that it was a good cause to fight for. The more famous a chief as a war-leader of daring and skill, the greater the number of warriors he could expect to rally to him. Chiefs could – and certainly did – go raiding on their own account without the paramount’s sanction, but technically warriors were not authorised to engage in war until the paramount himself had publicly issued his fighting orders. However, the rivalry between the sons of Phalo and their successors meant that it was increasingly seldom that the paramount could speak for the whole nation in time of war.

While they were assembling at the chief’s great place, warriors would keep up war-songs as fresh contingents arrived. When all had gathered, they sang the great *umhobe*, or war-anthem. War-doctors would then spray them with ritual medicines and give them others to swallow. Next, they painted a black mark on the forehead of each warrior, who then washed himself in a ‘doctored’ stream into which ritual medicines had been poured. The rituals concluded with the war-doctors hanging a charm around each warrior’s neck. These indispensable rituals were intended to render the warriors invulnerable both to hostile occult forces and their enemies’ weapons, and also to inspire them with courage and a reckless disregard of their own lives in battle. Ritually strengthened, the warriors were ready to set off on campaign. They were organised not in age-grade regiments like those of the amaZulu and amaSwazi, but in lineage-related clans attached to the two main divisions of the army, one consisting predominantly of royal clans, and the other of commoners.

A Xhosa army moved rapidly with no commissariat to slow it down apart from a few driven slaughter-cattle. Men might carry a few roasted mealies in a hide bag, but on campaign the amaXhosa relied almost entirely on foraging and raiding for supplies. Consequently, forays into enemy territory could never be long sustained, especially since the usual strategy employed by those being invaded was to fall back with their families and livestock to forests and mountain fastnesses, and to leave behind them burnt pasturage and emptied grain pits. Indeed, unlike the amaZulu, who were fixated on
the military offensive, the amaXhosa always accepted the logic of adopting the defensive when risking a pitched battle seemed unwise.

An attacking army attempted to achieve surprise, and pairs of daring young warriors would be deployed far in advance to report back to the screen of small bodies of scouts who, in turn, sent intelligence back to the main army. That consisted of a ‘chest’ of younger warriors in the centre and two wings of veterans who would rush forward to encircle the enemy. Two further columns stationed at some distance on either flank had the responsibility of protecting the army from being outflanked or taken in the rear. If the main army were repulsed, it fell back onto the reserve body. The chief, who was expected to show suitable daring without recklessly endangering himself, was usually positioned among the reserves with his bodyguard of circumcision-mates, the *amafanenkosi*, or ‘those who die with the chief’.\(^2\) As the battle loomed, it was his duty to exhort his men with cryptic, heroic orders. When the warriors joined battle, they uttered no single, national war-cry as did the amaZulu, but yelled formulaic cries that their comrades understood to be calls for assistance or reports that the enemy was being worsted.

When considering the raid the amaGwali carried out against the Prinsloo clan in 1779, it is well to bear in mind that cattle rustling was less the object of Xhosa warfare than the usual means of conducting it, for by depriving the enemy of their accumulated wealth and means of livelihood, they were striking him a crippling blow. But should the affair of Prinsloo’s stolen sheep and the Xhosa reprisal be considered the opening passage of arms in what has come to be called the First Cape Frontier War? Or should that dubious distinction be bestowed on the frontier Boers who retaliated in April 1780 when they mobilised a large, but unofficial, commando under Josua Joubert? Made up of men from the Swellendam and Stellenbosch districts, its aim was simply to punish the amaXhosa. Joubert’s commando crossed the Great Fish River and attacked amaXhosa living between it and the Keiskamma to its east, indiscriminately shooting all those it came across and capturing over 8 000 cattle. In May 1780 a second commando returned to the attack. It had been raised by Adriaan van Jaarsveld, a tough and devious individual experienced in frontier warfare, who had led several commandos against the San in the northern districts, where he had held two loan farms under the Sneeuwberg. He later moved to the Bruintjieshoogte region and established himself as the leading local figure in confronting the
amaXhosa. In line with his usual tricky and amoral *modus operandi*, he made sure before he led out his commando that he had negotiated some sort of informal alliance with Rharhabe, who welcomed the impoverishment and dislocation of the western Xhosa chiefdoms over which he was attempting to exert his authority.

At the end of 1780, and months after the fact, Van Plettenberg gave the illegal cattle raids of April and May his official sanction. He took this step because he had come to believe that he could secure the future safety of the Zuurveld farmers by exploiting the continuing turbulence along the border – which the two commando raids seemed only to have stirred up still further – as the excuse for driving the amaXhosa east across the Fish River and fixing a well-defined boundary that would in future keep the feuding parties apart. On 14 November 1780 the Council of Policy duly resolved to proclaim the full length of the Great Fish as the eastern boundary of Kaapkolonie. In arguing for the new boundary, Van Plettenberg brazenly declared that the amaXhosa had agreed to it, even though, as everyone present in the council chamber of the Castle in Cape Town knew perfectly well, in 1775 the Council of Policy had set the boundary to the west of the proposed line, along the course of the Little Fish River. Moreover, Van Plettenberg himself had confirmed the Little Fish boundary during the meetings he had held in 1778 with the Gwali and other chiefs. But these inconvenient considerations were simply brushed aside, and 3 500 square kilometres were casually added to Kaapkolonie. No negotiations were entered into with the amaXhosa who already occupied the land in question, and no consideration was given to the fact that no *leningplaatsen*, which might have given the Boer farmers the semblance of a valid claim, had yet been established in the newly annexed territory.

The new eastern boundary agreed upon in Cape Town existed as yet only as a line drawn on a rudimentary map, and had still to be enforced on the ground. On 5 December 1780 Van Plettenberg declared an official General Commando – which ensured it was supplied with sufficient gunpowder and lead for its mission – and instructed its commander, the newly appointed ‘commandant of the eastern country’, Adriaan van Jaarsveld (the same man who had led the unsanctioned raid of May 1780) to ensure that the amaXhosa recognised the Great Fish River as the boundary. He was to ‘persuade’ those living west of the Great Fish to remove east of it, and to compel them to do so if they refused. Van Jaarsveld was indeed the man for
the job. During the course of his years fighting the San, he had revealed just how appallingly callous and cunning he could be. In an incident notorious even in the annals of the bitter war against the San, in August 1775 he had shot twelve hippos in the Zeekoe River and left their carcasses on its banks as bait for the San while he and his men lurked in ambush. When the San discovered the dead hippos and started joyfully feasting on their mildly flavoured, delicious flesh, Van Jaarsveld and his companions shot 122 of them dead and captured another twenty-one.

Such was the man who in May 1781 assembled his General Commando of sixty frontier Boers to drive the amaXhosa out of the Zuurveld in accordance with the governor’s orders. Van Jaarsveld imagined he commanded enough men for the task but, as he would discover, the dense Zuurveld bush and the riverine bush of the Great Fish River neutralised the supposed advantages of their guns and horses. While the river in itself was no great obstacle, it ran through a jumble of long, steep, flat-topped hills separated by deep, narrow valleys, all thickly covered in evergreen, drought-resistant, succulent vegetation – euphorbias, aloes, portulacaria, Christ thorn, cotyledons – deeply sinister and alien to settler eyes. And, understandably, from the very first Cape Frontier War until the last, the preferred fighting terrain of Xhosa warriors and their last place of refuge remained bush such as this, so much so that other indigenous peoples associated them closely with it, bestowing on them an appellation signifying a ‘Bush Buck, or native of the thicket’. Indeed, although the traditional Xhosa manner of fighting was the formal battle with little resort to ambushes and so on, their response right from the beginning to the heavily armed Boer commandos was to make good tactical use of the bush and forests or the cover of night to strike unexpectedly and then to melt away before the amaBhulu could respond fully. They also discovered how they could neutralise the Boers’ unwieldy muskets by getting in close with their stabbing spears. It seems too that from the outset the amaXhosa realised that warfare against the Boers was of a different order from that waged against each other, and was going to be more bloodthirsty and merciless.

On 23 May 1781 Van Jaarsveld, with his commando at his back, ordered Nkosi Khoba and the amaGwali to move at once across the Great Fish, but they did not budge. Then, true to his vicious and treacherous character, when Nkosi Jalamba and the imiDange refused to remove as ordered, Van
Jaarsveld employed a dreadful subterfuge to get rid of them. On 6 June he agreed to meet a large group of Dange men for further discussions. When they were assembled, he proceeded to cut a large roll of tobacco into small pieces, scattered them on the ground, and invited the imiDange to help themselves. No sooner were the imiDange scrambling for the precious tobacco than Van Jaarsveld and his men opened fire, shooting down a hundred or more of them, including Jalamba himself. This perfidious massacre – the first of the many atrocities on this scale that were to sully the annals of the Cape Frontier Wars – understandably became long fixed in Xhosa memory, and Van Jaarsveld was henceforth execrated as the ‘Red Captain’. Having dealt with Jalamba and his men to his satisfaction, and having thereby sown consternation and fear among the other frontier amaXhosa, Van Jaarsveld went on to attack the remnants of the imiDange under Mahote, also turning on the amaGwali under Khoba and not forgetting the amaNtinde under Tshatsu and the amaMbalu under Langa. Taken unprepared, and cowed by the ready violence displayed by the General Commando, they all dispersed in panic, some of them scrambling across the Great Fish River. Highly satisfied, Van Jaarsveld disbanded his commando on 21 June to allow his men time to visit their farms and recoup, and ordered them to reassemble on 9 July. Ninety-two burghers duly did so, along with forty agterloopers all carrying firearms. Their target comprised all those amaXhosa who had not yet fled across the Great Fish. On 16 July they defeated the amaNtinde at the Kowie River, taking 1 500 head of cattle as booty. The following day they overcame the amaGwali in their turn and captured 2 000 more cattle.

Attaching more importance to securing the safety of their remaining cattle than to maintaining control of territory as such, many of the worsted amaXhosa withdrew across the Great Fish – for the time being, at any rate – while others continued to hang on in the Zuurveld. Nor were they misguided to do so. On 19 July 1781 Van Jaarsveld decided that he had achieved his objective in expelling the amaXhosa and disbanded his commando. The truth, however, was that despite massacring so many amaXhosa and defeating others, Van Jaarsveld’s commando lacked the numbers and sustained force to drive the amaXhosa completely and permanently out of the Zuurveld. The main Boer objective remained unachieved, therefore, and the members of the commando had to console
themselves with having at least conducted a hugely successful cattle raid, netting 5 330 head. But there was no real disguising the fact that the First Cape Frontier War had petered out inconclusively in mid-1781 in a sort of stalemate.

This, of course, was the beginning rather than the end of the matter. The distribution of the people on the ground in the Zuurveld remained as tilted as before against the settlers. In the entire district of Graaff-Reinet, created in 1786 to assert greater government control over the outlying eastern frontier region, there was as late as 1798 a total burgher population of only 4 262 people, of which less than 1 000 were adult males. Fewer than half of these, approximately 150 families, lived in the eastern and south-eastern divisions, including the Zuurveld. However, some 6 000 amaXhosa were settled there among them.

Ever since the imiDange had been massacred in 1781 and Van Jaarsveld had scattered the other chiefdoms, the most powerful Xhosa chiefdoms remaining in the environs of the Great Fish were the amaMbalu under the famous hunter Langa, and the amaGqunukhwebe under Tshaka and his heir, Chungwa. They saw their greatest threat coming not from the Boers but from Nkosi Ndlambe, the regent for his nephew Ngqika, the adolescent grandson and heir of Rharhabe, who had died in battle in about 1782. The grave and dignified Ndlambe was a shrewd and highly determined man who saw it as his special mission to consummate Rharhabe’s ambition to bring all the Ciskei Xhosa chiefdoms under his sway. As a special, deadly twist, Tshaka of the amaGqunukhwebe had supported Gcaleka rather than Rharhabe when they had fought each in 1775 to succeed their father, Phalo, as paramount and Rharhabe had lost. For this, Ndlambe could never forgive Tshaka and decided in 1789 to ‘eat him up’. All the amaGqunukhwebe east of the Great Fish came pouring onto the Zuurveld and took refuge in the territory between that river and the Kowie. They considered this their territory in any case, because in the 1760s they had purchased it from Ruyter, the chief of the Hoengeyqua, whose Khoikhoi people they largely incorporated. Of course, they were now occupying land within Kaapkolonie, west of the boundary Van Plettenberg had laid down in 1778. So too were other amaXhosa who had moved onto the Zuurveld during the severe drought of 1786 in search of pasture and food. The local authorities agreed to let them stay on provisionally in return for rent paid in cattle, and the indigent among them took employment with the Boer farmers as
herdsmen and in other menial occupations – or occasionally raided their livestock. But there was no getting rid of the amaGqunukhwebe without resorting to force because Tshaka simply dared not go back over the Great Fish where he would be at Ndlambe’s mercy.

The Boers of the Zuurveld were made increasingly uneasy by these developments. Their slaves and Khoikhoi servants began deserting to the amaXhosa of the Zuurveld, taking with them their invaluable skills as musketeers and horsemen, as well as their desire to seek reprisal against their former masters. The amaGqunukhwebe in particular attracted these runaways because of the strong Khoikhoi element in their composition. To unsettle matters further, Langa of the amaMbalu cannily allied himself with Ndlambe, and both chiefs started pushing into the Zuurveld themselves, harassing the amaGqunukhwebe.

The colonists inevitably both resented and feared these pushy ‘heathens’ who were only too aware that they greatly outnumbered the Boer farmers, who were thinly spread over a huge area. There was growing friction over the use of the land, with the Boers accusing the amaXhosa of overgrazing, of monopolising the water supply and of ruining the veld by burning it at the end of winter. Another severe drought in 1793 made the competition over resources even more dangerous. Yet, although the Boers knew themselves to be vulnerable and lived in fear of attack by roaming bands of young, aggressive Xhosa men, they proved incapable of modifying their own arrogant, insulting behaviour. They continued to show absolutely no respect for Xhosa chiefs and instead deliberately humiliated them in a variety of ways. They abused the amaXhosa physically, abducted their children, and forced them at gunpoint to barter cattle for goods they did not want.

Then Ndlambe, the regent of the Rharhabe amaXhosa, launched a campaign in 1792 to compel the Xhosa chiefdoms west of the Great Fish to come back across the river and place themselves under his rule. Rather than do so, the amaGqunukhwebe fled even further west into the Zuurveld, overrunning settler farms. The Zuurveld Boers were left boiling with indignation at the reluctance, or inability, of their distant government in Cape Town to come to their aid. Some of the more radical among them, under the leadership of Field Cornet Barend Lindeque, decided to take their future security into their own hands. Without the government’s sanction or authority, Lindeque approached Ndlambe with the objective of forming an
alliance against the Zuurveld amaXhosa. Ndlambe was only too pleased to comply, just as in the past Rharhabe had cooperated with the Boers, for he saw this as the perfect opportunity to shatter the amaGqunukhwebe once and for all, and to bring his ally Langa’s amaMbalu firmly to heel.

The deal was struck. On 18 May 1792, in the first action of what came to be regarded as the Second Cape Frontier War, Ndlambe’s forces joined Lindeque’s commando in attacking the amaGqunukhwebe living around the Bushman’s River and carried off 1 800 cattle. But then the Boers panicked when they took stock of the size of the army Ndlambe had brought onto the Zuurveld. Now fearing for themselves, and deeply regretting their pact with Ndlambe, they started to pack up their wagons and flee. The infuriated amaGqunukhwebe and amaMbalu, who had borne the brunt of their unholy alliance with Ndlambe, seized the opportunity to settle their score with the hated amaBhulu. They burnt down 116 of the Boers’ 120 homesteads on the Zuurveld and drove off 50 000 cattle, 11 000 sheep and 200 horses. Most of the Boers abandoned the Zuurveld entirely, but some parties were cut off by Gqunukhwebe and Mbalu war bands and had to seek security in their wagon laagers.

A wagon laager was a mobile, fortified camp, and together with the commando was to become indispensable for Boer survival on the frontier. The wagons were drawn into a circle, rough triangle or whatever shape best fitted the terrain and took advantage of natural features that might impede the enemy’s advance. They were lashed together, end to end, with the shaft of each wagon fitting under the chassis of the one next to it. Branches from thorn trees or wooden hurdles filled the gaps, and ox skins were stretched over the spoked wheels. The non-combatants, draught oxen, horses and other livestock sheltered inside the laager during an attack. Sometimes, four wagons were parked in a square inside the laager and were roofed over with planks and raw hides to protect the women, children and the elderly. The defenders were positioned between each wagon and ideally fired in ordered rotation to maintain an uninterrupted rate of fire. In this way they could keep the enemy at bay until reinforcements arrived to relieve them, or until the enemy abandoned the attack and retired. That was the moment, if they had the pluck and enough horses, for the defenders to sally out and transform the enemy’s retreat into a rout.

No great laager battle of this sort occurred on the Zuurveld in 1793, but the local authorities woke up with a sudden start to the perilous
developments there and the flight of the colonists. Since 1792 the landdrost of Graaff-Reinet had been Honoratus C.D. Maynier. He was well educated and fluent in several languages and, more unusually for an official of the Company, was very alert to suffering and injustice. Consequently, he had not endeared himself to the frontier farmers by doing his best to protect Khoikhoin against masters who abused them. Faced with the fast deteriorating situation on the Zuurveld, he knew very well that one of the major reasons for creating the district of Graaff-Reinet in the first place had been to have an official on the spot to prevent another clash with the amaXhosa such as had occurred during the First Cape Frontier War. His first action, therefore, was to attempt to conciliate the Zuurveld amaXhosa. But after a futile round of negotiations with the amaGqunukhwebe and abaMbalu, Maynier, who was no Van Jaarsveld and had no military experience or lust for battle, reluctantly accepted that nothing except the use of force would answer.

The commando Maynier proceeded to raise was in the field by 27 August 1793. Its objective was to expel all the amaXhosa from the Zuurveld and to seize their cattle in compensation for the stock losses they had recently inflicted on the frontier Boers. The amaGqunukhwebe fell back before Maynier’s commando across the Great Fish, intending to make it the whole way beyond the Kei where they hoped to find sanctuary among the amaGcaleka of the Xhosa paramount, Khawuta. But the commando caught up with them in the vicinity of the Buffalo River, deep in emaXhoseni between the Keiskamma and Kei Rivers. There the commando seized some 8 000 cattle and also took some Gqunukhwebe women and children captive. Ndlambe then gleefully joined in and attacked the retreating Gqunukhwebe survivors, killing their chief, Tshaka, at the Tsholumnqa River. Taking advantage of the general mayhem, Ndlambe then went on to attack his erstwhile allies, the amaMbalu, capturing their old chief, Langa, who died soon afterward as his prisoner.

This was not the end of the matter. Some of the amaGqunukhwebe under Chungwa (Tshaka’s heir) doubled back to the Zuurveld and regained their old territory between the Great Fish and the Kowie. The sons of Langa, meanwhile, also back in the Zuurveld with the remnants of their following, refused Maynier’s order to vacate their territory or to give up the cattle they had captured earlier from the Zuurveld Boers. The problem, as Maynier had reluctantly to accept, was that even though his commando had been
reinforced by one raised in the Swellendam district, the joint force was simply not strong or numerous enough to clear every last Xhosa person out of the Zuurveld. And, even if it did so, the moment it disbanded (no commando could stay in the field indefinitely) the amaXhosa would simply return. With no viable alternative, Maynier had to be content with Chungwa’s promise that the amaGqunukhwebe would stop fighting. On 26 November 1793 Maynier sent the members of his commando home.

So it was that the Second Cape Frontier War drifted to a close with many amaXhosa still living in the Zuurveld to the west of Van Plettenberg’s Great Fish boundary line – and with many thousands of the Boers’ livestock still in their hands. The war had underscored the uncomfortable fact that the Boers of the south-eastern divisions of the Graaff-Reinet district lacked the manpower to overcome the amaXhosa, not least because by the end of the eighteenth century only a third of the families that had fled the Zuurveld in 1793 had returned. Neither could they draw on the support of the northern divisions where, as we have seen, the commandos were fully committed to a critical and seemingly endless war against the San. Nor did it help that their fractious local leaders were at odds with the government officials and with each other, and that they consequently lacked good, undisputed leadership.

Consequently, it comes as little surprise that even so hard-boiled and ruthless a character as Adriaan van Jaarsveld should concede that it was the amaXhosa who had first settled the Zuurveld, and suggested that for the sake of an enduring peace the territory should be ceded to them. But, on both sides, the war had left a legacy of intransigence. Those driving policy believed that force, not negotiations and concessions, would determine the future of the Zuurveld. Meanwhile, nothing had been resolved by the last bout of fighting. The amaXhosa insisted the land was theirs, while the Boers believed that their mere presence posed an abiding threat to their property and very lives. Meanwhile, Ndlambe’s ambition to bring the western Xhosa chiefdoms firmly under his sway remained unrequited. To make matters worse, the many atrocities and other horrors perpetrated in 1793 fuelled an atmosphere of deep bitterness and irreconcilable hatred, but who in these disputed lands possessed the force and authority to impose lasting peace and order?
The fate of the contending parties in the Zuurveld would remain undecided for nearly two more decades. For their part, developments in emaXhoseni fractured any possibility of a unified Xhosa approach. The indecisive Second Cape Frontier War had left Ndlambe the most powerful Xhosa chief in the west, but he was unable to capitalise on his success. As we have seen, Ndlambe was the regent for Ngqika, Rharhabe’s grandson in the Great House. In 1795 Ngqika turned seventeen, and it seems that while his uncle installed him formally as chief, Ndlambe nevertheless retained the reins of power in his own hands. He underestimated Ngqika, however, for the handsome, elegant youth was gifted with great intelligence – if flawed by the spoilt and petulant temperament of one born to the purple – and possessed the regal demeanour befitting a great chief. His ambition and ruthless disposition matched his attributes, and he was determined to exercise full power himself and overthrow Ndlambe. In the ensuing confrontation Ndlambe sought the assistance of the abaThembu and the frontier Boers in vain. Khawuta, the Xhosa paramount, had died in 1794 and Hintsa, his heir as chief of the amaGcaleka and the designated Xhosa paramount once he came of age, was only five years old. His councillors took the field in Ndlambe’s support, but Ngqika handily defeated them all and took both Hintsa and Ndlambe prisoner. Before long, Ngqika let Hintsa go free, but not Ndlambe. Bereft of his former authority, the former regent was kept prisoner at Ngqika’s Great Place, and although allowed his wives and some cattle, his ignominy was complete. However, Mnyaluza, Ndlambe’s brother and main lieutenant, managed to cross over the Fish River with many of his adherents.
Thus, the amaRharhabe were split politically between what came to be known as the amaNgqika and the amaNdlambe. Their rulers were both members of the royal Tshawe clan, with the head of the amaNgqika the senior of the two. Both conceded precedence in ritual matters to the chief of the amaGcaleka of the senior Tshawe line, and acknowledged him as paramount chief. But the latter’s real authority ended at the Kei River. West of that, the amaNgqika and the amaNdlambe continued to contend for supremacy.

As for Ngqika, he skilfully proceeded to build up his personal authority and wealth in his chiefdom. He concentrated power in his own hands by deposing councillors, thereby bringing their adherents directly under his rule, and set about seizing the estates of deceased commoners. He also extended his sway westward over both the imiDange and amaGqunukhwebe, who paid him tribute. But his position was far from secure. His omnipotence west of the Kei River was challenged afresh when in February 1800 Ndlambe and his brothers Sigcawu and Hlahla broke out of his domain and joined Mnyaluza and the rest of the amaNdlambe west of the Fish River.

These developments among the amaXhosa might in themselves not have greatly impacted on the situation of the frontiersmen of the Graff-Reinet district, nor much changed existing relations on the Zuurveld, had they not been overtaken by galvanising upheavals in the great world far removed from the Cape frontier, in places never even imagined by the amaXhosa and largely beyond the ken of the trekboers. For this was the Age of Revolution in the Americas and Europe, of the collapse of the ancien régime in France, and of wars across the globe of an unprecedented scale, intensity and sweep. Kaapkolonie could not avoid being sucked into the universal maelstrom. The days of VOC rule were numbered, and with its ultimate dispossession of the Cape new players would appear on the scene, radically transforming the situation on the eastern frontier.

The American War of Independence, which broke out in 1775 when Britain’s Thirteen Colonies in North America rebelled against King George III, dragged the United Provinces of the Netherlands into the fray in 1780 (the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War) when the Dutch sided with the Americans. It also brought them into alliance with the French under King Louis XVI, who were supporting the American rebels in revenge for Britain’s earlier conquest of New France (Canada) during the global conflict called the
Seven Years’ War (1756–1763). Both Britain and France were in contention for the great, lucrative prizes within their grasp in India and were determined to secure the strategic naval bases en route from Europe. Accordingly, in March 1781 Commodore George Johnstone, carrying 3,000 British troops, set sail to capture the Cape for Britain. At the same moment the French despatched a fleet to India under the obese but brilliant Bailli de Suffren, perhaps the most enterprising naval commander of the period, and the two flotillas raced for the Cape. De Suffren had a successful brush with Johnstone in the battle of the Cape Verde Islands on 16 April 1781 and reached the Cape three weeks ahead of the somewhat battered British, giving the French time to strengthen its defences. De Suffren then sailed on to India, but left a regiment behind in garrison, strong enough to deter Johnstone from attempting a landing.

Thus, the first British attempt to seize the Cape ended in failure, and the French held on to that strategic key to naval operations in the Indian Ocean for the rest of the war. Finally, the British and Dutch signed a peace treaty on 20 May 1784 that brought the war between them to an end, and the French garrison, which for three years had brought a touch of spirited social gaiety to provincial Cape Town, departed. Doubly alerted to the significance of the Cape to other great maritime powers, the VOC resolved to post a garrison there of between 2,000 and 3,000 soldiers to secure it.

However, the VOC was hardly in a financial position to maintain a garrison of that size in Kaapkolonie. By the treaty of 1784 the British gained the right of free trade with the Dutch East Indies, which was a major British war aim and disastrous for the VOC. For decades the VOC had been piling up enormous debts, and returns from its trade with the East Indies were insufficient to pay even the interest. Then, during the war that had just ended, British frigates had swept up scores of the VOC’s ships as prizes, and for four years the Company’s international trade had been at a virtual standstill. No commercial company could stand such losses, and the VOC was a financial wreck, staggering to its end. In the Cape the ephemeral economic bubble of the French occupation burst, and in 1792 the VOC withdrew one of the two regiments in garrison there. In a further effort to reduce expenditure in every possible way, in 1792 two commissioners-general were sent out to effect economies. They had no success, and by the time a new commissioner-general, Abraham Josias Sluysken, arrived in late 1793, the economic system of the VOC in the Cape had collapsed. Sluysken
was in no position, therefore, to deal in any meaningful way with the still unresolved situation on the eastern frontier, which had taken a new and alarming turn.

Sluysken arrived in the Cape in late 1793, just as the Reign of Terror in revolutionary France entered into its full, sanguinary stride. The fanatical Maximilien Robespierre and his bloodstained associates on the Committee of Public Safety were executed in July 1794, bringing the Terror to a sudden end, but not the revolutionary regime of the National Convention itself. That continued to threaten the existing conservative order in France’s neighbours, and to exhilarate hosts of people around the world with the promise of a new dawn and freedom from all the old oppressions of the past.

How then, in that world-shaking context, should we regard the burgher rebellion that broke out in the village of Graaff-Reinet, a rudimentary settlement that consisted of no more than a dozen mud houses, covered in thatch and built in two lines to form a kind of street, with the miserable hovel of the landdrost at the upper end? In February 1795 a group of burghers under Marthinus Prinsloo, of the same rambunctious clan that had set off the First Cape Frontier War, appeared in arms at the humble drostdy of Honoratus Maynier, the landdrost of the district. Maynier was as unpopular as ever with many farmers for his unacceptably enlightened attitude towards their Khoikhoi farm labourers. Moreover, he had succeeded in alienating the burghers of the Bruintjieshoogte and Zuurveld districts who, as a matter of urgency, wanted the amaXhosa driven over the Fish River, when he insisted that every effort should be put into fighting the more dangerous San of the Sneeuwberg instead. To complicate matters further, Maynier had a great personal enemy in the unscrupulous but influential Adriaan van Jaarsveld, who vehemently opposed his policies and who, for his outspokenness, had run foul of the government for undermining their landdrost’s authority and now faced legal prosecution. This threat persuaded Van Jaarsveld to join the ranks of the rebellious burghers despite his deep dislike of Prinsloo. The rebels ordered Maynier to leave the district and, deploying the rhetoric of the French Revolution, set up their own administration in ‘the name of the people’ and called it the ‘National Convention’. Sporting the revolutionary red, white and blue tricolour cockade, they denounced the bureaucratic ‘aristocrats’ of the VOC’s administration.
Caught up in the ferment, in June 1795 a group of burghers in Swellendam, a village of only thirty houses, likewise expelled their landdrost and set up a ‘National Convention’. Yet, despite the fashionable revolutionary rhetoric, the rebels in the two frontier districts were hardly intent on overthrowing their world. What animated them most was the desire for an administration that would allow them to recapture the cattle they had lost to the amaXhosa in the previous war, and to drive the amaXhosa out of the Zuurveld once and for all. So, while they renounced their allegiance to the VOC in Cape Town, they pointedly stressed their desire to remain loyal subjects of the Dutch government itself.

Yet even this was more complicated than it may sound, for the political ground was seismically shifting under their feet. Revolutionary France had been at war with the United Provinces since February 1793, and on 24 December 1794 the French army took advantage of the frozen canals to overrun the Netherlands and seize the ice-bound Dutch fleet. The office of stadhouders-generaal (stadtholder-general), or hereditary chief executive officer of the state, was abolished, and its incumbent, William V, the Prince of Orange, fled to England. The Batavian Republic was proclaimed on 19 January 1795 as a client ‘sister-republic’ of France. In March 1795 the Batavian Republic concluded a defensive and offensive alliance with France aimed against Great Britain, which had been at war with France since February 1793. As for the VOC, it was nationalised by the Batavian Republic on 1 March 1796 and its charter was finally allowed to expire on 31 December 1799. So, to whom did the frontier rebels now own their proclaimed allegiance? As for the officials of the VOC at the Cape, and the burghers of the western districts who had not rebelled against them, did they accept the Batavian Republic as their new ruler, or did they adhere to the Oranje Partij (Orange Party) that continued to recognise the authority of the now exiled stadhouders? The issue would not be long in doubt, and its resolution would be quite unexpected.

In the same week that Swellendam proclaimed its short-lived National Convention, a British fleet appeared in False Bay. It was there to secure one of Britain’s strategic objectives in the world war it was waging against France, and had no thought for the internal affairs of the Cape as such. Indeed, it is in relation to India that British operations against the Dutch possession of the Cape should be seen. Any possible economic exploitation of the Cape itself was a minor, subordinate factor that came a decided
second to securing it as a naval base in the wider, global interests of Britain’s seaborne empire. For one thing, taking and holding the Cape would prevent it from being seized as a naval base by any enemy with designs on India. As Captain John Blankett, RN, put it in January 1795, ‘What was a feather in the hands of Holland will become a sword in the hands of France.’ More practically, British naval and military planners in this age of sail were increasingly regarding the Cape as a vital halfway point of refreshment and rest for battalions of troops during their five-month sea passage to India. The blight of scurvy and other shipboard diseases resulting from many unbroken months at sea rendered troops unfit for service on arrival. The long sea journey had to be broken, therefore, but the only alternative base to Cape Town was the desolate mid-Atlantic island of St Helena – a poor substitute. On account of the prevailing winds and currents, ships did not usually visit St Helena on the outward voyage to India and, in any case, it was a barren, volcanic rock, with barely enough food and water for its own needs, let alone for large convoys of ships. So, the Cape it had to be.

But by what right, if any, could Britain justly contemplate seizing the Cape from the Batavian Republic? After the conclusion of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War which had ended so badly for the United Provinces, there had been an internal struggle for political ascendancy between the conservative Oranje Partij which supported the stadhouder and looked to Britain, and the Patriotten (Patriots), the middle-class, urban opposition that enjoyed French support. The stadhouder prevailed with outside military assistance, and the Triple Alliance of 13 August 1788 between the United Provinces, the United Kingdom and Prussia guaranteed the system of government represented by the Hereditary Stadtholderate, vested in the House of Orange, against all forms of attack. Crucially, the treaty also provided for military cooperation in the Indian Ocean between the Dutch and British to protect their possessions against the French.

The terms of the Triple Alliance came immediately to mind when the military alliance of January 1795 between revolutionary France and the newly minted Batavian Republic began to ring alarm bells in Whitehall. It was now obvious that unless Britain took rapid action there would be a repetition of the events of 1781, and the French would seize the Cape from under their nose. Since, in the eyes of the ministry of William Pitt the Younger, the stadhouder, now in exile in London, was still the legitimate
ruler of the United Provinces, action could be taken to hold the Cape in his name until his government was restored. By the same legalistic reasoning, the British could also take under their ‘protection’ other strategic Dutch bases in Ceylon and the Dutch East Indies potentially menacing India.\textsuperscript{2} The \textit{stadhouder} was only too pleased to cooperate, and in February 1795 he issued orders (the Kew Letter) to Governor Sluysken to admit British forces and to surrender the Cape to them as a protective measure against the French.

On 3 April two squadrons – one of six vessels under Vice-Admiral Sir George Keith Elphinstone, and another of four under Commodore John Blankett – carrying on board a military force of 515 soldiers under Major-General Sir James Henry Craig, but without artillery or cavalry, set sail for the Cape. A third, even more formidable force of fourteen ships and 3 000 men and artillery under Major-General Alured Clarke proceeded to San Salvador de Bahia in Brazil to await upon events.

The Dutch defences of the Cape were centred on the Castle in Cape Town, but since its effectiveness was doubtful, numerous smaller earthwork forts and batteries had been erected around the Peninsula to create a system of formidable defensive lines served by some 400 artillery pieces. However, the number of regular troops Commissioner-General Sluysken had available were insufficient to man this massive defensive system adequately. The garrison consisted only of 1 302 officers and men – an infantry battalion and artillery corps – who were paid German mercenaries (the employment of professional mercenaries was a common practice in eighteenth-century Europe), the unreliable and unenthusiastic men of the burgher militia whose numbers were uncertain but amounted to a potential thousand or two, and 200 men of the locally raised Corps van Pandoeren.

The Corps van Pandoeren was made up of men of colour, and requires a word of explanation. Because the Company considered the burgher commandos ill-trained, when the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War broke out and the Cape faced attack, it established in 1781 a full-time, regular military force of 400 Khoisan and mixed-race servants under white officers called the ‘Corps Bastaard Hottentotten’. This unit was disbanded fourteen months later with the arrival of regiments of German, French and Swiss mercenaries from Europe. Then, when in February 1793 revolutionary France declared war on the Netherlands, the Corps Pandoeren was formed
from Khoikhoin and mixed-race servants armed by their white masters, as well as from recruits from the Moravian mission at Baviaanskloof (later Genadendal).

Because of the shortage of soldiers available to defend the extensive coastline of the Peninsula, False Bay, which was preferred to Table Bay as a winter anchorage, was very thinly held by the soldiers of the VOC. It was there that the two divisions of the advance British expedition anchored on 11 June, just off Simon’s Town. On 14 June two British officers went ashore with the Prince of Orange’s order to Sluysken to admit the British. Sluysken was in a real dilemma. Most of the burghers and the rank-and-file soldiers stationed in the Cape supported the Patriots and the Batavian Republic, while the VOC officials and officers were of the Orange Party. Moreover, Graaff-Reinet and Swellendam were in open revolt. To complicate matters further, rumours had arrived that the Batavian Republic was now on the side of France. Sluysken therefore temporised for the next fortnight. But when definite news of the Franco-Batavian alliance reached him, he terminated negotiations, stopped the sale of fresh provisions to the British, and on 29 June withdrew his forces to a strongly fortified position at Muizenberg on the north side of False Bay. British hopes of a peaceful takeover of the Cape were at an end. Major-General Craig landed his troops on the west shore of the bay, and on 7 August, supported by a barrage from the ships’ guns, attacked Muizenberg. The steadiness of the British regulars and the flight of the half-hearted German mercenaries in the pay of the VOC ensured a quick British victory.

Still, the position of the British was precarious. Two hundred men were down with scurvy and a frontal attack on Cape Town with its heavily gunned batteries was out of the question. Moreover, Sluysken and his remaining troops were still strongly posted between Muizenberg and Table Bay. Fortunately for the British, on 18 June Elphinstone had sent a fast sloop to Clarke at San Salvador with a request for assistance, and on 3 September the major-general sailed into False Bay with the long-awaited reinforcements. It was none too soon, because in the interim the British had suffered reverses at Retreat and at Steenberg when they tried to advance on Cape Town from Muizenberg.  

This is perhaps the appropriate moment to describe the British troops attempting to conquer the Cape. Detachments would soon be deployed on
the Colony’s eastern frontier, and their role, organisation and weaponry would not change fundamentally for the next forty years – or, to put it another way, for the duration of the next four Cape Frontier Wars.

Since Britain’s security and ability to project power ultimately rested on her fleet, naval supremacy was essential. Achieving and maintaining it was far from easy, however. Among other things, it required a handy network of logistical nodes to keep the patrolling squadrons of sailing ships at sea. To acquire these pivotal bases and depots in the first place necessitated a maritime strategy of amphibious operations and peripheral campaigns around the world – of which that in the Cape in 1795 was one. Once the desired naval base had been seized, it was then necessary to garrison it with sufficient troops, both to protect it from attack by seaborne enemies and to mount limited local military operations, such as those on the Cape frontier.

The British Army had emerged demoralised and weak from the disastrous American War of Independence, and was in a poor state when war broke out with revolutionary France in 1793. Yet by the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, after two decades of constant fighting, it was among the best in the world. The regular army had also expanded enormously in this period, from 43 000 men in 1793 to 250 000 in 1813, of which 76 000 were scattered in outposts around the globe. Yet these were also desperate times, and during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars the army incurred between 16 000 and 24 000 casualties every year. Consequently, the army was chronically short of the soldiers it required. Since there was no conscription, recruiting men with appropriate skills constituted a huge and generally unsuccessful challenge. The bulk of the rank and file were trawled from the dregs of society: the destitute, drunk or desperate. Drink regularly undermined discipline, and troops could run amok, committing terrible crimes when sacking a captured town or fortress.

Their officers had traditionally been members of the landed gentry or the younger sons of the aristocracy, but the growth of the army meant that the door had to be opened to middle-class men of relative affluence and education. Commissions, however, were by purchase, and promotion was not by merit but by cash or influence. Wealth and social position did not necessarily go with military aptitude, and many officers were inadequate. Even so, this venal system did throw up some officers of considerable talent. With regards to the men they commanded, officers reasoned that such incorrigible ruffians could only be controlled by the dread threats of
the lash or the gallows. Some reformers in this period did attempt to improve conditions in the ranks by taking a more paternalistic approach, but on the whole the army came out of the Napoleonic Wars believing that the key to discipline lay in satisfying the basic needs of soldiers such as clothing, shelter, medical care, regular pay and rations, coupled with an uncompromising disciplinary code upholding the social hierarchy of the country at large, which engendered obedience, loyalty, passivity and a lack of inquisitiveness or initiative among the rank and file.

The standard weapon carried by these troops, in service with the British Army from 1722, was a .750 calibre, 117-centimetre-long, muzzle-loading flintlock-action Long Land Pattern Musket, known as the ‘Brown Bess’, along with the Short Land Pattern with a 107-centimetre barrel. Slight modifications were made with the Pattern 1802, and this remained the standard firearm until 1838 when the Brown Bess finally went out of service. The Brown Bess had no sights and was of low accuracy, emitting abundant clouds of grey-white smoke which could rapidly obscure a battlefield. Its effective range was no more than 100 metres, and the rate of fire was generally about three rounds a minute. Also known as the ‘Tower musket’ after the proof mark of the government-supervised Tower of London system that subcontracted manufacture to many gunsmiths, it had a life expectancy of eight to ten years, after which it could become dangerously unreliable. This musket was fitted with a 41-centimetre bayonet of fluted steel attached to its muzzle. In battle the bayonet was often fixed on the assumption that the enemy could not face cold steel, but in reality was only rarely employed in hand-to-hand fighting.

An infantry line regiment, identified by its own number, was made up of a battalion of ten companies, or 950 officers and men. During the Napoleonic period the standard tactic in the British Army was to move in column but to fight in line. In other words, to make fire as effective as possible with the Brown Bess, the soldiers fired in volleys under the rigid supervision of their officers, maximising the effect by being drawn up in linear formation, shoulder to shoulder and three ranks deep. This required unfaltering obedience and steadiness under enemy return fire, and was the result of intense training and harsh discipline. In 1795 the British troops and the soldiers of the Batavian Republic engaged each other in just this way. However – and this would prove vital once they were stationed on the Cape frontier – some British light infantry (each battalion had a company of
them) were already being trained to become proficient skirmishers like the French, deploying in open order and employing independent fire as snipers to pick off enemy officers and demoralise their infantry line.

Soldiers on campaign did not look spick and span like those on parade in peacetime. Uniforms, when subjected to all vicissitudes of life in the field, rapidly became dirty, ragged and faded. Nor should we imagine that uniforms necessarily conformed to the pattern laid down at the time. Indeed, dress regulations were widely breached in practice. Old items remained in use long after they should have disappeared, and officers in particular made a point of sporting non-regulation items and even civilian clothes.

Even so, ‘Thomas Lobster’, the red-coated, pipeclayed infantryman of the line who formed the largest single element in all overseas expeditions, was in appearance the quintessential, definitive British soldier. Red was the predominant uniform colour associated with the British, just as blue was with the French, white with the Austrians, green with the Russians and black with the Prussians. Naturally, the precise style of uniform varied with trends of fashion and demands of the service. A white waistcoat and knee-length red coat with skirts hooked back for marching and action was the norm in the mid-eighteenth century, but the American War of Independence led to coats being cut short. The coatee, waist-length at the front with short tails behind, was officially introduced to the rank and file in 1797, but officers’ coats remained long until 1812 when they too were given a short-skirted jacket. Specific colour facings on the collar and cuffs of the coat helped differentiate the regiments one from another, along with individual badges and other insignia. Breeches were white with long, buttoned gaiters that were grey, black or brown for active service. Infantry in 1795 still wore a black felt tricorne hat laced with white, but since 1768 fusiliers, grenadiers, drummers and pioneers had worn regulation bearskin caps which they had exchanged for their previous embroidered mitre cap. From 1771 light infantry companies had worn a variety of caps, usually a leather skullcap with a crest, peak and decorated front plate.

Highland regiments wore a tartan kilt with their scarlet coatee, but it was (to say the least) an inconvenient garment. It let in the freezing breezes, chafed the knees when wet, was unbearable in hot weather, and entirely impracticable in the bush. It was no wonder that it was often replaced by
trews (tartan trousers), or simply abandoned on campaign for regular breeches. Regiments in Highland dress wore a blue knitted bonnet with a diced border, covered with black ostrich feathers fastened to a wire cage.

Officers were distinguished by a broad crimson sash knotted at the left hip in the infantry, and worn over the shoulder by Highland officers. A sword, the mark of a gentleman, was always part of an officer’s equipment.

A soldier carried all his possessions girt about his person, and in the late eighteenth century the tremendous weight of his kit and ammunition hung from pipeclayed leather cross belts with brass plates at their intersection. Officers did not carry their own kit, which could be really substantial, consisting of multiple chests of clothes, heaps of bedding and crates of wine and brandy. Instead, it went with the wagon train. The British found it too expensive to retain numerous draft animals and transport vehicles on a permanent basis, so it was always up to the commander on the spot to buy, hire or commandeer what he could.

The heavy, cumbersome artillery pieces of the time were difficult to move but were essential not only in siege warfare but in the field against infantry. A British battery of muzzle-loading, smooth-bore artillery consisted of six pieces: five 6-pounders or 9-pounders (depending on the weight of the cannon ball) and a howitzer (a short gun with a high trajectory). The cannons fired a variety of missiles: solid round-shot with an effective range of 1 000 metres, which bounded lethally over the ground; and at short range grapeshot, which was packed tightly into a canvas bag, and canister, a metallic cylinder filled with larger shot, both of which sprayed projectiles like a shotgun. The howitzer lobbed shrapnel shells, hollow metal spheres packed with shot around an explosive core. Artillerymen, officers and gunners alike, wore blue uniforms with red facings. They too followed the military fashions of the age, shifting from long coats to shorter jackets during the Napoleonic Wars.

When Major-General Clarke landed in False Bay he carried with him the government’s instructions dated 4 May 1795 to take the Cape in King George III’s name if Major-General Craig’s advance force was resisted. The British now had the overwhelming numerical advantage and the issue was rapidly decided. While the fleet threatened to bombard the Castle and batteries in Table Bay (but did not), on 14 September the army advanced against Sluysken’s forces on Wynberg Hill, fifteen kilometres from Cape
Town. Deserted by the mercenaries (whose commanding officer seems to have been bribed by the British), the burghers stood firm for a while, then broke. On 16 September a capitulation was signed at Rustenburg House, the commissioner-general’s pilastered country house in Rondebosch. The Dutch at the Cape handed over the property and rights of the VOC to the British, and were required to take an oath of allegiance to George III. The news of the successful capture of the Cape was greeted with considerable relief in Whitehall where the new conquest was immediately referred to as a British possession. No mention was again made of the rights of the Prince of Orange to the colony, and that convenient stalking-horse was quietly discarded.

Craig was left in charge as the commandant of the town and settlement of the Cape of Good Hope when Elphinstone and Clarke sailed on to India on 15 November 1795. He was a vigorous, humane and scrupulously honest administrator. War conditions still pertained and Craig upgraded and increased the Peninsula’s fortifications against a possible Franco-Batavian attempt to retake the Cape and insisted on retaining a strong garrison, as well as a strong Royal Navy presence as the first line of defence against an amphibious attack. The new strategic naval base was therefore well defended by both land and sea.

Preparing to defend the Cape from external attack was one thing, but Craig had to face trouble brewing internally. All districts of the Cape, except for Graaff-Reinet, more or less grudgingly took the oath of loyalty to George III, but anti-British feeling was universal. On 29 October 1795 the Graaff-Reinet rebels wrote to Craig explaining that their rebellion was against the extortions of the VOC and against the conciliatory pro-African policies of Landdrost Maynier which, they insisted, had imperilled their safety. Craig was firm but conciliatory, and sent Frans Bresler, a reliable former VOC official, to take over as landdrost. But when Bresler arrived at the drostdy on 9 February 1796, the rebels tore down the Union Flag and refused to take the oath of allegiance. Bresler thereupon fled the district and Craig was left with no option but to prepare to take military measures against the rebels. He cut off all supplies of lead and powder to Graaff-Reinet, leaving the rebels exposed to attack by their black neighbours, and set about concentrating a military force at Stellenbosch.

Among the troops Craig was gathering for action against the Graaff-Reinet rebels was the Corps van Pandoeren (or Pandours, as the British
called them), for he perceived that if he cultivated Khoikhoi loyalty, he would be creating an effective military counterweight to the suspect burgher population. By May 1796 Craig had recruited more than 100 Christian converts from Genadendal and concentrated them at the Pandours’ headquarters at Wynberg near Cape Town, thus expanding the force to 300 men. They received the weekly pay of sixpence to buy tobacco, and were given the same rations and drink as British troops. To look slightly ahead, in 1801 the ‘Hottentot Corps’, as the British usually called it, was further expanded to 735 men. On 25 June that year the Corps was finally made a British line regiment, although with the special provision that its service was confined to the Cape. The Corps’ uniform was suitably colourful to impress potential recruits: scarlet jacket trimmed with red and white lace with yellow facings and white buttons, blue cloth waistcoat and trousers, round, flat-topped hat with a hackle, and leather shoes (although the men much preferred to go barefooted).

As it so happened, Craig was compelled to delay military action against Graaff-Reinet, because intelligence reports in January 1796 confirmed that the Batavians, supported by their French allies, were fitting out an expedition to retake the Cape. The British government took immediate and considerable steps to secure their new conquest. Strong naval and military reinforcements were hurried out from Madras in India and from England, so that by the end of July 1796 the British had 8 400 troops at the Cape with another 1 000 on their way. Elphinstone, who had returned from India to take command, patrolled the seaways with fourteen warships.

The Batavian squadron of eight warships and a cargo vessel under the command of Rear Admiral Engelbertus Lucas took five months to sail to the Cape because of his circuitous route to evade British patrols. On 6 August 1796 he anchored in Saldanha Bay on the west coast north of Cape Town. Lucas had anticipated support from a French squadron, but he was let down when it proceeded directly to the Isle de France (Mauritius) in the Indian Ocean. He consequently found his position in Saldanha Bay a hopeless one. Elphinstone blockaded him from the sea and Craig brought up the British troops to the shore. On 16 August one of Lucas’s frigates fired a few cannon shots at the infantry on the beach. Having never faced artillery before, the men of the Pandour Corps fell down panic-stricken or fled, but the British regulars held firm. Short of supplies, outgunned and facing mutiny from his crews, most of whom supported the House of
Orange, Lucas surrendered on 17 August and the British captured his entire fleet intact. Elphinstone returned to Britain a hero, and for his decisive victory over the Batavians at the Cape was created Baron Keith in the peerage of Ireland.

The capture of the Batavian fleet not only secured the Cape from foreign attack; it also had a profound effect on the inhabitants of the Colony. The Graaff-Reinet rebels grasped that the British victory was decisive and that further resistance was useless. On 12 November 1796 they submitted, and in statesmanlike fashion Craig pardoned them. But their basic grievances were still unmet, and the frontiersmen petitioned Craig to be allowed to occupy the land beyond the Fish River boundary and to be supplied with more ammunition for their ongoing war against the San since, as they put it, ‘it has not yet pleased Providence to extirpate from this colony the rapacious Bosjesmen’. Craig responded with asperity and considerable justice, demonstrating an imaginative liberalism usually absent in military administrators of the time:

With what face can you ask me to allow you to occupy lands which belong to other people?
What right can I have to give you the property of others?… Reflect for a moment on what would be your own sensations were you to hear that I was even debating on a proposal to turn you out of your farms, and to give them to others.⁵

But his advice to the frontiersmen to make friends with the San and amaXhosa fell, as might be expected, on deaf ears.

On 5 May 1797 Major-General Craig was relieved of the post he had held so competently by the arrival of George Earl Macartney as the military governor of the Cape of Good Hope. The ‘Old Lord’, as the burghers dubbed him, famous for his embassy to the Qianlong Emperor of China in 1792, ruled with inelastic efficiency. He was respected, but failed to conciliate or gain affection. Fortunately for him, he experienced no trouble from the frontier districts where the former rebels, disappointed of French or Batavian assistance, lay low. Macartney’s instructions of 30 June 1797 to Bresler, back at his post of landdrost of Graaff-Reinet, were ‘to restore the tranquillity of that country’. As for the San, Macartney ordered that lenient methods were to be used against them. Nevertheless, if those did not work, the San were to be reduced to obedience by the commandos and, if necessary, expelled from the Colony. With regard to the amaXhosa, whom Macartney basically considered too powerful and numerous to try
conclusions with, Bresler was ordered as his first priority to establish cordial relations with Ngqika, whom the British believed to be the principal Xhosa leader, even though he himself disclaimed any authority over the amaXhosa living west of the Fish River. A promise was extracted from Ngqika that none of his subjects would cross over the river into the Colony, and that he would refrain from any dealing with the frontier farmers. In other words, Macartney was content to follow the VOC’s policy of maintaining the Fish River as a definite boundary, and Bresler was ordered to ensure that that he did not permit the amaXhosa ‘henceforth to pass & repass the established Limits of their Territory’.  

What precisely, though, was it that Lord Macartney had in mind when he referred to the Colony’s ‘established Limits’? Denver Webb has argued that the classical education shared at the time by soldiers and colonial administrators alike predisposed them to think in terms of the frontiers of the Roman Empire. These could be fixed military lines indicated by fortifications, or natural boundaries such as rivers. Either way, they demarcated the line between civilised people and barbarians. And certainly, there was a British propensity, feeding on the prevailing attitude of most colonists and growing ever starker as the nineteenth century progressed, towards identifying the people living across the boundary – such as the amaXhosa – as barbarians and savages to be kept at bay on their side of the frontier. Yet – and this was a problem that would continue to exercise British officers and officials for decades to come – what precisely was a frontier when it was porous, with ‘us’ and ‘them’ living intermingled and the boundary line largely ignored? Precisely this problem would bedevil the British during their First Occupation of the Cape when war broke out again in the Zuurveld.
ORD MACARTNEY WAS a martyr to gout and advancing years. He retired after just over a year as British governor of the Cape, and was replaced on 22 November 1798 by Major-General Francis Dundas, who became acting governor. Dundas was an honest and efficient officer, but a man of choleric temperament and overbearing demeanour, quite lacking in tact. His position was weaker than Macartney’s, for not only was he merely a stopgap waiting for the designated governor, Sir George Yonge, to arrive, but he did not command the same respect among the burghers as had the ‘Old Lord’. Crucially, the number of troops at his disposal was reduced. The worldwide French Revolutionary Wars were again impinging on the affairs of the Cape, and at the same time that Macartney returned home, three veteran British regiments left the Cape for Madras and the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War (1798–1799) against Tipu Sultan of Mysore, an Indian ally of the French. Then, to make things worse, on 23 November 1798 a disastrous fire in Cape Town killed 130 unfortunate cavalry horses and destroyed almost all the naval and military stores, followed by a short-lived naval mutiny at Simon’s Town. To complete Dundas’s catalogue of woes, in January 1799 the fleet on station at the Cape was reduced, and further regiments departed for India.

The news of these events spread to the eastern frontier, where it was believed that the trimmed British garrison had been put effectively out of action. The frontier farmers were a rough, lawless lot, harsh to their Khoikhoi labourers, and grown accustomed to treating magistrates set in authority over them by a distant Cape Town with resentment and contempt. They were only too happy to grasp another opportunity to throw off British control, and here the exceptional figure of Coenraad de Buys came to the
fore. Of Huguenot stock, about two metres tall, endowed with massive self-confidence and an irrepressible troublemaker, De Buys was the quintessential ‘transfrontiersman’. Such individuals left settler society and flouted its norms to settle among Africans, adopting their values and lifestyle and taking wives from among them.¹ De Buys had once been a farmer on the Zuurveld where he lived with a Baster woman and sired seven children. But he was constantly at odds with his Xhosa neighbours, and in the Second Cape Frontier War they burnt him out, leaving him with nothing but gunrunning to keep him going. Predictably, he was prominent in the Graaff-Reinet Rebellion of 1795. His fortunes suddenly changed when Ngqika, who had recently defeated his uncle, Ndlambe, decided he must acquire a white adviser who could help him obtain guns and horses, those essential instruments of military superiority. He chose the multilingual, notorious De Buys for the role and, to cement their alliance, Ngqika gave his own mother to De Buys as his wife.

Marthinus Prinsloo, the unreconciled leader of the 1795 Rebellion, believed he could take advantage of the British garrison’s weakness to raise a commando to recapture cattle lost to the amaXhosa in the late war of 1793. But to do so he had to create a situation where the burghers would be willing to turn out for military duty. To assert their authority, the British authorities had arrested the troublesome Adriaan van Jaarsveld for fraud. In January 1799 Prinsloo and a party of thirty armed men intercepted the escort taking Van Jaarsveld to Cape Town to stand trial, and released him. With nothing to lose, Van Jaarsveld threw in his lot with the rebels. The rebels were also in contact with De Buys, urging him to use his influence to secure Ngqika’s assistance against the British. (It is worth noting how, when occasion required, these frontiersmen were willing to put aside their racial prejudices and ally themselves with Africans.) But Prinsloo and Van Jaarsveld were playing a double game. In order to intimidate burghers not willing to join their uprising, they threatened them that De Buys would use his influence with Ngqika to turn the amaXhosa loose on them if they did not play along. But besides setting the whole district into an uproar, the rebels had no clear plan about what steps to take next beyond besieging the drostdy in Graaff-Reinet and threatening to hang Landdrost Bresler.

This new uprising was a test of Dundas’s capacity as acting governor. He immediately suspended the supply of ammunition to the frontier and cut the road between Graaff-Reinet and Cape Town. His well-founded fears of
French intervention from the Indian Ocean Isle de France in support of the rebels were removed by the capture on 9 February 1799 of the French frigate *Prudente* before it could land troops and ammunition at Algoa Bay. Consequently, it seemed that the problem was now reduced to no more than the suppression of some 200 perennially disruptive farmers in Graaff-Reinet, and Dundas despatched Brigadier-General Thomas Packenham Vandeleur to Algoa Bay with a sufficient force to effect it. Beside infantry, Vandeleur’s force included British dragoons, ‘light’ cavalry intended primarily for screening, reconnaissance and pursuit. They wore heavily braided, tight blue jackets, blue breeches and the elegant Tarleton helmet, a metal and leather skullcap with a bearskin crest. Light dragoons carried a sabre with a heavy curved blade, as well as a short musket – a carbine – with a barrel only 66 centimetres long. The carbine was handily suspended from a broad belt over the left shoulder and, when not in use, hung, muzzle down, at the rider’s right thigh.

In addition to these troops, and far more provocatively, Vandeleur commanded a detachment of fifty men of the Hottentot Corps. As we have seen, the British assumed they would intimidate the rebels, but these Khoikhoi troops were never other than an affront to the bigoted racial order of the frontier, and as such never ceased to be resented and distrusted by the Boers. Their presence on the frontier in British uniforms would have additional, entirely unanticipated, but inflammatory consequences.

Vandeleur marched inland from Algoa Bay and reached Graaff-Reinet on 19 March 1799. It was swiftly evident that the great majority of burghers, especially those from the northern Sneeuwberg district, whose interests were ever at variance with those from the Zuurveld, had no stomach for a fight. The rebel leaders and their hardline supporters retreated southwards to the Bruintjieshoogte district and Vandeleur followed. Lamely, on 6 April 1799 Prinsloo and 112 of his followers surrendered without a fight at the Boschberg. In their determination to be master at last of the frontier, the British despatched Prinsloo and his son, along with Van Jaarsveld (who had been rearrested) and seventeen other ringleaders, to the Cape to stand trial for high treason. In September 1800 Prinsloo and van Jaarsveld were sentenced to death, commuted to life imprisonment, and ten others were banished from the Colony. Van Jaarsveld’s pugnacious and disruptive career came to a wretchedly subdued end in prison, where he died.\(^2\)
And that should have been the end of it, with British rule reasserted in Graaff-Reinet. That it was not, and that the situation escalated into an unprecedented conflict that engulfed the eastern districts, was entirely the fault of the British themselves. The oppressed Khoikhoi of the border districts, witnessing the burghers surrendering to British troops and being disarmed, were given the impression that a new order had been established. This notion was powerfully reinforced by the sight of Khoikhoi soldiers in the British ranks. Many supposed that the moment had come to rise up against their cruel masters. Moving in large groups from farm to farm, they aggressively demanded guns and goods in lieu of their unpaid wages. Having put themselves beyond the pale, they then sought the shelter of the British forces for fear of Boer reprisals. Their leader, Klaas Stuurman, harangued Vandeleur, speaking darkly of the blood his people were required to avenge, and calling on the brigadier to bring back Khoikhoi liberty: ‘Restore the country of which our fathers were despoiled by the Dutch, and we have nothing more to ask.’ This smacked far too closely of French revolutionary sentiment for Vandeleur’s taste, and he was genuinely alarmed by the spectre of something akin to a slaves’ revolt in the Cape. Nevertheless, he accepted a hundred recruits for the Hottentot Corps from among the Khoikhoi seeking his protection, and they duly marched off, mostly with families in tow, for the unit’s camp at Rietvallei near Cape Town.

Vandeleur persuaded the rest of the Khoikhoi – some 500 of them – to surrender their arms and sent them under escort to the British camp at Ferreira’s farm near the Swartkops River at Algoa Bay. But about 400 Boers who had fled their farms in the Zuurveld had also congregated there in search of security, and the British were hard put to keep the two deeply antagonistic, vengeful groups apart. Meanwhile, by his own intervention (although he later made repeated efforts to obfuscate his responsibility and shift it onto Vandeleur’s shoulders), Dundas opened a new, disastrous front. With the Boer rebels suppressed, he decided he should utilise the opportune presence of British troops to solve the other great issue bedevilling the peace of the frontier, namely the Xhosa presence west of the boundary line. Accordingly, he issued an order to Vandeleur for ‘gently hushing the [amaXhosa] back into their own country on the other side of the Fish River’. Doubtless, Vandeleur can be blamed for being both diplomatically
and militarily inept in carrying out Dundas’s order, but he was wading out into unfamiliar, treacherous waters.

At this time, Nkosi Chungwa of the amaGqunukhwebe had been attempting to extend his authority over his neighbours in the Zuurveld, weakened by the war of 1793. By 1799 he was claiming the Sundays River to the west as his boundary. His position was severely challenged, however, by Mnyaluza, Ndlambe’s brother, who had fled into the Zuurveld after being defeated by Ngqika in 1795. When Vandeleur, retiring southwards to Algoa Bay, encountered Chungwa on the banks of the Sundays River, the chief was intent upon protecting his threatened position in the Zuurveld at all costs. Vandeleur, however, believed his instructions were to drive him east across the Fish River. He persuaded the tall, muscular Chungwa to come into his camp and negotiate, but the dignified chief firmly declined to evacuate the Zuurveld. The upshot was that the amaGqunukhwebe and the men of Vandeleur’s column rapidly came to blows, and so initiated the hostilities that have come to be known as the Third Cape Frontier War.

Vandeleur was not long in realising how difficult and unrewarding it was to fight the amaGqunukhwebe without decent maps in the dense bush and ravines of the Zuurveld. That is not to say that the British army did not have considerable practical experience in adapting to local conditions on campaign, even if it had not yet developed the late-nineteenth-century formal military doctrine of conducting colonial ‘small wars’ against ‘savage’, inferiorly armed and organised enemies. Adaptation in the field extended to altering uniforms and equipment to suit local conditions, and in the Zuurveld Vandeleur’s troops replaced their boots with comfortable, raw-hide sandals, and patched their white trousers, ripped to pieces by the thorns, with whatever material came to hand so that they assumed a camouflaged effect. Even so, the troops were out of their depth in the alarmingly alien environment where their enemies were entirely at home, making full use of the difficult terrain to surprise the floundering British. The amaXhosa concealed their cattle from the British in the bush and kloofs (the warriors subsisted mainly on hunted game), used spies and signal fires, and relentlessly harassed the rearguard of British forces. In one encounter the amaGqunukhwebe practically wiped out a British patrol of twenty-one men, and in another ambushed a column in a narrow defile where they had blocked the road with trees and bushes. Only concentrated musket and artillery fire finally allowed the British to break through.
Thoroughly worsted, Vandeleur pulled back to Algoa Bay. Once there, in a fit of sour grapes he declared that fighting ‘savages in the midst of impenetrable thickets’ would add ‘little lustre to the British arm’. Deciding to call it quits, the brigadier ordered most of his troops to embark for Cape Town. But having set the blaze, it would prove no easy matter to extinguish it again. ‘What a pity’, wrote Lady Anne Barnard, the perceptive wife of the colonial secretary at the Cape, that the amaGqunukhwebe ‘were ever annoyed by forcing them out of a territory where they were doing no harm!’

When Klaas Stuurman and the Khoikhoin at Algoa Bay saw the British beginning to pull out, they realised that they were being abandoned to the vengeance of the Boers. Left with no other option, they forged an alliance with the amaGqunukhwebe. Stuurman and his people were joined by further Khoikhoi bands under Hans Trompetter and Boesak. They had horses and firearms, and many had previous military experience fighting as agterryers on commando. In conjunction with the amaGqunukhwebe, who were on foot, they fanned out vengefully through the Zuurveld, rustling livestock, plundering wagons, seizing firearms and burning Boer homesteads. During this rampage they killed fifteen burghers and took a dozen women and children prisoner. This uprising differed significantly from previous Khoikhoi resistance, since the rebels were not fighting to halt colonial expansion, but were an already colonised people aiming to overturn settler dominance from within.

The Zuurveld farmers were nigh defenceless since their supply of powder and lead had been stopped during their failed revolt. They fled the district in panic, huddling together in wagon laagers, and by the end of July only three families were reported still to be on their farms. The colonists tried to regroup in June and July when Vandeleur called out the Graaff-Reinet and Swellendam commandos to expel the amaXhosa over the Fish River and to compel the Khoikhoin to return to their masters. But a Khoikhoi force of 700 men with horses and 150 guns, together with the amaGqunukhwebe and other Zuurveld amaXhosa, defeated a commando of 300 men at the Sundays River in a night action. They then went on to raid deep into the Swellendam district, killing twenty-nine settlers and driving almost all the survivors west of the Gamtoos River. As for Vandeleur, he had entirely lost the initiative and was pinned down with 200 troops in his camp near the Swartkops River (which was fortified with a star-shaped earthwork).
men were short of provisions and there was no ship in Algoa Bay to take them off.

Yet, while Dundas was unwilling to commit himself to a full-blown campaign in the eastern districts, he could not allow them to be lost. On 6 August 1799 he marched out to the frontier with 500 men and ordered supplies and a prefabricated wooden blockhouse to be shipped to Vandeleur at Algoa Bay. Picking up commandos in the Stellenbosch and Swellendam districts, Dundas reached the front in September. He found Vandeleur breathing fire, buoyed up by a small success on 10 August against a cattle raid on his encampment during which the fifty men of the Hottentot Corps had behaved commendably, and demanding to get his own back against the Khoikhoi and amaXhosa who had humiliated him. But Dundas considered a fresh campaign through the difficult terrain impracticable. He had already decided on conciliation, and with that purpose had brought Honoratus Maynier, the unpopular but humane former landdrost of Graaff-Reinet, along with him.

Maynier bravely went alone and unarmed to negotiate. He managed to convince some of the Khoikhoi to return to their masters with promises of government protection against their exactions, although others preferred to stay with their war-leaders, Stuurman, Trompetter and Boesak, in the Sundays River bush. He persuaded Chungwa to call off the amaGqunukhwebe by agreeing that they would be allowed to remain unmolested in the Zuurveld. The farmers were told to return to their farms or risk losing them. To oversee the compromise peace – it certainly could not be called a British victory – and to protect the Khoikhoi from further cruelty and injustice at Boer hands, Maynier was placed over the Graaff-Reinet district as resident commissioner. He was to be guarded by a small force of British soldiers, nineteen men of the Hottentot Corps and eighty armed Khoikhoi. A garrison of 300 British soldiers was posted at Algoa Bay where a rectangular stone redoubt with walls 2.7 metres high, surrounded by a double ditch and palisade of sharpened stakes, augmented the prefabricated blockhouse. It was named Fort Frederick after the commander-in-chief, HRH Frederick Duke of York, and was sited on the heights above the Baakens River commanding the anchorage in the bay. Its armament consisted of eight 12-pounder guns, and the garrison was accommodated in barracks nearby and in the original blockhouse. On 16 October 1799, Dundas declared that the hostilities were concluded.
Yet, as he himself acknowledged, it was going to be no easy matter to enforce the peace. He believed that he was being unreasonably called upon to protect ‘the Frontier of this too extensive colony’ with too few troops, and saw no way of doing so without the ‘permanent establishment’ of a garrison at Fort Frederick. It was not long, however, before even this proved impossible. On 24 February 1800 Dundas had to withdraw the troops from the frontier to bolster the understrength garrison in Cape Town, underscoring that in the final resort the interests of the frontiersmen and the authorities in Cape Town were incompatible. Whereas the frontiersmen demanded protection, Dundas had to assess all the threats to the Colony’s security, and the defence of Cape Town, the ‘Indian Gibraltar’, remained his preeminent responsibility.

With the withdrawal of the troops from the frontier districts, the collapse of Dundas’s settlement became inescapable. Maynier found himself called upon to enforce the rule of humanitarian law regarding the Khoikhoi farm labourers without the necessary force to back him up. The burghers, who heartily disliked him and his administration, were deeply upset by the unabated plundering by bands of unpacified Khoikhoin, which made it unsafe to return to their deserted farms, and angrily resented the restrictions on their use of armed force to recover their rustled cattle. The situation took a turn for the worse in 1800 with the arrival in Graaff-Reinet of the Dutch Reverend Dr Johannes van der Kemp of the London Missionary Society (LMS), a scholar and army officer who had been converted to evangelical Christianity after the tragic death of his wife and child. His initial mission to Ngqika the previous year had failed, and he now joined forces in the village with another LMS missionary, James Read.

The expansion of Christianity as part of British imperial culture overseas was remarkable. Protestant missionary societies had been growing out of a renewed proselytising movement in Britain, which was a reaction against the increasing secularisation of society. By the end of the eighteenth century, evangelical Christians and the missionaries they sponsored overseas were going confidently forth to convert the world. Consequently, missionary endeavour was becoming a significant factor in colonial policy and an inextricable element in colonial societies. The LMS, originally non-denominational, but eventually Congregational, was founded in 1795, and Anglicans and Methodists followed with their own missionary societies in the same decade. Consciously or not, missionaries could undoubtedly find
themselves agents of colonial conquest, and their role would always be an ambiguous one, just as the religion they preached could be internalised, transformed and wielded as a weapon by the victims of colonialism. It was not without reason, therefore, that imperial authorities initially distrusted the missionary enterprise. In many places, while missionaries and their churches became the chief mediators of colonial politics and culture among colonised peoples (a development welcomed by the authorities), they also provided powerful stimuli for local resistance and opposition to colonial rule – as on the Cape frontier.

Van der Kemp and Read discovered nearly a thousand displaced Khoikhoin converging on Graaff-Reinet in search of food and security. With Maynier’s support, the two missionaries fed them and used the burghers’ little church as a place to give them religious instruction and to teach them the rudiments of reading and writing. Not only that, the new converts attended Sunday service alongside the settlers. Enraged by this social levelling that put their servants and ‘savage’ inferiors (many of whom may well have committed atrocities during the recent uprising) upon an equal footing with Christians, the settlers demanded that the Khoikhoin vacate their church and that the seats be washed. When the missionaries, with Maynier’s support, held firm, wild rumours swept the settler community, asserting that the resident commissioner was assembling the Khoikhoin to kill the burghers and ravage their wives. Angry and frightened, in July 1801 the burghers began openly to resist Maynier’s authority, setting off the flight of panicking Khoikhoin to the drostdy to put themselves under the protection of the resident commissioner. Then, apparently having learnt nothing from their failed rebellion of 1799, in October 1801 a larger force of them besieged Maynier in his drostdy, exchanging shots with his small garrison of British regulars and men of the Hottentot Corps. To assist in the defence, some 150 of the Khoikhoin who had taken refuge at the drostdy were enlisted with the Hottentot Corps for a year.

General Dundas, who was now full governor of the Cape in his own right since the ignominious recall in January 1801 of his venal, short-lived predecessor, Sir George Yonge, had no choice but to despatch 300 British troops under Major F. Sherlock to Graaff-Reinet. They reached the village in November 1801 and relieved Maynier and his motley garrison. Against all local expectations, Sherlock took no further action against the rebellious
Boers because Dundas’s instructions were to conciliate them. Accordingly, he offered them full pardons if they laid down their arms and dispersed, and agreed to recall Maynier and to replace him (once again!) with Bresler.

The reason for Dundas’s non-confrontational handling of the Boer rebels was that he knew that the amaXhosa and Khoikhoi in the eastern districts were again taking up arms. Ndlambe, who had escaped from Ngqika’s custody in February 1800, had been reunited with his adherents in the Zuurveld, and was busily attempting to establish himself as the most important Xhosa chief there. Chungwa of the amaGqunukhwebe was naturally resisting him, and was doing his best to attract Stuurman’s, Trompetter’s and Boesak’s still unpacified Khoikhoi bands roaming the banks of the Sundays River to his cause. For their part, the members of this Khoikhoi league allowed themselves to believe that Sherlock’s soft handling of the Boers meant that the Khoikhoi were being given a free hand to wreak their revenge on their detested former masters. Stirred by their misreading of the situation, the Khoikhoi bands formed an alliance with the amaXhosa of the Zuurveld, and their war parties were on the move by late 1801, ranging far and wide and wreaking greater destruction than in 1799. Far from being over, the Third Cape Frontier War had reignited with greater force than before.

Dundas had learnt his lesson during the 1799 campaign, and he was not prepared to deploy regular troops against the Khoikhoi and amaXhosa. Instead, he decided to utilise Boer commandos raised in the Graaff-Reinet and Swellendam districts which, he believed, were better fitted to the irregular warfare of the Zuurveld bush. The commandos, however, lacked discipline, their tactics were poor and, as ever, the capture of cattle (especially the recovery of their own) was their priority. As a result, the campaign did not go well. The Swellendam commando under Commandant Tjaart van der Walt was badly worsted on 30 January 1802 in a thirty-six-hour battle against Stuurman’s Khoikhoi, and dispersed home. A far larger commando raised by Dundas in May 1802 had a greater measure of success, but the death in August during a pre-dawn raid of their trusted leader, Commandant van der Walt, sent them home again in disarray. During September and October 1802, the amaXhosa and Khoikhoi launched a westward offensive, deep into the Swellendam district, destroying Boer farms as far west as Mossel Bay. By the end of the year some 470 farms, close to half the number registered in the two frontier
districts, were estimated laid waste, and stock losses amounted to 50 000 cattle and an equal number of sheep. Panicked farmers and their families were everywhere in flight. All in all, the frontier burghers had suffered by far the worst setback experienced by settlers since the founding of the colony in 1652. The only British outpost remaining on the eastern frontier was Fort Frederick, and that was blockaded by hostile forces.

Meanwhile, at this critical juncture, while Dundas was vainly attempting to pacify the eastern frontier, world events again impinged on the Cape, directly affecting how he handled the situation. In Britain, Henry Addington’s administration (1801–1804), financially exhausted by the unsuccessful war against revolutionary France and facing social unrest at home, was anxious for a temporary cessation of hostilities. For his part, the French First Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte, desired a breathing space in which to consolidate his gains. On 25 March 1802 Great Britain and France accordingly signed the Treaty of Amiens, which was in effect no more than a temporary truce until the war resumed on 18 May 1803. During the drawn-out peace negotiations, Napoleon ensured that the client Batavian Commonwealth (as the Batavian Republic had been renamed in October 1801) received the Cape back from the British ‘in full sovereignty’, and that the stadhouder’s claim to be its ruler was discarded.

In the event, the retrocession of the Cape to the Batavian Commonwealth took nine months of tiresome negotiations to effect, and Dundas and the British troops did not finally withdraw until 20 February 1803. When he learnt that the Cape was going to be handed over to the Batavian Commonwealth early in the new year, Dundas effectively washed his hands of the troubled eastern districts. On 1 October 1802 he withdrew all British troops from the region, and turned over Fort Frederick to a small party of Boers. The missionary Van der Kemp retreated to the fort for protection with a number of his Khoikhoi converts where they and the Boers already sheltering there came under repeated attack by the amaXhosa and their Khoikhoi allies.

Jacob Abraham Uitenhage de Mist was appointed the Batavian commissioner-general to receive the Cape from the British. Once the new machinery of government was in place, he was to hand it over to the governor, Lieutenant-General Jonkheer Jan Willem Janssens.
De Mist was a reformer, seeking to establish a model colony along the rational principles of the Enlightenment, but his policy of centralising the administration naturally infuriated frontier opinion, ever resistant to Cape Town’s control.

As for bringing peace to the frontier, the new Batavian regime possessed neither the funds nor the troops necessary to attempt anything other than a policy of negotiation and conciliation. Batavian troops occupied Fort Frederick on 18 April 1803, and Governor Janssens followed hard on their heels to initiate talks with all the warring parties. Janssens was determined to maintain the Batavian claim to the frontier zone and to restore the colonial social order – meaning, despite the enlightened rhetoric of his administration, the continuing domination of the frontier by white settler society. As for the burghers, through persuasion and compulsion a large number were induced to return to their farms. Closer administrative control was imposed over them by the founding of the new district of Uitenhage carved out of the southern Graaff-Reinet district and embracing the Zuurveld. Its drostdy of the same name was established near Algoa Bay, and Captain Lodewijk Alberti, who was in command at Fort Frederick, became the new landdrost. His instructions were to preserve the peace on the frontier. This in part meant ensuring that the Boers kept to the colony’s side of the border, and neither pastured their cattle across the Fish River, nor hunted there, and certainly did not settle in Ngqika’s domain.

Dr van der Kemp and his converts were catered for by the establishment of Bethelsdorp near Algoa Bay, the first permanent mission station in the region. There the ascetic Van der Kemp, indifferent to his comfort and dignity as a white man, campaigned tirelessly against the labour practices of the Boers until his death in 1811, thus establishing a pattern of tension between the LMS and white settlers that was to endure for a century. The Khoikhoi had to be persuaded to return to their employment on the farms of the burghers, and that was a difficult sell. Fortunately for Janssens, the alliance between the Khoikhoi bands and the Zuurveld amaXhosa was already breaking up. There were disputes over the division of plunder, and between those who wanted to continue raiding and those who wanted to settle down again. Personal rivalries also played their part. In the end many Khoikhoi were bought off by small grants of land on the eastern bank of the Gamtoos River, and others were persuaded to go back to their farms with the promise of better conditions and more protection against arbitrary
treatment by the farmers. The one, absolute condition that applied to all these peace negotiations was that all sides would retain possession of the livestock they had captured. Restitution would have implied defeat, and Janssens’ diplomacy was aimed at avoiding the creation of discontented, losing parties.

In dealing with the amaXhosa, though, Janssens had far less success than with the burghers or the Khoikhoin. His objective was to enforce the Fish River as the eastern boundary of the Colony, but found he could not do so. He met the Zuurveld amaXhosa, led by Ndlambe and Chungwa, on the banks of the Sundays River on 24 May 1803. The encounter began amiably enough, but when Janssens raised the matter of the border the chiefs became grim and all steadfastly refused to move over the Fish, not least because they were Ngqika’s enemies, and reluctantly paid him tribute. Thwarted, Janssens decided he must instead parlay face to face with Ngqika, whom he believed to be the great chief of all the amaXhosa – and Ngqika indeed projected himself thus to the colonial officials. The two leaders duly met on 23 June 1803 in an open, grassy spot on the banks of the Kat River. Janssens was guarded by a detachment of the blue-coated Austrian and Hungarian mercenaries of the Regiment Waldeck; while Ngqika was accompanied by a large train of councillors, as well as by his mother and Coenraad de Buys. Ngqika opened proceedings by treating the Batavians to a lavish, ceremonial feast. For the negotiations the following day he donned a regal cloak faced with leopard skin and a diadem of white beads.

During their discussion Ngqika tried to persuade Janssens to participate in a joint attack against Ndlambe, his inveterate enemy, as well as against the other Zuurveld chiefs, but the governor would not bite. For his part, Janssens eventually got Ngqika to agree to the confirmation of the Fish River as the boundary between his territory and that of the Cape. But (as both knew) this was an empty, unenforceable concession. Janssens had to accept that, in the end, Boers, Khoikhoi and amaXhosa all still inhabited the Zuurveld intermixed with each other, and that the Fish River was no more than the Cape’s notional eastern boundary, effectively ignored by all the inhabitants of the frontier region. It was also clear to Janssens that, after three Cape Frontier Wars, the amaXhosa had successfully prevailed against every attempt by the VOC, the British and the Batavians to expel them from
the Zuurveld, and that those who had suffered most in the three wars were the colonists. As matters stood in 1803, the amaXhosa were the winners.

The unresolved situation on the Cape eastern frontier was, however, only of minor concern to Janssens compared to the security of the Colony as a whole. From the moment the Treaty of Amiens collapsed on 18 May 1803 and the British ministry of Pitt the Younger set about creating the Third Coalition against France, Janssens knew that he should expect a British attack and that the Cape must be put in a state of defence. He had at hand some units of mercenary regular soldiers, seriously weakened by the withdrawal of the best troops to Batavia in the East Indies, augmented by the very uncertain burgher commandos and the Cape Town militia. In addition, there was the Hottentot Corps consisting of 300 soldiers and 400 women and children. Janssens had initially intended to disband it since he considered it without military value, and likely still loyal to the British. But Dundas had prevailed on him to keep it on, and with the Cape facing attack, Janssens was glad he had done so. He began recruiting so actively among the Khoikhoi population that the Corps Vrijen Hottentotten, as it was renamed, began to resemble a forced labour venture. Reaching battalion strength, in October 1804 it was redesignated the Bataljon Hottentotsche Ligte Infanterie.

The anticipated British assault was not long in coming. Napoleon, who had crowned himself Emperor of the French on 2 December 1804, was pushing determinedly ahead in 1805 with his plans for the invasion of Britain. To make an invasion feasible, he needed the British fleet to be dispersed far away from the Channel, giving his army sufficient time to cross the narrow seas without being intercepted. So, the emperor devised a strategic deception. When in 1805 the French Rochefort and Toulon squadrons broke out of the British naval blockade with the intention of luring the British fleet to the West Indies, Napoleon deliberately (but falsely) let it be known that an expedition was also planned to the East Indies, and that a powerful French squadron could soon be expected at the Cape, still ruled by the Batavian Commonwealth, France’s client state and ally. Determined to prevent the French occupying that strategic base on the way to India, doubly important now as a resource in the war of attrition against Napoleon, the British took the bait.

On 2 October 1805 Admiral Lord Nelson won the decisive naval battle of Trafalgar over the combined French and Spanish fleets. Nelson’s victory
put British fears of a French invasion to rest, but did not halt an ambitious amphibious operation already under way to capture the Cape. On 4 January 1806 a fleet of nine warships and fifty-three transport ships under Captain Sir Home Popham landed the majority of the 6700 troops on board under Major-General Sir David Baird at Losperd’s Bay (now Melkbosstrand) twenty-five kilometres north-west of Cape Town. The wild Atlantic surf was extremely heavy and thirty-six unfortunate Highlanders were drowned when their boat capsized. The British troops were armed as they had been in 1795 when the British last invaded the Cape, but there had been a major change in 1801–1802 to the headdress of regiments of the line when the tricorne had been replaced by the stovepipe shako. This was a tall, cylindrical, felt military cap with a visor which was adorned with an ornamental brass plate on the front and (depending on the regiment) with a feather, plume or pompom attached at the top. Officers wore the shako too, although many preferred a bicorn cocked hat.

The landing of Baird’s army came as no surprise to Janssen, but his forces were dispersed garrisoning fortifications around Cape Town, and he only had some 1700 troops with which to oppose the invaders. Of these, 1258 were trained regulars, although not all were reliable. The mercenaries of the Regiment Waldeck were barely recovered from a dysentery epidemic and were keen, in any case, to swap Batavian for British service. The Batavian troops were better. They consisted of two battalions of infantry, along with a squadron of light dragoons and a troop of horse artillery. A handful of French sailors and marines were also under his command. Not many of the Cape burghers, who were busy with the harvest, turned up, and none from the eastern districts. Nevertheless, some 220 mounted infantry of the blue-coated Burgher Cavalry, who hailed mainly from the Swellendam district, were present, and had fought well at the battle of Muizenberg in 1795. They marched with 180 trustworthy soldiers of the Hottentotsche Ligte Infanterie, and were supported by the Javanese Artillery Corps. This was made up of fifty freed slaves who serviced traditional Indonesian light cannons known as ‘lantaken’. There were also a hundred or so auxiliaries of little value recruited from a cross-section of Cape Town’s cosmopolitan proletariat.

On 8 January 1806 Janssen’s motley force attempted to bar Baird’s march on Cape Town below the eastern slopes of Blaauwberg, where he drew them up in conventional line of battle. Baird divided the advancing
British army of some 4,000 men (who outnumbered the Batavians by more than two to one) into two strong columns with the aim of breaking through the overextended Batavian line. The left column consisted of the Highland Brigade (the 71st, 72nd and 93rd Regiments), and the right was made up of the 24th, 59th and 83rd Regiments. Sailors and marines manned two howitzers and six field guns in support.

The battle of Blaauwberg opened at about 5 a.m. in the early morning cold of the Atlantic shore. This was the last battle in South Africa fought between regular troops employing the conventional tactics of the age of the musket, and no future battle in Cape Colony would ever be remotely similar. The encounter lasted only upwards of an hour, but it permanently altered the regional architecture of colonial power.

For a time, the Batavian forces stood fast, even though bombarded from the sea by three warships and outgunned in the field. The Regiment Waldeck was the first to break when the kilted Highland Brigade fixed bayonets and charged them to the demented accompaniment of bagpipes. The craven mercenaries bolted at such a ‘furious rate’ towards Cape Town that the pursuing British could not keep up with them. Their flight exposed the rest of the Batavian line of battle, which began to disintegrate. Unable to rally his troops, and to spare them unnecessary casualties, Janssens withdrew his regulars while the Cape colonial forces tenaciously and most gallantly covered their orderly retreat. After regrouping his forces (with the exception of the disgraced Regiment Waldeck), Janssens fell back inland to the fortified pass over the Hottentots Holland Mountains (today Sir Lowry’s Pass), where he hoped to hold out. The Batavian losses in the short battle are estimated at 337 killed or wounded, while the British suffered 15 killed and 189 wounded.

At 4 p.m. on 10 January 1806, in a small, thatched house in Woodstock, the commander of the Batavian garrison in Cape Town, Lieutenant-Colonel H.C. von Prophalow, signed the articles of capitulation handing the Cape over to the British. Realising the hopelessness of his position, Janssens surrendered on 18 January. General Baird took over as acting governor and the Second British Occupation of the Cape began. The news of these events took some time to reach the distant Cape frontier, and it was only on 1 March 1806 that Captain Alberti was handed a letter in his drostdy at Uitenhage informing him that he was dismissed from his post, and that he
was now a prisoner of war. The amaXhosa did not yet realise it, but the change of regime in Cape Colony boded them considerable ill.
The Fourth Cape Frontier War, 1811–1812

The Napoleonic Wars overshadowed all other issues in London while they were being waged, and until they were finally won the British regarded the Cape as nothing more than a valuable fortress, an outwork of the Indian defence system. As Lord Castlereagh, the British secretary of state for war, expressed it when he wrote on 10 September 1805 to Lord Cornwallis, the governor-general of India: ‘the true value of the Cape to Great Britain is its being considered and treated at all times as an outpost subservient to the protection and security of our Indian possessions’. In other words, the British seized the Cape in 1806 to deprive their enemies of a naval base, and were committed to securing it against all comers. The last thing British statesmen desired was to jeopardise their control of the Cape of Good Hope by having to divert precious military resources to stamping out any new conflagration on the eastern frontier.

The British troops in garrison at the Cape would reach a maximum of 6,211 in December 1809: a cavalry regiment, five battalions of infantry and detachments of Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers. But from mid-1810 the exigencies of the worldwide war against Napoleon led to the withdrawal of two of the infantry battalions. Thereafter, shortages of money and men would restrict the British government’s ability to increase the size of the garrison. Even so, the Cape garrison of regular troops, periodically rotated in and out, always remained several battalions strong, not only in order to guard the Royal Navy’s naval station (in 1814 Simon’s Town became its principal base in the Cape), but also to add highly trained backbone to the local military formations that were not sufficient in themselves to defend the Colony. For want of a better alternative, the British kept the Boer commando system going, although this militia’s reliability and military effectiveness were questionable. In 1806 the Cape furnished only one
colonial military unit on a permanent footing, the Bataljon Hottentotsche Ligte Infanterie which had distinguished itself in the recent campaign fighting on the Batavian side. The British renamed it the Cape Regiment, with its headquarters at Rietvallei north of Cape Town. All the private soldiers and a few of the NCOs were Khoisan, of mixed race or ex-slaves, while the majority of NCOs and all the officers were white. Almost all the soldiers were married men with families of dependants, and there is evidence that they disliked service when it entailed separation from their families. The British valued them as sharpshooters, military escorts, trackers and guides, and the military recruiters who toured the Colony targeted wagon drivers (to the annoyance of white farmers who relied upon their services) because they were able to manage the large teams of oxen indispensable for military transport and supply.

When the second Earl of Caledon – a young, untested man of twenty-nine who had been reluctantly appointed in an act of political patronage but who would prove both able and honest – took the oath as governor of the Cape on 21 May 1807, his instructions were to avoid disturbing the status quo in the Colony while Britain was still at war. Where the eastern frontier was concerned, this meant conciliating the Boer farmers and not annoying the amaXhosa. Caledon had another reason besides for trying to avoid the complications of a frontier conflict. As governor, defence policy was his to formulate, but it was not clear who exercised actual authority over the military forces in the field, the governor as titular commander-in-chief, or the general officer commanding. During his tenure as governor, Caledon failed to secure a definite ruling one way or the other from the havering home government. In any case, thanks to slow communication by sailing ship, it took at least six months for any query sent by Caledon to receive an answer from London. Such uncertainty encouraged his instinctively passive attitude to the still dangerously unsettled frontier.

When Janssens had met Ngqika in June 1803 at the conclusion of the Third Cape Frontier War, the Fish River was reconfirmed as the notional eastern boundary of the Cape, although the Batavian governor acquiesced in the amaXhosa remaining in the Zuurveld. Certainly, the Xhosa chiefs west of the Fish River, headed by Ndlambe and his brother Mnyaluza of the amaRharhabe, and by Chungwa of the amaGqunukhwebe, had no intention of quitting the territory and had taken advantage of the recent war to make up their herds at Boer expense. They were eager nevertheless to remain at
peace with the British who now ruled the Colony, but feared Ngqika, who still desired to impose his rule over them, and who in the past had looked to the Cape for support.

Then, in 1809 Ngqika took an egregious misstep that radically changed the balance of power among the Xhosa chiefdoms of the frontier. Whether he intended it as an act of provocation to entice Ndlambe to abandon the Zuurveld, or whether he was simply driven by sexual desire, Ngqika ordered the abduction of Thuthula, his uncle Ndlambe’s favourite wife, a woman renowned for her beauty. This rash action, held by the amaXhosa to be an act of incest, provoked Ndlambe to war, and he inflicted a crushing defeat on Ngqika along with his brother Mnyaluza, who had misguidedly joined what turned out to be the losing side. Ngqika fled to the mountains, almost entirely abandoned by his followers. But Ndlambe soon found he could not secure a complete victory because some of the Zuurveld chiefs, his erstwhile allies, fearing that he would now be overly powerful, renewed their old allegiance to Ngqika. Ndlambe consequently came to an agreement with Ngqika that brought the fighting to an end. He recognised Ngqika as his titular senior among the amaRharhabe, and Ngqika abandoned his claims of suzerainty over the trans-Fish amaXhosa. Ngqika emerged from this bruising episode a much-diminished, almost destitute figure, shorn of most of his adherents. Desperate, he petitioned the British to uphold his erstwhile status and to lend him their support against Ndlambe. When that ploy failed, he was reduced to simply begging them for clothes and brandy, and for cattle to rebuild his severely diminished herds.

For his part, Ndlambe found his power in the Zuurveld to be greatly augmented, and he was said to have some 3,000 warriors under his command. Chungwa of the amaGqunukhwebe, long accustomed to being the dominant chief in the region, was overshadowed. To escape being hemmed in by Ndlambe, he moved ever further westwards, deep into Cape territory, and settled near the Gamtoos River west of Algoa Bay. Despite their growing rivalry, both Ndlambe and Chungwa fully understood that their position in the Zuurveld depended on maintaining good relations with the settlers among whom they lived. But the local colonial authorities did not prove amenable. Jacob Cuyler, the obdurate landdrost of Uitenhage, who wholeheartedly adopted the settlers’ viewpoint in all things, proved unwilling to permit the amaXhosa to continue with their well-established
transhumance patterns through Cape territory, even in times of drought when the herds were in dire straits. As a result, some of Ndlambe’s adherents left him for Ngqika to escape colonial interference. Some other subordinate chiefs soon sought independence from Ndlambe, just as he had previously repudiated Ngqika’s control. Habana and Galata of the amaGwali and Xasa of the imiDange migrated north to the good sweetveld grazing around the Zuurberg. When Ndlambe tried to reassert his control over them, they either resisted or fell back across the Fish and joined Ngqika.

These conflicts among the amaXhosa of the Zuurveld increased tensions along the frontier, especially when the chiefdoms newly settled around the Zuurberg began raiding nearby settlers’ farms and driving the burghers away. The stock farmers of the frontier were already in an alarmed and discontented state, deeply concerned by the mass desertion of their Khoikhoi servants since the dislocations of the Third Cape Frontier War. The labour shortage was compounded when the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which was enforced in the Cape from 1808, prohibited the slave trade in the British Empire. This did not mean that existing slaves would be emancipated, but that no new slaves would be imported. The widespread complaints of the frontier farmers prompted Caledon to send his trusted military adviser, Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Collins, on a fact-finding mission to the eastern frontier. There, Collins was deeply influenced by Cuyler, the landdrost of Uitenhage, who was unabashedly opposed to the amaXhosa. He persuaded Collins that the humiliation suffered by the British in the war of 1799–1803 had reduced the reputation of the British in the eyes of all parties, and that firm measures must be taken to restore a belief in the superiority of British power.

Collins’s resulting report of 6 August 1809 proposed a two-pronged initiative to extend firmer control over the frontier. The first was to set up a mechanism to regulate the employment of the Khoikhoi labour force. The Hottentot Proclamation of 1 November 1809 (the Caledon Code) duly decreed that written work-contracts had to be drawn up before a magistrate, thus affording the Khoikhoin some legal protection from exploitative masters. But this concession was negated by the instruction that all Khoikhoin must register at a ‘fixed place of abode’, and which forbade them to move about without a ‘certificate’ issued by their landdrost. The effect was to force Khoikhoin to live – and thus work – on white farms, and
this meant that if they attempted to leave a cruel or unjust farmer they would be in violation of the law.

The second of Collins’s proposals was that in the interests of preserving the peace in the eastern districts, all future contact between colonists and amaXhosa should be prevented by expelling every last one of the amaXhosa beyond the Fish River. That effected, the amaXhosa should be prevented from returning to the Zuurveld as they had done after all the previous frontier wars. To ensure this, Collins recommended that the previously porous frontier should be turned into a rigid boundary delineated and guarded by a line of fortifications.

Caledon was not convinced. To expel the amaXhosa from the Zuurveld would require military action, which he was determined to avoid if he could. Moreover, he was not entirely convinced that the Zuurveld belonged by rights to the colonists. But this was not an opportune moment to adopt this position. The drought of 1809 saw the amaXhosa shifting further west into those parts of the Zuurveld less affected, and moving about in parties aggressively begging or raiding along the entire border region from the seaboard to Graaff-Reinet. By mid-1810 hardly any farms were still occupied east of the Uitenhage drostdy, and Bruinjtjieshoogte was being abandoned. With intimidated settlers in flight, it seemed that the amaXhosa had largely regained complete control of the Zuurveld.

The farmers made increasingly desperate appeals to Caledon to intervene to save them, but the governor held fast to his position that even though they were enduring considerable hardships, these still did not justify a war in their defence. To maintain the peace, he prohibited burghers from pursuing or firing on marauders except in self-defence. But the amaXhosa only grew in confidence as a result, openly mocking the apparently pusillanimous farmers and British officials. Insulted and humiliated, Caledon’s own officials declared they could not accept the contempt in which the amaXhosa held them. Cuyler in particular urged that the reconquest of the Zuurveld was essential. Daunted by this widespread and bitter criticism, exhausted by a festering dispute over who was in charge of the troops at the Cape, and conceding that his frontier policy had been a failure, Caledon resigned in July 1811.

Sir John Cradock, who succeeded Caledon on 6 September 1811, was an experienced major-general with a most distinguished career in many
theatres that ranged from Egypt, Spain and Portugal to India. He suffered from none of Caledon’s inhibitions against taking vigorous military action, and was determined to follow Collins’s recommendation that the amaXhosa be cleared out of the Zuurveld. To his way of thinking, the amaXhosa posed a real threat to the security of the hinterland and thus to the stock farmers’ essential supply of meat to British shipping at the Cape. Encouraged by Cuyler at Uitenhage, within a month of his assumption of office he had set in train a military campaign against the Zuurveld amaXhosa. This sudden switch from Caledon’s passive conciliation to offensive measures was entirely on Cradock’s initiative, and did not reflect a change of policy in London. Indeed, Cradock was subsequently reprimanded by the government and sharply reminded that his prime duty was to keep all his troops available for the defence of the Cape station, and not to fritter them away on a distant frontier. But in the Colony the settlers enthusiastically applauded his decisive action.

On 30 September 1811 Cradock invested Lieutenant-Colonel John Graham of Fintry with all civil and military power along the eastern border. The debonair, thirty-four-year-old Scot was fluent in several languages. He had fought with distinction at the battle of Blaauwberg, and since 26 January 1806 had been in command of the Cape Regiment. It was with no reservations that he endorsed Cradock’s frontier ‘solution’ which the governor spelt out in his Instructions of 6 October 1811. Graham was permanently to expel every last one of the Zuurveld amaXhosa over the Fish River, preferably by peaceful means. However, if that were not possible, Cradock authorised him in vague, oblique language to take ‘those measures of example and effect’ necessary to do so, thereby giving Graham a free hand to take violent action against the amaXhosa.6

In mid-October 1811 Graham arrived on the frontier, where he was eagerly welcomed by the settler community. By December 1811, he had assembled nearly 900 regular troops, comprising 167 light dragoons, 221 infantry of the line, 431 men of the Cape Regiment (who would bear the brunt of the fighting to come) and a detachment of Royal Artillery. These troops were joined by about 450 mounted burgher volunteers on commando. This was the largest colonial army ever assembled on the eastern frontier. But that was not all that was new. Its ethos was different too. Previously, colonists had tended to regard the Zuurveld amaXhosa in an ambivalent light, seeing them as long-term labourers and trading partners
when they were not the enemies of the moment. Graham was having none of that. In the spirit of Cradock’s instructions, in his own orders to his army he laid down that Xhosa plundering parties must be pursued to their homesteads where all males were to be killed and their chiefs destroyed. The stark objective, as Cradock later informed the colonial secretary, was ‘to impress on the minds of these savages a proper degree of terror and respect’ and to deter them, once they had been expelled from the Zuurveld, from so much as even contemplating a return.\(^7\) This brutal policy would be a bewildering experience for the amaXhosa, who were habituated after three frontier wars to a period of running skirmishes, cattle raids and general plundering, followed by the cessation of hostilities and a return to life much as it had been before. Now, Graham was setting out to assert unequivocal British military superiority and to hound them out of the Colony altogether, even if this meant laying their familiar world waste with unprecedented inhumanity.

Graham, who was an energetic and inspiring commander, deployed his force in three divisions along the Sundays River and instructed them to advance east, pushing the amaXhosa ahead of them over the Fish. On 20 December 1811 the southern column under Landdrost Cuyler of Uitenhage, who was stationed at Fort Frederick, advanced from the Sundays River mouth towards the Great Place of Chungwa, the now elderly and infirm chief of the amaGqunukhwebe. The somewhat daunted Cuyler discovered that Ndlambe, the Rharhabe chief, had assembled a large number of warriors from the surrounding chiefdoms and was concentrated in the nearby Addo Bush, the densely overgrown country east of the Sundays River. Ndlambe intended making a stand there, and personally challenged Cuyler on 26 December to do his worst. When Cuyler peremptorily ordered him to quit the Zuurveld, Ndlambe stamped his feet violently on the ground and defiantly exclaimed: ‘Here is no honey, I will eat honey and to procure it I shall cross the rivers Sundays, Couga and Zwartkops. This Country is mine, I won it in war, and shall maintain it.’\(^8\) Ndlambe’s forces were drawn up in conventional Xhosa battle array on open ground, but they disintegrated the moment Cuyler’s men opened fire, and melted back into the Addo Bush.

This was only a fleeting success for Cuyler, since his column was not strong enough to pursue Ndlambe and confront his warriors waiting in ambush in the densely overgrown terrain. Graham, who was with the centre
column commanded by Captain George Fraser of the Cape Regiment, decided that the centre and northern columns should converge on the Sundays River close to Cuyler’s position and support him in driving Ndlambe from his stronghold.

Anders Stockenström, the Swedish landdrost of Graaff-Reinet who had joined the VOC to escape his debts, and whose great-grandmother was the daughter of two slaves from Guinea, was in command of the northern column. He was unwilling to move his column south because he feared that doing so would expose his district to Xhosa attack. He decided he must talk the matter over with Graham in person, and with that purpose rode south accompanied by twenty-five burghers. On the way the party stopped at Doorn Nek in the Zuurberg mountains to negotiate with a group of a hundred or so imiDange under their chief, Xasa. The imiDange indignantly refused Stockenström’s order to remove over the Fish River, and became furiously angered when word reached the meeting that British troops elsewhere were attacking the amaXhosa. They turned on Stockenström and his escort, killing him and seven others. The survivors were rescued the next day by a patrol gallantly led by the landdrost’s nineteen-year-old son, Andries Stockenström, an ensign in the Cape Regiment, who was destined to become a major figure on the frontier. Then the young man, who assumed his father’s duties, led the northern column south to join Graham and the central column.

On New Year’s Day 1812 Graham sent about 800 men into the Addo Bush to root out Ndlambe’s warriors. They were made up almost entirely of colonial troops: 400 men of the Cape Regiment, and 350 burghers on commando. The only regulars to accompany them were 50 men of the Royal Artillery and of the 21st Light Dragoons. The amaXhosa had chosen their ground well, and adopted evasive tactics that equalised musket and spear. (The amaXhosa did possess some firearms, but they were few in number because of the small volume and clandestine nature of the gun trade, and used them only to supplement, and not to replace, their conventional weapon, the spear.) The mounted colonial forces were unable to manoeuvre their horses in the dense bush, and found it difficult to concentrate their firepower in the broken terrain. When they could, the amaXhosa isolated small colonial units and engaged them in close combat with spears they had made into stabbing weapons by breaking off the shafts close to the blade. During days of intense bush fighting the colonial forces
embraced the latitude given them to kill all the male amaXhosa they encountered, but since it was impossible – or inconvenient – to distinguish between men and women and children in the dense bush, they indiscriminately shot anything that moved. Concerned by the intensity of the fighting, Graham requested an additional 200 regulars of the 60th Regiment to be despatched by sea from Cape Town to hold the line so that all of the Cape Regiment and the commandos could be freed up to go forward for the operations in the bush.

Eventually, unnerved by the unprecedented intensity of the British attack, Ndlambe retreated across the Fish River on 14–15 January 1812 with all his adherents and cattle, leaving Chungwa and the amaGqunukhwebe in the lurch. Chungwa tried to negotiate with the British, indicating that he would be willing to leave the Zuurveld with his people, but he was too decrepit and unwell to move from the hiding place where his bodyguard had deposited him. A party of Boers tracked him down and cold-bloodedly shot him as he lay helpless on his mat, an atrocity that would become engrained in the collective memory of his people.

The old and infirm Habana and the amaGwali were still holding out in their stronghold in the Rietberg and were attracting other Xhosa remnants that had not yet fled the Zuurveld. On 24 January they foiled a two-pronged offensive by avoiding direct contact with the troops and withdrawing into the vast, overgrown ravines of the Rietberg. Undeterred, on 13 February Graham made use of the reinforcements that had arrived to mount a twelve-day sweep against Habana’s final refuge. For the first time in the course of the Cape Frontier Wars, and setting a frightful precedent, the troops carried out a scorched-earth strategy, implacably putting standing crops and huts to the torch and seizing livestock. The objective was to destroy the basis of the Xhosa economy and, by depriving them of their livelihood, drive them away. Adhering to Graham’s orders to take no male prisoners, his troops killed all those they encountered out of hand, profoundly shocking the amaXhosa, whose practice this had never been. In addition, the troops seized several hundred women and children, and it seems they were subsequently put to forced labour on the frontier farms. Carrying off these women and children was not deliberate British policy, but by permitting it they were following the precedent set in the previous three frontier wars. For frontier farmers and amaXhosa alike, the purpose of war in the past had always been to capture productive sources such as cattle and women. The
British understood that permitting their colonial troops to do so again served as a useful inducement to secure their full cooperation.

By the end of February 1812 Graham declared that all resistance had been broken, that the amaXhosa had retreated over the Fish, and that farmers were beginning to return to the Zuurveld. On 8 March Cradock stated that operations in this, the Fourth Cape Frontier War, were successfully concluded, and commended Graham highly for his ‘good management’ and success ‘beyond expectation’. Just how many amaXhosa had the British expelled from the Zuurveld, an area of some 10 000 square kilometres? The British military estimated the number at about 8 000, but it may have been as high as 20 000.

Yet effective British tactics alone do not explain the speed with which they succeeded in expelling the amaXhosa from the Zuurveld. Certainly, the amaXhosa were traumatised by the unprecedented ferocity of the British offensive, by their systematic destructiveness and by their sheer, incomprehensible mercilessness. As Jeff Peires has put it, they had suffered ‘a new and shattering experience’ they found difficult to internalise. Clearly, the whites were not like other people familiar to the amaXhosa. They were strange, they were *abantu abasemanzini*, ‘the people from the water’ associated with all the mystical power of the sea. For the first time, the amaXhosa had a glimpse of the daunting scale of the military and other resources the Cape was capable of deploying against them, something not at all apparent during the three previous frontier wars. As one of them later told Andries Stockenström, ‘You came at last like locusts. We stood: we could do no more. You said, “Go over the Fish River – that is all we want.” We yielded, and you came here.’

Nevertheless, the amaXhosa could have held out longer in the Zuurveld if they had decided to, as the trajectory of future frontier wars would confirm. It seems that their precipitate retreat across the Fish River had as its overriding objective the preservation of their herds, the basis of their wealth and well-being. And, as it turned out, the British haul of captured cattle was small. The Xhosa assumption was that, as in the past, when peace was restored, they would return to the Zuurveld, their herds almost intact. It was a fatal miscalculation. Cradock and Graham had no intention of allowing them back. The amaXhosa were not to be incorporated into settler society, nor permitted to dwell ever again cheek-by-jowl with the Zuurveld
farmers. The Fourth Cape Frontier War is significant for delineating the stark ‘otherness’ of Africans and Europeans. During its course we find Cradock, Graham and Cuyler regularly referring to the amaXhosa in degrading terms as ‘barbarians’ and ‘savages’, something British officials and officers had not previously been in the habit of doing. A critical line had been crossed in frontier relations which would become increasingly bitter, derogatory and irreconcilable over the years to come.

To ensure that the expelled amaXhosa could never return to the Zuurveld, Cradock gave practical expression to Lieutenant-Colonel Collins’s report of 1809 by immediately fortifying the border with several lines of military posts – in itself a statement of power calculated to overawe the amaXhosa. The purpose of each of the twenty-six posts was to guard a strategic point such as a drift across a river, and to serve as a base for its small garrison to keep hostile territory under observation though regular patrols, and to deliver early warning of any Xhosa incursion. The officers in charge of each post had orders to shoot all amaXhosa who ventured into its vicinity and to take no prisoners. The posts themselves were either rehabilitated farmhouses of wattle and daub, or stone-built shelters enclosed by primitive earth redoubts. There were two main lines of these posts, the first directly along the west bank of the Fish River, and the second behind it in support. A few more scattered posts to the rear of these two lines guarded communications. The entire system of posts hinged on Fort Frederick at Algoa Bay because it was essential to secure the harbour. Overland transportation from Cape Town where the main garrison was stationed was slow and unreliable, and the only way to bring in troops quickly to reinforce the border defences was by sea.

A centrally located site on the Kowie River in the Uitenhage district was selected as the main military supply depot for the outlying posts. It was also the headquarters for the standing reserve of troops that could be called upon to support the posts in an emergency. In August 1812 the colonial secretary in Cape Town proclaimed that the place would be called ‘Graham’s Town’ after the man ‘through whose spirited exertions the kaffir hordes have been driven from this valuable district’. In the following year another military camp was established in the Graaff-Reinet district at the northern end of the lines to serve the same purpose as Grahamstown (as it was soon spelt) did in the south, and it was named Cradock after the governor.
While small units of Royal Artillery, light dragoons and line infantry made up part of the garrison holding the lines of fortifications, the main weight fell upon the men of the Cape Regiment (515 rank and file and 79 officers and NCOs) whose headquarters were transferred from Rietvallei to Grahamstown. Because Cradock considered them better adapted to the irregular warfare of the frontier zone than British troops, it was not long before he increased the strength of the Cape Regiment to 800 men. The families of the married men of the regiment accompanied them to the newly established depots and outposts. These rapidly developed into domesticated settlements, their inhabitants increasingly acculturated to a colonial style of living. Illiterate soldiers and their children were educated at a regimental school founded in 1814 in Grahamstown. However, these military posts also encouraged the vices associated with soldiers on station. Soldiers of all ranks sought sex from indigenous women who were driven to prostitution by poverty and poor alternative economic opportunities. Prostitution was especially rife at Fort Frederick with its increased garrison and the impoverished Bethelsdorp mission nearby, and the incidence of venereal disease in both the fort and the mission rose accordingly.

It was both Cradock’s and Graham’s intention that military settlers – discharged British soldiers or military pensioners and their families – should be placed alongside the frontier posts to form a cordon of small semi-military agricultural settlements that would provision the posts and supplement the garrisons when need arose. Nothing came of this, although (as we shall see) the idea would be resuscitated and implemented in the future. Meanwhile, the security of the Cape’s eastern frontier with its white farmers and Khoikhoi labour force was placed primarily in the hands of the Colony’s brown soldiers, charged with keeping the amaXhosa at bay.

The fortified lines served their main purpose, which was to deter the amaXhosa from returning to the Zuurveld en masse. But the Fish River in itself made for a poor barrier thanks to the broken, bushy terrain and to the fact that for much of the year it was no more than a muddy stream that could be forded at all points besides the drifts guarded by the military posts. Consequently, determined and revengeful Xhosa raiding parties could evade British patrols and strike at settler farms almost at will. This meant that the commandos raised in 1811 could not yet be disbanded, and the burghers on patrol duty were unable to give proper attention to their farming activities, which suffered accordingly. In December 1813, a few months before he was
replaced as governor by Lord Charles Somerset, Cradock was forced to concede ‘with pain’ that the amaXhosa could penetrate his carefully arranged defensive system, and that it had therefore failed in at least part of its purpose.\footnote{14}

As Hermann Giliomee has concluded, the Fourth Cape Frontier War and the expulsion of the amaXhosa from the Zuurveld was the culmination of the first phase of intensive contact between the colonists and the amaXhosa.\footnote{15} This war ruptured the ties of trade and labour that had kept the two communities together despite the disruptions of the three previous frontier wars. No decisive victory had then been possible because, for their part, the Zuurveld amaXhosa lacked coordinated leadership and were distracted by their own internal rivalries. Nor could they match the superior military technology of the colonists, and developed no coherent plan for driving the settlers permanently off the Zuurveld. On their side, the burghers had possessed the battle-winning muskets and horses, but they were few in numbers, their leaders were no more than buccaneers, and they were in chronic, enervating semi-revolt against the authorities at the Cape. As a result, none of the successive colonial administrations – whether the VOC, the British in their first occupation of the Cape, or the Batavians – had been able to enforce the Fish River boundary laid down in 1780, and the frontier zone had continued to be a porous one. The British changed all that once they conquered the Cape for the second time in 1806. They damped down the rebelliousness of the frontier farmers and based their frontier policy on the view that the Fish River marked the unambiguous boundary with emaXhoseni, and they were determined to uphold it. The corollary was that they recognised no Xhosa claims west of this boundary and were prepared to employ the harshest military methods to expel them from the Zuurveld, methods that were destined to become standard when the amaXhosa refused to acquiesce in their fate and continued to resist.
The Fifth Cape Frontier War, 1819–1820
(Makhanda’s War)

HMS MEDWAY DOCKED in Cape Town on 6 April 1814, and the following day the new governor of the Cape, Lord Charles Somerset, came ashore with a numerous suite. He discourteously gave his predecessor scant time to wind up his affairs, thus instantly alienating many of the Cape elite who were Sir John Cradock’s friends. Somerset was the second son of the fifth Duke of Beaufort and thus descended from King Edward III of England. He was undeniably overbearing and autocratic by inclination, and rode roughshod over those who disagreed with him. As befitted an aristocrat he lived in extravagant style and spent beyond his means, so much so that he became notorious for using every opportunity afforded by his official position to prop up his precarious personal finances. Yet, for all that, he was also an administrator of genuine ability who took the affairs of the Cape seriously, founding hospitals, libraries and museums, promoting better farming methods and the improved breeding of livestock.

Somerset had barely settled into Government House (which he found far too small for his grandiose tastes) when, by the Treaty of Fontainebleau on 11 April 1814, the triumphant powers exiled the defeated Emperor Napoleon to the tiny Mediterranean island of Elba. Victory confirmed Great Britain as the world’s predominant power at sea, with the Royal Navy equal to all the other navies of the world combined. Until the 1870s no foreign power would be able to challenge Britain’s maritime supremacy; indeed, none would have the wish to do so because British mastery of the seas guaranteed the peaceful benefits of international free trade. During the course of 1814, while they engaged with the other powers in rearranging the post-Napoleonic world, British statesmen recognised that the Cape was a vital link in the burgeoning, triangular trading system between Great
Britain, India and the Americas, and that its place in the imperial system was an essential one. They feared that if the Cape were restored to the newly liberated Dutch (Napoleon had incorporated them directly into his empire in July 1810), they would not necessarily govern this strategic naval base in Britain’s interests. Consequently, the foreign secretary, Viscount Castlereagh, resolved to make the occupation of the Cape permanent. When on 13 August 1814 the Anglo-Dutch Treaty (also known as the London Convention) was signed after protracted negotiations by the United Kingdom and the Sovereign Principality of the United Netherlands, certain exceptions were accordingly made to Britain’s original undertaking to return the Dutch colonial possession it had conquered during the long war. The Cape of Good Hope was one of these exceptions and it was transferred to Great Britain. The Final Act of the Congress of Vienna, signed on 9 June 1815 between all the great powers, confirmed Britain’s possession of the Cape.

With British rule came the assertion of English cultural supremacy at the Cape, whether it be its language, emblems, dress, architecture, food or social conventions. Somerset was more than happy to do his best to ‘civilise’ the Colony, but found the Dutch-speaking colonists determined to preserve their own language and cultural distinctiveness, especially when it came to religion. The further from the urban centres of the Western Cape, the less the Boers of the countryside were ready to accept or adopt the new British ways.

The Boers of the eastern frontier were especially resentful of the new order and in particular of its perceived favouritism towards the Khoikhoi. They were aggrieved by the presence of the Cape Regiment garrisoning Cradock’s new lines of fortifications along the border, and incensed by the activities of the ‘Black Circuit’ of 1812 when the new circuit judges (instituted by the British administration) heard the complaints maltreated Khoikhoi labourers brought against their masters. A further cause of grievance was the shortage of land for the growing burgher population, three-quarters of whom did not own a farm. In 1813 Cradock had tackled one of the perceived root causes of lawlessness along the frontier by ending the loan farm system and replacing it with perpetual quitrent title to farms that had been properly surveyed and beached off. This innovation put a straightjacket on landholding, and there was much talk of moving beyond the border and accepting the overlordship of African chiefs in return for
land. And then there were the rough, lawless types, eking out a precarious existence on the unproductive margins of settlement, mostly interconnected through marriage. Prominent among them were the sons of Marthinus Prinsloo, the unreconciled leader of the rebellions of 1795 and 1799.

Their fractious discontent exploded in the Slachtersnek Rebellion that sorely tested the mettle of the young Andries Stockenström, now the deputy landdrost of Graaff-Reinet. Although himself a slave-owner with much culturally in common with the more respectable burghers with whom he identified as an Afrikaner, he nevertheless was wedded to the British concept of the rule of law and equal justice for all being the basis for sound government. The rebellion had its beginnings when in 1813 Stockenström summoned Freek Bezuidenhout, one of the violent crew of frontier ruffians, to answer charges laid against him by Booy, one of his Khoikhoi labourers. The case simmered on for two years, Bezuidenhout refused to appear in court, and on 10 October 1815 he was shot dead in a brief firefight after Stockenström, who was determined to uphold order against anarchy, despatched a small party of the Cape Regiment to arrest him. At Bezuidenhout’s funeral, his brother Hans swore to avenge him, and with Hendrik Prinsloo raised a rebellion among the malcontented burghers of Bruintjieshoogte and the Zuurveld. They failed to attract any of the better-off farmers despite threats of the dire consequences that would be visited on them if they did not join the uprising. As in 1799, the rebels tried to bring Ngqika in on their side. The proposed deal was that Ngqika was to aid the rebels in driving away the British. In return, the amaXhosa would take possession of the entire Zuurveld in return for allowing the rebels to occupy the Kat River valley in Ngqika’s territory. Nothing came of these negotiations. In November 1815 Jacob Cuyler, the feisty landdrost of Uitenhage, led out a force against the rebels and rounded them up with a minimum of bloodshed because they were already disheartened by their lack of popular support.

The rebels were tried at Uitenhage for armed rebellion. On 9 March 1816, to the profound shock of their frontier community, five of the guilty were publicly hanged (four of them twice because the ropes broke on the first attempt). Despite subsequent Afrikaner nationalists’ determination to make martyrs of the hanged rebels in the cause against alien British tyranny, Hermann Giliomee is surely right to suggest that the most significant consequence of the Slachtersnek Rebellion was the firm establishment of
the British administration’s control over the eastern frontier. A government that was prepared to hang white men was clearly not to be trifled with. Thereafter the Boers respected the rule of law and were always ready to ride out dutifully on commando when summoned to do so.3

With the fractious frontier Boers brought to order, Lord Charles Somerset was determined to deal next with the amaXhosa. However, he was not alone among the British governors during the first forty years of the nineteenth century who struggled to formulate a consistent, workable frontier policy. In a nutshell, the amaXhosa had either to be conquered in their entirety and ruled as a subject colonial people, or firmly excluded beyond a defined border. Either way, this required the exercise of overwhelming power. But the imperial government, wedded to its perception of the Cape as a strategic naval possession, remained unwilling to supply the necessary armed forces required, and Cape Colony itself lacked the resources to take up the military slack. Consequently, while the British had possessed sufficient strength in the Fourth Cape Frontier War to dispossess the frontier amaXhosa of their land and drive them beyond the colonial boundary, they did not have the military resources to exercise absolute military control over the frontier and to deter the amaXhosa, whose ever more determined resistance they had provoked, from taking future retaliatory action. The inevitable upshot was a continuing cycle of mounting violence.

Somerset, determined to assert himself as governor, decided he must address the frontier problem. Since the end of the Fourth Cape Frontier War, the amaXhosa had continued to engage in cross-border raids, bypassing the inadequate line of frontier fortifications, and the farmers of the Zuurveld remained fearful. By 1817 they had lost 36 000 head of cattle to the raiders, 90 of the 145 burgher families had abandoned their farms and the rest were on the verge of flight. Somerset believed that the best means of sealing off the frontier would be through denser colonial settlement, but that was not yet a practicable solution for lack of London’s support, although it would soon be. For the moment, therefore, he decided he must continue to employ military muscle to protect the frontier farmers from Xhosa incursions, while at the same time attempting to transform the amaXhosa into more docile neighbours through ‘civilising’ them. In the first instance, he envisaged missionaries introducing them to productive agriculture and peaceful ways. He also believed that if he could enter into amicable relations with the Xhosa chiefs, he could negotiate a cessation of
their raids against the colonists in return for allowing them to cross over the border to trade peacefully. As he explained to Earl Bathurst, the secretary for war and the colonies, through such interactions ‘civilization and its consequences may be introduced into countries hitherto barbarous and unexplored’.

Somerset travelled to the frontier to impose his policy. He summoned Ngqika, Ndlambe and lesser chiefs to attend him on the banks of the Kat River, at the same place where Janssens had met Ngqika in 1802. The Fourth Cape Frontier War had caused a major disruption in Xhosa society because Ndlambe and his allies, expelled into Ngqika’s domain, had since destabilised the region politically and their many adherents had placed great strain on its limited resources. Seemingly unaware of the extent of these tensions within emaXhoseni, it was Somerset’s intention to induce the amaXhosa to assume collective responsibility for cattle thefts through a ‘spoor’ or reprisal system. A farmer would report a loss to a military post, and a patrol would follow the cattle’s tracks (spoor) to a homestead that would either hand over the lifted cattle or pay compensation. A homestead head innocent of the theft could recoup his loss by demanding compensation in turn from the real thieves.

Determined to overawe the Xhosa chiefs, on 3 April 1817 Somerset received them in a white pavilion with a four-inch howitzer placed at either side of the entrance. His military escort, 300 strong, their weapons primed, was drawn up in a hollow square. Ngqika, Ndlambe and the lesser chiefs, separated from the 800 warriors accompanying them, were escorted into the menacing square where Somerset grandly took a chair while the amaXhosa squatted on the ground. It was Somerset’s misplaced belief that Ngqika, as the senior chief of the amaRharhabe, was in a position to assert his power over the other frontier chiefs, and that he could be held responsible for enforcing the Spoor Law. When Ngqika tried to explain that he did not possess such authority, Somerset lost his temper, and Ngqika, with a nervous eye on the soldiers surrounding him, and cajoled by the gifts of a grey horse and a sack containing shawls, handkerchiefs, buttons, beads, mirrors, knives and a tinder-box, gave way. Suitably cowed, he also acceded to Somerset’s command that he was to prevent any amaXhosa crossing over the Fish River into the Colony.
Believing he had secured Xhosa compliance, Somerset completed his tour of the frontier by inspecting its defences. He gave instructions for a chain of fourteen posts along the Fish River and for a second line of thirteen to their rear. The existing third line was abolished. Sixteen of these forts already stood and were strengthened and repaired, and three new ones were built. The layout and construction of the posts varied considerably, from being stout, loopholed stone enclosures with bastions for artillery at the corners, to more insubstantial fortifications. Somerset also increased the strength of the 21st Light Dragoons stationed along the border in order to pursue and overtake marauders.

Confident that he had made the border impregnable for the time being, Somerset returned much satisfied to Cape Town. There he found a despatch from Lord Bathurst informing him that the Cape garrison was to be reduced from 4 000 men to 2 400 infantry with no cavalry at all. Somerset was exasperated, but decided to retain at least 1 100 troops along the frontier to deter the amaXhosa. To fill the gap left by the dragoons that were withdrawn in July 1817, the Cape Regiment was reconstituted in September 1817 as the Cape Corps of Infantry and Cavalry (also called the Cape Light Infantry and Cape Cavalry), with separate infantry and cavalry sections. Reliable parties of Khoikhoi NCOs and white officers toured the country with brandy and tobacco to encourage volunteers, but found few on farmsteads and almost none at all on mission stations.

The Cape garrison could have been even worse hit, because at the time British troops across the empire were reduced by nearly 59 000 men. Britain had emerged from the Napoleonic Wars not only supreme at sea, but also as the world’s greatest imperial power. In 1792 there had been twenty-six British colonies, but by 1816 these had nearly doubled to forty-three. Although the Royal Navy was the prime, essential arm in defending this empire, naval bases, such as that at Simon’s Town, had to be garrisoned. Unstable frontier regions, such as the Cape Colony’s porous and expanding frontier of white settlement, had to be protected. For the rest of the nineteenth century, colonial defence of this sort constituted the major commitment of the British Army (it was not expected to fight a major war in Europe, the Crimean War of 1853–1856 being the single exception). Colonial defence was chronically constrained, however, by the taxpayers’ reluctance after Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo on 18 June 1815 to pay for bloated naval and military establishments during peacetime, and by
Parliament’s passionate insistence on economy and retrenchment. Between 1815 and 1834 naval estimates fell by over half, and army estimates slumped to 20 per cent of what they had been, with the military establishment declining from 233,952 to 87,993 soldiers. To meet its multifarious imperial commitments abroad, the reduced army had to scale back on domestic defence. Thus, of the army’s 103 infantry regiments in the 1830s, 79 (or two-thirds) might be stationed abroad or be in transit, while only 24 remained in Britain itself – and they would be waiting their turn for embarkation in due course to distant garrisons.

Overstretched and scattered across the globe, these garrisons were a form of imperial bluff that masked real vulnerability. They gave the impression of a potent power held in reserve, ready to be summoned if necessary, but which in reality was slow to arrive over the great stretches of ocean, and was far more constrained than its enemies might suppose. It must not be thought, though, that the role of these imperial garrisons was exclusively military. Besides doing their best to guard the empire, permanent garrisons had a considerable impact on colonial economies and societies. The building of military works and the prolonged stationing of soldiers with money to spend injected capital into small communities, and colonists certainly gained financially from the military presence. Officers mixed with the colonial elites, contributing actively to their social life and living style. In all, soldiers were generally active agents in spreading British norms and tastes abroad, not least, in the early years of the nineteenth century, in exporting evangelical Christianity and philanthropy to the rude frontier.

The burden of supplying soldiers for imperial garrisons fell on infantry regiments of the line (all regiments that did not have a specialist role) because the elite Guards battalions seldom went on foreign service. Most cavalry regiments, too, remained in Britain. Specialist corps of Royal Engineers and Royal Artillery were ordered to the colonies in small detachments only as need arose. Military service was long, normally for twenty-one years in the infantry and twenty-four in the cavalry. Regiments were stationed abroad for protracted periods of ten to twelve years. Enlistment was voluntary, but the harsh brutalities of an irksome and harsh disciplinary code, the insanitary, cramped, cheerless and squalid living conditions in barracks, the discouragement of marriage, the high rates of disease and death in foreign garrisons, and the years spent away from home meant it was very difficult to find sufficient men to fill the ranks. Those
who did enlist were predominantly of the unskilled labouring class. ‘Going for a soldier’ was neither popular nor honourable, and liquor and deception were the tools of recruitment. In such circumstances it was not possible to be selective, and all that was required of a soldier was a minimal degree of physical fitness and a minimum height. Their respectability and sobriety were not a concern.

Officers, whose commissions were still by purchase and influence as they had been in the eighteenth century, continued to come from another world entirely. A wide, unbridgeable gap of social standing and human sympathy yawned between them and the rank and file, which they regarded as consisting generally of incorrigibly idle, dissolute and vicious reprobates who required the sternest discipline. Punishment was no longer quite as harsh as it had been, but was fearsome enough. It was only in 1829, for example, that flogging in regimental courts for crimes such as desertion, insubordination or theft of army property was reduced to a limit of 300 lashes.

In sum, the British Army in the decades after Waterloo continued to be a conservative and self-contained institution, deeply entrenched in its authoritarian and hierarchical traditions. Its ethos and operations were dominated by senior officers who were veterans of the Napoleonic Wars. They remained convinced that their training, habits and practices had been vindicated by victory, and that the surest guarantee of success was to repeat what had been done in the past. As we have already seen in the case of Brigadier-General Vandeleur in the Third Cape Frontier War, irregular warfare in the bush tended to flummox them.

Such were the British troops stationed along the Cape eastern frontier in Somerset’s day, with the regulars’ headquarters at the Castle in distant Cape Town. It was a time when metropolitan uniforms were becoming more elaborate, with broad-topped ‘Regency’ shakos and long-tailed coats. But earlier campaigning in the Cape and in India was having an effect on dress. Officers often wore blue frock coats or short red shell jackets rather than the regulation coat. Their large, ostentatious shakos had black oilskin covers and were regularly abandoned for a low, peaked forage cap worn with a white cover which might extend to protect the back of the neck from the sun.
While Somerset’s depleted forces along the frontier busied themselves in strengthening the new chain of posts which remained ‘in the air’ without the backing of a large settler population to their rear, great events were occurring in emaXhoseni. East of the Kei River the Xhosa Great House was undergoing a resurgence as the amaGcaleka recovered from their internal divisions and their defeat by Ngqika in 1795. Hintsa, the weak Khawuta’s Great Son, who had been only five years old when he succeeded his father in 1794, had achieved his majority and asserted his rule. Hintsa has been considered by many the most impressive member of Tshawe’s line. Honourable but politically astute, he found favour with the poor through his unfailing generosity, but built up his own cattle wealth by bearing down on the wealthy. Under him the Great House re-established its control over the lesser Xhosa chiefdoms east of the Kei, perhaps most dramatically when he engineered the massacre of seventeen refractory councillors of the Ngqosini clan during a hunting expedition. Hintsa then contemplated extending his authority over the Xhosa chiefdoms west of the Kei, and to that end intervened in the strife between Ngqika and Ndlambe. He naturally threw his support behind Ndlambe because he hated Ngqika, who had humiliated and imprisoned him in the past, and added fuel to the flames of their discord by recognising Ndlambe as the chief of the amaRharhabe while slighting Ngqika entirely. Ndlambe’s hand was strengthened not only by Hintsa’s support and by his reconciliation at this time with his powerful son, Mdushane, who had opposed him in the past, but by the rise of the great war-doctor, Nxele.

The Xhosa world had been thrown into confusion by the aggressive irruption of the whites, and their reaction to defeat, loss of land and growing pressure of population was to seek supernatural aid as a way of controlling the unfathomable foreigners. But since the ancient, familiar otherworldly forces had failed to rise to the challenge, two contradictory alternatives presented themselves: either armed resistance against the invaders with the support of newly recruited forms of divine aid; or submission as preached by the missionaries purveying Christianity.

The rival Rharhabe chiefs each adopted a spiritual advisor who mirrored the route he preferred to follow, and this was in conformity with familiar Xhosa practice where dialogue between the diviner and client was circumscribed by what the client was willing to accept. Ngqika patronised Ntsikana, a Christian convert who preached peaceful coexistence with
Europeans; while Ndlambe harboured Nxele who, although likewise influenced by Christianity, was also inspired by a sense of awakening black identity and prophesied that the amaXhosa would drive out the white man.

Nxele’s real name was Makhanda, but out of respect people avoided addressing him as such, and called him Nxele, which means ‘the Left-Handed’. The Boers translated this as Links, or ‘Left’, but the British turned Links into Lynx, or wildcat. Nxele had heard Van der Kemp preach at Bethelsdorp, and had absorbed elements of Christian teaching which he incorporated into a new cosmological vision. He preached of a supreme being, Mdalidiphu, the god of the black people, who was superior to Thixo, the missionaries’ god. In his Manichaean view the world was a battleground between the two divinities, and Mdalidiphu would punish Thixo and his sinful followers. Nxele proclaimed that he himself was the brother of Tayi, the son of God, whom the whites had killed, and for which great crime they had been thrown into the sea, and from which they had eerily emerged in search of land, theabantu abasemanzi. As Mdalidiphu’s son and his agent on earth, Nxele declared that he would drive the whites back into the sea from which they had come.

Under Ndlambe’s patronage, Nxele became politically powerful and rich, encouraging his followers to make love so that the blacks would multiply and fill the earth. Distorting the Christian teaching of the Resurrection, he promised that he would bring back to life all those blacks who had died, along with their cattle.\textsuperscript{6} Nxele increasingly operated as a traditional war-doctor, and his influence became a vital element in the coalition Ndlambe was building up against Ngqika, whom Nxele usefully denounced as an adulterous and incestuous sinner through his marriage to Thuthula, Ndlambe’s abducted wife.

Ntsikana’s theology was a reaction to Nxele’s. Following some contact with white missionaries, he was inspired by a vision to preach the Christian gospel in isiXhosa with Xhosa imagery and musical forms. He taught that God was a great cloak that protects all true believers, and that submission to his will was the way to find peace. In search of a patron he had first approached Ndlambe, but when he was rejected, he turned to Ngqika. He failed to convert Ngqika and gained only a small following, but Ngqika took him on as a councillor, and Ntsikana used his influence to encourage him to seek the support of the British. Ntsikana died in 1821, entrusting his
followers to the missionaries, and preaching peace and submission to the last.

In the months following the conference at the Kat River in April 1817, Ngqika found his authority and popularity undermined by the aggressive implementation of the Spoor Law, even though the main targets of colonial raids to recover allegedly stolen cattle were Ndlambe and his allies. Angered by this victimisation, but seeing how it worked against Ngqika’s reputation, Ndlambe seized the opportunity to settle matters with his nephew. His men began provocatively raiding Ngqika’s adherents for cattle, and in October 1818 Ngqika took the bait. He mobilised his army of 2 000 men at his Great Place on the Tyhume River with the intention of attacking Ndlambe’s Great Place on the Buffalo River. Before the army marched off, Ntsikana approached Ngqika with a clay pot full of water and cried: ‘Nkosi, please do not fight with your brothers, because if you do you will fall.’ He then smashed the bowl to the ground and prophesied, ‘this is what is going to happen if you go there and fight!’ But Ngqika was undeterred and had every confidence in his army’s commander, his son Maqoma.

Maqoma was to prove the greatest of the Xhosa military leaders, a key figure in Xhosa resistance during three frontier wars who would come to personify idumo, or heroic fame and renown. He was born around 1798 of one of Ngqika’s junior wives. He was thus of Ngqika’s Right-Hand House, and although his eldest and favourite son, he was not first in line to succeed him. For many years Ngqika favoured him as his heir, but when his Great Wife, Suthu, a Thembu princess, gave birth to Sandile in 1820, the succession had to go to him. Maqoma was known by his praise-name awarded by his father: Jongumsobomvu, meaning ‘watching the sunrise’ and connoting alert readiness for action. He grew up in the pervasive, menacing atmosphere of internecine warfare and the growing colonial threat, but possessed the charismatic personality necessary to rise to the challenge. Although small in stature, he was sharp of tongue with a piercing eye, and was a strong, skilled and aggressive fighter. To assert his high status, he always wore the royal skin of a leopard he had killed himself. His homestead was on the lower Kat River near present-day Fort Beaufort. He lived there with the amaJingqi, his loyal circumcision-mates, or amafanenkosi, building up his following and wealth in cattle.
Although Ngqika had entrusted his army to him, Maqoma had as yet no experience in war, and he was about to face Ndlambe, the wily veteran of many a battle. During the march south, Maqoma’s men camped near the base of a mountain called Ntaba kaNdoda in the environs of present-day King William’s Town. The next morning, they resumed their march, and very soon came in sight of several hundred of Ndlambe’s warriors camped below the Debe ridge on an open plain scarred by shallow depressions known as amalinde. Preparing to engage, the leaders of both sides yelled out their typically cryptic, heroic challenges and counter-challenges: ‘Go! Go! As in former days (to victory) and enquire of that matter at close quarters’; and ‘Go forward and die. It has ever been the fortune of men to be killed.’

Maqoma’s army charged, and tumbled into a trap cleverly devised by Mdushane, Ndlambe’s eldest and recently reconciled son. Ndlambe’s warriors in the plain were his young, less battle-hardened men, and they deliberately fell back, exposing Maqoma’s flanks to several thousand warriors lying in wait in a nearby forest. Apart from Ndlambe’s veterans, the fresh warriors falling upon Maqoma’s shocked army were from the Gqunukhwebe, Dange, Mbalu and Ntinde chiefdoms allied with Ndlambe, and included a contingent of amaGcaleka led by Hintsa himself.

The fighting lasted all day until Maqoma’s warriors eventually broke out of the encirclement and fled up the slopes of Ntaba kaNdoda. Maqoma was seriously wounded and only narrowly escaped capture when his surviving amaJingqi carried him off the battlefield. His conduct had been conspicuously brave, and so, although vanquished, he was not disgraced. Nevertheless, his defeat had been catastrophic enough. Mdushane’s men, some of whom had horses and guns, pursued the shattered army and raided their communities, seizing around 6 000 cattle. The wounded left behind on the battlefield were all killed, many of them impaled, and Maqoma’s losses amounted to 300 men or more. Ngqika had no choice but to retire north with his remaining cattle out of the range of Ndlambe’s victorious army, and re-established his Great Place under the lee of the Winterberg mountains. To this day, the battle of Amalinde is remembered for the great slaughter that took place, and for the ferocity with which kin slew kin.

Following his great victory, Ndlambe sent urgent messages to the Colony declaring that he was anxious to remain at peace, but the British could not abandon their ally Ngqika. Consequently, on receiving Ngqika’s appeal for military support, in early December 1818 Somerset despatched an
expedition of infantry and mounted burghers led by Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Brereton, military commander of the eastern frontier, to invade Ndlambe’s territory. Joined by Ngqika’s vengeful warriors, they burnt homesteads as they progressed and captured 23,000 cattle, leaving Ndlambe’s people utterly destitute. Avoiding a confrontation against impossible odds, Ndlambe withdrew his people into the nearby forests. Brereton, unable to bring Ndlambe to battle, moved back into the Colony, making Ngqika a gift of 11,000 of the captured cattle.

Spurred on by Nxele’s visions, Ndlambe was determined to be revenged and to take the war to the British. The ensuing Fifth Cape Frontier War was known to the amaXhosa as Makhanda’s War on account of Nxele’s leading role in the conflict. In January 1819 Ndlambe launched a series of raids into the Zuurveld. Easily evading the line of fortified posts and military patrols, his men attacked settler farms and ambushed military patrols (they had learnt that muskets did not fire well in wet weather), seizing cattle as well as firearms. By February it appeared that the Zuurveld had fallen back into Xhosa hands, and despairing Boers were cowering in their wagon laagers, pleading for assistance. Somerset declared martial law, and in March 1819 replaced the fumbling Brereton with Colonel Thomas Willshire, known (with good reason) as ‘Tiger Tom’, a veteran of the Peninsular War of 1808–1814 when the British fought Napoleon in Portugal and Spain. Willshire was despatched from the Cape with reinforcements while Andries Stockenström, now the landdrost of Graaff-Reinet, was ordered to raise a large commando. However, before the British were in a position to take the field, Ndlambe’s warriors appeared to have withdrawn from the Zuurveld. What the British did not realise was that they were in fact massing in the impenetrable Fish River bush in preparation for what Tim Stapleton has called ‘the most ambitious military endeavour in Xhosa history’.9

On 12 April 1819, at midday, about 10,000 Xhosa warriors from Ndlambe’s amaRharhabe and the amaGqunukhwebe of Phato, the son of Chungwa, along with their allies from among other Xhosa chiefdoms expelled from the Zuurveld, attacked Grahamstown. Since its establishment as a military camp, Grahamstown had grown into a village and was the symbol of the British occupation of the Zuurveld. Its broad main street was lined by a straggle of cottages and half-completed public buildings. A triangular parade ground was at the street’s western end, and 900 metres to its south-east were the solidly built East Barracks. Nxele, who was the
guiding hand in the Xhosa venture, had intended to attack under cover of night, but the British observed the lurking Xhosa presence behind a hill overlooking the town and forced on the battle. The ensuing encounter illustrates how Xhosa tactics were being modified by observing British methods, and were being influenced by the example of a number of British deserters and renegade Khoikhoi agterryers who were skilled in firearms and who had joined Ndlambe’s ranks. Moreover, Nxele had himself carefully studied the defences of Grahamstown under the pretext of engaging in theological discussions with the military chaplain, and while apparently idly chatting with military officers.

The bold attack came as complete surprise to the British, who had never dreamt that the amaXhosa would dare target their headquarters. A few days earlier a Xhosa interpreter – in reality a spy working for Nxele – had deliberately misled Willshire by warning him that the amaXhosa were crossing the Fish River close to the coast, and Tiger Tom had duly despatched a company of British troops southwards to patrol the area. This left Grahamstown with about 350 defenders, comprising 45 men of the 38th Regiment, 135 men of the Royal African Corps (a regiment of foreign adventurers and captured British deserters with decided disciplinary shortcomings), 120 troopers of the Cape Corps, a detachment of Royal Artillery manning five cannons, and a few armed settlers.

In preparing to confront the Xhosa army, Willshire sent sixty men of the Royal African Corps to defend the East Barracks. He drew up the rest of his forces on a slope in front of a stream outside the village itself. They were deployed in two ranks, the front one kneeling. The artillery was placed on higher ground to their rear. For all their indiscipline when in barracks, most of the British soldiers were veterans of the Napoleonic Wars and knew how to comport themselves in combat. The amaXhosa were armed mainly with their traditional weapons, although a few carried muskets, which they handled ineffectively. Nxele divided the Xhosa army into four divisions, and to the disquiet of the British defenders marched them to fixed positions just as a European army would have been. Two of the divisions, those under Mdushane, Ndlambe’s warlike son, and Khobe, a subsidiary Gqunukhwebe chief, attacked the main British defensive line. A third group under Nxele himself, who (as any other war-doctor was wont to do) vainly promised that the British bullets would turn to water, assaulted the East Barracks in a
flanking movement. The fourth, and smallest division, moved round to the south to intercept anyone fleeing the village.

Mdushane’s and Khobe’s men, who broke off the long shafts of their spears for close combat, made repeated attacks but took heavy casualties from the steady, skilled British volley-fire and from the artillery firing shrapnel shells and cannister. Many of the amaXhosa were terrified by the smoke and flash of the muskets and cannon, and warriors were seen holding their hands or hide cloaks up to their eyes so they would not see the horrifying pyrotechnic display. The most intense fighting took place where Nxele’s men penetrated the external walls of the East Barracks, and where some got inside the hospital building. It is claimed that Elizabeth Salt, the wife of one of the British soldiers, passed through the ranks of the amaXhosa warriors, who did not molest women during war, carrying what looked like a baby but was in fact a vital sack of gunpowder to the defenders. Seeing the East Barracks to be in danger of falling, Willshire sent some men of the Cape Corps to reinforce the hard-pressed defenders. At this critical moment a party of 130 Khoikhoi buffalo hunters, led by Jan Boesak, made their timely arrival. They were Christian converts from the Theopolis mission station, founded in 1813 by the LMS on the Kowie River, and with their experienced marksmanship they adroitly picked off the Xhosa leaders and helped drive off Nxele’s division. After two and a half hours of desperate fighting, the amaXhosa finally broke off their attack and fled back towards the Fish River, their wounded crawling away while trying to stop up the bullet holes with tufts of grass. The Kowie River has its source in the hills above Grahamstown, and many of the amaXhosa died in the waters of the ‘Kowie ditch’, still called egazini, the place of blood. The British did not pursue the fleeing amaXhosa far for fear of leaving Grahamstown defenceless.

The losses suffered by the two sides were very lopsided, and demonstrated that disciplined musket volley-fire supported by artillery could be almost as lethal as breech-loading rifle-fire would prove in the last Cape Frontier War fifty-eight years later. On the British side, only two men were killed and five wounded. Estimates of Xhosa losses varied considerably and grew ever greater with the telling. Three days after the battle Willshire reported that 150 Xhosa corpses had been left behind in the rout. Three weeks later a Cape Town newspaper claimed that 500 had been killed. Ten years later, settler Thomas Pringle stated that 1 400 had died; but
in 1876 Charles Stretch, who had fought in the battle, was putting the figure at 2 000. Of more significance, though, than confirming the precise extent of Xhosa losses, is the fact that the largest Xhosa army ever assembled had suffered a grave, morale-shattering defeat.10

Stung by the hard-fought battle of Grahamstown, the British now took the offensive. On 22 July 1819 Willshire led three converging columns across the Fish River into Ndlambe’s territory. The right column consisted of 160 mounted Cape Corps and 380 Boer volunteers. The centre column, accompanied by Willshire, was made up of 400 British infantry, 68 British cavalry, and 400 Boers supported by four pieces of artillery. Commanding the left column, Stockenström led 560 mounted Boers. Another 360 soldiers and Boers were held in reserve in Grahamstown and other posts. The campaign was no easy promenade, however, and both Xhosa hit-and-run night attacks and unexpected winter rains hampered operations. Nevertheless, when Ndlambe attempted to concentrate his people in the dense Fish River bush, Boer volunteers under Stockenström drove them out into the open where they came under bombardment from rockets and artillery, and cavalry pursued them further east. Once again, as in the previous war, the amaXhosa were shocked that the British indiscriminately killed women and children. ‘Your troops’, a Xhosa emissary complained to Willshire, ‘cover the plains, and swarm in the thickets, where they cannot distinguish the man from the woman, and kill all.’11

The systematic destruction of their crops and the seizure of their cattle meant that famine threatened Ndlambe’s people, who were driven right back to the Kei River. On 16 August Nxele handed himself over to Stockenström, hoping that his surrender would be enough to persuade the British to cease hostilities. ‘Lynx’ had posed too real a threat to British rule to be treated magnanimously, and he was sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island in Table Bay. The VOC in the late seventeenth century had been the first to use this desolate, windswept place to secure political offenders, and the British followed suit. Nxele did not remain a captive for long. In 1820 he and some fellow prisoners seized a boat from the whaling station that had been established on the island in 1806, and attempted to escape to the mainland. Close to the shore the boat overturned in the surf and Nxele was drowned. For generations many amaXhosa believed that Nxele would come back to them to resume his crusade against white
oppression. When he did not, they coined the ironic byword, ‘when Nxele returns’, meaning something that was promised but would never happen.12

Nxele’s surrender did not end the fighting as he had hoped it would. Willshire kept up the pursuit of Ndlambe, who had gone into hiding, and ravaged the countryside from the Amathole Mountains in the north to the ocean in the south, and as far east as the Kei. Stockenström eventually persuaded Willshire to bring the slaughter and devastation to a halt, but not before his patrols had seized another 20 000 cattle from Ndlambe’s adherents. In mid-September Willshire met Ngqika and Bhurhu, Hintsa’s brother of the Right-Hand House, on the banks of the Kei River. He peremptorily informed them that the British recognised only two paramount chiefs in emaXhoseni, Ngqika and Hintsa. Hintsa consequently gave up his plans to re-establish his sway over the amaRharhabe, and Ngqika was left supreme west of the Kei. But Ngqika would not celebrate the final eclipse of Ndlambe for long, for what his British allies had given, they could also take away.

Somerset had not abandoned his intention to ‘civilise’ the amaXhosa, but the recent war had convinced him that it would be some time yet before they could be transformed into docile neighbours, and that in the interim more effective measures were required to protect the margins of white settlement. The governor concluded that the answer was to create a territorial buffer between the amaXhosa and the settlers.

On 15 October 1819 Somerset met Ngqika and Maqoma (who had taken several months to recover from the wounds he had received at Amalinde) at the Gwangqa River. Khobe of the amaGqunukhwebe and Habana of the imiDange were both present and apologised abjectly for having supported Ndlambe in his wars against Ngqika and the British. They were magnanimously forgiven and swore future allegiance to Ngqika. For a moment Ngqika’s cup was full, but then Somerset dashed it from his lips. In an ‘amicable’ verbal agreement which Ngqika had no means of refusing, and which was never committed to paper, Somerset imposed a new frontier settlement on him. The Fish and Baviaans Rivers would remain the Colony’s eastern borders, but the western borders of emaXhoseni would be moved eastwards to the Keiskamma, Tyhume and Klipplaat Rivers. The area in between was to be kept entirely free of amaXhosa, and Somerset
gave Ngqika until the new moon to remove beyond the new western boundary of emaXhoseni.

But this was to be no ‘neutral zone’ as it was initially termed, for the ban on occupation applied only to the amaXhosa, and the land was not to be left a vacant tract. On the same day he imposed the new boundaries on Ngqika, Somerset wrote to Lord Bathurst: ‘The country thus ceded is as fine a portion of ground as is to be found, and with still unappropriated lands in the Zuurveld it might perhaps be worthy of consideration with a view to systematic colonisation.’ Thus the Ceded Territory (as it was swiftly called), an area of 7 800 square kilometres, was effectively added to Cape Colony.

The amaXhosa always thereafter rejected the verbal agreement that deprived them of the Ceded Territory as invalid and unfair, and Ngqika was appalled that his so-called benefactors had turned into shameless oppressors and deprived him of half his kingdom. His sons Maqoma and Tyhali bitterly resented having to leave their homes in the fertile Kat River valley where Maqoma was, as the head of the Right-Hand House, setting up a semi-autonomous Jingqi chiefdom, as was his prerogative. The two brothers settled for the time being at Ngqika’s new Great Place in the upper Keiskamma valley, resentfully dismissing their father as a spineless drunk who had thrown away their birthright. Nor were they wrong to be so angered and dismayed. Jeff Peires has argued that the British imposition of the Ceded Territory on Ngqika marked a crucial turning point in frontier relations. It was no longer possible for the amaXhosa to delude themselves that the British could be their friends. And for those of them living east of the Keiskamma, it meant the influx of Xhosa expellees from the Zuurveld and the Ceded Territory when there was already considerable pressure on their available pastureland.

Somerset decided that to enforce the colonial boundary, a revised line of fortifications was required. Since the existing detached and under-manned posts had either easily fallen to the amaXhosa during the late war, or had been bypassed, they would be replaced by a primary line of defence in the Ceded Territory consisting of larger and more concentrated fortifications with bigger garrisons. By 1821 the stone-built Keiskamma Barracks close to the Keiskamma River – known as Fort Willshire – was complete. It was built in a square with bastions at each corner and was roomy enough to
accommodate 250 men. With its hospital, commissariat stores, stables and powder magazine, it was sufficiently imposing to project an aura of British military power. Three existing posts situated to its rear along the lower Fish River close to the coast were rebuilt with stone to act in support. Similarly, Fort Beaufort (named in honour of Somerset’s ducal house) was strategically sited in 1822 deep in the Ceded Territory at the mouth of the Kat River valley. Mostly built of brick on stone foundations, it was designed in a square with barracks for 250 men and contained the same buildings and offices as did Fort Willshire. A new line of fortifications was constructed at strategic points along the middle and upper reaches of the Fish River to ensure the exclusion of the amaXhosa from the Colony itself, and over the next decade further strongly fortified posts were built to strengthen the line.

Having secured the colonial border to his satisfaction through the creation of the Ceded Territory and the construction of new fortifications, Somerset believed he could pursue his scheme for weaning the amaXhosa from unproductive warfare and introducing them to the benefits of peaceful trade. Previously, he had permitted the amaXhosa to barter goods at Grahamstown in a small way. From 1821 trade fairs were regularly held at Fort Willshire (and were extended to three times a week in 1824). The sale of arms, ammunition and alcohol to the amaXhosa by licensed traders from the Cape was prohibited, but a large trade in ivory and hides sprung up, greatly benefiting the amaXhosa who provided these commodities. Xhosa labourers already employed in the Colony were allowed to remain and benefit from their participation in the colonial economy.

Nevertheless, Somerset knew that ‘taming’ the amaXhosa by these means would take time. The clinching element of his frontier policy remained the projected dense settlement of the Zuurveld by European colonists without whom the frontier would remain vulnerable to attack, and its economy undeveloped.
The Albany Settlers, the Ceded Territory and the Battle of Mbholombo

Even as Somerset was pushing the Cape’s boundary further eastwards and fortifying it, complementary plans were afoot to bring in more settlers. In July 1819 the British House of Commons voted £50 000 towards an assisted emigration scheme to settle approximately a thousand families at the Cape. In sponsoring this scheme, Lord Liverpool’s Tory government was killing two birds with one stone. On the one hand, it was harkening to Somerset’s requests for an infusion of settlers that would stabilise the Cape eastern frontier and create a rural buffer against the amaXhosa. On the other, it was anxious to be seen to be doing something positive to placate the unemployed and disaffected labouring classes that were rioting and striking on account of the deep economic depression that had followed hard on the termination of the Napoleonic Wars.

The government strove to make the emigration scheme enticing. Swayed by pamphlets and government-sponsored publicity eulogising the Cape as possessing ‘the finest soil and climate in the world’, and producing ‘in unparalleled abundance all the necessities and luxuries of life’, up to 90 000 applicants put their names forward. Applications from individuals or families were not considered because, to ensure that land was granted only to settlers with the capital and labour to develop it, the scheme was open only to the leaders of parties who could afford to engage and maintain at least ten able-bodied men over eighteen. The director of a party would be granted 100 acres of land for each adult male under his direction, and would gain full title to his estate after it had been occupied and cultivated for three years.

The fifty-six emigrant parties finally selected ranged from 15 to 344 strong, with 40 being the average number. Only about a dozen of these
parties fully met the government requirements. These were the ‘proprietary’ parties made up of masters and their indentured servants – the would-be gentry of the new settlement, most of whom came from the landed class in England with its aristocratic connections. The remainder of the parties consisted of men who had banded together on a joint-stock basis, with one of them selected as their nominal leader. These joint-stock companies were predominantly made up of artisans and tradesmen along with middle-class men of education and some means, such as schoolteachers, ministers of religion and merchants – hardly the agricultural labourers the government had in mind.

Between December 1819 and March 1820 twenty-one crowded chartered emigrant ships left England and Ireland for the Cape carrying about 1 000 men and 3 000 women and children. The first ship dropped anchor in Algoa Bay on 9 April 1820, the rest following over the next three months. The emigrants were sorely disappointed by the inhospitable shores of their Promised Land, with Fort Frederick the only sign of habitation on the barren coast.

Somerset had gone home on leave before the emigrants landed, and all arrangements were left in the capable and sympathetic hands of the acting governor, Major-General Sir Rufane Donkin. He was there to greet the desponding settlers and had gathered sufficient transport to carry them to their allotments. There they were dumped in the empty landscape and left to shift for themselves, although they were issued with supplies to tide them over until the land began to produce. Donkin founded the township of Bathurst (named after the secretary of state for war and the colonies) in the centre of the settlement as its administrative hub. In September 1820 he created a new magisterial district called Albany, comprising the Zuurveld region of the south-eastern Uitenhage district.

Despite Donkin’s efforts to keep the settler parties together and on the land allocated them, within weeks professional men, tradesmen and artisans of the joint-stock companies (fully half of the settlers) were requesting permission to leave their locations. Their intention was to move to the towns of the Colony where their skills could be employed and where, except for wagon-builders and wheelwrights, there had always been a dearth of trained artisans. By the end of 1820 members of the ‘ornamental trades’, who ranged from goldsmiths to bookbinders, were given permission to go wherever they could find work. Many of them were soon earning
good wages in the western districts of the Colony where their luxury products were in demand, far from the rough-and-ready frontier.

Many of those left in on the land in Albany were soon in dire distress. Their widespread ignorance of practical farming, especially in conditions very different from those in Britain, contributed to the failure of the government’s plans for a close-knit settlement. The main cause of their failure, though, was the country itself. As the stock-keeping Dutch settlers of the Zuurveld knew perfectly well, the poverty of the soil and the irregular rainfall made Albany totally unsuitable for intensive agriculture. But on his visits to the frontier in 1817 and 1819 Somerset had been fooled by the verdant landscape after rain to suppose it was fertile. When Donkin visited Albany again in mid-1821, he remained optimistic despite the failure of the first wheat crop, which had been blighted by rust. He even went so far as to grant land in the Ceded Territory to the officers of the recently disbanded Royal African Corps to establish a military village called Fredericksburg. But in 1821 the wheat crop failed again, and when this disaster was followed by floods, many of the heads of the proprietary parties ran out of capital and were ruined, and had to be assisted by charitable societies and government loans.

Somerset landed back in the Cape on 1 December 1821. True to his combative character, he resented everything Donkin had achieved during his absence, and set out to undo as much of it as he could. He reinstated Grahamstown as the capital of Albany and the promising village of Bathurst was left to wither. The military settlement at Fredericksburg was abandoned. Meanwhile, the Albany settlement was taking on quite a different character from that originally envisaged. By May 1823 only 438 of the 1 004 men who had originally made up the parties at time of landing were still on their locations to claim title to their land after fulfilling their three-year residence. The remainder were scattering across the Colony in the urban centres and beginning to intermarry with the Dutch settlers. That had its own effect. Before 1820, the British element in the Cape had been small and confined to Cape Town and its environs. It had been mainly composed of retired army and naval officers who had despaired of promotion with the termination of the Napoleonic Wars, but who found employment as government officials. Now, with the dispersal of the Albany artisans and professionals, British influence began to radiate from Algoa Bay in all directions.
Along the eastern frontier, the presence of the remaining Albany settlers was also having its effect. In 1825 Somerset established another district between Grahamstown and Graaff-Reinet to improve administration. With no attempt at modesty, the governor named it the Somerset district. In the Albany district, Grahamstown rapidly developed from an administrative and military centre into a brisk commercial hub peopled with a politically aware mercantile community that erected churches and increasingly elegant houses. The Albany settlers’ economic future depended on having a suitable port for trade, and Port Elizabeth in Algoa Bay (named after Sir Rufane Donkin’s deeply mourned wife who had died in India) began to develop tentatively under the lee of Fort Frederick. Until the middle of the nineteenth century Port Elizabeth had no proper jetties, no lighthouse or breakwater, and passengers and cargo landed precariously through the angry surf. The place itself was described by contemporaries as an ‘ugly, dirty, ill-scented, ill-built hamlet, resembling some of the worst fishing villages on the English coast’, and suffered from a reputation for disorderly ‘drunkenness and immorality’. Another potential harbour, Port Frances on the Kowie River (named as ever after Somerset’s clan, this time his daughter-in-law) was only navigable for small craft, and was soon no more than a derelict settlement. But Port Elizabeth, despite its sordid character, became within thirty years a genuine harbour and seaport with prosperous marine stores, lodging houses for mariners and a commercial hall for trade and entertainment.

Exports from the Eastern Cape increased rapidly. Many settlers remaining in Albany were encouraged with Somerset’s permission to trade deep into the interior beyond the boundaries of the Colony, bartering goods such as cloth, iron utensils, beads and buttons with Africans for valuable commodities like cattle hides, ivory and gum. With enormous implications for the future of south-eastern Africa, on 10 May 1824 Henry Francis Fynn and his party of hunter-traders landed in a great bay within the confines of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona’s Zulu kingdom. With his compliance they founded their settlement of Port Natal and brought the vigorous, expanding Zulu kingdom – the most powerful African state in the region – within the Cape’s commercial and political orbit. Trade up the east coast of southern Africa and across the Orange (Gariep) River onto the highveld represented a new dynamic of colonial expansion. Earlier settlers in the Eastern Cape had sought land for their pastoralist, essentially subsistence economy that
differed little from that of the amaXhosa. Now the Grahamstown merchants were beginning to flourish on the so-called ‘Inland Kaffir Trade’. To sustain it, they set about instituting the essential credit and banking facilities and to forming joint-stock trading companies. In a nutshell, their endeavours brought the beginnings of a capitalist economy to the eastern frontier, with profound implications for all who lived there.

Those Albany settlers remaining on the land as farmers also began to make a go of it. Soon they were replacing their original, insubstantial wattle-and-daub shelters with clay-floored thatched cottages of the ‘cob’ construction typical of south-western England. Learning from initial adversity, they came to see that their only hope for success lay in pastoral farming. To that end, in 1825 they called successfully for far larger grants of land appropriate for grazing livestock. Inspired by the advanced ideas of the British agricultural revolution, they worked hard to improve their herds through the importation of breeding stock, in which they were supported by Somerset. Crucially, Merino sheep were introduced in 1827. The coarse hair of the long-legged fat-tailed Cape sheep was useless for anything except stuffing a mattress, but wool soon become the Cape’s biggest single export, rising in value in the eleven years between 1830 and 1841 by 125 times.

Contemporaneously with the arrival of the Albany settlers, the British government determined that the existing system of government in its new colonies of the Cape and Ceylon (both of them hangovers from Dutch rule), as well as that in the former French island of Mauritius, needed to be remodelled in the British image. In July 1822 Parliament appointed a commission of inquiry to investigate the state of the government, laws and administration of justice in the three colonies. A pair of commissioners, J.T. Bigge and W. Colebrooke, duly arrived in the Cape in 1823. These two professional bureaucrats set great changes in motion that broke the closed, corrupt networks of patronage and influence inherited from the VOC, and which British governors had exploited – none more than Somerset – to get their own way.

The establishment in 1825 of a Council of Advice and Somerset’s recall in 1826 marked the end of the governor’s autocratic rule. Momentum was accelerating in Britain itself for constitutional reform, and it was in the spirit of the Great Reform Act of 1832, rather than on account of pressure in the Cape itself, that in 1833 white settlers were given some slight say in
their own affairs when a Legislative Council was constituted of five officials and five to seven nominated colonists to advise the governor alongside the officials who made up the Executive Council.

On the recommendation of the commissioners, a new Charter of Justice was granted in 1828 which further limited the governor’s arbitrary powers by introducing an impartial judicial system and trial by jury. Press freedom was firmly established by 1829, although not without a struggle. A reformed and more professional civil service with resident magistrates and civil commissioners was instituted. English became the language of government offices in 1824, and the sole language of the courts in 1828. This new, determinedly British dispensation opened opportunities for employment and advancement for educated English-speakers at all levels of colonial government, but what of Dutch-speakers? Many of those living in the Western Cape became increasingly closely identified with the British way of life, its cultures and traditions – and its employment opportunities. But in the eastern districts many burghers resented and resisted this process of anglicisation, and were fervently opposed to further British reforms which seemed to threaten their way of life further.

The scarcity of labour remained the greatest problem for the Albany settlement. Attempts to recruit additional labourers from Britain failed, and most of the Khoikhoi of the eastern districts were already contracted to the local Boer farmers. The labour shortage was eased by Ordinance No. 49 of 1828, promulgated by the acting governor, Major-General Richard Bourke (1826–1828), which permitted Africans from beyond the border to enter the Colony in search of work and to squat on white farms. Bourke was a lifelong Whig and reformer who felt the ordinance unfairly favoured the amaXhosa from without the Colony when the indigenous Khoikhoi were oppressed. But he also saw that Ordinance 49 still did not provide enough labour for the Albany settlers, and that it was necessary to free up Khoikhoi labour tied to burgher farms. Bourke was prompted to take further action by Stockenström, who in 1827 had been appointed commissioner-general of the eastern districts, and by the missionary interest that advocated a programme of ‘Christianity, commerce and civilisation’.6

This programme was most closely associated with Dr John Philip, who in 1820 was appointed superintendent of the LMS missions in South Africa. His was an earnest, forceful personality, marred by his self-opinionated and
arrogant temperament. He campaigned tirelessly for the removal of
discriminatory regulations against the Khoisan and for the recognition of
their rights as subjects of the Crown. His mission was supported by the
Cape merchant interest in a ‘humanitarian alliance’ that might strike one
today as inherently contradictory, but made perfect sense to contemporary
liberal reformers. They believed that every individual, if liberated from
constricting and artificial constraints, had the capacity to progress
spiritually and materially to the greater good of society as a whole. In
practice, this meant reforming the manners of the downtrodden Khoisan and
introducing them to the ‘respectable’ aspects of British civilisation. These
encompassed Christianity and regular church attendance, prudish sexual
mores, schooling and literacy, modest, Western-style dress, and life in well-
ordered communities epitomised by the neat, rectangular houses of the
mission stations. Crucially (and this is where missionaries and merchants
fused), through this new order of society the Khoisan would be transformed
into settled, productive labourers and cultivators who, through their honest
earnings, would become the welcome consumers of commodities.

Bourke identified with this civilising mission and promulgated Ordinance
No. 50 of 1828. It repealed the repressive vagrancy law and the necessity
for Khoisan to carry a pass, outlawed dubious forms of labour contracts and
any form of coerced labour, protected them against arbitrary punishment,
and specifically reaffirmed their rights and those of all free people of colour
to buy and own land and property on the same basis as white people. This
last element reflected the liberal humanitarian belief of the two
commissioners that once the Khoisan had been granted security of property,
they would become industrious farmers and respectable members of the
community. But if in terms of Ordinance 50 the Khoisan won their freedom
in the eyes of the law, they had already irrevocably lost their land and were
thus in little position to set up as independent producers. They remained as
dependent as before on securing their livelihood through their wage-earning
labour for others. And rather than freeing up farm labour for the Albany
settlers, Ordinance 50 had the unintended effect of precipitating the flight of
emancipated Khoisan from farms to the towns and to mission stations,
where their numbers rocketed. And, perhaps predictably, farmers who no
longer could control their labour in the old way complained of a sudden
upsurge in stock thefts and pilfering by wandering Khoisan unfettered by
the former vagrancy laws.
If the Albany settlers were following in the footsteps of the Zuurveld burghers by taking to pastoral farming, they were also quickly learning it was attended by hazards nothing in Britain had prepared them for. Their growing number of cattle and sheep proved irresistible for the amaXhosa who had been pushed back over the Fish River and who had recently lost both land and cattle to the colonists. Xhosa raiding parties were soon active, and there was widespread consternation in Albany when in September 1821 an English herd boy was killed and his cattle lifted. As the settler Thomas Philipps poignantly recorded, ‘his jacket was found with a hundred holes in it, his body was devoured by wild beasts, and a book he had been reading lay open a little way off’. Alarm grew when more settlers were stabbed to death as they passed through the bush. Conscious of their vulnerability, which was proving to be far greater than they had been led to believe it would be, the Albany settlers began calling for a more effective system of frontier patrols to secure their herds and to protect their lives. Thus, far from strengthening the Cape eastern frontier as had been intended, the new settlers had simply added another disruptive factor to this contested zone and laid the ground for future conflict with the amaXhosa.

Indeed, Somerset’s creation of the Ceded Territory had solved nothing. As early as February 1821 Maqoma’s amaJingqi began returning to the Kat River valley from which they had been expelled in 1819. By the end of that year Maqoma had established his new Great Place called Ngewenxa (isiXhosa for the Kat River) at the base of the Katberg. Within a year or two his amaJingqi numbered about 16 000 and were settled in thirty-three large homesteads. They absorbed the scattered groups of Gonaqua living in the Kat River valley, and attracted many of Ngqika’s disaffected adherents, along with their cattle. Maqoma’s semi-autonomous chiefdom had become the fastest-growing polity in the region, and made him the most important Xhosa chief west of the Kei. Which is precisely why the colonists feared him and subjected the amaJingqi to constant pressure and to cattle raids justified in terms of the Spoor Law.

The principal figure among the British military stationed on the frontier was Colonel Henry Somerset, the governor’s eldest son, who sported a heavy cavalry moustache and carried his head at an arrogant tilt. He was a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars who had served as a twenty-year-old with the 10th Hussars in the Peninsular War during 1813–1814, and who had the distinction of having fought at Waterloo. In 1818 Major Somerset was
posted to the Cape where his father, in an act of nepotistic patronage, appointed him commissioner of stamps, which topped up his military salary by a princely £600 a year. The young major served with the mounted section of the Cape Corps and fought in the final stage of the Fifth Cape Frontier War. Then, in October 1823, his father appointed him the new commandant of the eastern frontier. Major Somerset wasted no time in putting his aggressive stamp on the frontier, and was determined to show Maqoma where the power lay. On 4 December 1823 he rode out of Fort Beaufort at the head of 100 men of the Cape Corps and a commando of 200 mounted burghers. His target was the Kat River valley, and he took Maqoma completely by surprise when he unexpectedly came over the Katberg from the north. Somerset’s men rampaged over the valley, indiscriminately shooting Jingqi men, women and children before finally retiring with some 7 000 captured cattle. Somerset distributed 2 000 of them to colonists who had experienced stock losses. He then returned the balance to Maqoma in exchange for his pledge to desist from raiding the Colony for livestock.

With deep anger in his heart, Maqoma set about rebuilding his ravaged community. In October 1825 Somerset visited him specifically to remind him that his continued presence in the Ceded Territory depended on how peacefully he comported himself. Repeatedly threatened by the Colony on one flank, and on the other by his father, Ngqika, with whom he was still at odds, Maqoma decided to improve his ability to defend himself by developing new tactics through the stepped-up acquisition of horses and guns from white traders.

Only a few years previously the amaXhosa had been reluctant so much as to mount a horse; but by the 1820s they were beginning to breed tough little Cape horses themselves, and to own and ride them in ever increasing numbers. Men of status, in particular, rode them as a matter of prestige. As with horses (and alcohol), the trade in firearms over the Cape border was illegal, but colonial officials tended to turn a blind eye because it was such lucrative business for settler merchants and farmers who exchanged them with the amaXhosa for cattle. Slowly but surely, significant numbers of muskets came into Xhosa hands. The trade in gunpowder kept pace, increasing from 1 200 pounds in 1829 to 12 910 pounds in 1833. Most of the powder was bound for the villages of the eastern frontier. There everyone seemed to be involved in its illicit traffic with the Griqua and
Basters north over the Orange River, and with the amaXhosa as well. Missionaries were suspected of being involved in the gun and ammunition trade too, since they defended both the rights of Africans and the principles of free trade. This latter principle was regularly invoked by merchants to water down the stiffer penalties the colonial government periodically attempted to impose for violating its regulations regarding the trade in firearms.

It might be thought that it was extremely short-sighted of settlers to be so keen to sell firearms to their adversaries, yet they could not conceive that the potential dangers outweighed the profits from the trade. They complacently assured each other that the savage amaXhosa were incapable of handling firearms with any degree of competence. Nor were they entirely mistaken. The generally inferior firearms that came into Xhosa hands – primarily the outmoded Tower musket or trade ‘gas-pipe’ gun – along with the chronic shortage of powder, which limited the amount of practice they had in firing them, and a lack of spares to maintain them in reasonable working order, did indeed combine to reduce their effectiveness.

For the next several years after Major Somerset’s admonitory visit to Maqoma in 1825, the situation along the eastern frontier remained relatively stable, although hardly peaceful. The reprisal system championed by Somerset remained in full operation, keeping emaXhoseni in a constant state of alarm. In terms of the Spoor Law, patrols regularly mounted punitive raids into Xhosa territory to recover – or simply seize – livestock, but also to attack unsuspecting homesteads at dawn, firing randomly at all the inhabitants. No chief, not matter how exalted, was exempt, and even Ngqika’s Great Place had been raided in March 1822.

In this same period the Cape government gave colonists a great swathe of land in the Ceded Territory between the Colony’s border along the upper Fish River and the Koonap River to its east. However, in 1826 the imperial government delayed transfer of the land in question until it had made up its mind about the status of the Ceded Territory. Lord Bathurst did make clear, though, that he preferred that only English settlers be permitted in the area, and ordered the Dutch-speaking burghers to leave. Nevertheless, the gritty burghers decided to sit tight. Understandably, settlers and burghers alike felt more insecure along this stretch of the border than elsewhere. Besides their uncertainly of tenure, they were made anxious by the close proximity of
Maqoma and other powerful Xhosa chiefs, and by the relative lack of military protection in that distant sector. Their sense of vulnerability was heightened by Ordinance 9 of 1825, which regulated the right of colonists to fire on vagrants, deserters or escaped convicts, and which left them uncertain about what was lawful if they tried to defend their farms. All this added to the bitterness of frontier farmers, which they directed at ‘English’ officials who, in their estimation, did not understand that security was their overriding concern.

Hand in hand with the Albany settlers’ fear of Xhosa raids, a retaliatory agenda began to gain ground. The settlers’ mouthpiece, The Grahams Town Journal, edited by Robert Godlonton, called ever more baldly for the Cape’s expansion beyond the Keiskamma River and for the complete subjugation and dispossession of the amaXhosa. Of course, such a programme would require a far larger military presence in the frontier zone, along with its associated increase in expenditure, than the government was prepared to consider. But the expansionist merchant lobby, with its eyes on the lure of lucrative trade and profitable land speculation to be derived from the incorporation of emaXhoseni, countered by harping unrelentingly on the irredeemably aggressive nature of the amaXhosa and their sole responsibility for the unending unrest along the frontier.

Dr Philip, the spokesman for the missionary interest, rejected this selfish settler charge. He insisted that the cattle-raiding was the inevitable consequence of the amaXhosa being driven to desperation by the loss of their cattle and by the encroachment on their land by the rapacious colonists. He held that Stockenström, the commissioner-general of the eastern districts, was in favour of the existing, oppressive frontier system. And certainly, Stockenström, who had the responsibility for dealing with the fears of the white frontier community, was determined that the amaXhosa should be left in no doubt that the government would defend the Colony and punish stock theft. But he knew that the reprisal system as it was being applied was not operating properly. When a farmer called on the nearest military post to search for his lost stock – which might merely have wandered away – the patrol seldom allowed the targeted Xhosa homestead to prove its innocence before plundering it and seizing its cattle. The difficulty for Xhosa chiefs and homestead heads who were genuinely attempting to restrain stock theft was that bands of marauders, rootless men...
expelled from their former lands and not acknowledging their authority, were usually the culprits.

Stockenström was an upright man of considerable principle, and certainly understood Philip’s charge, but he wondered what alternative there was to the reprisal system. He never claimed that the colonists had a moral right to the land – and here he differed sharply from the Grahamstown merchant lobby. Nor did he dispute that the oppressions of the reprisal system stirred up deep hostility among the amaXhosa. Yet, at the same time, he believed that the farmers along the frontier had the right to protect their lives and property, and that the government had an obligation to ensure their safety. The only alternative to defending themselves, Stockenström concluded, was for the farmers to pack up and abandon the frontier districts. Since that was decidedly not an option, Stockenström fell back rather lamely on the principle that the survival of all the frontier peoples, black and white, had to be based on justice. In practical terms that meant the reprisal system had to be kept in place, but be put under the firm command of trustworthy people who would ensure that it operated fairly. Whether such people could be found was another matter.

Meanwhile, in emaXhoseni, Ndlambe died in February 1828. In his old age many of his powers had been exercised by his son, Mdushane. But Mdushane died in May 1829 and the chiefdom was engulfed in disputes between his surviving brothers and his sons. It was not long before Ndlambe’s chiefdom split into various fragments and ceased to play any significant role in the affairs of emaXhoseni. With the eclipse of the amaNdlambe faction, Ngqika was finally left secure as the senior chief of the amaRharhabe. Yet he did not seem set to outlive his great rival for long. He still retained his good looks, but he had become a hopeless, despised alcoholic, addicted to brandy, and had forfeited his people’s regard. Meanwhile, Maqoma in his Jingqi chiefdom was seeking some insurance against further reprisal patrols, and was hoping to secure some way of opening peaceful communication with the colonial authorities. He believed that missionaries might prove to be the means, and began to court them. In June 1828 the Glasgow Missionary Society set itself up in the upper Kat River valley. Maqoma did not himself convert to Christianity but nevertheless showed the missionaries every favour. His efforts would prove wasted, however.
The eastern districts of the Cape and emaXhoseni did not exist in a void, and it was at this moment that they were drawn into the wider circles of war and panicked migration taking place elsewhere on the subcontinent. Until the late eighteenth century the large chiefdoms to the north that would subsequently be subsumed into the Zulu kingdom did not yet exist. Then, for reasons that are still disputed by historians, a process of political centralisation and territorial expansion got under way. Intensifying warfare in the first decade of the nineteenth century between the main rival polities caused many of their weaker neighbours to migrate out of harm’s way, sparking destructive conflicts that spread from the eastern coastal lands to the highveld of the interior. This volatile, violent period has long been known as the *Mfecane*, or the Crushing, a concept energetically under debate by scholars. In the region around the White Mfolozi River the initially minor Zulu chiefdom rose to prominence in the early 1820s under the inspired leadership of Shaka kaSenzangakhona. He shattered his regional competitors and consolidated his rule over the entire region between the Phongolo River to the north and the Mzimkhulu River to the south. Smaller chiefdoms resisted, fled or submitted, when they were incorporated into the Zulu kingdom.

In the years 1823 to 1825 the amaBhaca from the environs of the Mgeni River, in the Zulu kingdom’s outlying domains south of the Thukela River, fled south in fear of Shaka. In their flight they first disrupted the Mpondo kingdom between the Mzimvubu River and the Mthatha River to the south. Members of the Mpondo Nyawuza royal clan had been involved in a succession struggle in the early 1800s, and Faku had emerged the victor. The losing faction, the amaBomvana – ‘the red-faced ones’, called thus on account of the red and orange ochre with which they adorned their faces – who lived between the Mthatha and Mbashe Rivers and who had become the tributaries of Hintsa, the Gcaleka chief and Xhosa paramount, were also thrown into disarray by the amaBhaca. So too were the abaThembu, situated to the west of the amaMpondo and amaBomvana. Adopting the San name for the abaThembu, the British called them the ‘Tambookies’. Like the amaXhosa, the abaThembu were composed of a number of clans that had accepted the leadership of one royal clan, the amaHala. The royal clan had never been able to exert much control over its subordinate Thembu clans, and the amaXhosa were long in the habit of inserting themselves into Thembu affairs. At the time of the Bhaca incursion, several Thembu clans
were Hintsa’s tributaries, although Ngubencuka, the current Thembu paramount, had managed to restore some stability to his realm. The abaThembu managed to repel the amaBhaca, but not before the amaTshatshu clan under Bawana and his son, Maphasa, had moved westwards over the Kei with about a thousand families. They were harassed by another Thembu clan, the amaGcina under Mtyelela, who followed them, and the amaTshatshu entered Maqoma’s territory and sought his protection. Welcoming them as new adherents to swell his following, Maqoma allotted them land in the north of his chiefdom, and the amaTshatshu established themselves between the Winterberg range and the Klipplaat River.

The lands abutting the northern limits of emaXhoseni were thrown into turmoil once again when in April 1824 Shaka’s armies raided the amaMpondo for the first time. Over the next few years Shaka came increasingly under the influence of the Cape hunter-traders settled in Port Natal and its environs, and was persuaded it was in his interests – and that of the traders too, of course! – if he entered into good relations with the British at the Cape. Shaka’s embassy, led by Sothobe kaMpangalala, an eminent chief, arrived by sea in Algoa Bay on 4 May 1828 on board the schooner Elizabeth and Susan provided by the white hunter-traders of Port Natal. However, his protestations of Shaka’s goodwill and desire to live at peace with the Colony were completely undercut by Shaka’s second Mpondo campaign between May and June 1828 which penetrated as far south as the Bomvana country, and which set the region in an uproar.

The Cape authorities, who were trying to impose order on their own terms onto the frontier region, and who considered all the country south of the Mzimkhulu River to be within the British sphere of interest, were alarmed when they learnt from missionaries that the Zulu army had crossed the Mzimvubu River and was apparently heading towards Hintsa’s Great Place. Moreover, it appeared that Shaka was sending threatening messages to the Xhosa paramount and to Ngubencuka, the Thembu ruler, with the demand that they submit to him. Both Hintsa and Ngubencuka refused, and appealed to the British for military aid. Bourke, the acting governor, feared that unless he took action thousands of Xhosa and Thembu refugees would flood into the Colony. Yet, at the same time, he wished, if possible, to avoid becoming involved in any fighting beyond the frontier. His compromise was to despatch Major William B. Dundas, the landdrost of the Albany
district, to seek out Shaka, warn him against further provocative incursions, and persuade him to withdraw. Dundas rode off in July 1828 with only a small armed escort of fifty mounted burghers and a force of Thembu auxiliaries, but he knew that Bourke had arranged for a strong force under Somerset, the commandant of the eastern frontier, to follow behind and back him up if necessary.

Somerset was a major no longer, for in 1827 he had been promoted to lieutenant-colonel. In the same year the Cape Corps of Infantry and Cavalry had been overhauled as the Corps of Cape Mounted Riflemen (CMR). In 1828 Somerset (who was becoming notorious for the posse of Khoikhoi concubines who accompanied him all around the frontier) was appointed their commander. The CMR mustered as an imperial battalion of mounted infantry, rather than cavalry, and was trained according to the standards of the British Army. Its officers were British and the rank and file Khoikhoi. They were all fully horsed and carried a sword and carbine.

As he rode north, Dundas learnt that Faku and the amaMpondos had submitted to Shaka, and that the Zulu army was on its way back across the Mzimkhulu River with about 10,000 captured cattle. Nevertheless, when Dundas arrived at Ngubencuka’s Great Place on the western bank of the Mbashe River, the abaThembu were fully mobilised for war, and informed him that the amaZulu were ravaging their territory, and that a division of their army was encamped nearby, just east across the Mbashe. Dundas went forward on 26 July and his small force took the enemy completely by surprise, driving them off in a skirmish and capturing cattle and women in great numbers.

From his foes’ dress and military style, Dundas was in no doubt that he had engaged a Zulu force. In a sense he had, but these warriors were not part of Shaka’s army. They were amaNgwane under the leadership of Matiwane kaMsumpa, and had been dislodged during the wars of the Mfecane from their original home near the headwaters of the White Mfolozi in what was now the heart of the Zulu kingdom. They had fled to the highveld, where they encountered Moshoeshoe, who was cobbling together his own Sotho kingdom in the mountains of the eastern escarpment. The amaNgwane failed in their attack on Thaba Bosiu, Moshoeshoe’s stronghold, and then came to blows with Mzilikazi kaMashobana, whose Ndebele people had broken away from Shaka’s rule and were expanding their chiefdom on the highveld. Retreating southwards, the amaNgwane
were harassed by Griqua and Bergenaar bands. In 1827 the amaNgwane crossed the Orange River and entered Thembu territory, where they raided cattle and endeavoured to force the Thembu chiefs to pay them tribute. Clearly, it was Matiwane’s intention to settle down permanently near the sources of the Mthatha River, right in the middle of Thembu territory, where his people began planting their gardens.

Dundas had only temporarily scattered the amaNgwane he had engaged on 26 July 1828, but not defeated them. They rapidly rallied and pursued his retiring force, retaking all their plundered cattle. Thereupon, Ngubencuka sent an urgent message to Somerset, who was coming up with his little army of about 1,000 men, consisting of British infantry, the CMR, settler commandos and several pieces of artillery, warning him that the amaZulu had returned in force. Ngubencuka was fully aware that the people he was fighting were not amaZulu, but rather the amaNgwane whom he wished to evict and drive away. But since the British seemed determined to fight the former, and had little or no knowledge of the latter, who was he to disabuse them? Ngubencuka worked on Somerset to create a coalition to take on the ‘Zulu’ army. Hintsa had been kept informed of proceedings by some councillors he had sent to accompany Dundas. He had no reason to feel threatened by Matiwane, but scenting the prospect of plunder, he joined up. Faku did likewise, for he saw an opportunity to absorb the amaNgwane and their herds, which would compensate him for his losses to Shaka.

The abaThembu, amaGcaleka and amaMpondo made for uneasy allies, but they added thousands of men to Somerset’s army. Just before dawn on 27 August the British and their African allies attacked the camp of the sleeping amaNgwane at Mbholompo close to the Mthatha River near the present-day town of Mthatha. A determined cavalry charge broke them up, and when the amaNgwane attempted to rally in the neighbouring forests, they were bombarded by howitzer fire. It seems that about 700 amaNgwane perished in the fighting, including many non-combatant women, children and old people. The amaXhosa, abaThembu and amaMpondo gathered a good booty of women, children and cattle – to the disgust of the British, who did not appreciate they had joined the campaign for this very purpose – and absorbed other survivors into their chiefdoms. The British were in no position, however, to take the moral high ground. It was Somerset’s practice to entice burghers to volunteer for military service with the promise of easy booty, and they too drove off captured cattle and carried away about a
hundred women and children, whose fate it was to be ‘indentured’ as labourers. Humanitarians duly criticised Somerset for the brutality associated with the battle of Mbholompo, but he spuriously defended himself by claiming that he had saved the Colony from a Zulu invasion. Of course, he had done no such thing, and the future possibility of a Zulu attack dissipated once and for all with Shaka’s assassination on 23 September 1828 – news of which only reached Port Elizabeth on 15 December. But Somerset could at least insist that the campaign was an effective demonstration of British military power in a region it considered within its sphere of interest, and that his African allies owed the Cape a debt of gratitude.
12

The Kat River Settlement and the Expulsion of the AmaXhosa from the Ceded Territory

The victors and allies of convenience at the battle of Mbulompo soon fell out among themselves. The adherents of Hintsa and Ngubencuka came to blows over the division of the spoils, and all-out war between the amaGcaleka and the abaThembu was only narrowly averted thanks to the intervention of the missionaries and by Ngubencuka’s fortuitous death in 1830. His heir, Mtirara, was still a minor, and Fadana, who became the Thembu regent, was left in a weak position and was unwilling to try conclusions with Hintsa. Feeling vulnerable and isolated, Fadana withdrew his adherents from the coastal lands, and began looking to the British at the Cape for future protection.

Other abaThembu, meanwhile, were setting the frontier ablaze. The amaTshatshu, as we have seen, had taken refuge with Maqoma at the time of the Bhaca incursions in about 1825. Bawana, the Tshatshu chief, cannily forged ties with the Colony, welcoming a Moravian mission among his people and gaining the support of the burghers settled along the Baviaans River by paying them tribute. In late 1828 the amaTshatshu and the neighbouring and aggressive amaGcina Thembu under Mtyelela (also known as Galela) came to blows. Maqoma decided to have done with both the disruptive intruders on his patch. By driving them off he would deprive the Colony of regional allies, and capturing their cattle would make up for the stock he had lost to the recent colonial raids. On 24 January 1829 Maqoma attacked both Bawana’s and Mtyelela’s homesteads along the well-watered Koonap River and seized some 5 000 cattle. But Maqoma had not reckoned with the inconvenient fact that Bawana was an ally of the Colony. Moreover, the slaughter of amaTshatshu refugees in clear sight of the Baviaans River Boers further turned colonial sentiment against him,
while the prospect of an influx of Thembu refugees caused alarm along the frontier.

Stockenström, the commissioner-general of the eastern districts, although tolerant and humane, determined that Maqoma must be punished in the interests of frontier security. In early February 1829 he persuaded the new governor, Lieutenant-General Sir Lowry Cole (yet another Peninsular veteran) that Maqoma and the amaJingqi must be expelled from the Kat River valley. To regularise this, on 17 April 1829 Cole declared that the Cape’s eastern border now ran officially along the Tyhume and Keiskamma Rivers. Colonel Somerset, cock-a-hoop after his victory at Mbolompo, gave Maqoma two months within which to return the herds he had captured and to leave the valley. Maqoma not unnaturally dragged his feet, and on 1 May 1829 Somerset led the CMR out of Fort Beaufort and despatched a Boer commando to the Koonap River. Between them they ravaged the whole district, burnt Ngwenxa, Maqoma’s Great Place, and brought back 3 000 confiscated head of cattle to Fort Beaufort.

On 4 May many thousands of cowed amaJingqi left the Kat River valley under military escort for Ngqika’s domain, hundreds of women and children carrying great burdens on their heads. They halted on the arid banks of the Gaga River, on the eastern border of the Ceded Territory, and there they erected temporary shelters. The year 1829 was one of grinding drought in the frontier districts and emaXhoseni, and one of the few areas to have been spared was the well-watered basin of the Kat River. Driven out of it, the amaJingqi were both hungry and bitterly resentful, and as Tim Stapleton has put it, ‘the recovery of territory stolen by the colony would preoccupy Maqoma for the rest of his life’. Understandably, the destitute amaJingqi raided what cattle they could to survive, including some belonging to amaRharhabe living along the Mankazana River. These people were the adherents of Tyhali, Ngqika’s favourite son and chief advisor, and it seemed that war between them and Maqoma was on the cards. Indeed, for Maqoma, who remained as charismatic and as popular as ever, war seemed the only way open to acquire new land for his people and to ensure their independence.

Hostilities had not yet broken out, however, when in September 1829 Governor Cole met a number of Xhosa chiefs on the frontier with the significant absence of both Ngqika and Maqoma. Cole confirmed
Maqoma’s expulsion from the Kat River and reminded the gathering that they occupied land in the Ceded Territory entirely at Her Majesty’s pleasure. Learning of the governor’s speech, Maqoma could only impotently fume, and as Nkosi Bhotomane of the imiDange later deposed in 1837, ‘Macomo’s heart was very sore about the land; the subject always set him on fire; he fought in hopes of getting it back.’

At this low point in Maqoma’s fortunes, fate stepped in. By September 1829 the brandy-sodden Ngqika was clearly succumbing to the ravages of tuberculosis. The rivals for the Rharhabe chieftainship began jockeying for the succession, accusing each other’s supporters of bewitching Ngqika. Hundreds perished, as Peires has expressed it, ‘in a welter of blood and witchcraft accusations’. Ngqika finally collapsed and died on 14 November 1829 during a fit of maniacal dancing. Further discord was staved off by agreement between the contending rivals. Maqoma could not succeed his father Ngqika as chief of the amaRharhabe because he was of the Right-Hand House. Nor could Tyhali, who was born of a mere concubine. It was agreed, therefore, that the lame Sandile of the Great House, the son of Suthu, the unpopular Thembu princess, would be the new ruler of the amaRharhabe, and that he would reside with his mother at Ngqika’s Great Place. Since Sandile was still only nine years old, a regent was required until he was circumcised and attained manhood. Tyhali was persuaded to step aside and Maqoma, the most popular man among the amaRharhabe, was declared regent. Secure once more, and a man of power, Maqoma re-established his Great Place near the boundary of the Ceded Territory at the confluence of the Tyhume and Keiskamma Rivers, close to the modern town of Alice.

Stockenström, meanwhile, proceeded with his carefully planned corollary to the expulsion of Maqoma from the Kat River valley. The valley was not to be left unoccupied, but was to be occupied by Khoikhoi and people of mixed race densely settled on small land-grants. In Stockenström’s own words, they were to serve as ‘a breastwork against the exasperated, powerful enemy’, that is, the amaXhosa, in ‘the most vulnerable and dangerous part’ of the border. Stockenström understood full well that the implementation of this scheme would be entirely at the expense of the amaXhosa. Nevertheless, he was never one to shrink from facing up to the harsh challenges of the frontier situation as he understood them. He was,
moreover, at one with the LMS missionaries who, following the promulgation of Ordinance 50 of 1828 abolishing ‘Hottentot’ passes, were disposed to favour the emerging Khoisan community over the less civilised blacks across the border.

The initial settlers in the Kat River Settlement consisted of pockets of Gonaqua who had been living among the amaJingqi as clients of Maqoma. Stockenström permitted them to remain and placed over them Andries Botha, a Gonaqua known as a loyal servant of the government. Seventy to eighty families of Basters from the Somerset and Graaff-Reinet districts joined the settlement, people who had adopted Dutch clothing, religion, technology and language, and did not any longer associate themselves with their Khoikhoi heritage. Stockenström added another 144 Khoikhoi families from the Theopolis and Bethelsdorp mission stations, who brought their ploughs with them, and another 116 Khoikhoi families joined from elsewhere in the Colony. Many were Christian converts from various missionary societies, but the new residents proclaimed that their allegiance was to the LMS and, against the wishes of the government, secured James Read as their minister because he had fought so long for equality for the Khoisan. As Read wrote to Stockenström, the Kat River Settlement was the fulfilment of his hopes for the Khoikhoin among whom he had worked for twenty-eight years, and he hailed it as ‘an act of humanity, of wise policy, and of justice’. And, as he justly pointed out, the Khoikhoi had been ‘great losers’ and had previously ‘received nothing in way of compensation’.  

Stockenström’s vision was to turn the Kat River Settlement into a prosperous cash-crop community of small-scale farmers supported by the many skilled artisans who were also part of the community, along with traders, transport riders and teachers. The settlement was the choicest spot in the Ceded Territory, 400 square kilometres in extent, well watered, with forests nearby and with good access to colonial markets. It was divided into 640 allotments (erven) of about 2.5 hectares each, forty of which were capable of irrigation. Grazing commons were attached to the erven, which were granted on perpetual quitrent. By 1835 some 5 000 people were living in the burgeoning settlement, which seemed well set for a bright future. But it had its enemies: Maqoma, who wanted his land back; and burghers who covetously eyed the fair Kat River valley. Stockenström had originally wanted to make military service a condition of tenure, and issued the Kat
River settlers with government weapons. This condition was later waived, but the weapons were not recalled.

The establishment of the Kat River Settlement failed to end the turbulence along the frontier because the reprisal system was still in full operation. Despite Stockenström’s efforts to curb Somerset, patrols and commandos continued to go out every week, committing every form of excess. It seemed to Stockenström that Somerset was deliberately trying to provoke the amaXhosa into attacking the Colony in order to justify a counter-attack that would finally drive them out of the Ceded Territory and open it to white settlement. Stockenström tried to curb the raiding, but Governor Cole took Somerset’s part, and the aggressive patrols continued unabated.

On 17 June 1830 Somerset scoured Tyhali’s community, ostensibly to recover ‘stolen’ cattle. Somerset’s aim was to push him east of the Mankazana River, but Tyhali rolled with the punch, neither resisting nor moving away. Yet, as he bitterly complained, ‘Shall I never have peace in my own country? Am I to be treated in this way, day by day?’ The amaXhosa were in no doubt that the objective of the raids was the appropriation of their land, and a gathering of chiefs was in full agreement when Maqoma presciently warned that the reprisal cattle raids were a ‘prelude to other measures, which would not only endanger their independence, but lead to a complete subjugation of their country’.

Still the raids continued, with Maqoma himself a target in August 1831. Chiefs exerted themselves to stop their adherents from further, inflammatory thefts, although the colonial farmers’ cattle were so loosely guarded that the temptation was irresistible. The situation was made even more precarious when retaliatory patrols started killing Xhosa chiefs, or taking them captive. This went flatly against Xhosa custom, because the lives of chiefs were considered sacrosanct and they ought not to have been threatened in time of war – although, it must be said, the amaXhosa themselves ignored this stricture when it suited them. In any event, Hintsa, the Xhosa paramount, and the other Xhosa chiefs were aghast, and began to suppose that the British intended to do away with them and the very institution of chieftainship. The contemptuous way colonial officials habitually treated chiefs when they encountered them only confirmed this notion. Chiefs expected to be treated as equals by their colonial
counterparts, but colonists were increasingly adopting the racist line that whites were superior to all blacks, whatever their status. Ironically, Somerset alone was liked by the chiefs because, with a sense of aristocratic solidarity, he was always studiously courteous to them, munificently presented them with gifts, and even accommodated them in his house and invited them to entertainments.

Then, in July 1832, Somerset went on leave of absence to deal with the estate of his father, Lord Charles Somerset, who had died the previous year. Stockenström also left the scene. He was badly affected by the death of his only child, an infant son, and travelled to London in 1833 to lobby the government to grant him more authority as commissioner-general of the eastern districts so that he could rein in the constant border raiding. When he was denied his request, he resigned his post and left the Cape for Sweden. Others were only too happy to persist in dispossessing the amaXhosa and extending the boundaries of the Colony.

In July 1832 Colonel Richard England took over from Somerset as the military commandant of the eastern frontier. He immediately stepped up the patrol system and tried – unsuccessfully – to push Tyhali’s people east across the Mankazana. Even so, the strain was telling increasingly on the Rharhabe chiefs. By June 1833 Maqoma was observed to be drunk on brandy at the canteen in Fort Beaufort, and the word went around that he was taking after his father and becoming an alcoholic. He had reason, though, to despair.

For one thing, 1833 was another year of relentless drought, and although he tried to maintain cordial relations with the missionaries, Maqoma believed he had no choice but to turn to a traditional rainmaker called Nqatsi. Then, when Cole’s term as governor came to an end in August 1833, Colonel Thomas Wade, the military secretary at the Cape, was appointed acting governor. Wade was an unashamed supporter of settler interests. He wasted no time in ordering Colonel England in November 1833 to drive Maqoma from the western bank of the Tyhume and Tyhali out of the Mankazana valley. Maqoma protested that his people’s mealies and melons could not be harvested until March and that they would starve if expelled. He consequently declared he would resist, especially as there seemed to be no valid reason for the sudden expulsion. After further negotiation, both Maqoma and Tyhali grudgingly agreed to remove on condition that their case would be put to the new governor when he arrived
in early 1834. But they remained deeply, aggressively disaffected in the territory further east where they temporarily settled and where the drought had entirely denuded the veld. Maqoma put his case to Dr Philip in a letter which was subsequently published in the *South African Commercial Advertiser* on 7 December 1833: ‘When shall I and my people be able to get rest … I do not know why so many Commandos come into this country and take away our cattle and kill our people … We do no injury to the colony, and yet I remain under the foot of the English.’

When Somerset returned to the frontier in early January 1834 and resumed his post, he was truly alarmed by what he found. Xhosa crops were abandoned and dying in the fields, livestock were perishing of starvation, and desperate warriors were insisting on retaliation. Between them, Wade and England had gone much too far and had created a truly combustible situation. Somerset urgently met Maqoma, Tyhali and their councillors at Fort Willshire on 18 January 1834 and made some concessions. He informed them that, depending on their good behaviour, they could graze their cattle west of the Tyhume, but only on condition that no huts were built there or gardens planted. However, this concession did not apply to the valley of the Mankazana, which was earmarked for settler farms. Regular patrols, Somerset concluded, would ensure that the amaXhosa abided by these stipulations.

The newly arrived governor, Lieutenant-General Sir Benjamin D’Urban, who had distinguished himself in the Peninsular War and had lately been the governor of Antigua, agreed to Somerset’s measures. But settlers with their eyes on the Ceded Territory reacted indignantly to what was intended as only a temporary concession. They vociferously complained that hostile Xhosa warriors were to be seen all along the frontier, and that Xhosa herdsmen were constructing shelters in the Ceded Territory despite the prohibition against doing so. Dr Philip had wasted no time in assuring the new governor that the entire blame for the frontier conflict lay squarely with the retaliatory raids and with unscrupulous colonists eager for plunder and land. But D’Urban, who had as yet to take the full measure of the colony he had been sent to govern, bowed to settler pressure.

In March 1834 Somerset’s mounted patrols were unleashed and drove all the terrified amaXhosa away from the west bank of the Tyhume. Citing the Xhosa rustling of settlers’ cattle as the justification, throughout the
succeeding next few months Somerset’s patrols swept the entire frontier, burning out any Xhosa community that had been surreptitiously established in the Ceded Territory. Once the amaXhosa had fled, white farmers quickly moved in and started fencing off the land. The expelled amaXhosa were by now on the verge of starvation, without cattle for milk and with their crops left standing in the fields. Bhotomane, the chief of the imiDange who had first been driven out of the Zuurveld, and now out of the Ceded Territory as well, put their desperate case in a nutshell: ‘after having taken our country from us without even a show of justice, and shut us up to starvation, you threaten us with destruction for the thefts of those you left no choice but to steal or die of famine’.

Confronted by the dreadful plight of his people, Maqoma tried to elicit missionary support, but with no success. In October 1834 D’Urban decided that more settlers were to be moved into the Ceded Territory. Further patrols were sent in to drive the remaining amaXhosa out, and the entire Ceded Territory was put into an uproar. By November 1834 Maqoma was desperate. Dr Philip urged him to submit peacefully, as he had done previously, and to appeal to D’Urban for redress. Understandably, Maqoma put absolutely no store in this, and his people, driven beyond the limits of their tolerance, were calling loudly for vengeance against the perfidious whites.

Unaccountably, neither the frontier farmers nor the Cape administration grasped that their unremitting harassment of the amaXhosa in the Ceded Territory was forging a sense of solidarity among all the factions of emaXhoseni, amaRharhabe and amaGcaleka alike, and that it was driving all of them to resist by force of arms. So, instead of taking precautions, the colonists assured each other that the amaXhosa would never dare to attack the British again after their drubbing in the Fifth Cape Frontier War. So confident was the government in Xhosa passivity that in late 1834 only 755 soldiers were stationed along the border. Moreover, the government had recently limited the supply of muskets and gunpowder to burghers on the frontier in an attempt to limit the illicit trade in these items, and stocks of ammunition in the frontier districts were at their lowest ebb, just when they would be needed most.
The Sixth Cape Frontier War, 1834–1835 (the War of Maqoma, or of Hintsa), and the Coming of the AmaMfengu

In December 1834, Xhoxho, Maqoma’s favourite half-brother and effective ruler of the Ngqika section of the amaRharhabe, had his head slightly grazed by a shotgun blast during operations by a colonial patrol. The incident sparked widespread indignation among the people, who declared, ‘It is better that we die than be treated thus … Life is no use if they shoot our chiefs.’ Maqoma had been itching to take his revenge against the British who had driven him from his lands and continued to harass his people through the reprisal system. Yet he had been held back by his well-founded concern that his men were no military match for the aggressors. With the wounding of Xhoxho, he nevertheless resolved he could no longer endure the indignities the British continued to heap upon the amaRharhabe, and furiously declared that ‘the blood of a son of Ngqika has been shed and [can] only be avenged by blood!’ The harvest of 1834 promised to be an especially abundant one, so that summer would be a propitious time to go to war. As regent of the amaRharhabe, Maqoma consulted the other Xhosa chiefs living between the Colony and the Kei River. The amaNdlambe, imiDange and amaMbalu fell in more or less enthusiastically with Maqoma’s call to arms. However, the amaGqunukhwebe under Phato and the amaNtinde under Dyani Tshatshu, both of whom were under strong missionary influence, stood aside.

On 21 December 1834 perhaps as many as 10 000 Xhosa fighters (their actual numbers can only be guessed at, and colonists naturally inflated them) launched a series of raids into the Colony along a broad, 145-kilometre front from the Winterberg in the north to Algoa Bay in the south.
This attack was the opening move in the Sixth Cape Frontier War of 1834–1835 and was exceptional in that it was the first time the amaXhosa had ever deliberately initiated major hostilities. The ensuing conflict, known to the amaXhosa either as Maqoma’s War, or (for reasons that will become apparent) as Hintsa’s War, would prove the most brutal and wide-ranging up to that time.

After the experiences of five frontier wars, the amaXhosa knew better than to launch suicidal, mass frontal attacks against British troops or colonial forces deployed in the open field, or to attempt to storm fixed positions like laagers or forts. Instead, they advanced in numerous small detachments, evading CMR patrols and easily bypassing the chain of fortifications that the British had erected with such effort and expense at key points along the border, but which proved a useless deterrent when put to the test. Caught unprepared, the British garrisons abandoned some of their key forts, including the showpiece Fort Willshire – where the trade fairs were held – which the amaXhosa proceeded to loot and burn, and retreated to Grahamstown and Fort Beaufort. With no forces in the field to oppose them, the amaXhosa rampaged through the border districts at will.

The entirely unanticipated Xhosa invasion of the Colony unleashed widespread panic and confusion in the Albany, Somerset and Uitenhage districts and inflicted considerable destruction and loss of property. Between 22 December 1834 and 12 January 1835, thirty-two settlers (their womenfolk and children were spared, as was the Xhosa custom in war) and about eighty of their Khoikhoi servants were reported killed, 456 farmhouses were besieged and burnt down, 300 were pillaged and (according to doubtless greatly inflated estimates) some 5 700 horses, 115 000 cattle and 162 000 sheep were driven off by the exalting amaXhosa. Thousands of colonists were reduced to destitution overnight. Only the missionaries were left unharmed, on the orders of the Xhosa chiefs. The amaXhosa had hoped that the Khoisan would rally to them, and some labourers and servants did indeed serve as guides to the raiding parties. But, encouraged by the missionaries, the Khoisan generally stood by the government, some took up arms in its cause, and others suffered at Xhosa hands, not least the inhabitants of the Kat River Settlement, which the raiders devastated. The terrified settlers close to the border took refuge in the frontier villages and settlements of Fort Beaufort, Grahamstown, Bathurst and Salem, where they built defensive barricades and fortified the
stone churches. Further west, Boer farmers formed their traditional wagon laagers. One of them at the farm Mooi Meisiesfontien came under amaXhosa attack on eight successive nights.

Disconcerted British officials, caught flat-footed and thrown onto the defensive – and only too aware that the Cape garrison had been reduced by almost 40 per cent since 1820 and now stood in the region of only 1 600 regular troops – were egged on by the shrilly panicked colonial press to portray the Xhosa incursions into the Colony as entirely unprovoked. Counter-measures had to be adopted with all despatch. Governor D’Urban, although he enjoyed a fine military reputation, was known to be slow and cautious. On this occasion, though, the moment news of the Xhosa invasion reached him on 28 December, he had the good sense immediately to bundle off the dynamic Colonel Harry Smith to take temporary command of military operations on the eastern frontier until he himself arrived.

Henry George Wakelyn Smith (1787–1860) who (as we shall see) his more irreverent associates had good cause to nickname ‘Sir Hurry Wackalong Smite’, was the son of a provincial surgeon. Coming of such a lowly social background, Harry Smith would never have been eligible for a commission but for an act of patronage that in 1805 saw him in the dark green jacket of the renowned Rifle Brigade. Smith’s sense of social inferiority and his consequent need to prove himself meant he was always drawing attention to himself, and his fellow officers sneeringly considered him a ‘pusher’. Smith was certainly excitable by nature, with an appalling temper, and was given to ferocious swearing. Still, his tremendous self-confidence and invincible optimism meant that he always inspired the men he commanded.

Smith possessed considerable military experience. During the assault on Badajoz on 7 April 1812 during the Peninsular War, he had rescued the ravishingly beautiful, fourteen-year-old noblewoman, Juana Maria de Los Dolores de Leon, from the horrific sack of the town. He subsequently married her, and she remained devoted to him, accompanying her paladin on most of his military campaigns thereafter. Smith fought in the War of 1812 against the United States, when he witnessed the burning of the White House in Washington, and was present on the field of Waterloo. However, as with many another officer, Colonel Smith’s chances of further promotion were severely diminished with the coming of peace, and in July 1828 he
accepted the post of deputy quartermaster-general at the Cape. This was a distinctly unglamorous posting, but the Sixth Cape Frontier War gave Smith a fresh opportunity to shine.

Urgently despatched by D’Urban to stem the crisis on the eastern frontier, Smith famously rode from Cape Town to Grahamstown in a mere six days. There, to his contempt, he found chaos and confusion, with the settlers cowering behind their barricades, even though by the time he arrived on 6 January 1835 the amaXhosa were already retiring east of the Fish and Keiskamma with their enormous booty in livestock. This withdrawal was part of the Xhosa plan. For although ordinary Xhosa warriors exuberantly expected to drive the hated colonists into the sea, Maqoma and Tyhali understood they did not possess the means to do so. Their objective in raiding the Colony was strictly limited, confined to employing a sharp, destructive blow in order to induce the worsted British into a negotiating a settlement that would address their grievances. Of one thing they were certain: they had no intention of embarking on a prolonged, potentially disastrous campaign.

Smith planned otherwise. Taking energetic command, he declared martial law and ordered the now unnecessary and demoralising barricades taken down. Red-coated reinforcements were beginning to arrive from Cape Town, the CMR in their dark-green capes and jackets were in the field, and the commandos in the eastern districts were being called out, the burghers dressed as usual in corduroy jackets and broad-brimmed hats. British settlers also responded staunchly, and contributed the Grahamstown Volunteers, the Albany Mounted Sharp-Shooters, the Bathurst Volunteers and the Corps of Guides, with jaunty ostrich feathers in their hats. To augment these forces, Smith raised and trained two Provisional Battalions of Khoikhoi auxiliaries from the Albany district and from the Kat River Settlement. Numbering about 800 in all, Smith put them into black jackets and low-crowned hats, and rapidly came to appreciate their natural ability as soldiers. With these forces Smith went characteristically onto the offensive – this being, in his estimation, the best form of defence. On 10 January 1835 a column of 400 armed volunteers rode east from Grahamstown and burnt the homesteads of Nqeno (the Mbalu chief and son of Langa, Rharhabe’s brother) and Tyhali. Meanwhile, Smith ordered Colonel Somerset, the commandant of the eastern frontier, to clear the road to Port Elizabeth, the main supply point from Cape Town, and sent out
further patrols to secure other strategic points along the frontier and to
reoccupy and improve the defences of the abandoned military posts.

D’Urban arrived in Grahamstown on 20 January 1835 and spent the next
eight weeks mustering a large striking force. Until the governor was ready
to begin his advance, Smith remained actively in the field to keep the
amaXhosa off-balance. In early February 1835 he led a mixed force of 900
mounted burghers and settlers, the CMR and his newly raised Khoikhoi
Provisional Battalions against those amaXhosa still occupying the Fish
River bush. After three days of many small, desperate encounters in which
twelve colonial troops and about seventy-five amaXhosa were killed, Smith
withdrew with some 2 000 captured cattle. On 26 March, Smith rode out
again with a strong patrol into the Amathole Mountains, the traditional
stronghold of the amaRharhabe where Maqoma and Tyhali were ensconced,
and returned with 1 200 cattle. The British were never to relish operating in
this labyrinthine terrain, ideally configured for Xhosa ambushes and hit-
and-run tactics, and described by a participant in a later frontier war as
‘broken up in the most extraordinary manner into hills and valleys,
raaantzes and kloofs, table-land and precipices, pasture and bush’.

Finally, on 31 March, five days after Smith’s return from his raid into the
Amathole, D’Urban was ready to launch his offensive into emaXhoseni. He
had at his disposal 385 regular British cavalry, 1 639 additional mounted
troops comprising the CMR, British settler units and burgher commandos,
and 1 570 regular infantry. In addition, there were Smith’s Khoikhoi
Provisional Battalions and whatever other Africans might be induced to join
up. These forces were divided into four supporting divisions, and were to
converge in their separate marches on Maqoma’s stronghold in the
Amathole. The first division, under Lieutenant-Colonel John Peddie,
accompanied by D’Urban and his headquarters staff under Smith, left Fort
Willshire and marched north-east towards the Amathole. Somerset’s second
division, which was encamped between Fort Willshire and the coast, did
likewise. Further north, the third division, led by Major William Cox
(another Peninsular veteran), left Fort Beaufort and advanced across the
Tyhume River. The fourth division, consisting entirely of mounted
commandos and settlers, was led by Field Commandant Stephanus van
Wyk. It assembled in the northern extremity of the Ceded Territory and
entered the Amathole from the north.
Mqoma well understood that he was confronted by the largest, most
dangerous colonial intrusion into emaXhoseni that had ever been mounted.
Since he could not withstand the British in the open field, he cannily evaded
fixed engagements, and small groups of his fighting men harassed and
ambushed the four columns as they converged on the Amathole. Some of
the amaXhosa were armed with muskets. Later commentators have
wondered whether they could have fought off the British more successfully
if they had made better use of them. But would muzzle-loading muskets
have been more effective in this bush warfare than spears? The amaXhosa
were themselves uncertain. In the early Cape Frontier Wars when they
possessed very few firearms (which were bought illegally or looted) they
regarded them as mere ancillaries to their conventional weapons, and
valued muskets more for hunting than for fighting. Now they had more of
them, but they were mainly inferior muskets, produced especially for the
‘Kaffir trade’, and a chronic shortage of powder meant that they’d had scant
practice in firing them accurately or effectively. Nor was their poor aim
helped by their practice of firing their undependable muskets from the hip
rather than from the shoulder, and their need to improvise bullets from
whatever metal came to hand: spoons, pot legs, zinc stripped from the roofs
of raided farmhouses.

Indeed, it should be noted the Xhosa tentativeness regarding firearm
technology was but one element in their uneasy adaptation of the settler
civilisation that was engulfing them. They were beginning to wear more
and more items of European clothing and red trade blankets were
supplanting their hide cloaks. They were also acquiring many more horses
from the Colony. Men of substance rode them for prestige, yet they stopped
short at using them for mounted infantry along the lines of the CMR,
considering them more a hindrance than a help in bushy terrain, and
confined their military employment to carrying scouts and messengers.
Even so, the positive psychological impact on the amaXhosa in possessing
firearms and horses, those potent symbols of colonial military supremacy
ever since the first commandos took the field in the seventeenth century,
cannot be underestimated.

D’Urban’s four divisions destroyed Xhosa homesteads as they advanced,
seized livestock and captured women and children for forced labour in the
Colony. But when Maqoma withdraw his forces ever deeper into the
inaccessible kloofs of the Amathole, the British advance became bogged
down. Consequently, the governor decided to adopt a revised strategy and push on into Gcaleka territory.

Maqoma and the Ciskeian chiefs had consulted Hintsa, the Xhosa paramount, before invading the Colony, and Hintsa had given the undertaking his approval. He was fully aware of the depredations the Ciskeian chiefs were enduring at the hands of the British, and could only suppose that his turn would be next. Moreover, as his councillors reminded him, it was his duty to stand by his kinsmen as their lineage head. There were also old Graaff-Reinet rebels among his advisers who supplied him with firearms and fuelled his anti-British sentiments. Yet when Maqoma did invade the Colony, the amaGcaleka had not actively joined in – even if Hintsa had permitted the amaRharhabe to drive their cattle into his country for safekeeping – and D’Urban thus had no real justification for attacking them. But, much under the influence of the British settler lobby led by Robert Godlonton, and deeply affected by settlers’ tales of their sufferings and losses, he had come to the conclusion that it made strategic sense to push the colonial boundary forward from the Keiskamma to the supposedly shorter and thus more defensible line of the Kei. The annexation of the intervening territory would have the additional advantage of meeting the unremitting settler demands for more land and labour. In any case, it made sense to D’Urban to sweep up all the cattle he could from the paramount’s domain in recompense for those captured by the amaRharhabe.

In mid-April D’Urban therefore decided to leave Cox’s and Van Wyk’s divisions to continue ravaging the Amathole with the hope of bringing Maqoma to bay, while he personally led Smith’s and Somerset’s divisions east across the Kei to invade Hintsa’s territory – which is why the amaXhosa also call this the War of Hintsa. Once D’Urban had crossed the Kei on 15 April he made camp fifty kilometres east of the river at Hintsa’s Great Place near the abandoned Butterworth Wesleyan mission. From this base, Smith led 300 horsemen in a series of raids against Gcaleka homesteads, while some 5,000 Thembu allies of the opportunistic Thembu regent, Fadana, led by Major Henry Warden, gleefully joined the fray against their Gcaleka enemies and captured 4,000 cattle.

Facing these daunting odds, on 29 April Hintsa, arrayed in a superb leopard-skin cloak and wearing brass, ivory and bead ornaments, appeared at the British camp to sue for peace. He was accompanied by Sarhili, his son and heir, a dignified young man who was about twenty-five years of
age, by his half-brother Bhurhu, and by several senior councillors. Smith, who was awaiting him, was in no mood to be accommodating. He roundly blamed the amaXhosa for starting the war and, as he stated in a letter to his sister on 7 May 1835, he wrote off ‘the whole race’ as ‘a perfidious set … possessing nothing but a love of mischief, rapine, and injustice’. Conveniently blind to his own perfidy, and to Hintsa’s indignation and dismay, instead of negotiating with him, Smith treacherously seized the paramount as a hostage, violating the norms of diplomatic practice, whether British or Xhosa. He then proceeded to hold Hintsa against British demands for 50 000 cattle and 1 000 horses as reparation for the Rharhabe raids the previous December, and against the paramount’s undertaking to order those amaRharhabe holding out in the Amathole to surrender. Hintsa knew himself to be in no position to enforce any of these demands. Unnerved by Smith’s threat to summarily hang him from the tree under which he sat if he did not comply, he attempted to temporise while he planned his escape. Meanwhile, British patrols continued toraid Gcaleka homesteads and seize their livestock.

With Hintsa still held in his camp, on 10 May 1835 D’Urban proceeded with a spectacular land-grab at the expense of the amaRharhabe and the other Ciskei amaXhosa. On that day, in the presence of Hintsa and to the accompaniment of a twenty-one-gun salute, the governor issued a proclamation taking possession of the territory ‘lying between the eastern Boundary of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope and the Kye River’ to ‘form part of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope’, and to ‘belong to his Britannic Majesty’s Colonial Dominions’. D’Urban named this huge, annexed territory between the Keiskamma and Kei Rivers the Province of Queen Adelaide after King William IV’s consort, Princess Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen. For the new province’s administrative centre, D’Urban selected a site on the Buffalo River where John Brownlee’s LMS mission had stood, and named it King William’s Town to compliment Queen Adelaide’s husband, the reigning monarch. At this stage, as he expressed it in the proclamation, it was D’Urban’s intention to ‘provide for the future security of the Colony … by removing these treacherous and irreclaimable savages to a safer distance’ – or, in other words, to expel all the amaXhosa currently living in the newly annexed province east across the Kei. In that way, as Alan Lester has articulated it, the colonial margins would be secured through ‘mass expulsion and spatial separation’.7
The establishment of the Province of Queen Adelaide led to a completely new approach to fort-building, with an emphasis on occupation and subjugation. D’Urban ordered the construction of eight fortifications at strategic points to command the wagon routes through the new province, to threaten and dominate territory where the amaXhosa were living, and to serve as bases for future operations. These forts, in which D’Urban took an intense professional interest, were all relatively rudimentary earthwork redoubts, either square or star-shaped and surrounded by a ditch and abattis, each designed to protect a magazine, cattle kraal, stores and soldiers’ accommodation. D’Urban’s fort-building was not restricted to the new province. His aim was also to repair, improve and add to the defensive posts in the Ceded Territory and along the colonial boundary of the Fish and Kat Rivers to the Winterberg, and work on twenty-five structures was put in hand.

To induce the havering Hintsa to meet their terms, on 11 May the British compelled him to accompany a 500-strong patrol commanded by Smith as an unwilling witness while they captured his people’s cattle. Sarhili and Bhurhu remained in camp, held as hostages. The next day Hintsa attempted to escape when near the Nqabara River by suddenly galloping away from his mounted escort. Smith himself gave chase and in a tussle knocked him off his horse. Hintsa then attempted to run into the shelter of the bush in the river bed. Although shot in the back and leg by his pursuers, the wounded Hintsa gained the river where he submerged himself up to his shoulders. George Southey, the commander of the Corps of Guides, found him there. Despite Hintsa’s pleas for mercy, Southey shot him through the temple at point-blank range, blowing out his brains. Southey and his companions then dragged the body onto the rocky bank and stripped it of its brass ornaments, beads and bracelets. Smith himself looted Hintsa’s spear and some of his bracelets and sent them to Juanita as souvenirs. Assistant Surgeon Ford of the 72nd Highlanders extracted some of Hintsa’s teeth as specimens. George Southey – or perhaps his brother William – cut off one of Hintsa’s ears as a trophy, and someone else took the other. The ears (or what passed for his) were later offered on sale in the streets of Grahamstown. It seems Hintsa’s testicles were also taken as souvenirs. Having done with desecrating Hintsa’s corpse, the troopers left it in a hut covered by a kaross, and rode away.
In recent years scholars have evinced much interest in the nature of Western military culture as it evolved during the course of colonial wars. As Simon J. Harrison has postulated, ‘a distinction seems to have arisen … between “civilized” and “savage” enemies’ in which it was ‘allowable or even necessary’ to imitate and reciprocate the savagery imputed to the latter, thus confirming the superiority of the former. There is little doubt that by the Sixth Cape Frontier War settlers and soldiers were increasingly taking human ‘trophies of the chase’ to signal their military prowess and their dominance over the enemy. Yet, not to absolve those who mutilated Hintsa’s corpse, but rather to contextualise the act, since the dawn of time it has been the habit of soldiers to take trophies from the enemy they have killed – one has only to read Homer’s *Iliad*, written down some 2 800 years ago, to see this is so. The weapons, armour and personal ornaments of the slain were typical trophies, but so too were body parts. Consider but the alabaster bas-relief (c. 645 BC) in the British Museum of the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, banqueting in a garden with his wife under ornamental trees, from one of which hangs the severed head of Teuman, the defeated king of Elam. Nor has the taking of body parts as trophies been confined to ancient times or colonial conflicts. Joanna Bourke has shown how common the practice still was in the twentieth century when in the two World Wars, in Korea and Vietnam, the taking of ears, fingers or penises confirmed a kill and proved that a man had acquitted himself in the field.

Even so, ‘civilised’ and humanitarian Victorian sentiment was revulsed by the removal of body parts as trophies, and the summary shooting down of a ‘native’ ruler in British custody was equally frowned upon. It was upon orders from London, therefore, that D’Urban was eventually compelled on 29 August 1836 to convene a week-long court of inquiry at Fort Willshire into Hintsa’s death. The witnesses (including Harry Smith) excelled themselves in providing fabricated and obfuscatory evidence, and the court ultimately found no one at fault. It did criticise the mutilation of Hintsa’s corpse, even though it felt unable to identify the perpetrator.

Despite the criticism and unwelcome publicity the circumstances surrounding Hintsa’s death brought in their train, D’Urban considered the paramount’s demise extremely convenient. He summoned Sarhili to him, and having extracted an acknowledgment from the dead paramount’s young heir that the Kei now formed the boundary between the Colony and his
domain, he sent him home escorted by a guard of honour – an attention that did nothing to assuage Sarhili’s bitterness and abiding distrust of the white man. But satisfied that the chastised amaGcaleka would present no future threat to the Colony, D’Urban pulled back west across the Kei with 10 000 captured Gcaleka cattle – far fewer than he had demanded of Hintsa, but a large enough haul to rub in his point.

In the days before the annexation of the Province of Queen Adelaide was announced and Hintsa was killed, D’Urban’s camp had begun attracting great numbers of Africans. D’Urban reported that these people were refugees from Shaka who had subsequently been enslaved by Hintsa and were seeking their freedom. Their origins were not so straightforward, however. There has been considerable scholarly debate about who these people, whom D’Urban and the colonists called the ‘Fingo’, and whom Africanists in the 1960s redubbed the ‘amaMfengu’, actually were.\(^{11}\)

At the time it was assumed that the amaMfengu (as we shall continue to call them) were a destitute group of Northern Nguni refugees – such as the amaNgwane – who had been displaced by the upheavals of the *Mfecane* and who had settled as inferior clients among the abaThembu, amaMpondo and particularly among the amaGcaleka. Most recently, Poppy Fry has argued that the majority of these amaMfengu were Christian amaGcaleka, who in the 1820s had been the first people in the region to accept missionaries among them. They spoke the same language and presented the same physical appearance as other amaXhosa, but had developed their own, specific identity within the broader context of Xhosa society.\(^{12}\) It seems that the amaMfengu accepted their name as a form of self-identification to assert their difference, and that refugees and outcasts gravitated to their settlements as safe havens. They farmed more intensively than their Xhosa neighbours, and the active involvement of Mfengu men in agriculture flew in the face of Xhosa practice, where this was strictly women’s work. Moreover, the amaMfengu eagerly participated in trade and were prominent at the Fort Willshire fairs. In an uncertain time, when the great bulk of amaXhosa held on tightly to their existing social system with its promise of stability, Mfengu practices were considered subversive, especially when they were seen to be resistant to the traditional authority of chiefs. Little wonder then, that they were increasingly the victims of witchcraft accusations in the years leading up to the War of Hintsa.
John Ayliff, the Wesleyan missionary at Butterworth, who had long championed the Christian amaMfengu, grasped how he could use D’Urban’s invasion of the Transkei to better their lot, and persuaded D’Urban to ‘rescue’ them. On 9 May the governor arranged for a great column of nearly 17 000 amaMfengu (including large numbers of Gcaleka hangers-on who jumped at the chance to secure British protection and patronage), along with 22 000 cattle confiscated from the amaGcaleka, to cross over the Kei into the Colony under military escort. Carrying their mats and cooking pots, they pushed on until they were west of the Keiskamma River. The colonial authorities settled them near the coast between the Fish and Keiskamma in the southern half of the Ceded Territory centred on the newly established Fort Peddie (which would grow over the next ten years into a considerable fortification with stone-built barracks). There, and in their hamlets outside other military posts, the amaMfengu would serve as a buffer between the Colony and the amaRharhabe.

Indeed, the Mfengu presence would considerably alter the dynamics of the Cape’s borderlands in the British interest. Not only would they add considerably to the colonial labour supply, but over the next thirty years they would prove to be staunch military allies. One should be wary, though, of dismissing the amaMfengu as mere mercenaries, even if self-preservation and self-interest played a part. Certainly, living under Cape rule they were beholden to their patrons for their favoured status, but they also had their own specific identity and prosperity to protect against the amaXhosa. For, once settled around Fort Peddie and in the other settlements the colonial government designated for them, the amaMfengu did their best to be accepted into the colonial order. They made a formal vow to become Christian, acquire an education and remain loyal to the colonial government. This played well with evangelical missionaries who wished to create literate, educated and God-fearing communities in which independent peasants owned land, used ox-drawn ploughs and wagons, sold their produce on the market, built proper, square houses and dressed decently in European clothes. The amaMfengu did their best to oblige and became pioneers of Christian respectability and the vanguard of an African elite. In every way their integration into colonial society set them apart from the resistant and barbarous amaXhosa – as the colonists saw them – who had to be dominated to be reformed.
While D’Urban was campaigning east of the Kei, Cox and Van Wyk continued to pursue the amaRharhabe round and about the Amathole, but were hampered by the rough terrain and heavy rain. In an attempt to bring the stalled campaign to an end, they offered to suspend operations if Maqoma agreed to move east of the Kei with his people. Maqoma understandably refused, and the inconclusive fighting went on. Once D’Urban had withdrawn Smith’s and Somerset’s divisions from Gcaleka territory he redeployed them to participate in a new offensive aimed at engaging the amaRharhabe in a decisive battle. Hoping to maintain British goodwill in what was now the British Province of Queen Adelaide, Phato, the Gqunukhwebe chief, sent 1 200 warriors to join the campaign. Yet, despite their increased numbers, the cumbersome British columns had no more success than before in pinning Maqoma down, and he successfully evaded them in the broken terrain.

In this gruelling campaign the British regulars did make concessions to the terrain and climate by adapting some elements of their uniforms and accoutrement. The 72nd Highlanders, for example, exchanged their trews for ‘crackers’ (brown buckskin or sheepskin trousers), and replaced their pipeclayed cross-belts and small cartouche-boxes with large, light pouches attached to brown waist belts. (The standard knapsack, introduced in 1824, was a heavy affair, with wooden boards at top and sides.) The redcoats also converted their headgear – the unsuitable shako introduced in 1829, which flared outwards towards the flat top, giving it a distinctive bell shape, and which was often adorned with decorative cords and plumes – to forage caps by adding broad red leather peaks in front and back.

The amaRharhabe continued to lay ambushes in their familiar landscape of thick bush with its game trails invisible to the British, who had little idea of where the enemy were lurking. But their elusive foes always knew precisely where they were, and alerted each other of their whereabouts through hilltop signal fires and long calls. Spies too played an essential role in locating the British. Some rode horses and passed themselves off as auxiliaries on the British side, while Xhosa women gathered intelligence, taking advantage of the immunity they usually enjoyed in war. Indeed, women played a crucial part in the Xhosa war effort. They continued to cultivate the fields at home and brought provisions to their fighting men, carried messages (on occasion acting as emissaries between the amaXhosa and the British, as did Nongwane, Maqoma’s sister), smuggled ammunition
and played a vital role as traditional healers and war-doctors. They could also display exemplary courage, as did Nqeno’s daughter, who decoyed a patrol away from him when his Great Place was surprised, by donning his leopard-skin cloak. She was wounded several times before her brave deception was uncovered.

The cumbersome British supply trains were particularly vulnerable to Xhosa ambush as they plodded along the steep winding tracks through the dense bush with the enemy hanging doggedly onto their rearguard. The amaRharhabe emerged suddenly from the thick cover, sometimes sheltering behind cattle they drove into the column to disrupt it, killed the draft-oxen in order to immobilise the wagons, and then tried to cut off the military escort as it closed up to protect them. Another favourite tactic was to lure small parties away from the main body of soldiers by using cattle as decoys, or by appearing at a distance and shouting out challenges and insults to provoke the British forces to break ranks. Moreover, so long as the British were still armed with single-shot muskets it was always possible for the amaXhosa to close in with these isolated groups before they could reload and cut them down with their spears. One such cornered patrol heard the exultant amaXhosa shout out: ‘You are like a mouse in a calabash, you have got into it, but you cannot get out.’

All in all, British troops proved next to useless against Xhosa guerrilla tactics in the Amathole, and the Boers were hardly any better despite being veterans of frontier warfare. Smith and other commanders soon learnt that in this irregular warfare they had to depend upon the CMR and their Khoikhoi auxiliaries. From mid-1835 they were also able to call upon the amaMfengu, who were eager to express their loyalty to the Colony through their military service, even though at that stage they were still indistinguishable in their dress from the amaXhosa. In this and next three Cape Frontier Wars they would repeatedly demonstrate their worth as light troops who could search out the enemy and operate with pluck and tenacity in the bush fighting which white troops were always to find such ‘bloody and hopeless work’.

With the campaign in the Amathole still no closer to a conclusion, D’Urban departed for Cape Town and put Smith in command of operations. Left to his own devices, towards the end of June Smith changed his tactics. Instead of sending unwieldy columns into the Amathole, he began
deploying numerous small patrols of 30 to 100 men made up not of British regulars, but mostly of Mfengu, Khoikhoi and Gqunukhwebe auxiliaries. Their objective was to starve the amaRharhabe into submission by systematically capturing their cattle, burning their fields and granaries, digging up their grain pits, and destroying the dwellings of the women who tended the fields. Driven away from their homes and themselves starving, Xhosa women could no longer provide food for their men. The amaRharhabe responded by refining their ambush tactics and making more use of firearms captured from farmers during the raids into the Colony or from defeated British forces. Maqoma himself was spotted leading ambushes on his white horse. This new approach was validated when on 25 June Maqoma’s warriors surprised a patrol of thirty Khoikhoi under the command of Lieutenant Charles Bailie in the foothills of the Amathole, and slaughtered them to a man.

Such minor Rharhabe successes, although heartening, were not sufficient in themselves to derail the British campaign. Ideally, the sowing of crops for the new season should have begun in June and could not be delayed beyond September. But the amaRharhabe, already dangerously short of food thanks to Smith’s scorched-earth tactics, had been prevented from doing so and were desperate to begin. And although records of rape and abuse of Xhosa women during the Cape Frontier Wars are rare, such atrocities undoubtedly occurred, and the Khoikhoi auxiliaries and amaMfengu in particular considered them fair game. Starving women taking refuge at D’Urban’s camp were subjected to sexual violence, which is why others were afraid to leave the bush, and preferred to run ‘the risk of being shot to the licentious conduct of the Christians’.\textsuperscript{15} At this extremity, and living, as Maqoma put it, ‘like wild beasts’,\textsuperscript{16} they were saved by D’Urban’s change of front. Not only was the governor under increasing pressure from Viscount Melbourne’s Whig administration in London to end the interminable and expensive frontier war, but he had come to the realisation that, for lack of sufficient military sources, he must modify his original intention to sweep the new Province of Queen Adelaide clear of the amaXhosa. Instead, he reluctantly conceded that the amaXhosa living between the Keiskamma and Kei would have to remain there, and banked on the administration he put in place being able to ensure their transformation into docile subjects through indirect rule and a thoroughgoing exposure to colonial culture.
Therefore, with everything to gain through negotiation, British and Rharhabe delegations met warily on 15 August. They engaged in several weeks of on-and-off wrangling, during which Maqoma (who was habitually clad in a military overcoat and ‘crackers’, while Tyhali retained his traditional leopard-skin cape) initially jibbed at the British demand that he abandon his stronghold in the Amathole and surrender his firearms. Finally, on 17 September 1835, both parties reached a compromise agreement at Fort Willshire. The amaRharhabe accepted nominal British suzerainty, but did not actually surrender. The prominent frontier chiefs were all allocated locations designated by the governor, and Maqoma was recognised as the most senior among them. Although chiefs would remain largely responsible for their people’s conduct in these locations, they were placed under the supervision of resident agents. It was D’Urban’s intention that the territorial spaces between the designated locations be filled as soon as feasible by settler farms to secure order in the new province. For he understood perfectly well that a system of fortifications and military garrisons did not effectively occupy a country: only settlers could do that.

D’Urban’s revised policy, as embodied in the treaty, therefore marked a decisive shift from the previous colonial tendency to secure a defensive form of separation from the amaXhosa, coupled with a vague hope that they would become gradually more ‘civilised’ and less hostile. Now, for the first time, the decision had been taken that the military domination of the amaXhosa on the borders of the Colony would ensure their actual integration into the colonial order. Harry Smith was named civil commissioner of the Province of Queen Adelaide which, according to a census taken in 1835/1836, encompassed 56 000 amaNgqika and 9 200 amaNdlambe making up the amaRharhabe, 7 500 amaGqunukhwebe and 18 500 amaMfengu. Smith was not at all sure that the ‘experiment’ (as he termed it in his letter to D’Urban on 22 September) would succeed. Nevertheless, as he assured the governor, even if it did fail, the British would still retain ‘surveillance and magisterial power around the several component bodies of the Kafir nation, and the means to subdue any serious resistance’.

Smith set about his herculean task with characteristic panache, establishing himself like a chief in the embryo settlement of King William’s Town, surrounded by all the pomp and ceremonial he could muster in order to overawe all the chiefs he had commanded to attend him. He played to
their sense of hierarchy, hanging silver medals of office around their necks, and was as affable as could be. But under this façade it was his intention to undermine the power of the chiefs in the new locations in order to transform them into salaried, subservient officials – or ‘magistrates’ – of the new colonial order. As part of his drive to absorb the amaRharhabe into the colonial world, Smith did his best to end witchcraft executions (previously a powerful instrument of control in chiefs’ hands), introduced schools, encouraged missionaries and their evangelical endeavours, promoted the trade in colonial commodities, and harangued women with the intention of persuading them to imitate the useful activities of their white sisters.

But, with only 1 300 troops (many of them ill) to maintain order, the British military and administrative presence in Queen Adelaide Province was too weak for the undertaking. Moreover, in the wake of the war many amaXhosa were left in a pitifully destitute state. Their homes had been burnt, their crops destroyed, their livestock captured, and locusts threatened the new harvest. Some starving people in these shattered communities sought assistance at the mission stations, many others migrated to find work within the Colony or simply wandered off to beg, while those remaining with their chiefs turned in their extremity to raiding other amaXhosa, the amaMfengu or colonists. Besides, the recent war had further embittered relations between blacks and whites, and widened the ideological gap between racist settlers on the one side, and the missionaries and the growing number of influential people in Britain who espoused the increasingly humanitarian sentiment of the age.
Harry Smith did not lord it over the Province of Queen Adelaide for long, and the settlers’ hopes that great tracts of its territory would be thrown open to occupation as farms or for profitable speculation in land were thwarted. In the United Kingdom there was a swell of humanitarian and evangelical unease concerning relations with indigenous people in the growing empire and the way they were being treated. In 1834 Parliament set up the Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes to investigate. It was chaired by the anti-slavery champion Thomas Fowell Buxton, and included among its members William Ewart Gladstone (a future Liberal prime minister) and George Grey (a future governor of New Zealand and the Cape). The committee, whose work stirred up considerable debate about colonial policy, delivered its final report in 1837. It advocated greater rights for aboriginal peoples and recommended that their administration be taken out of settler hands and entrusted to professional administrators.¹

Lord Glenelg, the Whig secretary for war and the colonies, was an evangelical Christian who was ill at ease with the many questionable consequences of colonial conquest. He was much influenced by the testimony of the witnesses called by the Select Committee, notably that of Andries Stockenström (who had been in retirement in Sweden) and of Dr John Philip of the LMS (who brought along a deputation of Griqua and amaXhosa to give evidence). On 26 December 1835 Glenelg fired off a despatch to D’Urban squarely blaming the Sixth Cape Frontier War on the Cape’s unjust provocations which had driven the amaXhosa to take up arms. Alarmed too by the cost of the recent war and the prospective expense of administering the Province of Queen Adelaide, he went on to order its immediate retrocession unless the governor (whose rationale for annexation had been both tardy and insufficient) could better justify why he
had acted as he had. Glenelg further directed that the Ceded Territory remain outside the Cape boundary proper, but continue to be administered by the Colony. This entailed requiring the Xhosa chiefs living between the Great Fish and Kei Rivers to formally abandon all claim to the land they occupied. However, by administrative sleight of hand, Glenelg’s directive allowed for the same land to be ‘lent’ back to them dependent on their future good behaviour, and on their undertaking to leave the recently established Mfengu settlements in the Ceded Territory undisturbed. Glenelg’s bombshell of a despatch only reached Cape Town on 21 March 1836. Mortified and indignant, D’Urban stonewalled and tried to enlist the support of the king himself, while Smith fulminated. But Glenelg was not to be moved, and on 2 February 1837 the Province of Queen Adelaide was formally de-annexed.

Meanwhile, to his surprise, Stockenström found himself back in Cape Town on 25 July 1836 in his new capacity of lieutenant-governor of the Eastern Cape. Glenelg had made the appointment on the basis of Stockenström’s compelling evidence to the Select Committee in which he had blamed the continuing frontier violence on the provocative and unjust reprisal system, and on settler determination to seize more Xhosa land. Stockenström’s proposed panacea, which gained Glenelg’s ear, had been the institution of a treaty system with the Xhosa chiefs to replace the policy of military coercion. It was to implement this policy that Stockenström arrived in Grahamstown on 3 September 1836 to take up his new post.

Although his prime mission was to foster peaceful relations with the Xhosa chiefs, Stockenström stuck to his long-abiding principle that all parties should be treated with strict, equal justice. He was consequently convinced that the future stability of the frontier depended on fostering a sense of security and stability among all the people living on both sides of the border, whether black or white. This, he believed, could only be done through convincing them that the colonial government would take all the measures necessary to protect their lives and property against marauders and arbitrary violence. From the colonial perspective, this meant, above all, beefing up the frontier defences through creating a stronger line of military posts along the border, and D’Urban (as we have seen) had already set this project in train.

In late 1836 all the newly built posts in the Province of Queen Adelaide were dismantled and abandoned (as was King William’s Town). But over
the next ten years, existing fortifications in the Ceded Territory and along the eastern boundary of the Colony were upgraded and, in what Denver Webb has characterised as a ‘frenzy of fort building’, new lines of fortifications were established along the Kat River and in the Winterberg, and along the Great Fish River. The most significant system, implemented after D’Urban’s departure in 1838, was the Lewis Line (named for Lieutenant-Colonel J. Lewis, the commander of the Royal Engineers in the Colony). It consisted of six forts, each a rectangular, stone-built fortification with a square tower in one corner, incorporating barracks, stables and commissariat stores. To improve communications between them, new roads were constructed and bridges built over the Fish and Kat Rivers. Major-General Sir George Napier, who succeeded D’Urban as governor between 1838 and 1844, and who too was a Peninsular veteran (he had lost his right arm in battle), was particularly enthusiastic in this regard. He initiated a communications system of stone signal towers, each with a semaphore mast on its flat roof. (As it later turned out, the isolated towers proved difficult to supply and defend, and were not a success.)

Stockenström believed it was essential to organise a more effective burgher force to support the fixed border defences, but government plans to turn the venerable Boer commando system into a modernised militia ran into indignant burgher opposition. The Boer commandos had played a valuable and often essential role in the Sixth Cape Frontier War, yet the British military had treated them with humiliating disdain and failed to compensate them properly for their service. This affront only compounded the bitter sentiment among many burghers in the frontier districts that under British rule they had been progressively marginalised, and that they had been turned into foreigners in their own land where the command of the English language, along with the adoption of English dress and manners, had become the prevailing indictors of civilisation. And, perhaps most of all, they deeply resented that they had been put legally on an equal footing with their servants and Christian converts of colour. It was this social levelling under the British administration they took deep exception to, quite as much as the affront to established racial hierarchy it entailed.

Consequently, when Stockenström returned to the eastern frontier in late 1836, far from establishing a burgher militia, to his dismay he was confronted by an orderly, mass migration of burghers out of the Colony, a popular movement that was nothing less than a peaceful rebellion against
British rule. It had long been axiomatic among British administrators, including Stockenström, that dense settlement was essential to secure the frontier, and now the underpopulated eastern districts were being left even emptier than before. Between 1836 and 1838 alone, perhaps as many as 8,000 burghers, along with their servants, flocks and herds, moved away into the interior where, free of British control, they planned to regulate society as they chose. By 1840 about 10 per cent of the Colony’s whites had joined what came to be known as the Great Trek, and some of the Eastern Cape districts had lost as many as 20 per cent of their burgher inhabitants. These were not the trekboers of old, individual families of pastoral farmers who gradually moved on beyond the limits of white settlement in search of better pastures. Rather, the Emigrant Farmers (as they called themselves), trekked away in organised parties, abandoning their long-established homesteads for an itinerant, uncomfortable life in ox-wagons, first selling off their farms and other fixed property, often at great financial loss.

Their resolve to accept such material sacrifice in order to embark on a hazardous future in untamed lands far away to the north requires further explanation to augment that of cultural marginalisation already offered. As Hermann Giliomee has pithily suggested, the other causes of the Great Trek ‘can be summarized as a lack of land, labor and security’, issues which the retrocession of the Province of Queen Adelaide only served to exacerbate.

We have already seen that with the natural growth in the burgher population, the shortage of land still available in the eastern districts for new farms was becoming acute. If burghers had been prepared to farm more intensively and efficiently, all might nevertheless have been well, but they were wedded to their traditional subsistence farming, and this way of life depended on continuing expansion rather than on the better usage of the land. And beyond the boundaries of the Colony, free land in abundance seemed to beckon—no matter if it was already inhabited by indigenous peoples, since they could always be either driven away or subdued as they had been in the Cape over the past two centuries. When the Province of Queen Adelaide was de-annexed, this seemed to terminate any possibility of expansion east under the aegis of British rule, and for the land-hungry frontiersmen the only remaining alternative lay north, over the Orange River and beyond the boundaries of the Colony.
The shortage of labour on burgher farms was also a chronic problem, made worse by Ordinance 50 of 1828, which had released Khoikhoi workers from bondage. The abolition of slavery within the British Empire was a related issue. On 1 August 1834 the Slavery Abolition Act (1833) came into effect and commenced in the Cape on 1 December 1834. All slaves in the Cape were emancipated, although under terms that left them indentured for four years to their former owners in the so-called ‘apprenticeship’ system that finally came to an end on 1 December 1838. The release (according to official figures) of 38 742 slaves in the Cape – where the population as a whole was approaching a quarter of a million – had a far greater impact in the western districts of the Colony where most slaves were held than on the eastern frontier where few burghers were slave-owners and where slaves numbered 8 196, or 21 per cent of the total. Nevertheless, emancipation was another psychological blow to the old paternalist order. It hardened the resolve of the Emigrant Farmers to perpetuate traditional – and oppressive – labour relations on the new farms they planned to stake out for themselves in the far interior beyond the reach of British interference. Nor would there be any unwelcome surprises there such as the retrocession of the Province of Queen Adelaide, which deprived burghers of the fresh Xhosa labour they had expected to secure.

Pressing as all these considerations concerning land and labour were among those burghers planning to abandon the Colony, it was the breakdown of security on the frontier that they found the most distressing. Frontier farmers had long complained about the nuisance posed by those they characterised as ‘vagrants’ (the wandering bands of Khoisan or amaXhosa begging for food and stealing when they could), and by the graver threat presented by armed parties of stock thieves. Loss of property and life had always spiked during the successive frontier wars, sometimes significantly. But the Sixth Cape Frontier War came as an extreme shock to all colonists along the eastern frontier since it was so unexpected, and since the loss of life suffered was so unprecedented, and the material damage inflicted by the amaXhosa so particularly severe. The subsequent annexation of the Province of Queen Adelaide had seemed at first to promise greater security, but its retrocession and the reappearance of plundering Xhosa bands shattered any such hope. Settlers along the entire frontier zone were reduced to a state of nervous apprehension, and the resentful notion was widespread that the British government was indifferent
to their fate. To those joining the Great Trek, it seemed that their future security lay in taking responsibility for it out of British hands, and placing it squarely in their own.

It was in these negative circumstances, with the frontier districts in a chronic state of alarm and discontent, and with thousands of burghers preparing to abandon them altogether for the far interior, that Stockenström set about implementing the treaty system he had sold to Glenelg. On 5 December 1836 he repealed and declared void D’Urban’s annexation of the Province of Queen Adelaide (thereby anticipating its formal de-annexation by two months), and entered into treaties with the Ngqika, Ndlambe and Gqunukhwebe chiefs. Maphasa, the son of Bawana and chief of the amaTshatshu Thembu north of the Amathole, was also drawn into the treaty system with the additional proviso, insisted upon by the humanitarian lobby, that he respect and protect the San people living in his domain ‘as the original Proprietors of the soil’.

Stockenström’s treaty system was based on the proposition that the chiefs were sovereign rulers who should be dealt with through proper treaties regulated through appointed diplomatic agents assisted in their law-enforcement functions by the freshly recruited ‘Kaffir Police’ armed with long sticks and dressed in short white jackets and trousers. The treaties addressed the central issue of stock theft and the provocative system of retaliatory patrols. In future, the onus would be on farmers to prevent theft by guarding their herds properly, and they could only reclaim stolen beasts taken over the border through peaceful, regulated negotiations with appointed Xhosa councillors.

A significant flaw in this arrangement (which Stockenström refused to recognise) was that, thanks to the shortage of labour in the frontier districts, there were simply not enough herdsmen available to guard livestock effectively – even if farmers were willing to entrust them with firearms, which they generally were not. In any case, by this date the limited labour force in the frontier districts was being required to undertake the intensive work connected with the flocks of woolled sheep that were fast replacing cattle. Wool was beginning to boom by the 1830s and was taking over from wine as the Cape’s staple product. By 1851 wool would account for nearly 60 per cent of the Cape’s export revenue. To meet demand, enterprising merchants were putting in place a distribution network (centred in the
eastern districts at Port Elizabeth) to transport the clip to the far-flung markets, and international investment was being attracted. However, the lack of labour remained a serious obstacle. Since farmers and merchants argued that labour must be cheap to make their investments pay off, it was difficult to attract or retain Khoikhoi labour. Resentful settler fingers were pointed at the Kat River Settlement in particular, which by now had a population approaching 5 000, and which was accused of locking up a potential source of workers. But, since there seemed no remedy to the labour shortage from within the Colony, farmers had to turn instead to the newly settled amaMfengu in the Ceded Territory, and also to amaXhosa who entered the Colony in increasing numbers in search of work and subsistence. The growing presence of the latter greatly complicated the situation since it was clear that much of the stock theft attributed to amaXhosa from over the border was actually being perpetrated by these unstable squatter communities of migrant labourers. The problem contributed to the passage of the Masters and Servants Ordinance of March 1841 whereby the Khoikhoi and the Xhosa labour force would in future be bound to landowners by contracts that included harsh criminal penalties for any breach of their restrictive terms. (At the same time, this ordinance was a recognition that the amaXhosa were no longer ‘foreign workers’ as Ordinance 49 of 1828 had categorised them, but were an integral part of the Colony’s labour force requiring regulation and not exclusion.)

The issue of stock theft, then, as inflammatory as the issue remained, was not the major factor behind the failure of the treaty system. The core point of contention was land. The English settlers, once they found their feet in their new country, looked on land both as an investment and a commodity in which they could speculate for profit. The rapid growth of the wool industry inexorably pushed up the value of land and stimulated a search for new pastures for the burgeoning flocks. Ominously for the people of the Kat River Settlement, theirs was potentially excellent sheep country, already surrounded by the farms of wealthy settlers who coveted it. Nevertheless, it was not available to them. That is why speculators had eagerly grasped at D’Urban’s intention to open up great stretches of land in Queen Adelaide’s Province to farms (over 400 requests for grants were received) and were commensurately disappointed by the territory’s retrocession.
As far as farmers and merchants of the set represented by Robert Godlonton and *The Graham’s Town Journal* were concerned, ‘a few thousands of worthless savages’ were sitting ‘like a nightmare’ upon land better occupied by merino sheep and ‘civilised men’. Nor were they prepared to allow the amaXhosa to continue doing so. As a political pressure group, they campaigned unrelentingly for the end of the treaty system they deemed unworkable, and for the re-annexation of the territory between the Keiskamma and Kei. Stockenström, as the architect of the reviled treaty system, was their particular bugbear, and in a concerted, slanderous campaign they blackened his reputation and agitated for his removal. In August 1839 Governor Napier, although himself in favour of trying to make the treaty system work, concluded that Stockenström was too unpopular to fulfil his duties as lieutenant-governor of the Eastern Cape, and replaced him with Colonel Sir John Hare. Created a baronet and given a pension, Stockenström retired sourly to his estate, *Maastrum*, in the Kat River valley.

The amaXhosa were of course uneasily aware, as Nkosi Bhotomane put it in 1840, that many settlers continued avariciously to ‘smell the grass and waters of Caffreland’ and ‘would drive us into the bush with our women and children’. Nevertheless, the amaXhosa had little option but to hope the treaty system would prevent violence and secure their future. Maqoma, for example, who had been permitted to reoccupy his lands on the east bank of the lower Kat River, but not those of his Jingqi chiefdom in what was now the territory of the Kat River Settlement, swallowed his considerable discontent and made every effort to cooperate with the Colony in implementing the terms of the treaties.

Stockenström’s ouster in 1839 was a blow to the chiefs, but they attempted to abide by his treaties. As late as May 1843, Maqoma declared to Captain Charles Stretch, the uncharacteristically sympathetic diplomatic agent to the amaNgqika who persistently opposed the dispossession of the amaXhosa and sought a fair deal for them, ‘I will hold by Stockenström’s word until I die … If the treaties are forced from us, nothing can preserve us from war.’ Nevertheless, by then the treaty system was coming under strain from new quarters. There were signs that many chiefs were losing control over numbers of what can only be described as bandit gangs operating along the fringes of society in the bush between the Colony, the
Kat River Settlement and emaXhoseni. Colonel Hare, Stockenström’s replacement, pessimistically reported that he also found himself unable to put a stop to their plundering.

Maqoma continued as regent of the amaRharhabe until 1840. In that year Sandile attained full manhood despite Maqoma’s attempt to delay the nineteen-year-old’s ritual circumcision. Sandile was installed as ruler of the amaRharhabe on 20 July 1840 before all the chiefs and thousands of their subjects, and was saluted by a volley from 3,000 muskets. But Maqoma, who considered his crippled half-brother a weakling who could never hope to match his prowess as a warrior, and who would never be competent to rule his people as authoritatively as he himself had been doing as regent, looked for means to put him aside and seize the chieftainship.

Maqoma’s brother Tyhali had determinedly remained traditionalist, but he was a man of authority and good sense who had done much to repress cattle-raiding. His death on 1 May 1842 of the tuberculosis he had contracted six years before left a void in the Rharhabe leadership. But, more than that, it presented the resentful Maqoma with the means of regaining the power he had forfeited to Sandile. The former regent arranged for Suthu, Sandile’s unpopular mother, to be accused of having been responsible for Tyhali’s death through witchcraft and, for good measure, for Ngqika’s in 1829 too. Maqoma hoped that in the ensuing uproar he would be able to set the discredited Sandile aside. Yet, as it turned out, both Suthu and Sandile were saved by the intervention of Cape officials who believed Sandile would be a more pliable tool than the strong-minded, charismatic Maqoma.

Thwarted, Maqoma withdrew more into himself in his homestead near Fort Beaufort, although he continued to do his utmost to maintain good relations with the Colony. His enemies, especially those among the frontier farmers with expansionist aims, attempted to weaken his diminished position still further by spreading the malicious rumour that he was succumbing to the ravages of brandy, just as Ngqika had done. Sandile, for his part, was only too aware that he lacked the chiefly presence expected of him on account of his withered leg, and was conscious that many among his subjects held him in low regard on account of the years he had spent humbly under Maqoma’s shadow. Commendably, he set about attempting to impose his authority and did his best to earn popular approval. At Sandile’s installation as chief, Nqeno, the venerable Mbalu chief, had reminded him that ‘Peace is better than war and a nation that loves war can never be rich.
The British government is strong and we possess its friendship. Sandile took Nqeno’s advice to heart, but over the next few years his sensible eagerness to be on good terms with his dangerous colonial neighbours only alienated many amaXhosa who deeply resented the British, and they did their best to frustrate his efforts and to undermine him. The upshot was that leadership among the amaRharhabe remained dangerously weak and uncertain in a time of mounting crisis.

The situation in the Ceded Territory was further destabilised by the presence of the Mfengu settlements D’Urban had established. The amaXhosa deeply resented them, and were anxious to move them out of the well-favoured regions they occupied. Low-grade violence was the consequence, and the amaXhosa repeatedly raided the Mfengu interlopers. Even Phato of the amaGqunukhwebe, who had fought on the British side during the late war and had initially welcomed the amaMfengu into his domain, fell out violently with them. The partisan involvement of the British political agents in the discord over their Mfengu clients, and their generally erratic intervention in disputes between various chiefs, stirred the waters still further.

With the situation along the frontier increasingly volatile, and with the treaty system coming under real stress as a consequence, it is hardly surprising that when Governor Napier returned home in 1844, he was mightily relieved to have done so before renewed fighting along the border had marred his term in office. Even so, there was no immediately compelling reason why war should break out, especially since the Xhosa chiefs (despite their forebodings) were anxious it should not.

All changed with the arrival of the new governor of the Cape. Napier, who had been appointed on Glenelg’s watch, was at least pledged to making the treaty system work as well as it could. Unfortunately, his successor, the coolly elegant General Sir Peregrine Maitland, was not. He had been appointed by Sir Robert Peel’s Conservative administration formed in September 1841, and Viscount Stanley, the secretary for war and the colonies, was not invested in the treaty system as his predecessor, Lord Glenelg, had been. Maitland was not therefore obliged to uphold it, and nor did he wish to do so. He was yet another veteran of the Peninsular War who had also fought at Waterloo (and, incidentally, was a first-class cricketer). An experienced and overly self-assured colonial administrator, between
1818 and 1834 he had been the lieutenant-governor, first of Upper Canada, and then of Nova Scotia. He believed firmly in Britain’s civilising mission and the need to transform barbarous indigenes into useful producers. It was no great step for him, therefore, to fall in with the view of the Grahamstown lobby that the amaXhosa were incorrigible savages who could not be appeased, and that the only way to deal with them was to show them who was master.

Accordingly, at Fort Peddie in September 1844, in the presence of the Ndlambe, Gqunukhwebe and Mbalu chiefs, Maitland abrogated the 1836 treaties and substituted those of his own. To make the point that his authority was supreme, Maitland deliberately did not invite Sandile, Maqoma and the other chiefs of the amaNgqika to the ceremony. Nor did he consult them beforehand. Rather, the governor insulted them further by waiting for a month before summoning them to Fort Beaufort to learn of the terms of the new treaties. To underline his power, Maitland was escorted by the 7th Regiment of Dragoon Guards, which had arrived at Fort Beaufort in August 1843, the first British cavalry regiment to form part of the Cape garrison since the withdrawal of the 21st Regiment of Dragoons in 1817. Intimidated (as was intended) by their 400 gleaming sabres, the Ngqika chiefs assented to Maitland’s treaties.

These treaties did not immediately open up new lands for white settlement in emaXhoseni as the frontier farmers ardently desired, but they did effectively destroy the system set up by Stockenström. Farmers were permitted to cross the border in search of their missing livestock and to insist on ‘compensation’ – just as they had been under the old reprisal system which Stockenström had seen as the root of all frontier violence. The Xhosa chiefs had been determined to stand by Stockenström’s treaties – imperfect as they were – if by doing so they could avoid the catastrophe of further war. But for how long would the alienated chiefs be prepared to stomach Maitland’s amended treaties, and how soon would the insatiably land-hungry frontier farmers pressure the colonial government into trying once more to subjugate the amaXhosa? Sir John Hare saw only trouble ahead, and in protest offered his resignation as lieutenant-governor of the Eastern Cape. It would not be accepted until September 1846, by which time the eastern frontier was again engulfed in war.
In mid-January 1846, a small party of Royal Engineers under Lieutenant J. Stokes crossed the Tyhume River at Block Drift and provocatively set about surveying the site for a new fort. Precisely why the fortification had to be built on that side of the river, in Ngqika territory, rather than on the colonial bank, within the Ceded Territory, has never been satisfactorily established. It does seem, though, that Sandile, wishing to appear accommodating, had given his prior permission. Yet, once they saw what Stokes’s party was about, many in Sandile’s council vehemently objected to its presence, and the Rharhabe chief hastily changed tack. He rescinded his permission and talked tough, as his council required of him: ‘We thought the white man could not be killed, but we see they are also like us, they can also be killed … [T]hat tent which there is at Blockdrift, must be off tomorrow.’¹¹ The British responded angrily, and a military confrontation threatened. Maqoma used his influence to persuade Sandile to pull back from the brink, and he agreed to meet Lieutenant-Governor Hare at Block Drift on 29 January. Hare arrived with a strong military escort, and Sandile was accompanied by a great throng of several thousand warriors, some of whom carried firearms and fired warning shots over the heads of the British. Each party was sufficiently daunted by the other to be accommodating. Sandile apologised and Hare did not insist on the new fort being built. Both then withdrew without further incident.

This meeting resolved nothing, however, because the basic issue of who was to rule the land remained unaddressed. The Graham’s Town Journal continued to press for the annexation of the Ceded Territory along with the relinquished Province of Queen Adelaide, and Governor Maitland (who thoroughly sympathised with this agenda) began seriously to consider a pre-
emptive military strike against the amaXhosa to settle the matter once and for all.

Then, on 16 March 1846, a man named Tsili was arrested for the theft of an axe from a shop in Fort Beaufort, more a straggling village than a fort as such, and the headquarters of the 7th Dragoon Guards, whose fashionable officers were hard-pressed to entertain themselves in such a dismal spot. Tsili was a member of the imiDange, ruled over by Nkosi Bhotomane, and his headman was Tola, one of the notorious border bandits. While Tsili was on his way to Grahamstown to stand trial, Tola and his desperadoes ambushed his small Khoikhoi police escort and rescued him. They found Tsili handcuffed (as was customary) to another prisoner, a Khoikhoi man. To release Tsili, his rescuers brutally hacked off the hand of the man manacled to him, and chucked him into the Kat River. The man died, and Hare first ordered Bhotomane, and then Sandile, to deliver up the killers. But both came under considerable popular pressure not to do so, and refused to comply. Hare decided to regard their contumacy as their call to war, and on 24 March he announced his own intention to march into emaXhoseni to exact satisfaction. With barely any hesitation, Maitland backed him up with a declaration of war on 1 April 1846.

This time, it was unequivocally the British who initiated hostilities and invaded Xhosa territory. The ensuing conflict is called the Seventh Cape Frontier War of 1846–1847. The British dubbed it the ‘War of the Axe’ after the unsavoury incident that was its official *casus belli*, but the amaXhosa knew it appropriately enough as the ‘War of the Boundary’ because, as Peires has commented, the war was not fought over the theft of an axe or anything so trivial, but ‘over the land, like the wars which had gone before it’.

It took the British close to two weeks to assemble their forces for Maitland’s strike into emaXhoseni, and meanwhile the governor ordered all the missionaries to leave. Most missionaries had been making it very clear that they were anxious to civilise the amaXhosa under the umbrella of British rule, and that they were losing patience with Xhosa recalcitrance. They would consequently have been vulnerable when hostilities started. The white traders operating in Xhosa territory were already at risk and some had been plundered or killed. The rest of them made haste to get out of harm’s way.
On 11 April 1846, three columns under the command of Colonel Somerset, the commandant of the eastern frontier, crossed the Great Fish and then the Keiskamma, aiming to converge on Sandile’s Great Place near Burnshill, the abandoned Glasgow Missionary Society station in the foothills of the Amathole. The soldiers were supported by a cumbersome, five-kilometre-long supply train of 125 wagons, each drawn by twenty-four oxen. When they set out, the Dragoons on their heavy cavalry chargers were still dressed in their red tunics and blue pantaloons with blue forage caps (rather than their ceremonial plumed helmets). The CMR, mounted on small, colonial ponies, were in their green jackets, brown buckskin breeches and blue caps. The infantry of the line were dressed in their tight, scarlet coatees (since 1836 officers and sergeants had adopted a double-breasted coatee with long tails and no lapels), pipeclayed cross-belts, white trousers, and the cylindrical ‘Albert’ shako (introduced in 1843) that tapered inwards at the top with peaks fore and aft to protect the face and neck from sun. It was not long, however, before the infantry were abandoning their coatees for comfortable shell jackets, their trousers for blue dungarees, and their shakos for forage caps. Their heavy knapsacks and cross-belts were replaced by small canvas bags slung over the right shoulder, and their leather ‘stocks’, or tight collars, were jettisoned altogether. Before the campaign was over, the regular infantry would scarcely be distinguished in style of dress from the burghers on commando and settler units in their drab civilian clothes, or from the Khoikhoi levies in their wideawake hats, cloth jackets and buckskin breeches with a rolled blanket over the shoulder.

The three advancing columns encountered no resistance and rendezvoused at Burnshill as planned. Leaving his wagon train under guard at Burnshill under the command of Major John Gibson, on 16 April Somerset led 500 men into the Amathole valley. The amaNgqika were present in force in the surrounding bush, and brought Somerset’s men under a heavy, if inaccurate, fire.

This was the first frontier war in which the amaXhosa made really extensive use of their firearms. Yet they still lacked practice in using them effectively, and their quality remained poor. Most of those they had acquired from unscrupulous dealers were out-of-date, inferior ‘trade’ flintlock muskets, which were very liable to misfire. By way of contrast, the British Dragoons and CMR were armed with the double-barrelled carbines introduced in the 1830s. The infantry were equipped with the percussion-
lock smoothbore musket, introduced between 1838 and 1842, which replaced muskets with the old flintlock mechanism. A brass percussion cap, coated with fulminates of mercury which ignites when struck, replaced gunpowder as the primer for firearms. When the hammer struck the cap placed in a hollow metal ‘nipple’ on top of the touchhole, it exploded and ignited the charge inside the barrel. This was a much more reliable system than the flintlock mechanism. It almost entirely did away with misfires and remained usable in wet weather. Moreover, in its simplicity it greatly speeded up the possible rate of fire.

Consequently, with regards to firearms there was a technological mismatch between the amaXhosa and the British. Even so, the amaXhosa had learnt to adopt tactics that largely neutralised the superior British firepower. Since they understood that they stood little chance against the British in the open field (even if they were learning to keep up their resolve when facing artillery), in 1846 they were prepared to resist tenaciously with hit-and-run tactics and ambushes, and to make more extensive use of their firearms when doing so. And, under Maqoma’s prompting, they decided that the best way to attack the British was through the baggage trains on which they depended.

On the same afternoon that Somerset found himself under Xhosa fire in the Amathole valley, a party of Ngqika raiders daringly snatched some oxen from the Burnshill camp to his rear. Captain R. Bambrick, a dashing veteran of Waterloo, led out a troop of the 7th Dragoons and some CMR in pursuit. The amaXhosa were waiting for them, and ambushed the horsemen in dense bush. Bambrick was shot dead. According to some accounts (but not mentioned in others), his skull was then despatched to the dreaded Mpondomise war-doctor, Myeki, to make ritual ‘medicine’ used to conjure up supernatural forces against the invaders. Chastened by the loss of their commander, the horsemen withdrew. As darkness fell, the amaXhosa emerged from the bush to attack the camp from all sides, and were driven off after a short, intense engagement in which superior British firepower was vital.

Already under attack, Gibson was dismayed to receive orders from Somerset to move his vulnerable supply train forward to his commander’s position. He had no choice but to obey, and on the morning of 17 April the convoy set out, with the amaXhosa massed menacingly on the surrounding
hills. Five kilometres from Burnshill, the convoy, which was itself strung out for over five kilometres, and which was protected by an advance guard and a rearguard, began passing through a defile that led down to a drift over the Keiskamma River. A large Ngqika force, under the command of Sandile himself, was lying in wait. They swooped down out of the bush, targeting the poorly defended middle of the train, and to immobilise the wagons either cut the oxen loose from their traces and drove them off, or killed them. For Gibson, the four ammunition wagons at the tail of the column were the most important part of the convoy, and the spirited action of 250 men of the Kat River Settlement under Andries Botha succeeded in saving them. Gibson pulled them back to Burnshill, while the vanguard and its wagons pushed on ahead and made it safely to Somerset’s camp. Nevertheless, Gibson had been compelled to abandon sixty-five wagons to the amaXhosa. Many of these wagons were carrying the splendid baggage of the stylish 7th Dragoons, including fine wines, dress uniforms, expensive private firearms and all the regimental silver, which was never to be recovered.

After this debacle, Somerset decided to call off his invasion of the Amathole. On the following morning, 18 April, just as he was about to lead his troops out, two large groups of amaXhosa, emboldened by their spectacular success of the previous day, attacked his camp from all directions. Somerset was forced to conduct a fighting retreat, during which the infantry’s sustained musket volleys and several charges by the Dragoons kept the amaXhosa at bay. With the loss of yet another wagon, Somerset finally withdrew his entire force over the Tyhume River at Block Drift, and took up a defensive position in a laagered camp at the Lovedale Mission.

Sandile’s spectacular victory over Somerset spurred on other Xhosa chiefs between the Keiskamma and Kei Rivers to take up arms. They were in no doubt that by invading emaXhoseni the British had broken the treaties they had concluded with them, and that retaliation was entirely justified. The cautious Mhala, the chief of the main section of the amaNdlambe, committed himself to the struggle, as did Bhotomane of the imiDange, Tokwethe of the amaMbalu, and even the Christian convert and missionaries’ pet, Dyani Tshatshu of the amaNtinde. Maqoma and his amaJingqi, although their actions remained low key, also joined in. Phato of the amaGqunukhwebe, who had been allied with the British in the previous war, but who deeply resented subsequently forfeiting so much of his land
around Fort Peddie to the amaMfengu, changed sides. In the far north, beyond the Amathole, Maphasa of the amaTshatshu also decided to attack the Colony, not least because he felt threatened by Mtirara, the Thembu paramount, who had aligned himself with the British.

Forewarned of the impending Xhosa attack, the white settlers hastily gathered in laagers or barricaded themselves in the villages. And not a moment too soon. From the sea to the headwaters of the Sundays River in the Graaff-Reinet district, Xhosa raiding-parties looted and torched farms and mission stations as they had in the Sixth Cape Frontier War. The amaGqunukhwebe stormed through their long-lost territory in the Zuurveld and threatened Port Elizabeth itself, and Grahamstown was swamped by terrified refugees.

And what of Sarhili, the titular paramount of the amaXhosa? When the British invaded emaXhoseni and Sandile and the other western chiefs responded in kind, Sarhili left it in no doubt where he stood. He rhetorically enquired of his councillors: ‘Where is my father? He is dead. He died at the hands of these people. He was killed at his own house. He died without fighting … Today, we all fight.’ But was he really in a position to do so?

When in 1835, during the crisis of the Sixth Cape Frontier War, Sarhili had unexpectedly succeeded the killed Hintsa as chief of the amaGcaleka and paramount of the Xhosa nation, he had done so unchallenged. Yet, as the young, untested man soon discovered, his father’s chief councillors were determined to retain real power in their hands, while his senior kinsmen felt free to go very much their own way. Sarhili knew he would never command their respect if he carried on living in Hintsa’s Great Place, surrounded by his father’s cattle, because it was essential to prove that he possessed the royal power to establish a new one of his own, and to win the cattle to go with it. But Sarhili found it difficult to do so. He was unsuccessful when he tentatively tested his military strength against Faku of the amaMpondo. Soon thereafter, in 1839–1840, he was ignominiously worsted in the environs of the upper White Kei River by the abaThembu led by their paramount, the warlike Mtirara. (Mtirara had recently come of age and taken over power from the regent, Fadana. He had gained possession of the White Kei region as his reward for helping the British against the amaGcaleka in the Sixth Cape Frontier War and had established his Great Place there.) In his war with Sarhili, Mtirara found an ally in Myeki, the
chief of the amaMpondomise, and between them they succeeded in pushing the Gcaleka chief right back to the coast. But Sarhili fought on gamely. With the amaGcaleka making skilful use of their horses and newly acquired firearms, in January 1844 they comprehensively routed a Thembu army. Mtirara was left with no choice but to cede Sarhili control of the region in dispute, and the Xhosa paramount finally established his own capital at Hohita, just south-east of the confluence of the White Kei and the Black Kei Rivers.

Yet, when war broke out in 1846 between Sandile and the British, Sarhili reckoned (despite his fighting words) that he was still not sufficiently established to come actively to the aid of the amaRharhabe. Instead, he settled for passive support and undertook to open his territory to the amaRharhabe as a place where they could drive their cattle for safety, and where their warriors could take refuge if the war went against them.

Meanwhile, to the west, the war was entering a new phase. On 20 April Phato and the amaGqunukhwebe attacked the Mfengu settlement at Fort Peddie, and the British garrison found itself under siege and rapidly running out of supplies. A supply train was duly despatched from Grahamstown to Fort Peddie, but on 21 May the amaGqunukhwebe ambushed it as it was passing through the Fish River bush. Its escort hastily fell back to Trompetter’s Drift, abandoning forty-three wagons which the triumphant amaGqunukhwebe looted and then set ablaze.

Ironically this second victory had disastrous consequences for the amaXhosa. Emboldened, hotheads persuaded the chiefs to abandon their proven strategy of ambushing supply trains, and to attempt a foolhardy, all-out assault on Fort Peddie. But the eight-pointed earthwork fort was impregnable to an enemy without artillery, and Xhosa musket-fire would have little effect on its thick walls. All the advantages lay with the defenders because the fort was built on a bluff overlooking open country, which gave the garrison an unobstructed field of fire for their muskets, artillery pieces and Congreve rockets. The surrounding ditch and other obstacles were designed to hold up attackers and expose them to this barrage.

On 28 May 1846 a combined Xhosa army of about 8000 men, drawn from every chiefdom west of the Kei, and which was the largest assembled since the failed attack on Grahamstown in 1819, moved forward at midday
to encircle the fort. The British troops withdrew inside the walls, but the Mfengu fighting men were deployed in the ditch below. The attacking amaXhosa were met by such a withering fire that they were prevented from even getting close to the fort. They nevertheless gallantly maintained the attack for nearly an hour before calling it off with the loss (according to British estimates) of ninety-two warriors. The only consolation for the amaXhosa was that when they withdrew, they managed to drive away some 4000 cattle captured from the hated amaMfengu.

The coincidence was unintended, but on the selfsame day as the battle at Fort Peddie was being fought, a day of humiliation and prayer was held in the Colony’s churches, called for by Governor Maitland, who was only too aware that the war he had initiated had brought fire and death down upon the settlers. God, it seemed, was listening, for the battle marked the turning-point in the fortunes of war.

Successfully fighting off the Xhosa attack did not alleviate the supply problem at Fort Peddie, and on 30 May Somerset himself led out a supply train of eighty-two wagons, escorted by 1200 troops, to its relief. This time, when the convoy entered the Fish River bush and the amaXhosa ambushed it as they had done the previous one on 21 May, the troops were ready. They had spare draught-oxen to replace those the amaXhosa killed or released, and soldiers manhandled the wagons when oxen were lacking. The amaXhosa kept up the attack for eleven gruelling hours, but in the end the convoy made it safely through to Fort Peddie.

Once emptied, the train of wagons had to return to Grahamstown, and when it started off on 8 June, Somerset led out a mounted patrol of Dragoons and CMR to distract the amaXhosa from intercepting it. Somerset headed for the nearby homestead of Stokwe, the Mbalu chief and a son of Nqeno, which he intended raiding. On the way the patrol came across the track of several hundred Ndlambe warriors led by Mhala. They followed it, and duly skirmished inconclusively for several hours with the amaNdlambe, who had been gathered around their campfires in the nearby forest. While this was going on, Somerset’s scouts stumbled unexpectedly upon another, larger force of amaNdlambe led by Siyolo, Mhala’s nephew. It was heading along open ground in the valley of the small Gwangqa stream (a tributary of the Keiskamma) towards the returning supply train. Mhlala had advised his nephew to move only at night, but Siyolo had overconfidently disregarded him and was about to pay the price.
It was not often that British mounted men caught the amaXhosa in open ground, and Somerset reacted swiftly. He disengaged his men from Mhlala’s force and rode off to attack Siyolo’s. Supported by fire from several cannons, he led the Dragoons, with the CMR in support, in a furious charge towards Siyolo’s men. The amaNdlambe drew together in a solid body to meet the charge and fired a largely ineffective musket volley at the horsemen. Undeterred, the horsemen crashed through the Xhosa ranks and then (with commendable discipline) wheeled around to charge them again from the opposite direction. In the hand-to-hand melee, Xhosa warriors attempted to grab the horses’ bridles and unseat the soldiers, who responded with slashing sabres and carbine fire. After only a few minutes of this deadly tussle, the amaNdlambe broke and ran. The mounted men pursued them for eight kilometres, cutting down the exhausted, demoralised warriors.

As ever, precise casualty figures are impossible to determine, not least because the amaXhosa always took great risks to carry away their wounded comrades. Perhaps 300 or more amaNdlambe were killed. The victorious British took only three prisoners, not least because when the tired horsemen gave up the pursuit, Mfengu auxiliaries came up from Fort Peddie and finished off the Xhosa wounded and looted their corpses. Warfare along the contested frontier was becoming increasingly merciless, and the amaMfengu, whose homes the amaXhosa had destroyed and whose cattle they had driven off, had no intention of sparing any Xhosa lives. Settlers, equally enraged by the loss of their property and with much to avenge, were no different.

Unburied Xhosa remains lay along the banks of the Gwangqa for some time, and British soldiers took away bones as souvenirs. This ‘brilliant affair’, as Maitland hailed it, restored settler morale in the Colony. Conversely, news of the disastrous defeat suffered by the amaNdlambe, coming on top of the repulse at Fort Peddie, prompted Xhosa raiding parties to retire east out of the Colony and to prepare to stand on the defensive. For these two battles had demonstrably changed the dynamic of the war and had unequivocally indicated that the British had regained the initiative. The amaXhosa could only dread what they would make of it.

Indeed, Maitland wasted no time. He took personal command of operations, proclaimed martial law, and ordered the burgher commandos to be called up from all over the Colony. In another strange twist to his career,
the Boers would have no one but Sir Andries Stockenström to lead them, and even the British settlers supported his appointment since they considered him more competent than his military counterparts. Maitland accordingly gazetted him commandant-general of the Burgher Forces with the staff rank of colonel. The commandos took time to assemble, but by the end of June 1846, when Maitland arrived at the frontier with reinforcements from Cape Town, they were ready to advance into Xhosa territory.

The large army Maitland had assembled numbered 3,200 regular troops, 5,500 armed settlers, 800 Khoikhoi levies, and 4,000 Mfengu and Khoikhoi auxiliaries. The governor divided his army into two divisions, but then was puzzled how best to proceed. He was stymied by the severe drought, which made it impossible for his forces to live off the land, and transport and supply never ceased to pose expensive and unwieldy challenges. Nevertheless, Maitland’s campaign got under way in mid-July when the southern of his two columns, 1,500 men under Somerset’s command, advanced on the amaGqunukhwebe. Phato and his people withdrew east with all the cattle they had captured when raiding the Zuurveld, and drove them across the Kei into Sarhili’s territory. Many cattle, especially calves, died of exposure and exhaustion as their herdsmen desperately drove them ahead of the pursuing British. This action brought the amaGcaleka into the war when Somerset pursued the amaGqunukhwebe over the Kei and captured several thousand of their cattle. He then retired towards Fort Peddie, but the amaGqunukhwebe harassed and ambushed him all along the way and recaptured most of their cattle. Later in July the northern of Maitland’s columns, under Colonel Sir John Hare, launched a ten-day-long sweep of the Amathole during which they destroyed crops and grain stores but failed to come to grips with the amaRharhabe, who successfully sidestepped them.

Thus far, Maitland’s two offensive thrusts had achieved little of military significance, but they exposed the increasingly ugly face of war. For the first time, the infuriated amaXhosa inflicted huge suffering on the British wounded. Reports came in of Xhosa women burning prisoners alive and torturing them to death, and a lurid tale did the rounds, asserting that five British officers who had been ambushed by the amaGqunukhwebe had their skin ‘cut off in strips, their eyes scooped out [and] one appeared to have been flogged with chains’. Duly horrified, British soldiers and settlers began to dread falling alive into Xhosa hands and declared that they would
rather commit suicide. Yet settler and military practices and attitudes were hardening too, and were expressed with the summary shooting of prisoners, the deliberate starving to death of their enemies, and the deepening insistence that the amaXhosa were irreconcilable savages who could only be brought to heel through British conquest.

After the relative failure of his July offensive, Maitland was again at a loss. His forces were becoming alarmingly demoralised and were themselves half-starved thanks to the regular loss of supply wagons and cattle to the enemy. Their horses and draught animals were no better off because of the ongoing drought and the deliberate incineration of pasture-land by the amaXhosa. By the end of August, Maitland had moved most of his men to Waterloo Bay, a landing place to the east of the Fish River mouth where they could be provisioned by sea.

Still, despite his lack of initiative, events began turning Maitland’s way. Some minor Xhosa leaders, including Stokwe of the amaMbalu, whose people were beset by the drought and were on the verge of starvation, began surrendering. And north of the Amathole, Maphasa, the Tshatshu chief, was knocked out of the war. After some desultory raids into the Colony, Maphasa had turned on Mtirara, the Thembu paramount, and seized his cattle on account of his alliance with the British. But Mtirara appealed to Joseph Read, the son of the LMS missionary James Read and a Khoikhoi mother. He commanded the 200-strong Bushman Regiment stationed in the area, which was made up of Khoikhoi from the Kat River Settlement and of amaMfengu settled around Alice and Fort Beaufort. The Bushman Regiment attacked Maphasa and recaptured 1 500 cattle. This success encouraged the British military to intervene, and a second colonial offensive seized another 6 000 to 7 000 head from the amaTshatshu. In August a third expedition netted another 4 000 cattle. As a consequence, Maphasa was utterly ruined, and the Thembu paramount’s greatest rival ceased to be a figure of significance.

Also in August, Stockenström proposed that in order to demonstrate that the British possessed the upper hand, an offensive should be mounted against the amaGcaleka to punish them for supporting Sandile. Maitland concurred, not least because he urgently needed to capture more cattle to feed his hungry army. Commandant-General Stockenström accordingly led his mounted burghers, joined by a regiment of regular infantry, across the Kei and reached Hohita, Sarhili’s Great Place. Sarhili, who was thoroughly
daunted by Stockenström’s incursion, put up no resistance and sought to negotiate instead. Stockenström was only too happy to comply, and he got Sarhili to acknowledge British conquests up to the Kei, and to agree to give up the Rharhabe cattle he was sheltering. Stockenström also insisted that Sarhili take personal responsibility as the Xhosa paramount for everything that occurred in emaXhoseni, and that he employ his power to prevent further Xhosa attacks on the Colony. Sarhili understood only too well that his authority over the Ciskei Xhosa chiefs was purely nominal, but he did not argue.

When on his return Stockenström complacently informed Maitland of his agreement with Sarhili, the governor brusquely repudiated it as ambiguous, and insisted that Sarhili must instead be compelled to pay reparations for the damage the amaGcaleka had done to mission stations and trading stores. Thoroughly piqued, Stockenström resigned as commandant-general and decommissioned his Burgher Forces. They were only too pleased to go home to attend to their farms and were not, in any case, prepared to serve under anyone else. Maitland found he could not replace them with a force of mounted English settlers because they were committed to guarding their own farms and property in the Colony, and were not prepared to serve in emaXhoseni. So, by the end of August, Maitland found that operations were again at a virtual standstill, and that supplies remained in a parlous state. In the circumstances he permitted Hare (who was very ill) to sail home at last – he would die on board ship – and replaced him as lieutenant-governor with Sir Henry Fox Young.

The sudden onset of heavy rains in mid-September made it no easier for the British to resume their stalled offense. Their transport oxen were dying of cold and exposure, and the rough seas were making it impossible to land supplies. For their part, the wet weather encouraged the amaXhosa to concentrate on sowing their crops. The British invasion had begun in April after a drought-stricken year, and the amaXhosa were already in difficult straits because the British were deliberately destroying their stores of grain. Desperate Xhosa women were approaching British camps to carry away what food they could, such as the offal of slaughtered cattle, and were sometimes reduced to eating roots and the bark of trees. If they were not to face famine in the coming year, the amaXhosa had to plant before it was too late in the season to do so. As had been the case in the Sixth Cape Frontier War, the outcome of the conflict depended not so much on fighting as on
the availability of food. As Peires has rightly stated, this war had become
one of attrition and supply, one in which the amaXhosa were doomed to be
defeated by the Colony’s ‘infinitely greater logistical resources’. 

Sandile was reported to have pertinently declared at this time: ‘As many
people have been killed on both sides, we had better … drop the war, and
cultivate the fields.’ The amaXhosa therefore retired unilaterally from the
conflict, and Maitland was left wondering what to do in a war against a
people who would not fight. Stalemate seemed to have been reached, and it
was Maqoma who initiated the next step. He had been dragged reluctantly
into the war, and when it turned out not to be the short campaign he had
hoped for, he withdrew his amaJingqi from active operations. For months
now, the amaJingqi had been living in the bush around their abandoned
homes across the Fish River from Fort Beaufort. They were on the verge of
starvation and were suffering from dysentery. Maqoma was desperate for
peace, and it was reported that he ‘was raging like a wounded buffalo
against the young chiefs for bringing on such a war’. He resolved to take
advantage of the general stalemate, and on 17 September he entered the
British lines under a flag of truce and proposed a peace conference.

The upshot was that during the first week of October most of the Xhosa
chiefs west of the Kei, including Maqoma himself, Sandile and Bhotomane,
met the British at Block Drift and attempted to negotiate a settlement. As
the price of peace, Maitland demanded that they abandon all their land west
of the Kei River, restore all the booty they had raided from the Colony, and
surrender their firearms. Anxious as they were to bring the war to an end,
such terms were too harsh for the Xhosa leaders to accept. They broke off
the negotiations and Maitland immediately resumed hostilities, raiding into
the Amathole. That was enough for Maqoma, and on 3 November he
formally surrendered to Maitland at Block’s Drift with what remained of his
following. Allotted a shack to live in with his wives and young children, he
seemed deeply despondent, prematurely aged and increasingly given over
to the ravages of drink. In April 1847 he was moved to Fort Beaufort,
where he was confined to the military hospital, and was moved again in
September to the Mfengu village outside Port Elizabeth. Meanwhile,
Sandile made tentative peace overtures of his own, and as a peace gesture
handed over Tsili (the man whose theft of an axe had started it all) to the
British.
By late November, Maitland had become convinced that the amaNgqika were no longer willing to resist actively, and that the campaign against them was effectively over. It therefore remained only to suppress Phato and to bring Sarhili to acceptable terms. He decided to deal with Sarhili first. In December 1846 Maitland led an expedition across the Kei. The amaGcaleka put up little resistance, and the troops seized 9,000 cattle. These captured herds not only were a welcome addition to dwindling British food supplies and a means of paying off their African auxiliaries, but their loss was a heavy blow to the amaGcaleka. To exert yet more pressure on Sarhili, early in the new year of 1847 Somerset resumed operations across the Kei.

Somerset was still in Gcaleka territory when, on 13 January 1847, Maitland received a most deflating despatch from the government in London. He learnt that he was being recalled for failing to bring the long and expensive war to a satisfactory conclusion. His immediate response was to repeal martial law, a decidedly premature move likely intended to salvage his reputation and cock a snook at his political bosses by making out that he had in fact already won the war.

Maitland was indeed somewhat unfortunate in that his recall owed as least as much to the changing political climate in Britain as to his lacklustre performance in the Seventh Cape Frontier War. Lord John Russell’s Whig government replaced Peel’s Conservative administration in June 1846 when the Conservative Party broke up over the repeal of the Corn Laws – an issue concerning protectionism versus free trade which proved as politically toxic then as that of Britain’s leaving the European Union has today. Russell’s ministry ushered in a long period of political confusion and instability in Britain. Between 1846 and 1867 there would be eight administrations, with not one of them enjoying a stable majority in the House of Commons.

Earl Grey, Russell’s notoriously crotchety secretary of state for war and the colonies, was all for free trade and the financial self-sufficiency of the colonies under the self-government of settler communities. In response to public opinion in Britain, he also advocated curtailing the burgeoning financial burden of military expenditure in the empire by reducing imperial garrisons in colonies of settlement. In future, such colonies would have to rely more on their own colonial corps and militia for internal policing, and would be required to maintain their own military installations. In cases of emergency, though, or in wars beyond the colonial boundaries, expeditionary forces of British troops would be rapidly despatched by
steamship to assist. This money-saving redeployment of military resources dovetailed with Grey’s policy of devolving colonial political authority, for in future self-defence would be the prerequisite of colonial self-rule.

In practice, this meant conceding representative government to the Cape Colony, with an elected House of Assembly, which would give the settler parliament legislative powers – although stopping short of executive ones, which would only come with the subsequent granting of responsible government in 1872. But before even this limited constitutional advance could be entertained, it was essential that the Cape would not be dependent in future on a large British garrison to defend it from Xhosa attack. And that in turn meant eliminating the amaXhosa as a military threat by finally subjugating them. Not that this prospect troubled Grey; quite the contrary, in fact. In his view – and it was one destined to become ‘the justification for imperialism and British self-interest for the rest of the century’ – firm British colonial government would bring the blessings of religion, education and commerce to the amaXhosa and finally civilise them, transforming them into useful and productive subjects of the Crown.

There was precious little left in this agenda of Lord Glenelg’s humanitarianism that had previously guided policy. And despite the continuing advocacy of the Aborigines’ Protection Society, founded in 1837 to secure the rights and well-being of indigenous peoples under British rule, the prevailing humanitarian discourse of the previous decade was being pushed into the margins of public life. As evidence of this shift, during the course of the Seventh Cape Frontier War humanitarian sentiment was significantly muted, with even the missionaries supporting the government’s view that peace could only be achieved through the imposition of colonial rule over the incorrigible amaXhosa.

Maitland’s successor, Major-General Sir Henry Pottinger, arrived in Cape Town by steamer on 27 January 1847. Besides his appointment as governor and commander-in-chief of the Cape, he also came as the first high commissioner in South Africa. This commission gave Pottinger – and his successors as high commissioner – sanction to intervene for the sake of British interests in the volatile affairs of the subcontinent beyond the colonial borders, especially if they threatened the security of British possessions. Pottinger was the man for the job. He possessed a considerable, impatient intellect, if marred by great rages and a pervasive
egocentricity. His previous career had been distinguished, and he had held several significant military and civil posts in India and China, culminating in his appointment in 1843 as the first governor of the new Crown Colony of Hong Kong. He had been reluctant to come out to the Cape since he wished to return to India, where he had his eyes on the coveted post of governor of the Madras Presidency. But Earl Grey, who was determined to make use of Pottinger’s talents in the vexatious Cape Colony, promised he would be relieved the moment he had settled the Xhosa question.

Pottinger carried with him Grey’s instructions of 2 November 1846 requiring him to pacify the Cape frontier by proclaiming British sovereignty up to the Kei and subjugating the amaXhosa between that river and the Colony. But how could this be done without giving these amaXhosa colonial citizenship rights, something the settlers would reject absolutely? Grey was advised by his legal experts that the circle could be squared by proclaiming the annexed territory a protectorate.

Pottinger carefully took some time to take the measure of the Cape. It was not long before he became disgusted by the settlers’ blatant profiteering from the war, which adversely affected the whole issue of transport and supply. He was not prepared to restart the campaign, which had stalled completely, before he had them firmly in hand, and until he had filled his depots with munition and supplies. Satisfied at last that he was fully prepared, and with the largest colonial army ever assembled in southern Africa at his command – close to 14 000 men, of whom British troops made up less than a third – Pottinger finally arrived on the eastern frontier in August 1847. There he found that almost all the amaXhosa were peacefully cultivating their lands, and that the only ones still actively opposing the British were the amaGqunukhwebe along the coast.

Discussing with his commander in the field, Lieutenant-General Sir George Berkeley, how best to revitalise the campaign, Pottinger was certain about one thing. With no possibility of a decisive victory in the field against an elusive foe wedded to guerrilla tactics, the British would have to adopt a remorseless scorched-earth policy. As Pottinger had written to Berkeley a little while before, the general would have to visit on Sandile and all those supporting him ‘such a measure of retribution as shall reduce them to throw themselves on our mercy, by devastating their country, destroying their
kraals, crops and cattle, and letting them finally understand that, cost what it may, they must be humbled and subdued'.

Pottinger was especially frustrated by the amaNgqika, who continued to insist that they were at peace without admitting that they had been defeated, and by Sandile’s refusal to resume negotiations. The only option, as he saw it, was to resume full hostilities, and to justify doing so he used the excuse of the theft of fourteen goats by one of Sandile’s adherents. When the Rharhabe chief failed to give Pottinger sufficient satisfaction, the governor declared him a rebel on 7 August 1847. He then prepared to scour the Amathole with the dual objectives of preventing Sandile’s people from sowing for the new season, and of clearing them out of their fastnesses. However, to do so efficiently he required colonial troops who were far more adept at irregular operations in the bush than were British regulars.

To raise them in sufficient numbers, Pottinger resorted to proclaiming that the amaMfengu, Boers and Khoikhoi who joined up could take whatever cattle or other booty they wanted. (For British administrators thinking to keep costs down, it was also worth bearing in mind that these colonial forces were less expensive to employ in the field because, unlike British regulars, they were disbanded at the end of each campaign.) In the event, the amaMfengu – or Fingo Levies, as they were called – who fought in the Seventh Cape Frontier War under their white officers really began to show their worth in the arduous irregular operations as messengers, sentries, guards, scouts and spies, as well as in combat. The British even entrusted them with muskets, even though (as a precaution) they were not allowed to enter colonial settlements bearing them.

When on 29 September 1847 Pottinger finally launched his long-delayed invasion of the Amathole, his forces avoided engaging the amaNgqika as far as they could, and instead resorted as planned to seizing their cattle, burning their huts and emptying their grain pits. This strategy soon achieved its vicious effect, and everywhere in the area of operations wretched Xhosa women and children were soon dying miserably of starvation. Sandile could no longer countenance his people’s sufferings, and on 18 October he put out peace feelers. The next morning, as agreed, the Rharhabe chief met deputy assistant quartermaster-general John Jarvis Bisset, who had been a member of the party that pursued Hintsa to his death and had given blatantly contradictory evidence at the subsequent court of
inquiry, but who would nevertheless end his career as a lieutenant-general and a knight. Like Hintsa before him, Sandile made the mistake of trusting the honour of a British soldier, which never seemed to apply when dealing with people of colour. Sandile accompanied Bisset to Grahamstown in the belief he was going to meet Pottinger to negotiate as an equal. Instead, when he reached the town on 25 October, he was immediately made prisoner.

With both Sandile and Maqoma in captivity, and satisfied that the amaRharhabe were finally knocked out of the war, Pottinger could deal with those amaXhosa still in the field. Somerset directed operations against the amaGqunukhwebe ensconced in difficult ground on the west bank of the Kei, while Pottinger directed a further campaign across the Kei to ensure that Sarhili was completely intimidated and would be amenable to British demands. In mid-December Phato, thin and tattered, was the last Xhosa chief to surrender. Thanks to the remorseless activity of Somerset’s patrols, his starving Gqunukhwebe warriors were down to eating their very shields.
JUST BEFORE PHATO finally surrendered, the last Peninsular veteran to be appointed governor of the Cape landed at Port Elizabeth on 14 December 1847. He was none other than Sir Harry Smith, the former civil commissioner of the de-annexed Province of Queen Adelaide. Smith had left the Cape in June 1840 to take up his post as adjutant-general in India. There he repeatedly distinguished himself in the field. His sensational victory at the battle of Aliwal on 28 January 1846 during the First Anglo-Sikh War of 1845–1846 brought him promotion to major-general, a baronetcy, the formal thanks of Parliament, and the patronage of the Duke of Wellington, the commander-in-chief of the army (Smith was destined to be the standard bearer at the Iron Duke’s state funeral in 1852). Smith returned to England with his already excessive self-esteem bloated still further. He was convinced that through his superlative flair he could resolve the festering, expensive conflict along the Cape eastern frontier both quickly and cheaply. His solution (little different from Earl Grey’s instruction to Pottinger in 1846) was to reverse the retrocession of the Province of Queen Adelaide, which he took as a personal affront, and he penned a memorandum outlining how he would go about governing the territory and taming the amaXhosa. Earl Grey was persuaded, and with Wellington’s commendation Smith was despatched as the new governor of the Cape and the Queen’s high commissioner in South Africa to carry out what he had advocated.

When on 16 December 1847 Smith met and formally relieved Pottinger, the retiring governor – who was only too pleased to leave the Cape in order to take up his coveted position of governor of Madras – the Seventh Cape Frontier War was to all intents and purposes already over. It was left to Smith to conclude a formal peace and to implement his blueprint for a
permanent settlement. Smith’s old friends among the frontier settlers believed they knew what he intended and heartily approved. Wherever the new governor went in the Eastern Cape he was joyfully received by the settlers with flags, banners, triumphal arches, illuminated windows, bonfires and welcoming addresses.

Yet if the settlers were cock-a-hoop at Smith’s return, their rejoicing was entirely at the expense of the amaXhosa, who would be the victims of the new governor’s settlement of the frontier. Smith began as he intended to proceed. The day Smith landed, Maqoma, who was being held at the Mfengu village outside Port Elizabeth, hastened to pay his respects at the Phoenix Hotel where the governor was staying. When Maqoma respectfully approached him, Smith, in the overblown, histrionic style that would characterise all his dealings with the Xhosa leadership, half-drew his sword, slammed it back into its scabbard, and then brusquely ordered the Jingqi chief to the floor. With Maqoma grovelling before him, Smith theatrically placed his foot on his neck and trumpeted that he was the master now, and that this was how he treated the enemies of the queen. Mortally affronted, Maqoma was heard to growl: ‘You are a dog and so you behave like a dog. This thing was not sent by Victoria who knows I am of royal blood like herself.’

But the queen knew nothing of Maqoma; and Smith, sent by Earl Grey and not by her, proceeded smartly with his planned agenda. On 23 December 1847 he stage-managed a great assembly of the Rharhabe chiefs at the site of the abandoned King William’s Town. Sandile, who had just been released from detention, was there, as was Phato, still emaciated and haggard from his privations, along with all the other chiefs and headmen of the amaNgqika, amaNdlambe, imiDange, amaNtinde and amaGqunukhwebe. Backed menacingly by ranks of British soldiers, Smith announced that the amaXhosa were all expelled from the old Ceded Territory, and that it was to be annexed to the Cape Colony as the district of Victoria East. At the same time, he annexed a great area to the north of the Amathole between the Klipplaat River to the east and the Black Kei to the west as the district of Victoria North. In annexing these territories to the Cape – known jointly as the district of Victoria – Smith was exercising the authority assigned him as high commissioner over the affairs of territories that were beyond the queen’s acknowledged dominion, but were
nevertheless (as his commission phrased it) ‘adjacent or contiguous to’ the borders of the Colony.  

Having stunned the assembled chiefs with the announcement of their expulsion beyond the Keiskamma, Smith proceeded with his pantomime. Two makeshift staves were placed on either side of him, which he declared were the staff of peace and the staff of war, and he invited the chiefs to come forward and touch the one they preferred. All naturally chose the one representing peace.

Smith was not yet finished. In compliance with Earl Grey’s instructions, while seated on his horse he next proclaimed all the territory between the Keiskamma and Kei Rivers (the former Province of Queen Adelaide) a dependency (or protectorate) of the British Crown – not a separate colony or a district of the Cape – which he would administer in his capacity as high commissioner. The territory would be known as British Kaffraria, and the amaXhosa would be permitted to continue living there on condition that the chiefs were prepared to recognise him as their supreme chief, or ‘inkosi enkhulu’. In other words, although Sarhili and the amaGcaleka retained their independence across the Kei River, he, Harry Smith, supplanted him as the Xhosa paramount. To signify their acceptance of these terms, each chief was required to come humbly forward in turn to kiss Smith’s boot in homage, and to proclaim him loudly as inkosi enkhulu. What the chiefs thought of this outrageous rigmarole – hardly the protocol typically adopted by a British proconsul – is not known, except that Bothomane of the imiDange slyly reflected afterwards that ‘The day was stormy – the wind blew very strong.’

On 7 January 1848, in a further ceremony, replete with parading troops and military band intended to overawe the assembled great chiefs, Smith spelt out in his harangue the measures he intended to adopt for the reform of all aspects of the lives of the amaXhosa living in British Kaffraria. ‘Your land shall be marked out,’ he declared, and ‘divided into counties, towns, and villages, bearing English names. You shall all learn to speak English in the schools which I will establish for you … You may no longer be naked and wicked barbarians, which you will ever be unless you labour, and become industrious. You shall be taught to plough … [and] learn the art of money.’ And, in a now typically melodramatic gesture, Smith concluded by suddenly giving the order for a nearby wagon loaded with explosives to
be blown up with a great roar. That, he warned the chiefs in the ensuing, stunned silence, was what he would do to them if they ever again dared to make war against the British. Then, in another stagey gesture, signifying the termination of the discredited treaty system, Smith tore up a sheet of paper, flung the pieces into the air and cried: ‘Do you see this? There go the treaties! Do you hear? No more treaties!’

Smith’s programme for the amaXhosa in Victoria and British Kaffraria was indeed radical and required the cowed compliance of the chiefs. The amaXhosa were all expelled from their old lands in the district of Victoria. However, Smith extended the Mfengu locations to include land around Alice and Fort Hare on the Tyhume River so that a chain of ‘loyal’ Mfengu settlements stretched from the sea to the mountains. Elsewhere in the newly proclaimed district, the land was surveyed into farms and put up for sale to settlers. Hectic land speculation took off, and absentee ownership became all too prevalent. In the northern parts of Victoria East, where Maqoma and Sandile had once lived, flourishing sheep farms were established. In Victoria North, where the newly arrived settlers built the village of Whittlesea (named after Smith’s birthplace) on the Klipplaat River, there was considerable resentment among the abaThembu. Mtirara, the paramount, died suddenly at this moment (his mother and an aunt were smelt out for poisoning him), and his stepmother Nonesi became regent. Disgusted by the influx of settlers, she moved many of her people back east to the old Thembu heartland. However, not all Africans left Victoria. Those who chose to reside and work on farms owned by settlers and missionaries were permitted to do so – with the proviso that they conformed to British values and practices. For, after all, as he had spelt out to the chiefs on 7 January 1848, ‘civilising’ the Africans in Victoria and British Kaffraria was at the heart of Smith’s mission.

British Kaffraria was ruled as a military protectorate and the rebuilt King William’s Town became the administrative capital and military headquarters. The other main settler enclave was the new port of East London at the mouth of the Buffalo River. The land was mapped out, and the surveyors’ flags planted everywhere were a deep affront to the amaXhosa. As for the amaXhosa themselves, each chiefdom was assigned a demarcated ‘reserve’, nearly 800 000 hectares of land in all. As a measure of control, settler farms were to be strategically planted between the Xhosa
reserves to hamper any attempt at concerted Xhosa action, making British Kaffraria a chessboard of black and white areas.

Indeed, since the amaXhosa had not been decisively defeated in the War of the Axe, Smith believed it essential to make the military arrangements necessary to hold them down. He retained the fortified posts that marked the Fish River and Kat River–Winterberg lines along the old eastern borders of the Colony, and planned for eight new forts in British Kaffraria to accommodate the garrison in reasonable comfort. For reasons of cost only six were built, including a military cantonment and barracks at King William’s Town. With the exception of Fort Hare at Block Drift on the east bank of the Tyhume, which was an earthwork with stone bastions surmounted by a palisaded fence, these forts all consisted of buildings arranged in a square for defence. They were constructed of rubble stonework set in clay and roofed with thatch. The strategy behind these fortifications differed little from that previously employed in the Province of Queen Adelaide: a central depot at King William’s Town with a grid of forts positioned in the midst of the subjugated amaXhosa protecting the lines of communications. Although the line westwards to Grahamstown was still important, the main one was now from King William’s Town to East London, because British Kaffraria depended on the port for its supplies and troops. Smith also established six military villages for 250 discharged soldiers willing to settle in British Kaffraria. The villages were all sited in ancestral Ngqika territory in the foothills of the Amathole and in the fertile valley of the Tyhume, and were intended to serve as a buffer against Sandile, who still occupied the Amathole as part of his reserve.

Smith intended these forts and military villages to serve a function beyond the purely military. Like King William’s Town, East London and the farms still to be established between the Xhosa reserves, they would act as platforms for disseminating ‘civilised’ values and culturally assimilating the amaXhosa. For that reason, Smith forbade the erection of traditional huts in the environs of the forts, and encouraged the garrisons to lay out neat vegetable gardens for the amaXhosa to emulate. However, the discharged soldiers in the military villages soon let the ‘civilised’ side severely down when they desecrated Tyhalí’s grave and seized Ngqika cattle that strayed back into their old pastures.
Whatever its shortcomings, the presence of a permanent garrison was necessary in British Kaffraria, not only for internal security against a possible Xhosa uprising, but because without military backing the new administration would be powerless to impose its reforms. Lieutenant-Colonel George Mackinnon, who had only recently arrived in the Cape, was appointed to govern British Kaffraria under the direct command of Smith in his capacity as high commissioner. As commandant, Mackinnon was responsible for the military forces in the territory, and as chief commissioner he dealt with the administration of the amaXhosa through commissioners and assistant commissioners. This was a system of indirect rule because, technically, the Xhosa chiefs were merely supervised by the white commissioners, but in fact, the commissioners persistently undermined the chiefs’ authority, bullying them into prohibiting polygamy and lobola, those two central pillars of Xhosa patriarchy, and forbidding them to fine their subjects’ cattle or to countenance witchcraft accusations. They and the military courts also retained jurisdiction over more serious crimes, sentencing those they arbitrarily convicted to the only punishments on offer: the payment of a fine or a flogging of up to one hundred lashes. In maintaining routine law and order, the commissioners had the services of a force of 400 Xhosa Kaffir Police under British officers. These police were stationed in Fort Murray, downstream the Buffalo River from King William’s Town, and at Fort Cox on a loop of the upper Keiskamma River, well situated as a base for patrols into the Amathole.

Following Smith’s programme, the commissioners in British Kaffraria set about methodically ‘civilising’ the amaXhosa and breaking down traditional society. A system of fines was established to suppress traditional customs and was balanced by one of rewards for promoting European attitudes. Many men began to take up the hitherto women’s work of agriculture, and were actively encouraged to use ploughs and to keep sheep instead of cattle. Missionaries, who within the space of only a few years established fifteen new mission stations, were active in their proselytising and in establishing schools, although with limited results. By 1850 only 1,492 amaXhosa were attending divine service and 833 were enrolled at the mission schools. Determined to bring the amaXhosa into the colonial money economy, the commissioners promoted commercial activity. As a result, by the end of 1849 there were already forty-three trading stores in
British Kaffraria selling blankets, clothes, farm implements, tobacco, sugar and rice.

But of all the colonial interventions in Xhosa society, the extraction of labour had the most immediate and greatest impact. A sympathetic missionary, the Reverend Robert Niven, well understood that ‘depriving them [the amaXhosa] of so much land’ would ‘end in the Caffres becoming a nation of degraded servants on their own soil’. A tax of £1 was levied on African plot holders in British Kaffraria to induce them to labour on white farms in order to pay it. But instead of being able to seek work on the free market, as had previously been the practice, Ordinance 3 of 1848 indentured Xhosa migrant workers to an employer before they entered the Cape Colony and without specifying wages. In the Western Cape, where labour was in short supply, there was a large demand for children under ten to meet the need, and a system of ‘apprenticing’ young amaXhosa came into operation. None were more assiduous in channelling Xhosa labour (including women and children) into the Colony than the Reverend Henry Calderwood, once an LMS missionary and now the magistrate of Victoria East stationed in Alice, and Charles Brownlee, the son of the pioneering missionary John Brownlee. The latter was an experienced translator who knew all the Xhosa leaders, and was stationed at Fort Cox where he was assistant commissioner to the amaNgqika.

The consequence of migrant labour was a considerable Xhosa population shift. The census that Smith ordered to be taken in 1848 revealed that the approximately 56 000 amaNgqika in 1835 had declined to 27 179. Of the missing 29 000 some would have taken refuge with the amaGcaleka beyond the Kei, but most had gone to seek work in the Colony, with some moving to the Mfengu locations. The same applied to the 35 179 amaNdlambe recorded in British Kaffraria, where a further 20 000 to 25 000 were presumed absent, mainly in the Colony.

With migrant labour on this scale, the economic fabric of Xhosa life was in danger of rapidly unravelling. When that came on top of Smith’s determined efforts to transform the cultural and social aspects of Xhosa society in accordance with ‘civilised’ norms, and was combined with the steady diminution of the familiar power of the chiefs, the amaXhosa were faced with an existential challenge. In the past, their resistance to colonialism had been largely about retaining possession of their land. Now,
it was also about salvaging what they could of their age-old way of life as it was inexorably engulfed by the advancing colonial order.

The imposition of his ‘improving’ regime on British Kaffraria was only part of Smith’s mission in South Africa. The Cape Colony was no longer the only settler polity on the subcontinent, and was becoming inextricably drawn into developments to the north. In 1842 the Republiek Natalia, which the Voortrekkers had established after defeating the Zulu kingdom, had submitted to British authority, and since 1845 Natal had been administered as a separate division of the Cape Colony under a lieutenant-governor. The security of this faraway outpost was Smith’s concern. So too were the disruptive activities of other Voortrekker groups on the highveld as they attempted to set up further little republics and came into conflict with various African states such as those of the Bapedi, Basotho and Griqua. To prevent these troubles impacting on the Cape, Smith energetically invoked his powers as high commissioner to bring the Voortrekkers under control.

On 17 December 1847 he increased the size of the Cape Colony by a third when he extended its border all the way north to the Orange River and along its length from its confluence with the Caledon River to its mouth. He thereby gained control of all the southern reaches of the Trekkers’ Road north and effectively brought the Great Trek to a close. Then, crossing the new border into what was known as Transorangia, on 3 February 1848 he annexed a great swathe of territory between the Orange and Vaal Rivers as the Orange River Sovereignty. Boer hardliners attempted to resist, and on 29 August 1848 Smith defeated them at the sharp little battle of Boomplaats. Smith’s friends among the Eastern Cape elite took immediate advantage, eagerly indulging in a bout of land speculation in the Orange River Sovereignty, just as they were in Victoria and British Kaffraria.

The government in London was less enthusiastic than the Cape settlers about this sudden extension of British territory, and worried about the future financial and military obligations. It should be borne in mind that since 1847 it had been government policy to reduce the size of imperial garrisons around the world, and Smith was expected to comply. He did so, even if his series of annexations spread the Cape garrison very thin indeed. Once the Seventh Cape Frontier War was over, Smith progressively reduced the Cape garrison from 6,509 regulars in late 1847 to 3,369 of all ranks in January 1850. However, of the garrison’s six battalions, one was stationed at Fort Napier in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal, leaving only five to defend
the Cape itself as well as the Orange River Sovereignty. Smith sent home the 7th Dragoons in late 1847, and their function as cavalry was only partly taken over by the CMR, who were deployed as mounted infantry. The CMR were the financial responsibility of the British government, not of the colonial authorities, and in January 1850 stood at 888 other ranks (744 of whom were Khoikhoi) along with their white officers. Whether these troops – supplemented by whatever colonial volunteers Smith could raise – would be sufficient to cope with a fresh conflict on the eastern frontier remained to be seen.

Smith was also expected by Earl Grey to smooth the way for representative government in the Cape. But as an exhibitionist authoritarian, he had no knack for dealing with obstreperous colonists who certainly would never consent to kiss his boot, and under his watch the cause of constitutional development stalled. The issue was in any case a polarising one. Conservative British settlers feared a wide franchise would lead to their being swamped at the polls by uncouth Boers and by people of colour under the baleful influence of the missionaries. For their part, coloured people feared that representative government would only entrench the oppressive settlers in power.

Precisely such fears were rife in the Kat River Settlement, which was one of the very few places in the Cape where people not defined as white could own their own land. As a petitioner put it in 1849: ‘in the land of our fathers … we have scarcely an inch of land on which to set our feet, the Kat River and the sterile spots of Missionary Institutions excepted’. Ninety per cent of the Kat River men had volunteered for active service in the War of the Axe – a better showing by far than that in any settler community – but that cut no ice with the settlers, who continued to criticise the settlement for locking up land and labour. Following the incorporation of Victoria East into the Colony, Kat River lost much of its military function as a buffer against the amaXhosa, and the firearms held by its inhabitants were called in.

To make matters worse for the Kat River community, whose lands had been devastated in the War of the Axe, groups of displaced people began to crowd into the territory, which was not big or prosperous enough to absorb them. These newcomers were amaMfengu who had been ousted by white farmers who had bought newly surveyed farms in Victoria East, and
amaXhosa looking for employment and pasture for their cattle. Their presence only added to the growing poverty of the settlement, which was not eased by the government prohibition against the sale of farmland in the settlement on the open market, and by the impossibility of acquiring the mortgages and capital farmers needed to convert to more profitable sheep-farming. Successive magistrates, far from ameliorating the situation, onerously raised the duties on cutting timber, which remained the people’s main means of acquiring an income, and exasperated them still further by attempting to requisition them as wagon drivers and skilled labourers.

Settlers, who were buying up all the farms surrounding the beleaguered Kat River Settlement, blamed the rise in cattle rustling on the displaced people settling there, and called on the Cape government to end its status as a self-governing territory. The government responded in part, and in the harsh winter of 1850 police evicted all the illegal immigrants from the settlement, burning their huts. With a government already violently oppressive, the Kat River settlers could only imagine what their future would be if the settlers gained representative government. They suspected that, at the very least, they would be subject to new vagrancy laws designed to force them into employment on white farms. At worst, they feared that the settlement would be abolished altogether.
The Eighth Cape Frontier War, December 1850–March 1853 (the War of Mlanjeni), and the Kat River Rebellion

If by mid-1850 the people of the Kat River Settlement believed their community to be under increasing threat, then the amaXhosa were equally aggrieved and apprehensive. Sir Harry Smith had expelled them from their lands in the Ceded Territory, and for them British Kaffraria ‘was a monster which swallowed them up, tore them from their children, and squeezed them off their land onto the labour market’. It was no wonder, Jeff Peires has reflected, that ‘weary and despondent, they determined to make a final stand’.¹

The war that ensued, the Eighth Cape Frontier War, became intertwined with a broad, multi-ethnic rebellion against rapacious settlers and coercive officials, what an appalled Harry Smith characterised in April 1851 as an ‘infernal coalition’ to ‘immolate the White Man’.² This war-cum-rebellion, remembered for generations as a heroic struggle against dispossession by the whites, was the longest of the frontier conflicts, lasting for twenty-seven months from December 1850 to March 1853. It required Britain’s greatest military commitment to date, with 8 000 regular troops eventually being deployed in the field, and it was the most expensive too, with the British government having to make extraordinary funds available for its prosecution. Casualties on the British side were exceptionally heavy for a colonial campaign, amounting to about 1 400 (compare this to the 100 casualties in the Sixth Cape Frontier War), but were insignificant when taken against the 16 000 suffered by the amaXhosa and their Khoikhoi and Thembu allies, the heaviest toll by far in the whole dreadful sequence of the frontier wars, the veritable loss of a generation.³ This war was also the most
desperate and brutal yet fought, with both sides guilty of committing atrocities to an unprecedented extent.

The amaXhosa remember this terrible conflict as the War of Mlanjeni, after the prophet of that name who rose among them and became Sandile’s war-doctor. Mlanjeni was a teenager, a Ndlambe commoner who acquired his name, which means ‘In the River’, because he spent much of his time lying half-submerged in a stream to relieve his tuberculosis. At an early age he showed all the signs of being called by the ancestral shades as a diviner. In Xhosa religion, diviners communed directly with the *amathongo* and the nature spirits of the earth and water. When the world seemed out of tune and was visited by disease and disaster, people turned to them to consult the occult forces that controlled the universe and to prescribe remedies. And in 1850 the Xhosa universe certainly appeared to be quite unstrung. Its lands were being stripped away, its culture was being forcibly transformed by Smith’s intrusive policies, and in that year the countryside was again gripped by grinding drought and the dearth that followed. In their desperate plight, the people were eagerly receptive to the promise of supernatural intervention, and this is when Mlanjeni stepped to the fore.

Mlanjeni was following in the footsteps of the war prophet Nxele, who had rallied the Ciskei amaXhosa in the Fifth Cape Frontier War. He proclaimed that the amaXhosa must root out the contaminating influences of witchcraft, to which he traced all the ills afflicting his people, and prophesied that they would drive out the white people if they followed his injunctions. He urged his followers to kill all their dun- and yellow-coloured cattle, whose evil tinctures were widely associated with the white people, and prophesied that the sacrifice of these beasts would ensure the disappearance of the pale oppressors. However, Mlanjeni seemed not to think this enough in itself, and yoked it to necessary military action in which the warriors would receive occult protection against their foes.

Mlanjeni’s prophecies rapidly gained a mass following among ordinary amaXhosa, and the Xhosa chiefs and men of substance began to see this popular mobilisation as a genuine threat to their already subverted authority, and pondered how they could control and direct the movement. Since they themselves had been driven to the edge by Smith’s policies and were already contemplating taking up arms, they came to the conclusion that they could regain their legitimacy in the eyes of their people and vindicate their
traditional authority if they harnessed Mlanjeni to a war waged under their own battle-hardened leadership.

Very cannily, therefore, Sandile appointed Mlanjeni as his war-doctor. The amaXhosa believed that occult forces – magic – affected every human activity, and employed ritual medicine to ‘doctor’ warriors, hunters and hunting dogs, and used charms and other symbolic medicines to ward off sickness, infertility, accidents, lightning and witchcraft. Every chief employed his own war-doctor, whose job it was to render his warriors fierce by giving them ‘medicines’ derived from dangerous animals (and sometimes from humans too), and to administer others that, when swallowed or rubbed into incisions in the body, would protect them from harm.

Mlanjeni was in this mould. He foretold that those who fought the colonists would not fall in battle if their spears, along with the charm sticks that they attached to their firearms, were daubed in the purple juice of the root of the pelargonium bush, and if their bodies were likewise anointed with it. To make warriors even more invulnerable, he exhorted them when attacking the enemy to chew on short sticks of the plumbago bush (normally used to ward off thieves and lightning), to spit out the fibres and to call on the amathongo and the prophet to assist them. And if this were not enough, Mlanjeni undertook to fill the white men’s guns with water and render them useless.

During the final months of 1850 the amaRharhabe began to prepare for war by amassing firearms and storing food. In September, representatives from most of the Xhosa chiefdoms gathered in Ngqika territory in the Amathole to confer with Sandile. It was then that Mlanjeni prophesied that Maqoma would lead the amaXhosa in a great war to recapture their land. Maqoma had been permitted by Smith to leave Port Elizabeth and return to the banks of the Tyhume River near Fort Hare, where he now lived among his Jingqi following, much reduced from around 17 000 adherents to a paltry 2 000 or so. Nevertheless, despite his reduced circumstances, with a war of revenge on the cards Maqoma was recovering much of his erstwhile panache and charisma. His fellow chiefs unequivocally recognised him as the best and most experienced military commander among them, and it hardly required Mlanjeni’s endorsement for them to hail Maqoma as their leader in the coming war.
In Cape Town, Smith was being made uneasy by news of these warlike preparations on the eastern frontier. He travelled to King William’s Town and summoned the Rharhabe chiefs to appear before him on 26 October 1850. When Sandile and Maqoma failed to arrive (and with vivid memories of Hintsa’s fate at Smith’s hands in 1835 it would have been surprising if they had), the governor, in his habitually intemperate way, deposed Sandile as the Ngqika chief. On 30 October Smith appointed Charles Brownlee to administer the amaNgqika through Suthu, the disgraced Sandile’s mother. Satisfied that he had closed the lid on an incipient revolt, Smith returned to Cape Town.

In his boundless assurance, combined with his essential contempt for the amaXhosa, Smith had misread the situation. Even though the amaNgqika continued with their preparations for war, Smith pooh-poohed the reports that they were doing so. But with word coming in of alarmed frontier farmers abandoning their farms with all their stock, he could do so no longer. He hurried back to the Eastern Cape with reinforcements, landing at East London on 9 December. Despite his swagger, Smith was uneasily aware that he had nothing to be complacent about if it actually came to fighting, since, following the wishes of the government at home, he had (as we have seen) drastically reduced the Cape garrison. In December 1850 he had only 1 700 British regulars at his disposal along the eastern frontier, of whom 900 were garrisoning various strongpoints, leaving only 800 available for service in the field. It was thus up to him to head off war by bluff and braggadocio.

His gnawing concern given away by the eruption of a great carbuncle on his neck, Smith rode north-west from East London to Fort Cox atop its great rounded hill in a loop of the Keiskamma. Nearby the fort, on 19 December, he met Maqoma. The meeting did not go well for Smith. When he brashly warned Maqoma that he could have his ships at East London full of soldiers ‘to punish all bad men who stir up the country to strife and war’, Maqoma scoffed and asked the governor whether he had ‘any ships that can sail into the Amathole’. Riled by Maqoma’s effrontery, Smith decided that, short of troops as he was, he must nevertheless nip the looming rebellion in the bud and bring the Rharhabe leaders to book with a pre-emptive strike.

Accordingly, on the morning of 24 December 1850 Lieutenant-Colonel Mackinnon, the commandant and chief commissioner of British Kaffraria,
led 600 soldiers (comprising British infantry, CMR and Kaffir Police) out of Fort Cox into the Amathole. His orders were to capture Sandile. Mackinnon marched east by way of the Booma Pass, a gorge on the upper Keiskamma, where Maqoma waited for him in ambush. The defile was too narrow to allow the mounted men to come to the aid of the infantry fighting past hundreds of Ngqika sharpshooters, some of them perched in trees, firing down on them from the rocky precipices above. Having pushed his way through the pass, Mackinnon decided it was too dangerous to return to Fort Cox by that route, and led his men south out of the mountains towards the Burnshill Mission and Fort White.

On Christmas morning the amaNgqika counter-attacked under Maqoma’s command, moving out of the Amathole to overwhelm the military villages of Woburn, Auckland and Juanasberg (named after Smith’s wife) along the Tyhume River. At Auckland the amaXhosa permitted the lamenting white women and children to depart, leaving their menfolk to fight to the death. The amaRharhabe then put Auckland to the torch, along with the other two captured villages. All along the frontier, settlers, terrified by gruesome reports of the sack of the military villages, took refuge in laagers and other strong points. Grahamstown was flooded with refugees and barricades were thrown up across the streets to put the town in a state of defence.

Initial Ngqika military success ensured that other amaXhosa rallied to their side, including the imiDange under Tola, the amaMbalu under Stokwe, the imiDushane under Siyolo, and a section of Dyani Tshatshu’s amaNtinde, but not the chief himself. Maqoma’s strategy following his surprise attack on the military villages was to capture the principal British forts between the Amathole and the Kat River, namely Fort Cox, Fort White, Fort Beaufort and Fort Hare, all of them really no more than weakly fortified military camps. For their part, it was essential for the British, their prestige already dented by the capture of the military villages, to hold these forts at all costs. The amaNdlambe, amaGqunukhwebe and other Xhosa groups within British Kaffraria were still uncommitted to the war, and the loss of any of these forts would probably persuade the waverers to join the Ngqika camp. Moreover, widespread Rharhabe successes might also bring the amaGcaleka into the fray. It was also vital for the British to retain Fort Armstrong in the Kat River to deter the disaffected people of the settlement from linking up with the Xhosa uprising.
Smith’s presence was required to coordinate the British military response, but he was trapped in the poorly supplied Fort Cox with only a handful of CMR troopers. Henry Somerset made two attempts to advance east from Fort Hare and relieve him, but the amaNgqika beat both back with skill and determination, inflicting appreciable casualties. With undeniable verve, Smith decided he was left with no alternative but to break out of Fort Cox. On 31 December he dashed out with a mounted escort, disguised as a CMR trooper. Brushing through several Xhosa ambushes, Smith gained King William’s Town. And there he stayed put for the next two years, conducting the campaign from his headquarters in the military cantonment. He remained at first undeniably rattled by Maqoma’s military successes and his own ignominious getaway. From King William’s Town he issued a spectacularly ill-considered communiqué to all soldiers and settlers (one which outraged public opinion and earned a stern rebuke from the government in London), exhorting them to ‘rise en masse … to destroy and exterminate these most barbarous and treacherous savages’. 7

Within days of his escape to King William’s Town, Smith was beset on every side by further uprisings, all coming together in a truly alarming challenge to British rule. With only the CMR, the Kaffir Police and a limited number of British troops at his disposal (it would take many months before regulars shipped from garrisons across the empire could arrive), and with Boer commandos reluctant to turn out for a governor they disliked, it seemed at first that Smith would have to abandon King William’s Town and fall back to Grahamstown. This retreat, which would only have encouraged yet others to join the uprising, was ironically averted by several elements of the amaXhosa themselves. Some, like Phato’s amaGqunukhwebe, who had suffered so badly in the War of the Axe, decided to side with the British; while others, like Mhala’s amaNdlambe (but not the section – the imiDushane – under his nephew Siyolo) resolved to remain neutral. This meant in practice that the amaGqunukhwebe, by occupying the countryside between King William’s Town and East London, kept the road open for supplies to Smith’s headquarters so that he could maintain his position there. Smith was also encouraged that John Montagu, the Cape colonial secretary, was energetically raising 3 000 Khoikhoi auxiliaries in the Western Cape at Genadendal, Caledon, Swellendam and Riversdale, and was signing them up for six months’ service on the frontier. But it would take nearly a month for them to arrive. In the meantime, Smith would have
to rely on levies raised closer to the theatre of operations. The amaMfengu, who had performed such sterling military service in the War of the Axe, were initially reluctant to re-enlist (although, as we shall see, circumstances would soon cause them to change their minds about that).

So, Smith cast around elsewhere, and appealed to Andries Botha, the leader of the Gonaqua in the Kat River Settlement who had led the Kat River contingent at the battle of Burnshill in the War of the Axe. His men were proven, first-rate marksmen and their tracking skills were highly regarded. This time, though, rather than rally to the governor’s call, some of the Kat River men thought it more prudent to stay at home and defend their own property, which had suffered so badly in the last war. Many others, after the years of being buffeted by antagonistic colonial officials, decided that the colonial government was their real enemy, and not the amaXhosa. Those who thought that way appealed to an incipient Khoikhoi nationalism. As Speelman Kievet, one of their leaders, exhorted the waverers, ‘It is a national cause and can you as a nation remain inactive? Arise courageously and work for your motherland and freedom.’ 8 Within a few days, between a third and a half of the people of Kat River rose in rebellion under Hermanus Matroos, who was born of a Khoikhoi mother and a Gqunukhwebe father, and who had once been Smith’s interpreter. The uprising swiftly attracted nearby Khoikhoi farm labourers (known as Boerlanders), who started attacking the amaMfengu Smith had settled along the Tyhume River, and Matroos sent men into the adjoining districts of the Colony to raid farms.

The Kat River Rebellion (as the British referred to it) was a seismic shock for the Colony, compounded when the Khoikhoi on the Moravian mission station of Enon and the LMS mission stations of Theopolis and Bethelsdorp rose in solidarity. As Smith himself recognised, this uprising was ‘of far greater moment than the outbreak of the Kaffirs’ because it arose out of the grievances shared by all the dispossessed and landless Khoisan population throughout the Colony. 9 In the Western Cape, hundreds of kilometres away from the eastern frontier, farmers became convinced during the course of 1851 that a revolt of their labourers was brewing, and as late as December 1851 apprehensions reached a climax when farmers in the Malmesbury district north of Cape Town went into laager. Nor were such fears without foundation. Willem Uithaaldor, one of the Kat River leaders, spoke of ‘the oppression and complete ruin of the coloured and poor of this land, a land which we, as natives, may just claim as our
motherland’, and called on the oppressed to ‘Rise manfully and unanimously as a nation, and children of one house.’ And certainly, in taking up arms, men of Khoikhoi and mixed-race descent were defending their patriarchal honour and fighting for the preservation of the last vestiges of their culture and identity. As one of them put it, ‘We shall show the settlers that we too are men.’

Matroos was in close contact with Maqoma, and wasted no time in joining forces with him to assist in capturing the British forts. On 6 January 1851 a combined force of 2 000 Kat River rebels and amaNgqika approached Fort Beaufort under cover of darkness with the intention of capturing its stores of arms and ammunition. The fort, situated on the west bank of the Kat River, was of considerable strategic value for the British in any future operations against the Kat River Settlement or the Amathole. It was saved for them when the Kat River contingent, led by Matroos on his horse, attacked prematurely at 4 a.m. without waiting for the amaNgqika to complete the encirclement. The attackers were cut down by concentrated fire from the fort, and Maqoma withdrew his men before they became engaged.

Matroos was left among the dead. In an act that expressed the defenders’ violent fear and hatred of those who had risen up against them, and prefigured so many further atrocities committed during the course of this terrible war, Matroos’s corpse was dragged into Fort Beaufort’s market square. There, as a warning to other traitors, it was thrown down under the market bell, which was surmounted by the Union Flag, and left exposed to the public gaze. But that barbaric gesture did not serve to deter the Kat River rebels. Willem Uithaalder, who had once served in the CMR, took over the leadership from Matroos. He established a camp in the inaccessible valley of the Blinkwater River, where it served as a rallying-point for the disaffected.

Maqoma was not making all the running on the Ngqika side. On the morning of 21 January 1851, Sandile led between 2 000 and 3 000 Xhosa warriors, including a large mounted detachment, against Fort Hare. Somerset, who had been promoted to major-general on 2 January 1851, was in command, but the garrison was depleted because many soldiers had been detached to escort supplies coming up from Grahamstown. That left only a hundred CMR to man the fort, and a few settler volunteers to hold the
village of Alice on the opposite bank of the Tyhume River. Most fortunately for the defenders, 800 amaMfengu were available to assist with the defence. As would become the norm in such circumstances, they were deployed outside the fixed positions to disrupt and absorb the attack long enough for the enemy to be caught in the open by the concentrated fire directed at them from the British fortifications. And because of their mobility and skill as marksmen, the amaMfengu suffered few casualties in these exposed operations.

It had taken the amaMfengu only a few days to acknowledge that, deeply resented as they were by the amaXhosa and Kat River settlers alike, they too had everything to lose should the British be driven out. Consequently, they unreservedly threw in their lot with the Colony, and their loyalty would ultimately be recognised through large shares in captured cattle and, once victory was assured, in the allocation of more land. During the course of the Eighth Cape Frontier War they would fight in almost every major engagement, usually most bravely and to the admiration of the British. They carried more firearms than ever before (although they were not usually issued with the latest models) and employed them more effectively than previously. Nevertheless, colonists could never quite rid themselves of the fear that their black levies might turn the firearms they were entrusted with against their white masters, so as a precaution their supply of ammunition was always closely rationed. In their dress the amaMfengu were also becoming more easily distinguishable from the amaXhosa, and were usually clothed in serviceable buff-coloured loose tunics and trousers and wore broad-brimmed hats. However, their European-style outfits were Africanised with the addition of feather and animal-pelt decorations.

Sandile’s advance against Fort Hare was intended to distract the garrison from the real objective of the operation. This was to capture the 5 000 cattle grazing in the vicinity (most of them belonging to the amaMfengu) in order to provision his forces in the fighting to come. So, while the amaXhosa on foot appeared to be about to attempt to storm the fort, the mounted men swept around to cut off and seize the cattle. They were foiled in their attempt by the amaMfengu, who mingled with the cattle and fought them off, and by musket-fire from the fort. Worsted, and suffering ten times more casualties than the amaMfengu, the amaXhosa withdrew with only 200 captured beasts. As James Read Junior, the LMS missionary at the Kat River Settlement who was watching the battle in anguish from the high
ground, reflected, ‘who … could for a moment think otherwise than that the Colony would at last conquer the Kaffirs? Though for a time the Kaffirs and Hottentots might triumph, that triumph would be ephemeral and short-lived.’

The rebels, however, were not resigned to thinking along the same defeatist lines as Read. On 22 January, the day after Sandile’s repulse at Fort Hare, the Khoikhoi Kat River militia garrisoning Fort Armstrong – a stone tower with a star-shaped earthwork close by and outbuildings situated on a tongue of land surrounded on three sides by the Kat River – mutinied against their white officers. The next day they permitted the white officials, missionaries and settlers who had taken refuge there to depart in peace, and turned the fort over to Willem Uithaalder, the leader of the Kat River rebels.

The loss of Fort Armstrong was a further blow to Smith, compounded by the outbreak of fighting to the north of the Kat River Settlement, in Victoria North. There, the War of Mlanjeni presented Maphasa of the amaTshatshu with an opportunity to recoup his losses during the War of the Axe. He had consulted the prophet Mlanjeni, and he was an old ally of Maqoma, with whom he remained in close communication. Encouraged by the Kat River rebels, he had been in open rebellion since 3 January 1851. Nonesi, the Thembu regent, was persuaded by colonial officials to stay neutral, and in February she shifted further east out of harm’s way to the upper reaches of the Mbashe River. But Maphasa was determined to fight.

The village of Whittlesea, close to Maphasa’s Great Place, was a tiny place of only three streets. Captain Richard Tylden, RE, the police commandant there, nevertheless decided to put the hamlet into a state of defence and directed the fortification of four strong buildings. To garrison them he commanded a mixed force of 70 settlers, 200 Xhosa Christian converts and 800 amaMfengu. On 25 January 1851 Maphasa’s amaTshatshu raided the environs of Whittlesea and made off with cattle. On the following day the amaTshatshu, joined by some Kat River rebels under Herms Perl, occupied the nearby Moravian Shiloh Mission, a prosperous, shady settlement of 700 souls in the Klipplaat valley. Maphasa next targeted Whittlesea itself, and over two days (27 and 28 January) an army of as many as 3 000 amaTshatshu and their Khoikhoi allies repeatedly assaulted the village. The defences held, and the attackers were driven off.
Tylden decided to take the war to the enemy, and on 1 February he led out 350 Xhosa Christians and amaMfengu to seize back Shiloh. After some six hours of fighting most of the settlement was burnt, but when Tylden finally withdrew to Whittlesea with 600 captured cattle, around a thousand amaTshatshu and some Kat River rebels remained in possession of the barricaded church. Two days later, on 3 February, the amaTshatshu retaliated, but once again the Whittlesea garrison repulsed them. But the defenders were running out of ammunition, and Tylden sent off an urgent request for help to Cradock on the Great Fish River, about 130 kilometres to the west. The amaTshatshu attacked Whittlesea again on 6 February, and this time it seemed that they must take the village. Just in the nick of time the Cradock Mounted Volunteers (or ‘Cradock Bricks’) rode up to save the day. Inconclusive skirmishing around Whittlesea continued until 11 February, when the amaTshatshu withdrew north to defend their own homesteads against a Boer commando that began operating in the area. Tylden retook Shiloh on 19 February and Maphasa retired further north to his mountainous stronghold on the Black Kei, where the colonial forces focused on trying to flush him out.

Elsewhere, too, the tide began to turn against the insurgents. On 24 January 1851 Smith ordered 270 CMR and 150 amaMfengu out of King William’s Town to drive off about 600 amaXhosa who were threatening the village under the joint command of Siyolo, the veteran of the disastrous battle of Gwangqa in 1846, and of Anta, one of Sandile’s bothers. After some tough fighting, the amaXhosa were driven off into the bush. Encouraged by this small success and the defence of Fort Hare three days earlier, Smith decided to go onto the counter-offensive in British Kaffraria. On 30 January Mackinnon set out from King William’s Town to relieve the beleaguered Fort Cox and Fort White with a wagon train escorted by 300 British regulars, 150 CMR, 1 500 of the Khoikhoi auxiliaries Montagu had despatched from the Western Cape, and 300 amaMfengu from Fort Peddie. A large body of amaXhosa attempted to prevent Mackinnon from crossing the Keiskamma at Debe Nek close to Fort White. They attacked the rear of the column and its left flank but were driven off by shrapnel from the single artillery piece with the convoy. The amaXhosa offered no further resistance to the column’s advance and the forts were duly relieved.

A few days later, on 3 February, Smith advanced two similarly composed columns from King William’s Town, one of 1 500 men led by himself, and
the other of 1 100 men under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel George T.C. Napier of the CMR, to attack Siyolo. They destroyed his homestead and pursued him north to Mlanjeni’s homestead on the Keiskamma. Siyolo’s men attempted to make a brief stand there, but were dispersed with artillery fire. The columns then returned to King William’s Town with 700 captured cattle, ravaging the Tyhume valley en route and mauling Nkosi Bhotomane’s imiDange. Just over a week later, Smith ordered Mackinnon to reinforce Somerset at Fort Hare with a column of 2 750 men comprising British infantry, the CMR and Mfengu levies. Siyolo’s men tried to block Mackinnon’s passage through Debe Nek on 13 February, but artillery fire and a charge by the CMR drove them off. The British forces then ravaged Siyolo’s territory and Somerset and Napier each advanced a column into the Amathole where they burnt Ngqika huts and fields. Driven out of his chiefdom, Siyolo fell back with his warriors to the sanctuary of the thick bush of the Fish River valley where he continued to resist as best he could.

Satisfied that he had recovered control of British Kaffraria south of the Ngqika stronghold in the Amathole, and that Captain Tylden had the amaTshatshu on the run, Smith next focused on the rebels of the Kat River Settlement. Somerset was ordered to recapture Fort Armstrong, which dominated the Kat River valley, the loss of which had been so damaging to British prestige. His plan was to take the fort in a pincer movement. A force of armed British settler levies advanced on Fort Armstrong from Post Retief to its north-west, and a column under Somerset’s personal command marched on it from Fort Hare to its south-east. As the two columns pushed through the Kat River valley – the vengeful settler levies bearing aloft a standard with ‘Extermination’ emblazoned on it – they burnt all the crops and houses along the way, irrespective of whether they belonged to rebels or loyalists. This indiscriminate destruction provoked some of the Kat River people who had been wavering into open revolt. Others – notably Andries Botha – took to the bush to avoid the rampaging columns, and as a consequence were subsequently accused of taking part in the rebellion.

On 22 February 1851 the overconfident and ill-disciplined settler levies unwisely attacked the rebels’ camp pitched around Fort Armstrong without waiting for Somerset to come up in support. Firing down on them from the high ground where they had taken up position, the rebels caught the settlers in the open and pinned them down. Fortunately for the latter, Somerset arrived with his column of 1 800 men before they had taken many
casualties, and the rebels fell back on Fort Armstrong, both the stone tower and the earthwork fort. Before assaulting the fort, Somerset permitted the women and children sheltering behind its walls to come out and be made prisoner, although by no means all did so. Somerset then bombarded the fort with four artillery pieces and stormed the walls. A few rebels tenaciously defended the stone tower, but that too soon fell. The British took some 500 prisoners, of whom some 400 were women and children. About a hundred people perished in the fort, many of them non-combatants. Some of the rebels made their escape and joined the amaNgqiká in the Amathole, where they kept up the struggle.

The Kat River Rebellion had severely jolted the colonists, and they were not prepared to be merciful in victory. After taking Fort Armstrong, Somerset swept through the settlement, disarming the men, arresting all suspected rebels, seizing cattle, destroying schools and generally burning and pillaging. Forty-seven of the captured rebels were found guilty of high treason and sentenced to death, although their sentences were all commuted to life imprisonment with hard labour on the Colony’s roads. Andries Botha suffered the same fate as the other rebels found guilty. Because of his long-standing stature in the Kat River community and his service in the War of the Axe, his arraignment turned into what has been described as ‘South Africa’s first political show trial’.¹³

Despite the severe repression of the Kat River Rebellion, widespread disaffection among the Khoisan population of the Colony did not suddenly die away. It soon manifested itself in a form that came as a dreadful shock to the military authorities. On the night of 13–14 March 1851, forty-six troopers of the CMR stationed in King William’s Town deserted and, rather than fight against those opposing British rule, went over to them with their equipment, arms, ammunition and military training. There had been an incipient CMR mutiny in 1838, but this time the disaffected acted, fed up with their white officers’ paternalism and the general atmosphere of racial abuse in the regiment. They were also troubled by the wave of arrests in the Kat River Settlement, and unsettled by rumours that every third man in the CMR was to be shot. Smith, like most other officers who had served in India, had a sentimental belief in the loyalty of his sepoys (the Indian soldiers in the service of the East India Company) and regarded the CMR and the Kaffir Police in the same light.¹⁴ Feeling deeply betrayed, therefore, Smith paraded those of the CMR who remained between two regiments of
British infantry with a battery of artillery at their backs, and made them lay down their arms. After being disciplined, the CMR resumed duties – only some 6 per cent of the regiment had defected – but the Khoikhoi troopers were never again fully trusted. For that very reason, and to replace them as mounted troops, the government sent out the 12th (The Prince of Wales’s) Royal Regiment of Lancers, who arrived in May 1851.

To make matters worse for the British, it was not only members of the CMR who went over to the enemy. Many of the Kaffir Police, to whom Smith was particularly attached, also melted away with their arms and ammunition and joined Maqoma and their fellow amaXhosa. The loyalty of the Khoikhoi levies Montagu had raised in the Western Cape also began to waver dangerously. Their sympathies were increasingly on the side of those they had been recruited to fight, people who, after all, were simply defending their own land, which the British were bent on taking away from them. Smith’s empty threat to restore discipline by decimating them – that is, by executing every tenth man – only made matters worse. Finally, in July 1851, Smith decided to send the untrustworthy levies back to the Western Cape. And lest they ‘infected’ the Khoikhoi communities along their line of march, Smith shipped them home by sea. With the CMR and the Kaffir Police unreliable, and the Khoikhoi levies simply unusable, the stock of the reliable amaMfengu rose accordingly, and they remained a mainstay of the British throughout the rest of the war.

Over the next few months, while Smith waited to build up his resources with the British reinforcements being despatched to the Cape, operations in British Kaffraria merely ticked over, with Mackinnon leading several destructive sweeps into the Amathole. Tylden, meanwhile, continued in his efforts to run Maphasa to ground, and was ranging beyond the Black Kei River north-east of Whittlesea in territory technically outside the borders of British Kaffraria. At the Imvani River on 15 April, Tylden and his Cradock Mounted Volunteers and Mfengu levies caught up with Maphasa and his amaTshatshu along with his handful of Khoikhoi allies who had fled from the Kat River Settlement, as well as his ally Chopo, a minor Thembu chief. Supporting Maphasa were 3 000 Gcaleka warriors whom Sarhili, the Xhosa paramount and Gcaleka chief, had quixotically sent to support him. Sarhili had been holding back from coming to the aid of the amaRharhabe in British Kaffraria and thus provoking the British into attacking him as they had in the War of the Axe. So why he imagined the British would not regard
his fighting alongside Maphasa to be a hostile act is unclear, even if his warriors were campaigning beyond British territory.

In the event, Maphasa attacked Tylden’s force on three sides in a pitched battle that went on for twelve gruelling hours. Ultimately, Maphasa’s men could not overcome Tylden’s forces’ concentrated, superior firepower, and broke when the Cradock Bricks surprised them in the rear. They fled, leaving behind 216 bodies lying on the veld, and 2,000 cattle and 2,000 sheep, which Tylden distributed among his grateful Mfengu levies. Sarhili ceased his support of Maphasa, deeply regretting that he had ever become involved, but the indomitable Tshotshu chief kept going. Throughout the rest of the year his small bands of fighters continued to range across the Black Kei and Klaas Smits Rivers in the direction of the Stormberg, raiding and occasionally skirmishing fiercely but indecisively with Tylden’s forces vainly trying to corner them.

Maphasa’s continued resistance was little more than a distant irritant, not to be compared with Smith’s major challenge in bringing the amaRharhabe to heel. When he tetchily declared that but for the ‘inexplicable Hottentot revolution’ in the Kat River Settlement and elsewhere he ‘would have put down the Kafirs in six weeks’,\(^1\)\(^5\) he was deluding himself. That was because he was facing Maqoma who, Tim Stapleton believes, more than any other Xhosa leader throughout the long series of frontier wars ‘successfully adapted traditional military methods in response to European firepower and total warfare’.\(^1\)\(^6\) Crucially, Maqoma also possessed an inventive strategic sense.

The conundrum facing Maqoma was how to keep up the fight now that the Kat River Rebellion had been suppressed, the beleaguered British forts relieved, Siyolo, Maphasa and Sarhili neutralised, and Sandile driven into his stronghold in the Amathole. His inspired response was to lead his several hundred intrepid Jingqi warriors into the Waterkloof (or Mtontsi). He was joined there in the mid-year by Willem Uithaalder, the Kat River leader who had survived the fall of Fort Armstrong, and by Hans Brander, the other main surviving Khoikhoi leader. Both were as determined as Maqoma to maintain the struggle and they imposed strict discipline on their small band of followers.

The Waterkloof Highlands lie north of Fort Beaufort between the upper Kat River to the east and the Koonop River to the west. It is an area only
eighty square kilometres in size, but contains some of the roughest and most impassable terrain imaginable, more difficult even than the Amathole or the Fish River valley. A narrow river valley with sheer, rocky sides cuts a horseshoe-shaped pattern through the Kroomie plateau. A canopy of huge forest trees – yellowwood, sneezewood, ironwood and assegaiwood – blocks out the sunlight in the steep ravines, and the forest floor is a nightmare undergrowth of tangled creepers and thorny bushes. This is territory that horses and artillery found almost impossible to traverse, and which made it extremely difficult for infantry to deploy into their usual firing lines. From the flat summit of the Kroomie Heights it was possible for Maqoma’s lookouts to spot any British forces approaching over the open land below, and to give his men ample time to prepare ambushes to receive them. And if Maqoma always knew where the British were operating, they had little idea where his forces were as they eluded their patrols in shrouded caves and along secret paths. Nor did the British locate the concealed places where Maqoma secreted his small herds of cattle and the stores of supplies, which Xhosa and Khoikhoi women surreptitiously replenished whenever they could.

The almost impregnable Waterkloof made an excellent base for raiding settler farms in the Somerset, Cradock and even Albany districts. But, most important of all in terms of a wider strategy, Maqoma’s disruptive presence in the Waterkloof diverted the British forces away from attacking Sandile’s stronghold in the Amathole and from capturing or destroying the cattle and crops upon which Ngqika resistance depended. And for many months this strategy succeeded brilliantly, distracting the British from their primary objective in the Amathole, and tying down nearly 4 000 troops best deployed elsewhere against only a few hundred insurgents. No wonder that in Xhosa tradition Maqoma is celebrated as his people’s greatest warrior, and that his heroic feats live on in popular memory.

By September 1851 Smith reckoned he had enough reinforcements to move onto the offensive. The arriving British troops were better outfitted to fight in the Cape bush than previously. The practice had finally taken hold of altering uniforms and equipment to suit local operational conditions. For example, the 74th (Highland) Regiment made changes the moment they landed. The men were issued with short dark canvas blouses to replace their scarlet coats (they retained their tartan trews), with veldskoene (tough, lightweight boots) and with lighter pouches of untanned leather, while
broad peaks were fixed to their serviceable forage caps. Once in the field, the troops took further measures, dyeing their clothes with mimosa bark soaked in water to make them even less visible.

It took time, however, for the newly arrived troops to come to terms with the actual nature of the bush warfare they were kitted out for, and with the unrelieved hardships associated with it. An initial sweep of the Fish River bush to suppress Siyolo was a near disaster for them, and they were badly mauled in repeated ambushes. Their situation would have been even worse had it not been for the extensive use of the Mfengu levies whom their commanders considered more expendable than British troops. To spare the white troops from being ambushed, the amaMfengu would be sent into the rough terrain to locate the amaXhosa. In turn, the amaMfengu would attempt to draw the amaXhosa out into ambushes laid by the British troops, or into the open where they were vulnerable to mounted attack and artillery fire.

Disregarding the setbacks in the Fish River bush, Smith’s troops tackled Maqoma in the Waterkloof. On 7 September 1851 Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Fordyce, commanding officer of the 74th Highlanders, led a punitive expedition into the Waterkloof made up of 250 regulars, 250 amaMfengu of the Fort Beaufort levy, and about 150 settler and Khoikhoi volunteers. When Fordyce withdrew after skirmishing inconclusively on the open Kroomie Heights, Maqoma ambushed his column in a densely forested valley where the amaXhosa had felled trees across the path to hinder movement. The Mfengu rearguard panicked and sowed confusion among the Highlanders. Maqoma’s sharpshooters picked some of them off and then charged in for hand-to-hand fighting before melting back into the forest, leaving the discomforted Fordyce to make his way back to base.

Determined to do better, Somerset called up reinforcements, and on 12 October 1851 renewed operations in the Waterkloof with British infantry, the CMR and the Fort Peddie and Port Elizabeth Mfengu levies. But, despite the Mfengu expertise in the almost impenetrable bush, the British forces tramped about after the elusive enemy without result, leaving the soldiers demoralised, suffering from dysentery and fever, and their uniforms in tatters. On 6 November Somerset launched a fresh but equally unsuccessful sweep of the Waterkloof. During the course of these operations a Khoikhoi sniper shot Fordyce dead. On the Cape eastern frontier British soldiers had long been known as ‘amaJohnnies’ in both
Xhosa and Mfengu slang, a derisive riposte to the soldiers’ racist habit of calling every African ‘Johnny’. Accordingly, the amaJingqi in the bush derisively yelled out as Fordyce fell: ‘Johnny bring stretcher! Johnny bring stretcher!’ On 8 November Somerset ignominiously withdrew all his forces from the Waterkloof. He left Maqoma the undoubted master of the field and drew down on his own head the bitter derision of the colonial press. To this day Maqoma is celebrated as ‘the leopard of Fordyce’, and is said to have ridden his favourite bull, Jingqi, into battle and to have personally killed the lieutenant-colonel.

After this series of humiliating setbacks in the Waterkloof campaign, Smith required an easy victory to damp down reviving Xhosa confidence. He also badly needed to restore waning support in the Colony and to allay the British government’s growing concern over the interminable (and expensive) conflict. In both the Sixth and Seventh Cape Frontier Wars the British had raided across the Kei to seize cattle from the amaGcaleka, and Smith decided to do so again. Now, as previously, it was easy to brush aside Sarhili’s declaration of neutrality with the charge that he was harbouring amaRharhabe fugitives, along with their cattle, and was robbing white traders. Furthermore, there was the matter of Sarhili having sent military aid to Maphasa in April. In any case, a raid against the amaGcaleka was tempting, not only because they promised to be a far easier target than the amaRharhabe holed up in their fastnesses, but because captured livestock meant an improved supply of food for the forces, and the means of cheaply rewarding the Mfengu levies and colonial volunteers for their services.

In December 1851 Somerset led a force of 5 000 men across the Kei, and operations continued for six weeks, into January 1852. The amaGcaleka were not the easy walkover Somerset had anticipated, however, and his roving patrols frequently encountered pockets of stiff resistance and ambushes in the broken territory. As in the Fish River bush, the Waterkloof and the Amathole, the regular troops relied heavily on the Mfengu levies in the bush fighting. In the end, the amaGcaleka were brushed aside, and when the Great Cattle Patrol (as the British called it) withdrew, it was with a crippling haul of 30 000 cattle and innumerable goats that made many of the Mfengu leaders rich men. Further weakening Sarhili, an estimated 7 000 people describing themselves as amaMfengu, but who were probably disaffected or opportunistic amaGcaleka, deserted him and joined
Somerset’s column, providing the Colony with a source of additional African labour.

It was at this time, in January 1852, that Maphasa died of what was clearly a heart attack. Nevertheless, four of his senior councillors and his Right-Hand wife were smelt out and executed for arranging his murder. His Great Wife, Yiliswa, was appointed regent for his minor son, Gungubele, and Tshatshu resistance dragged on until November. But with their indomitable leader gone, Tshatshu warriors never again rose above a little cattle rustling.

Buoyed up by Somerset’s successful harrowing of Gcalekaland and by word of Maphasa’s demise, Smith raided the Amathole in late January 1852. He adopted a scorched-earth approach and entrusted these operations primarily to the amaMfengu. Yet, despite the widespread depredations, Sandile could not be induced to surrender. Smith therefore decided that he must rather finish off Maqoma first, and began gearing up for a renewed assault on the Waterkloof by transporting more troops to the Eastern Cape for the campaign.

It was then that a tragic incident occurred which emboldened the amaXhosa in their resistance, and has lived longer and more vividly in British popular memory than any other event in the whole course of the frontier wars. On 26 February 1852, HMS *Birkenhead*, an iron-hulled troopship with steam-driven paddle-wheels, was carrying drafts for several regiments to Algoa Bay. Its course hugged the coast, and at two in the morning it struck an uncharted rock off Danger Point, 20 140 kilometres east of Cape Town. The troops were mustered on deck and remained calm while the inadequate number of serviceable boats were lowered and the seven women and thirteen children on board took their places in them first. Those troops who could find no room in the boats stood in their ranks shaking hands until the ship broke up and sank. Of 638 passengers and crew, 445 were drowned or eaten by sharks. The survivors, including all the women and children, were picked up by passing ships.

The *Birkenhead* disaster, redeemed in British eyes only by the courage, discipline and chivalry of the troops on board, was swiftly followed by a humiliating, personal blow for Smith himself. On 1 March 1852, he received despatches from Earl Grey, dated 14 January 1852, recalling him from his governorship. Despite the Duke of Wellington’s efforts to save his
protégé, Grey had decided that Smith was proving incapable of bringing the war to a conclusion and that he must be replaced by a new governor who could. His choice was the calm and efficient Major-General the Honourable George Cathcart, who had been one of Wellington’s aides-de-camp at Waterloo, and who received his post as governor though the duke’s influence. Cathcart was a soldier first and foremost, and had no experience as a colonial administrator. But that did not matter, for a civilian lieutenant-governor, Charles Darling, was simultaneously appointed to deal with the day-to-day administration of the Colony, leaving Cathcart free to tidy away the tiresome war on the eastern frontier.

Knowing it would take about a month before Cathcart arrived to supersede him, Smith resolved to take personal charge of the Waterkloof campaign in a final push to redeem his military reputation. On 10 March 1852, he directed three converging columns into the Waterkloof. During the operation 130 Jingqi women and children were found hiding in a cave and taken prisoner. Nonxina, Maqoma’s Great Wife, was among their number, and she was imprisoned at Fort Hare. Smith sent his columns into the Waterkloof again on 15 March, when the amaMfengu showed great brutality toward the enemy, including women and children. During this latest operation Smith adopted a new tactic, posting small groups of amaMfengu at strategic places to prevent Jingqi and Khoikhoi fighters from breaking out of the Waterkloof and joining Sandile in the Amathole. All of this undoubtedly damaged and disrupted Maqoma’s forces and affected their morale. But still, Smith had to accept that his last offensive had failed to dislodge them from the Waterkloof.

Cathcart arrived on the eastern frontier on 10 April, and Smith left for England. For a man of such vaulting self-esteem, his disgrace was nearly insupportable, although the hero’s farewell he was accorded must have applied some balm. The troops and townspeople of King William’s Town turned out to cheer him, Phato’s Gqunukhwebe warriors zealously escorted him to East London where he took ship, and in Cape Town his carriage was drawn through triumphal arches to the ship that was to carry him to England, ‘the aptly named HMS *Gladiato*’.

Once home, Smith was promoted to lieutenant-general. Taking up the tame command of a military district, he at least could enjoy the sour satisfaction of watching his successor at the Cape struggling for many months to finish the war he had been dismissed for not ending sooner.
As soon as he took charge on the eastern frontier, Cathcart halted further operations until he had assessed the situation. Despite all Smith had thrown at them, Maqoma was still ensconced in the Waterkloof and Sandile in the Amathole. Siyolo remained in the Fish River bush where he threatened the line of communications between King William’s Town and Grahamstown. Small groups of die-hard Khoikhoi rebels were dispersed in small armed camps all over the frontier. The British troops were exhausted and needed time to recuperate. And Cathcart found Major-General Somerset, who had been in charge of operations, not up to the job. Somerset had been in the Cape for thirty-four years and was popular with the settlers, but Cathcart accused him of incompetence and war profiteering, and succeeded in getting him transferred to India on 7 September 1852. There, the incorrigible Somerset bounced back. He was appointed KCB in 1853, and took up command of the Bombay Army between 1855 and 1860, successfully weathering the storm of the Indian Mutiny.

When he resumed operations in June 1852, Cathcart did so on three fronts. In the Fish River bush and in the Waterkloof he employed a new, effective strategy under the direction of Lieutenant-Colonel William Eyre (known to the amaXhosa as ‘Four-Eyes’ on account of his spectacles), who was a specialist in irregular warfare. Eyre built a series of small fortified posts in the Fish River bush and on the Kroomie Heights. Garrisoned by detachments of British regulars and amaMfengu, they served as patrol bases for searching the bush and forested ravines, denied the enemy the high ground for observing British movements, and generally kept them off balance. The establishment of these fortified posts went hand in hand in late June with fresh sweeps of the Waterkloof and Fish River bush by columns of regulars and Mfengu levies.

Shortly afterwards, Cathcart turned his attention eastwards, and on 28 July he launched a fresh raid against the amaGcaleka, ostensibly to deter Sarhili from sending aid to the amaRharhabe, but once again conveniently seizing livestock to build up supplies and reward the settler volunteers and Mfengu levies. In a new development, many of the amaMfengu were mounted for the first time to enhance their range and improve their ability to burn homesteads and capture livestock. On 12 August the British burnt Hohita, Sarhili’s Great Place, and crossed back over the Kei with 10 000 cattle. Sarhili, who had offered little resistance, was left further impoverished and politically weakened.
Meanwhile, Eyre continued with major sweeps of the Waterkloof throughout September, with regular troops, the CMR, Mfengu levies and settler volunteers. His orders to them were uncompromising: ‘There was to be no quarter. All that were taken alive were to be hanged.’ And certainly, even if hundreds of women and children were taken prisoner, others were shot, men were hanged from trees, and although the number of amaXhosa killed is not known, there were reports of their bones littering the area. With their position increasingly untenable, Maqoma and Uithaalder began pulling their Jingqi and Khoikhoi fighters out of the Waterkloof. Maqoma fell back to the Amathole, while some of the Khoikhoi, including Uithaalder himself, dispersed into small bands in the Colony. There they lived by banditry and were ruthlessly harried by Walter Currie, the commandant of the Albany Mounted Police.

On 12 October 1852 Cathcart could report that the Waterkloof was clear and abandoned by the amaXhosa. Encouraged by Siyolo’s surrender in the Fish River valley in October (he would be shipped off to Robben Island on 27 November after Cathcart had commuted his death sentence for rebellion and sedition), the governor confidently declared the ‘war of rebellion’ to be over. He was being premature, however, for it still remained to subdue the amaNgqika in the Amathole and the various small groups of insurgents still resisting elsewhere. To clear the Amathole, Cathcart’s forces mounted a remorseless scorched-earth campaign aimed at destroying Xhosa food resources and starving them into surrender. Throughout October and November 1852 patrols mercilessly burnt crops and seized cattle. Resistance crumbled, and the desperate amaXhosa and Khoikhoin began to flee this, their last refuge.

While some British soldiers fighting in the earlier stages of the War of Mlanjeni callously held that ‘it is fine fun … burning their houses and taking their horses and cattle whenever we can get hold of them’, the increasingly total character of the war being waged in the Waterkloof and Amathole was not lost on the perpetrators. The plight of the amaXhosa caught up in the fighting affected even hard-boiled British private soldiers, one of whom wrote home to his father that ‘it would surprise you were you to see the carcasses lying, Starvation and gunpowder has at last done for the Caffre’. Certainly, during the final months of the conflict, the line between combatants and non-combatants increasingly blurred, and the war
was marked by numerous frightful atrocities, high loss of life and growing racial hatred.

Smith’s hysterical and ill-judged call in early 1851 for the extermination of the amaXhosa was unfortunately echoed not only on the standard of the settler volunteers marching on Fort Armstrong, but by influential settler ideologues of race such as J.M. Bowker. Their position was that with the onward march of white civilisation not only would indigenous people disappear, but that they should disappear. As Martin Legassick and Robert Ross have expressed it, ‘the model for the expanding Cape Colony became … not India, but Australasia and North America’ where the indigenes were being systematically obliterated.27

A vicious circle was at play here. In the earlier frontier wars, the amaXhosa had followed tradition by sparing women and children as well as men who had done them no harm. As we have seen, this restraint progressively wilted as they were overcome by the bitterness of defeat, dispossession and the destruction of their society by a ruthless foe unwilling to differentiate between warriors and civilians. When the amaXhosa retaliated by becoming as pitiless in war as their enemies, settler opinion – and even that of the missionaries – progressively hardened, so that consensus was reached on the supposed barbaric ferocity and racial inferiority of the amaXhosa, validating their subjugation and dispossession. Ironically, increasing Xhosa effectiveness in guerrilla warfare also contributed to forming this viewpoint. While some British soldiers admired their determined spirit of resistance, and came to respect the amaXhosa as skilled, athletic, formidable enemies who ‘skirmish very well and have all the advantage over the regular troops’,28 this was not the position of the majority. Night attacks, sniping from concealed positions, the deliberate picking off of officers, the shooting of soldiers trying to aid their wounded comrades – all such contemptible but disturbingly effective ploys convinced the British that the laws of war as they understood them no longer applied to the amaXhosa, and justified the systematic, unlimited warfare being waged against them. In any case, British officers could often distance themselves from atrocities by laying those committed by their forces squarely at the door of their wild, unreliable Mfengu levies who ‘not being particular or infected with humanity slay women, children, and all they can catch’.29
And when the amaXhosa began mutilating and torturing their prisoners to death instead of exchanging them, this was taken as conclusive confirmation of their irredeemable savagery. Yet Xhosa ‘atrocities’ can in large measure – although not always – be explained in terms of their culture and religion, and should not be seen as an expression of merciless barbarism. The amaXhosa always fought to kill their adversaries, as did the amaMfengu or the amaZulu. They mutilated the bodies of their enemies to remove parts believed to possess powerful magical properties which, if used as ritual war medicine, would strengthen the recipient. The liver was extracted, for example, because it was held to be the seat of bravery and courage, and the head because the skull could be used as a vessel for the preparation of war medicines. When warriors were ritually strengthened with these medicines before marching off to war, it was believed that dangerous occult forces were generated within their bodies. These same potent, occult forces remained pent up in the corpse of a slain warrior and could severely injure the living. Warriors therefore feared their dead foes as much as, if not more than, their living ones, and to dissipate the terrifying supernatural forces they ripped open the stomach. They believed that if they did not do so, these same forces would monstrously swell up their own bodies like that of a putrefying corpse, and that they would die. Their enemies, especially white ones, were believed to possess evil occult powers. So, when for example captives were tortured by being roasted on red-hot stones, this should be understood as a death reserved for suspected witches. Of course, the atrocity story works both ways, and the grisly British practice of taking trophy skulls can also be explained in cultural terms, as an aspect of the scientific interest in collecting skulls for phrenological study. The point, though, is that mutual misunderstanding of the cultural purposes behind such practices only fuelled reciprocal hatred.

By the end of November 1852, Cathcart’s ruthless campaign had finally succeeded on all fronts. The exhausted and starving Kat River bands surrendered once the governor issued a proclamation promising them their lives. Some of the leaders were excluded from the amnesty, and Uithaalder was one of those who fled to Gcalekaland where he eked out a living in a trading store until his suicide in 1865. The dispirited amaNgqika began abandoning the Amathole. By January 1853 Sandile and most of his adherents had crossed the Kei and taken refuge in Sarhili’s territory.
Maqoma, who obstinately hung on in the Amathole with only forty amaJingqi, finally joined Sandile in mid-February 1853.

Both chiefs then indicated to Cathcart that they wished to surrender. Sandile met Charles Brownlee, whom Smith had appointed administrator of the amaNgqika, on 27 February 1853. After several days of haggling, during which it was agreed that Smith’s deposition of Sandile as the Ngqika chief in October 1850 would be rescinded, Sandile finally agreed on 2 March to surrender. Cathcart met Sandile, Maqoma and other Ngqika chiefs near King William’s Town on 9 March 1853 when a proclamation of ‘Royal Mercy and Pardon’ was extended to them. But now they had given up at last, what was Cathcart to do with them and the Xhosa people, along with the Kat River people and the abaThembu?
The Cattle-Killing

The consequences of rebellion for the Kat River community were dire. The rebels were dispossessed of their land, and it was redistributed to the white farmers who had coveted it for so many years. The women of the dismantled settlement were mostly forced into domestic service on the settler farms, while the men took up work as labourers, or migrated across the Orange River to join the Griqua communities living there. No new ‘Hottentot’ settlements were established by a colonial administration that now considered them too politically dangerous, and henceforth, as Elizabeth Elbourne has expressed it, ‘the Khoikhoi were no longer perceived as useful agents’ of colonial rule. Yet, paradoxically, the settler minority had received such a fright when it seemed for a time during the War of Mlanjeni that a widespread Khoikhoi uprising would fatally coalesce with hostilities against the amaXhosa that it led to a shift in perception. In the interests of their own security, most colonists accepted that they must conciliate the small-property-owning Khoikhoin, who placed the same premium they did on security and economic prosperity.

To influential Cape and British policy-makers, it seemed that the best way to secure the support of such people was through granting them meaningful political rights, something many colonists had strenuously resisted before. This was the counsel of expediency, and had little to do with the philanthropy and humanitarianism that had informed British political circles in the past. But, as the Cape attorney-general, William Porter, mordantly put it: ‘I would rather meet the Hottentot … voting for his representative, than meet the Hottentot … with his gun on his shoulder.’ And indeed, when in March 1853 the Earl of Aberdeen’s coalition government (which was formed in December 1852 after the Earl of Derby’s administration was brought down over the issue of the cost of the Eighth...
Cape Frontier War) approved the constitution for representative government at the Cape, it provided for a colourblind, exclusively male franchise without a literacy requirement, and with a lower property qualification than in Britain itself.⁴ The short-lived political era of the non-racial ‘Liberal Cape’ that ensued was, ironically, an unforeseen consequence of the Kat River Rebellion, and the very few amaXhosa in the Colony who met the franchise requirements were as qualified to vote as were any other people of colour.

With regard to the amaXhosa, Cathcart believed he had to be circumspect despite their defeat in the longest and most bitter of the frontier wars to date. They still remained a formidable force, and in a period of imperial economic restraint there were limits to British military power along the frontier. Consequently, although it had been Cathcart’s original intention to expel the amaNgqika from British Kaffraria altogether, he compromised by shepherding them out of their Amathole stronghold and resettling them in the well-watered but dreary plain between eastern foothills of the Amathole and the western bank of the Kei. The experienced Charles Brownlee was appointed the commissioner of the new Ngqika Reserve, eighty kilometres long and forty kilometres across at its widest point. In June 1853, to the fury of the amaNgqika, Cathcart selectively opened the territory they had been compelled to vacate – which was to be known as the Royal, or Crown Reserve – to Mfengu settlers. And to prevent the amaNgqika, who desperately hankered after their old home in the Amathole, from ever returning there and using it as a base for guerrilla warfare, Cathcart ringed the Crown Reserve with eleven temporary fortifications and five permanent ones. These posts were typically built with a small stone tower, or keep, that commanded the low huts of the garrison surrounded by a stone breastwork. Fort Eyre, built in the heart of the Amathole at Keiskammahoek, was the prototype of these ‘castles’, each one of which was intended to serve as the nucleus of a settler village. ‘Military control, not colonisation,’ Cathcart reminded Colonel John Maclean, the chief commissioner of British Kaffraria, ‘is the principle of policy which has induced me to advise the retention of Kaffraria as a separate government.’⁵ Thus, while colonial control in the neighbouring Cape Colony was based on the effective occupation of the land by settler farmers, in British Kaffraria the administration would rest on the military occupation of strategic strongpoints.
As for the amaXhosa within British Kaffraria, Cathcart abandoned Smith’s policy of interfering with their culture and social system, not only because he believed he had not the power to do so, but because he was convinced that a less rapid and drastic dissolution of Xhosa society would help restore calm. He also discouraged land speculation and confined settlers to the vicinity of their villages around the fortified posts, thus leaving most of the land in Xhosa hands. These concessions notwithstanding, Cathcart exploited his territorial arrangements to punish enemies and reward his allies in the recent war. Thus, while Sandile was expelled from the Crown Reserve, and Maqoma’s remaining amaJingqi and Bhotomane’s imiDange were squeezed into the small, southernmost portion of the Ngqika Reserve, Mhala’s amaNdlambe and Phato’s amaGqunukhwebe were left in control over most of southern British Kaffraria.

In like vein, on 22 November 1852 Cathcart proclaimed Maphasa’s land ‘forfeited’ and his surviving amaTshatshu, along with some amaGcaleka, were settled in the Tambookie Location between the White Kei to the east, the Black Kei to the west and the Stormberg mountains to the north. The location served as a labour reservoir for the village of Queenstown, which Cathcart founded in former Tshatshu territory, and for settlers who had been granted some 300 farms in the surrounding countryside on condition they paid quitrent and were able to bear arms. As for Sarhili and the amaGcaleka, severely damaged in terms of lost prestige and looted cattle, Cathcart left them to their own devices beyond the Kei.

The upright Cathcart sailed from the Cape in late 1854 to take up the more congenial military post of adjutant-general to the forces during the Crimean War (1853–1856), and very soon met his soldier’s death at the battle of Inkerman on 5 November 1854. He was succeeded as governor of the Cape on 5 December 1854 by Sir George Grey, a man of a very different stamp, who radically overturned his predecessor’s narrowly military arrangements for the future of British Kaffraria.

Grey, who had been the governor of South Australia from 1841 to 1845 and of New Zealand from 1845 to 1853, was an experienced and immeasurably talented proconsul of empire, a man of vision, but wilful, ruthless and unscrupulous in pursuing his goals. He was an assimilationist who believed that primitive societies could advance only through everyday
contact with white civilisation, thereby replacing the practices of barbarism with those of Christianity, modern farming, commerce and productive labour. In practice, as far as British Kaffraria was concerned, this meant breaking the residual authority of the chiefs left intact by Cathcart, and employing their adherents on public works such as roads, which would open up the country to colonial penetration. It also meant founding religious, educational and medical institutions to lead the amaXhosa towards civilised practices. In essence, this was not so removed from what D’Urban had attempted in the Province of Queen Adelaide, and what Smith had intended subsequently in British Kaffraria. But Grey’s transforming policies were more sophisticated and more systematically applied. In his own words, his goal was to transform the amaXhosa into ‘useful servants, consumers of our goods, contributors to our revenue; in short, a source of strength and wealth for this colony, such as Providence designed them to be’.  

Grey believed, moreover, that by bringing about the socio-economic integration of blacks and whites he could finally stabilise the chronically insecure frontier region because a society that was harmoniously integrated would pull together in mutual defence. However, he was under no illusion that it would be easy to carry through this idealistic project. For one thing, with scarcely a thousand white men, women and children settled in British Kaffraria, there was not yet a large enough white presence to make the necessary impact on Xhosa society. More settlers were therefore required, but the Cape was anything but a favoured destination for assisted emigrants. And then, the amaXhosa themselves were proving belligerently resistant to his assimilationist policies. Grey accepted that in the short term this could only add to the enervating insecurity of the frontier. But he lacked sufficient troops to contain the discontent because the home government, busy fighting the Crimean War, expected him to reduce military expenditure and shrink the garrison of imperial troops in British Kaffraria. Challenged in regard to finding more settlers for British Kaffraria and enough troops to ensure its security, Grey came up with a scheme that seemed to address both concerns simultaneously.

In its wars, Britain had a long tradition of recruiting foreign mercenaries because of the difficulty in attracting sufficient recruits at home. During the course of the Crimean War, German, Swiss and Italian legions were raised, but most never reached the front because hostilities were over before they
could do so. Viscount Palmerston’s administration (formed in February 1855) was left with the problem of disbanding and repatriating these ill-disciplined mercenaries. Grey had previously planted military settlers in New Zealand with success, and believed he could do so again in British Kaffraria. The British government was relieved to oblige, and 2 261 members of the British German Legion, who had been raised under the command of Baron von Stutterheim, duly volunteered for the Eastern Cape.

By February 1857 the British German Legion had all landed in East London. It then proceeded inland to establish seventeen military posts which formed three defensive lines that ran northwards from the coast across British Kaffraria and Victoria East. Many of these tiny military settlements were given the names of German cities such as Potsdam, Berlin, Hanover and Frankfurt, and one was named Stutterheim after the commander of the Legion. The Legionaries were dismayed by the wild, strange and undeveloped land where they found themselves, and as soldiers of fortune they were in any case inappropriate material as settlers. Their non-military skills, if any, were in artisanal and mechanical trades rather than in agriculture, the one their situation most required. They felt isolated and forgotten at their widely spaced posts, and very few women had accompanied them to provide a steadying, domestic influence. They proved discontented and unreliable, and Grey rapidly perceived that they would not provide the means of furthering his plans for ‘civilising’ British Kaffraria. With extraordinary irony, it was the amaXhosa themselves who furnished Grey with the opportunity to do so.

The British German Legion landed in British Kaffraria in the midst of the defining event of Xhosa history, the self-inflicted cattle-killing that came close to annihilating the nation. In mid-1853 contagious bovine pleuropneumonia (known as lung-sickness), which was enzootic to Europe, was imported to Cape Town by infected cattle arriving on a Dutch ship. The disease was previously unknown in southern Africa. Within less than a year it had become epizootic, and had been spread to the eastern frontier by the teams of oxen drawing wagons. By 1855 the amaXhosa were losing 5 000 head of cattle a month, and Christian Andreas has estimated that about 30 per cent of their herds, so central to their entire way of life, succumbed. Colonel Maclean, the chief commissioner of British Kaffraria, embraced the unforeseen lung-sickness disaster as the means through which he could
accelerate the eclipse of chiefly power, a project high on Grey’s agenda. As we have seen, chiefly wealth and power were based on the system of pastoral patronage, the ‘lending’ of cattle to subordinates. With their herds decimated by the lung-sickness, the traditional authority of the chiefs was dealt a fresh body-blow. Thus enfeebled, they succumbed to Maclean’s introduction of a new system of administration whereby, in exchange for a small annual government stipend, they were persuaded to surrender all their previous judicial authority to white magistrates.

The consequent weakening of the chiefs’ ability to control their adherents had further, unanticipated consequences. The Xhosa population was already in ferment. On top of the lung-sickness disaster, a spike in the endemic presence of smallpox heightened tensions among a people already deeply unsettled by Grey’s civilising programme. Their pervasive sense of impending doom was intensified by environmental disaster when grubs, incessant rain and rot wiped out the maize harvest. ‘Truly,’ as Peires has exclaimed, ‘it seemed as if nature itself was in league with the enemies of the Xhosa.’ In desperation, people turned in late 1855 to supernatural aid. A slew of prophets emerged in southern British Kaffraria, calling on the people to throw off the yoke of their discredited chiefs – especially those notorious for collaborating with the British – and to punish them by slaughtering what was left of the chiefly herds (but to leave their own untouched). Predictably, the movement was strongest in those communities hardest hit by recent natural disaster. Some of the most threatened chiefs in southern British Kaffraria – notably Mhala and Phato – adopted a fatal expedient aimed at bringing the people to their senses. As the titular owners of the land, they customarily ordered their people when to begin cultivation and performed the associated ritual ceremonies to ensure success. Now, they prohibited them from planting for the new season in the expectation that fear of famine would discredit the infernal cattle-killing prophets and enfeeble their movement.

In June 1856 the prophetic movement spread eastwards across the Kei into Sarhili’s still precariously independent Gcaleka chiefdom where the lung-sickness was gaining a terrible hold. Prophets had arisen there too, calling on Sarhili to endorse the cattle-killing. Despite his damaged political stature since the disasters of the War of Mlanjeni, he had initially resisted, and had smelt out and executed some twenty of these troublesome prophets. But commoners were now losing so many cattle to the disease that Sarhili
believed he could no longer resist the pressure to permit the cattle-killing, especially since a fresh prophet had galvanised the people.

The fifteen-year-old Nongqawuse was but the latest in the line of Xhosa prophets stretching back to Mlanjeni and Nxele. She preached a synthesis of the traditional Xhosa belief in sacrifice for the good of the community and a Christian, mission-trained millennial concept of the apocalypse, of the end of days. Nongqawuse proclaimed that she had seen strangers at the mouth of the Gxarha River who told her that the people must purify themselves of the corrupted world by destroying their remaining herds and planting no crops. Their sacrifice, this national atonement, would prepare for the coming millennium in which the placated *amathongo* would return to renew the world and the nation would be reborn. On that day two suns would rise and a great, cleansing wind would blow the whites into the sea from whence they came. Sarhili, who was still strongly attached to the old beliefs, seems to have been finally swept up by her message and began to see troubling visions of his royal ancestors.

In British Kaffraria, when in July 1856 Sandile’s messengers arrived from the paramount chief with orders to participate in the cattle-killing in order to fulfil Nongqawuse’s prophecy, neither Sandile’s nor Maqoma’s herds had yet been stricken by the epidemic. They consequently refused to comply. But only a month later lung-sickness began to spread in their lands and food stocks started running out thanks to drought. Stirred by word of the widespread cattle-killing beyond the Kei, despairing commoners began to kill their cattle to comply with Nongqawuse’s prophecy and Sarhili’s command, and called on their chiefs to sanction a general slaughter. The chiefs were placed in an impossible bind. Where the lung-sickness was raging unchecked, chiefs believed they had to comply to retain anything of their traditional authority. Where it was not, they attempted to resist the cattle-killing movement. Discord and deep divisions in the ranks of the amaRharhabe were the consequence. Violence broke out between believers, who were preventing cultivation, destroying the remaining stores of grain and slaughtering cattle, and the unbelievers, who were trying to thwart them. Sandile had been at the forefront of those chiefs resisting the cattle-killing despite the urgings of his mother, Suthu, and his brother Xhoxho. But in early February 1857 the lung-sickness at last entered his domain and he was left with no choice but to give the movement his sanction. Very shortly thereafter, on 18 February 1857, the marvellous day of resurrection,
which had previously declined to materialise, as Nongqawuse had foretold, on 16 August and 31 December 1856, failed once again to dawn. The cleansing wind did not blow, and the cattle-killing movement dissolved in famine across all of emaXhoseni, in death and migration on an unprecedented scale.¹¹

By the time the cattle-killing movement petered out, about 400 000 cattle had been sacrificed, besides those dead of lung-sickness. In the ghastly aftermath at least 15 000 people perished of starvation in British Kaffraria, and another 20 000 among Gcaleka and Thembu believers (for some of the latter people had also been swept up by the movement). The total tally may well have been as high as 50 000. Tens of thousands of starving and destitute men, women and children, mere breathing skeletons, sought succour in the Colony. In what was billed as a humanitarian initiative that would save them from their tragic, self-induced disaster, magistrates expedited their exodus. Some 29 142 unfortunates registered for service on farms in the western parts of the Colony, while an almost equal number entered the labour market there without formally signing up. Grey and his officials cynically welcomed this unforeseen influx of amaXhosa onto the migrant labour market. They also saw how they could exploit the catastrophe to destroy the residual power of the chiefs, undermine the vestiges of traditional Xhosa society, and consolidate their ‘civilised’ administration in British Kaffraria.

Grey also seized the opportunity presented by the depopulation of that territory to open it up further to white settlement. The extent of the depopulation of British Kaffraria through death and migration was indeed startling. Between January and December 1857, the Xhosa population dropped from 105 000 to 37 000, and by the end of 1858 it had fallen further to 25 916. Grey could not permit the complete social and economic collapse of British Kaffraria if it were to remain viable for white settlement, so he drew many surviving and remaining amaXhosa into large consolidated villages under salaried headmen responsible to magistrates, and instituted relief measures.

The scale of their calamity meant that the amaXhosa seemed to have forfeited any future ability to resist the advance of colonialism by military means. That certainly is how Grey viewed it. He was anything but disconcerted, therefore, when 1 058 men of the disappointing British
German Legion volunteered in mid-1858 for service in India to help suppress the Great Rebellion there. Grey replaced them, not with more military settlers, but with peasant farmers. Between 1858 and 1859, some 1 600 German adults and their families arrived in the eastern districts and proved frugal, orderly and industrious settlers – precisely what Grey now had in mind. He rapidly opened up large parts of British Kaffraria to white settlers, so that whereas the civilian population had stood at 949 in 1856, by 1865 it had risen sixfold to 5 895. Most of the new settlers received their extensive grants of farming land under the same grantee system that had pertained when Cathcart had opened up the new Queenstown district to occupation by white farmers. The terms specified that they would pay quitrent and render military service when called upon to do so. As Grey intended, the new farmers occupied the land far more effectively than isolated pockets of soldiers in their forts had ever done. The need to maintain as many fortifications as in the past consequently fell away. Between 1858 and 1866 many of the forts and posts in the frontier districts were abandoned, dismantled or leased to civilians, leaving only ten in use between Grahamstown and British Kaffraria.

Grey’s downgrading of these defensive arrangements did not mean that, in his capacity as high commissioner, he had abandoned his determination to control and civilise the entire eastern frontier and its environs. During the cattle-killing, Fadana, who had been the Thembu regent between 1830 and 1843, and had settled in the Tambookie Location, became a leading ‘believer’ and attacked and raided other abaThembu who refused to sacrifice their cattle. Grey chose to interpret Fadana’s activities as a challenge to colonial authority, and in June 1857 despatched Cape colonial forces – not British troops – against him.

With the granting of representative government in 1853 had come the Cape’s greater responsibility for its own defence, especially when imperial troops were withdrawn during the Crimean War and Indian Mutiny. British settlers were keen to form volunteer units such as were currently popular in Britain. Part of their attraction lay in their resemblance to exclusive social clubs, since members (although supplied with arms by the state) had to buy their own uniforms, horses and equipment and to pay membership fees. Where these new, part-time volunteer units differed from previous ones that had been raised during past frontier wars, was that they were not disbanded at the end of hostilities, but remained part of the Cape’s permanent military
establisment. The first of them, the Cape Royal Rifles, was established in Cape Town in 1855 and dozens of others followed until by 1877 there were forty-nine of them. Often only several dozen men strong, they all had low standards of drill and musketry, and were not (if truth be told) much of a military asset.

Tellingly, the membership of the Cape volunteer units was exclusively white. This was also the case with the only full-time regular military unit in the Cape military establishment, the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police (FAMP). It was formed in 1855 and numbered some thousand men on paper, although its establishment was only about 200 in peacetime. The FAMP, in their loose suits of predominantly brown corduroy and slouch hats, armed with double-barrelled percussion-cap muskets, revolvers and Bowie knives, rapidly began to replace the CMR, which had lost the trust of colonists since the mutiny of 1851. The CMR was a British, not a colonial, regiment, and in 1856 the army prohibited it from enlisting any more Khoikhoi into its ranks. By 1870, when the CMR was finally disbanded, it had only ten Khoikhoi left in its establishment.

It was the FAMP, therefore, with some Cape volunteer units, along with some Thembu levies, that rode out against Fadana in 1857. They quickly captured him and he was given a seven-year jail sentence for robbery. Fadana was not alone in his fate, however. The cattle-killing had triggered off the ‘Great Scare’ in the Colony when panicked settlers and Grey himself became convinced that it was all a plot hatched by the Xhosa chiefs to incite their followers into war against the Cape. This charge served to justify the deposition and imprisonment of many other Xhosa leaders. Maqoma was arrested in August 1857 for what was in fact his contumacious refusal to buckle down to the restraints of the new dispensation in British Kaffraria. Slight evidence against him was sufficient for the magistrate to hand down the death sentence, which Grey commuted to twenty-one years’ imprisonment. In December Maqoma was shipped off in heavy chains to bleak Robben Island, accompanied by Katyi, the youngest of his ten wives. He was duly joined by all the Xhosa chiefs Grey considered a threat to the peace: Fadana, Maqoma’s favourite half-brother, Xhoxho, Mhala of the amaNdlambe, Tola of the imiDange, and Dilima, the Great Son of Phato of the amaGqunukhwabe. On that windswept rock, where Nxele, the prophet, had drowned in 1820 while trying to escape, and where Siyolo and his wife had been held prisoner since 1853 for his part in
the War of Mlanjeni, the great warrior Maqoma miserably vegetated alongside his fellow captive chiefs. The cattle-killing had indeed provided Grey with the unlooked-for opportunity finally to break the residual power and influence of the Xhosa chiefs in British Kaffraria. No wonder, as Tim Stapleton notes, that many amaXhosa today believe that it was Grey himself who lurked among the reeds at the mouth of the Gxarha River and whispered those lethal prophecies into Nongqawuse’s ear.12

Grey followed up his crushing of Fadana with a strike in February 1858 against the amaGcaleka, who had been critically weakened by the cattle-killing. His intention was to ensure that Sarhili (about whom the colonists had woven a myth of devious savagery and undying hostility towards the Colony) would be in no future position to destabilise British Kaffraria. This was an act of sheer, unprovoked aggression, but one Grey could justify in his capacity as high commissioner as necessary to protect a British possession against a hostile neighbour. As in the expedition against Fadana, the FAMP and Cape units of volunteers, along with Thembu levies, did the business under the pathologically cruel commander of the FAMP, Walter Currie. They attacked from the north-west, overran Hohita, Sarhili’s Great Place, and swooped down as far as the coast. Some British officers accompanied the column and did not necessarily approve of what they witnessed. One of them, Lieutenant George Pomeroy-Colley,13 deplored what he characterised as a “‘filibustering’ expedition, as the country we are invading is at peace with us, and does not in any way owe allegiance to us”.14 Disregarding that inconvenient fact, the attackers hunted down the starving and broken-spirited amaGcaleka like so many buck, revelling in the vicious ‘sport’. They drove the despairing amaGcaleka, who put up no resistance, out of the area between the Kei and Tsomo Rivers, and forced them, along with what pitiful remnants of their cattle they were able to save, east across the Mbashe River into Bomvanaland. The Cape forces established Fort Bowker on the west bank of the Mbashe to make sure the amaGcaleka did not return to their ancient homeland. As for the territory from which they had been expelled, it was initially left vacant as a cordon sanitaire between the shattered amaGcaleka, British Kaffraria and those abaThembu allied with the British.

Grey left the Cape in late 1861 for a second term as governor of New Zealand. His successor, Sir Philip Wodehouse, had been governor of British
Guiana since 1854, where his unpopular rule had provoked several major riots. During his term as governor of the Cape, the high-handed Wodehouse embarked on what he intended to be the final settlement of the vexatious eastern frontier. He was prompted to act by two related decisions taken in London by Lord Palmerston’s cost-cutting administration. Firstly, the Commons accepted a motion on 4 March 1862 that ‘Colonies exercising the rights of self-government ought to undertake the main responsibility of providing for their own internal order and security, and ought to assist in their own external defence’. Henceforth, since the empire’s security still depended primarily on the Royal Navy’s global dominance, the British government would only undertake to provide garrisons to defend its key imperial naval stations, of which the dockyards at Simon’s Town were one. Secondly, as a measure of economy and administrative convenience, the government in London decided on 7 June 1865 to devolve British Kaffraria on the Cape. It ceased to be a separate entity on 17 April 1866 when the Colony formally annexed it. At the same time, the government firmly instructed Wodehouse to abandon any claims to British dominion beyond the Kei, and to make that river the utmost eastern boundary of the Colony.

Wodehouse consequently faced the prospect of absorbing and defending the former protectorate with only an uncertain number of imperial troops at his disposal. For the moment, small detachments of British troops continued to be maintained at King William’s Town (which had grown from a military cantonment into a flourishing commercial centre furnished with a bank, hospital, two churches and a jail), East London and five other posts. But this was not a permanent deployment, and the governor was obliged to take alternative steps to ensure the future stability of the eastern frontier.

To this end, Wodehouse went about systematically arranging the various pieces on the board. Some were easier to reposition than others. Despite the cattle-killing and their defeat in the War of Mlanjeni, Sandile’s amaNgqika in the reserve Cathcart had set aside for them retained their coherence and pride as a people. Consequently, in the eyes of the settlers they posed a potential internal threat to the security of the Colony. But when Wodehouse attempted in March 1865 to rid the Colony of them by offering to resettle them over the Kei in the territory from which Grey had earlier expelled the amaGcaleka, they indignantly insisted on remaining where they were, close to their ancestral lands. Since the amaNgqika appeared too strong to evict without inciting an armed conflict, which London would not have
countenanced and which he lacked the troops to contain, Wodehouse reluctantly let them stay where they were.

He had more success with Sarhili and the amaGcaleka living in destitution beyond the Mbashe River where Grey had driven them in 1858. Wodehouse invited them in September 1864 to cross back over the Mbashe and to settle in a reserve he set aside for them in their former chiefdom. It must be emphasised that this was not British territory for Wodehouse to give out in this way, but so established was British hegemony in the region that he felt free to do so. The Gcaleka Reserve was not generous in its dimensions – even when taking into account how diminished was the Gcaleka population – and comprised a stretch of territory in the coastal lowlands between the Mbashe and Kei Rivers only about seventy kilometres long and forty kilometres wide. It thus represented only a third or less of what had once been the Gcaleka domain, but it was lush and fertile after being left uninhabited for six years.

Related to his resettlement of the amaGcaleka, Wodehouse also had plans for the larger portion of the former Gcaleka chiefdom, a great swathe of territory to the north of the new Gcaleka Reserve between the Kei and Mbashe Rivers. As we have seen, after the cattle-killing, settler demands in the Colony for labour had been satisfied for a while by the influx of destitute, starving Xhosa migrants from British Kaffraria. Many of them availed themselves of existing legal procedures to change their status from Xhosa to Mfengu, and so gained the right to reside permanently in the Colony. As a consequence, the Mfengu locations around Alice, Fort Beaufort and Peddie expanded enormously. Colonists in the Eastern Cape had long cast acquisitive eyes on these locations and (as had been the case with the Kat River Settlement) urged their expropriation as settler farms. They now began to insist that the amaMfengu in their overcrowded locations were on the verge of rebelling, doggedly taking no notice of concerted protestations to the contrary by the Mfengu leadership. Wodehouse was only too aware that the settlers throughout the region were busily forming volunteer corps, and feared that the increasingly provocative actions taken by groups of volunteer hotheads against Mfengu communities might indeed provoke a rebellion. He therefore acted to prevent this most unwelcome conflagration, but in a way that served his advantage. In June 1865 Wodehouse decided to relocate as many amaMfengu as possible across the Kei. To do so would not only diminish the possibility of an
Mfengu rebellion, but would make hundreds of farms available for settlers inside the Colony and, at the same time, create a new buffer zone of loyal Africans east of the Kei to keep the amaGcaleka in check.

Some among the amaMfengu welcomed the fresh opportunities proffered beyond the Kei, but most of them were reluctant to move, and those who did (about 40 per cent of them) had to be intimidated into complying by pressure from hostile settlers and by the urgings of colonial officials. Within the space of three months some 20 000 amaMfengu were herded into their new lands by the FAMP. The presence of the FAMP was essential because the Mfengu ‘Exodus’ was in effect a land-grab at the expense of the African communities already living in their ‘Promised Land’. The amaXhosa and abaThembu they displaced were summarily redesignated Mfengu, incorporated, and placed under the rule of government-appointed Mfengu chiefs – thus effectively doubling the number of ‘amaMfengu’ dwelling in Fingoland, as the territory was named. Fingoland was not actually annexed as part of the Cape (any more than was the Gcaleka Reserve), but was placed under the Colony’s military protection. In this way, as Tim Stapleton has put it, Fingololand ‘served to quietly and inexpensively pave the way for future colonial expansion in that area’.

As for the almost 30 000 amaMfengu remaining behind in the Colony on their shrinking locations, they increasingly became labour tenants on the growing number of neighbouring white farms.

The creation of Fingoland in 1865 did not quite complete Wodehouse’s rearrangement of the eastern frontier. In the same year, he established Emigrant Thembuland to its north, likewise beyond the Colony’s eastern boundary. He settled the new territory with abaThembu who had been living within the Colony, but whose land (which they very unwillingly abandoned) was given over as more white-owned farms.

Confident in his reordering of the eastern frontier, in April 1869 Wodehouse released Maqoma and his fellow Xhosa chiefs from Robben Island. Back in his old haunts, Maqoma remained recalcitrant and proved a thorn in the side of the colonial authorities. The new governor of the Cape, Sir Henry Barkly, who took up the post in August 1870 after successful terms as governor of Mauritius, the Colony of Victoria in Australia, and Jamaica, was a man of decidedly liberal disposition. Nevertheless, he became convinced that Maqoma was a nuisance, and in November 1871 he
ordered his reimprisonment on Robben Island. Without companions, lonely and bereft of hope, Maqoma did not linger long in his desolate island prison. He died of unspecified causes on 9 September 1873, and was buried in an unmarked pauper’s grave.

Many amaXhosa insist to this day that Maqoma was murdered by either his white or his Mfengu prison guards, thus pointing the finger at one or another of his people’s obdurate enemies. Others believe that Jingqi, his favourite bull, swam all the way from emaXhoseni to Robben Island to rescue him, but that both were shot dead when Maqoma rode him into the surf – perhaps an unwitting reference to the drowning of Nxele during his attempted escape from Robben Island. Either way, such tales indicate the extent to which the indomitable Maqoma lives on in Xhosa collective memory as the abiding symbol of resistance to colonialism.

Most white settlers at the time viewed Maqoma’s death very differently. Insatiably covetous of yet more land in the eastern districts, they persisted in regarding the unyielding Jingqi chief as a threat and obstacle to their plans, and were pleased enough to see him dead. Yet one of the more perceptive among them, in an anonymous letter published by the Cape Argus on 25 September 1873, had the ironic sensibility to write of Maqoma’s death thus: ‘Serves him right was, and is, the general verdict. Why should the old chief covet land because it belonged to his fathers? What business has a black man to conspire for and fight for his ancient birth right and inheritance? … It is unpardonable for a mere kafir to pretend he loves his country.’
The Ninth Cape Frontier War, August 1877–August 1878 (the War of Ngcayecibi)

In the years after Maqoma’s death, Sandile continued to rule over the increasingly cramped Ngqika Reserve where – like his father Ngqika before him – he let the pointless days wash over him in a haze of brandy. Although deeply embittered, he was still proud. If nothing else, he was determined to maintain the eroded traditional customs of his people, and largely put aside the European clothing that, like so many other Xhosa men, he had previously adopted. East across the Kei, the amaGcaleka also chafed in their restricted coastal reserve and regularly mounted small-scale raids against their enemies in neighbouring Fingoland and Emigrant Thembuland. In 1872 Sarhili and his heir, Sigcawu, had struck a particularly telling blow against the abaThembu. This military success emboldened a new generation of Gcaleka warriors to plan for the day when they would prove their mettle against the amaMfengu and drive those despised ‘dogs’ into the sea. It was not to be, though, for the amaGcaleka were living in a rapidly transforming economic and political environment where such actions were no longer feasible.

In 1867 diamonds were first discovered deep in the high interior of South Africa at the confluence of the Orange and Vaal Rivers. Further fabulously rich deposits were soon uncovered nearby. Within five years 20,000 whites and 30,000 blacks had converged on what had become the Kimberley diamond diggings. prospectors scrambled to lay their claims in vile, overcrowded conditions where they succumbed to pneumonia, dysentery, typhoid and smallpox. The high commissioner, Sir Henry Barkly, saw to it that Britain annexed the diamond diggings and surrounding territory on 27 October 1873 as the Crown Colony of Griqualand West. Large-scale speculators with international finance behind them – capitalists such as
Cecil Rhodes, Alfred Beit and Barney Barnato – soon squeezed out the original small-fry diggers, and extracted diamonds on an industrial scale. Southern Africa, previously considered little more than an agricultural backwater, was rapidly transformed by what historians have dubbed the ‘mineral revolution’. Ripples of capitalist enterprise and newfound prosperity lapped out across the entire underdeveloped subcontinent, and cheap, migrant African labour was recruited to service this burgeoning economy and its infrastructure. Xhosa men were among those Africans who left their homes to work on the mines, railways and harbours, and returned with cash, useful manufactured goods like ploughs – and firearms.

The Cape’s sharply rising revenues from the discovery of diamonds and from a boom in wool and ostrich-feather exports persuaded William Gladstone’s economising first Liberal ministry (1868–1874) that the Cape was now well up to paying for its own defence and administration, and that the Colony should be granted responsible government. A vociferous faction of colonists from the western regions of the Colony under the leadership of John C. Molteno, the member for Beaufort West, was equally eager for responsible government since its attainment promised to give the settler elite control of their own affairs. Responsible government with its two-chamber parliament was duly instituted in June 1872, and Molteno took office as the Cape’s first prime minister on 1 December 1872. Henceforth, the governor of the Cape would have to work with a colonial prime minister and his cabinet responsible to the elected Legislative Assembly, and would no longer simply have his own way.

Critically, British policy towards southern Africa changed with the mineral revolution. Successive administrations in London had waxed hot and cold over adopting a ‘forward policy’ on the subcontinent. Thus, Sir Harry Smith’s annexation of the Orange River Sovereignty in 1848 had been overturned only a few years later with Britain’s recognition by the Bloemfontein Convention of 23 February 1854 of the independent Boer Republic of the Orange Free State. The pendulum swung back again when the Earl of Beaconsfield’s second Conservative ministry came to power in February 1874. The government resolved to assert British paramountcy over all of southern Africa though the creation of a stable, self-governing British dominion. Not only would such a dominion secure the strategic route to India, but it would lead to the more prosperous economic integration of the subcontinent. Critically, it would also bring the endemic,
expensive little wars of the region to an end, thus reducing the cost of its
defence.

To create a South African dominion required the preliminary
confederation under the Crown of all the British colonies there, and of the
two independent republics ruled by the Boers: the Orange Free State and
the South African Republic, whose independence Britain had recognised in
1852. Because the now self-governing Cape was by far the largest and
richest white-ruled territory in South Africa, it would inevitably have to
take up the chief burden of confederation. And there was the rub.
Unfortunately for the planners in London, the Molteno ministry did not
share their imperial vision and was morbidly suspicious of British
interference in the newly self-governing colony’s affairs. Undeterred,
Beaconsfield’s administration appointed an imperial statesman capable of
carrying confederation into effect as the new governor of the Cape and high
commissioner. He was the highly intelligent, forceful Sir Bartle Frere, who
had made his considerable reputation as an administrator in India and who,
as a committed evangelical Christian, saw it as his moral duty to bring
British civilisation to benighted savages.

Frere landed in Cape Town on 31 March 1877. He was welcomed ashore
by General Sir Arthur Cunynghame, the bluff, well-travelled but hide-
bound general officer commanding at the Cape who had held that remote
and undistinguished post since 1873. Cunynghame’s military establishment
was modest in size thanks to the prevailing climate of imperial economy,
and he commanded only three battalions of British infantry thinly spread
across Britain’s South African colonies.

British troops in the late 1870s were the product of the wide-ranging
reforms to increase the army’s efficiency, which had been spearheaded by
Edward Cardwell, the secretary of state for war in Gladstone’s Liberal
administration which Beaconsfield’s Conservatives had unseated. Short
service was introduced in 1870 so that recruits spent six years in the regular
army and six in the reserve, and in 1871 the purchase of commissions was
abolished and promotion opened to merit to encourage a more professional
officer corps. And for the sake of economy, Cardwell had accelerated the
withdrawal of troops from colonies of settlement like the Cape and Natal,
and had scaled down imperial garrisons everywhere.
British infantry in South Africa wore the now standard overseas uniform. The unlined scarlet frock was single-breasted with five brass buttons and with coloured regimental facings on cuffs and collar. Dark-blue trousers with a scarlet welt down the outside seam were tucked into black leggings. Headgear was the light cork sun helmet covered in white canvas from which the shiny brass shako-plate was removed when on campaign. The white accoutrements were of the valise pattern, introduced in 1871, and both they and the helmet were dyed brown in the field with coffee or boiled mimosa bark.

Infantry were armed with the single-shot Martini-Henry Mark II rifle, introduced in 1876. These rifles, with their grooved barrels that made the bullet spin and fly more accurately, were a product of the breech-loader revolution of the late 1860s. The breech was dropped when an external lever was lowered, allowing a cartridge to be inserted into the rifle’s chamber. The metal cartridge, which was wrapped in waxed paper, contained the bullet, powder and cap, and was detonated when the firing-pin was released by the trigger. The fired lead bullet flattened on impact, causing massive tissue damage and splintering bone. After firing, the spent cartridge-case was extracted when the lever was lowered again, and the empty chamber was ready for the next cartridge. Improved breech-loading rifles such as the Martini-Henry made it possible to fire more rapidly (about six shots a minute) and very accurately up to 500 metres, and to do so while standing, kneeling or lying down. This flexibility encouraged open-order skirmishing tactics rather than close-order formations. However, despite the undoubted technological superiority of his troops, General Cunynghame knew them to be dangerously scattered across southern Africa, and hoped to be spared the outbreak of some fresh conflict that would tax his limited military resources.

In the late winter of 1877, the worst drought anyone could remember had the eastern frontier in its grip, compounding the despair of the amaXhosa penned into their stifling reserves and inflaming their resentment of both white settlers and their hated Mfengu neighbours. For their part, settlers in the Eastern Cape were becoming increasingly anxious about the lax regulations governing gun ownership and the number of firearms in African hands. The colonial consensus was that the amaXhosa were becoming more skilled with firearms than they had been in the past, that their weapons were of better quality than previously thanks to unscrupulous gun merchants, and
that they should therefore be disarmed for the future security of the Colony. But should the loyal amaMfengu with their single- and double-barrelled muzzle-loaders be disarmed too? The colonists knew they would have to rely on the amaMfengu in any future war, but could not help regarding their firearms as a decided risk. Frere was in no doubt about that. As far as he was concerned, the future peace and security of the confederation he was committed to bringing together depended on *all* Africans being disarmed, whether living in British colonies or in their own, still independent states. Yet he understood that this objective could likely be effected only through a series of successful military campaigns, and he was uncertain whether to risk initiating a spiral of violence, especially since he had so few British troops at his disposal. In the event, Frere’s hand was forced.

Not altogether unexpectedly, considering the smouldering animosities between the amaGcaleka and amaMfengu, a wedding feast held in an Mfengu homestead set the eastern frontier alight. The bridegroom’s name was Ngcayecibi, which is why the amaXhosa dubbed the ensuing Ninth Cape Frontier War the War of Ngcayecibi. On 2 August 1877 a party of amaGcaleka gatecrashed the festive beer-drinking. The interlopers were edgy, bitter that the celebration was being held on land once theirs. Tempers cracked, and the amaMfengu ended by beating up their unwelcome guests, one of whom subsequently died of a staved-in skull. The amaGcaleka could not accept such an intolerable affront, and launched retaliatory raids. Blood was spilt and cattle stolen. The Cape authorities rushed to offer protection to their Mfengu allies. Sarhili rightly feared the consequences for his people if the turmoil was not dampened down, but admitted to the concerned colonial officials that ‘my people are like madmen, I cannot control them any longer’.¹ Indeed, the war-party in Sarhili’s council was in the ascendant, determined to make no further concessions to the white man. The Xhosa paramount eventually gave way, fatalistically declaring that ‘I intend to fight the English. I am in a corner. The country is too small and I may as well die as be pushed into a corner.’²

For his part, Frere decided he must take control and impose his own solution on the chronically unsettled eastern frontier, which was now in a state of heightened alarm. In early September 1877 he established his headquarters in the barracks of the garrison stationed in King William’s Town. With war against the amaXhosa now inevitable, Frere convened an informal war council which included General Cunynghame and two
members of Molteno’s cabinet who were determined to uphold the independence of the self-governing colony. Wrangling immediately broke out, therefore, between the high commissioner and the general officer commanding on the one side, and the Cape ministers on the other, over their respective spheres of authority in the impending campaign. It was eventually agreed that while the general was to be in formal command of all the troops, whether imperial or colonial, the actual conduct of operations in the Transkei was to be left exclusively to colonial troops – even though Frere and Cunynghame were decidedly sceptical of the Cape’s military ability to handle a campaign on its own.

The upshot was that while Colonel Richard Glyn, who commanded the British garrison stationed in King William’s Town, distributed his troops in military posts along the Kei River to secure the Cape frontier, the colonial forces marched off towards the Gcaleka Reserve. Under the command of Colonel Charles Griffith, a tough frontiersman who had fought in the Eighth Cape Frontier War and was currently the Cape government agent in Basutoland, they consisted of the FAMP (which since 1866 had been equipped with breech-loading Snider-Enfield rifles), and of Mfengu levies led by Chief (Captain) Veldtman Bikitsha.

The first clash between one of Griffith’s patrols, supported by a 7-pounder Rifled Muzzle-Loader (RML) Mark IV steel mountain gun, and the amaGcaleka took place between Mount Wodehouse and the little Gwadana stream near the headwaters of the Qora River on 26 September 1877. The inexperienced colonial troops panicked and bolted, and on learning of the affray, settlers, traders and officials in the border country hurriedly resorted to makeshift strongholds. Brushing aside this embarrassing setback, Griffith established his fortified headquarters in a small trading store at Ibeka, only eight kilometres from Holela, Sarhili’s great place on the west bank of the Qora River, and just within Fingoland. Provoked as intended, on 29 September a Gcaleka army of 7 000 or so warriors armed with spears and muzzle-loaders, and under the command of the famous war-leader Khiva, attacked Ibeka. The Gcaleka came on in a traditional array of densely massed columns, and made no attempt to deploy into the open, skirmishing order that had become customary during previous frontier wars. Apparently, this was at the insistence of Nita, a famous young woman war-doctor, who declared that the amathongo wished the amaXhosa to attack in the manner of their ancestors. Nita also promised to catch the English bullets in her
mouth and smeared a war mark on each warrior’s forehead to protect him from bullets.

In two days of fighting the amaGcaleka were repulsed by the heavy fire laid down by the garrison of 180 FAMP and 2 000 Mfengu levies supported by three artillery pieces and a rocket tube. The defenders finally sallied out in a mounted counter-attack that broke and scattered the amaGcaleka, pursuing them as far as the gates of Holela. Nita, the young war-doctor, fell in the fighting and the amaMfengu cut off her head as a trophy which they proudly presented to the British. Following this crushing rout, the Gcaleka war party was discredited, and Sarhili attempted to negotiate a settlement. But Frere decided that the time had come to annex Gcalekaland and include it in his South African confederation. On 5 October he accordingly issued a proclamation demanding that Sarhili cease hostilities, relinquish his chieftainship and forfeit his territory. To ram home Frere’s proclamation, on 9 October the colonial forces at Ibeka marched on Holela and burnt it down, withdrawing with herds of captured cattle.

With the intention of finally ‘pacifying’ Gcalekaland, Griffith augmented his forces at Ibeka until they stood at 500 FAMP, 1 000 white colonial volunteers (only English and German volunteer units came forward, and barely any Boers in their traditional commandos), and 6 000 African levies. Most of the levies were drawn from the amaMfengu, but some were made up of abaThembu under Ngangelizwe, now their paramount chief, who, after the battle of Ibeka, decided to join the war on the colonial side. On 18 October Griffith began his advance through Gcalekaland in three lightly equipped columns, comprehensively devastating the reserve as they went. The columns encountered little opposition because the Gcaleka warriors deliberately fell back with their families and livestock across the Mbashe River into the sanctuary of neutral Bomvanaland.

Griffith’s men, encumbered by the huge herds of cattle they had captured, failed to intercept the retreating amaGcaleka. In mid-November Griffith called off the colonial campaign. His commissariat, which he had entrusted to the hands of inexperienced colonials rather than to the army’s professional Commissariat Department, had failed (as Cunynghame predicted it would), and his ill-disciplined volunteer forces were simply packing up and going home to enjoy their loot. Nevertheless, it appeared that his campaign had achieved its objective. On 13 November notices went up offering grants of land in the conquered territory, and on 1 December
1877 Frere designated Gcalekaland a Cape magistracy. The war, it seemed, was over.

In fact, far from being extinguished, the flames of war were about to burst into a furious blaze. During Griffith’s campaign in Gcalekaland, some amaGcaleka had sought sanctuary west of the Kei. Frere decided these refugees on Cape soil must be disarmed, and targeted Makinana of the amaNdlambe (whose father, Mhala, had died in 1875) for harbouring them. When an FAMP patrol attempted to enforce Frere’s order, Makinana and his followers took flight to the nearby Ngqika Reserve. Responding to panic among the neighbouring settlers, Cunynghame attempted to cordon off the Ngqika location with a thinly stretched line of imperial troops. The amaNgqika did not resort to arms as it was feared they would, but the military presence along their borders deeply unsettled them. Some began to urge war as a last chance to regain their lost independence, while others foresaw it would be a terminal folly. Sandile himself was roused out of his despondent lethargy and was swept up by the war party, starkly warning the colonial authorities that ‘a snake trodden upon would bite’.4

The amaGcaleka, however, anticipated him. With their families and herds stowed away beyond the Mbashe, their warriors prepared to resume the struggle. Griffith had now only 500 FAMP available to patrol the long Mbashe River border with Bomvanaland. On 2 December a thousand or more Gcaleka warriors under the formidable Khiva slipped undetected over the Mbashe to attack an FAMP patrol at Holland’s Shop on the west bank of the Qora River. The skirmish was inconclusive, but the overstretched FAMP were near exhaustion and Griffith called for reinforcements. All the colonial authorities could suggest to contain this new crisis was to call out the Mfengu and Thembu levies once more. At this juncture Frere decided he had had enough of colonial dithering and incompetence. Ignoring colonial sensitivities, on 8 December he placed Cunynghame in active command of the imperial troops he intended to send into the Transkei to deal with the amaGcaleka. At the same time, he placed the general in direct command of the colonial troops, which he pulled back to monitor the Ngqika Reserve.

Colonel Glyn was gazetted commander of the Army of the Transkei with his headquarters at Ibeka. There he was reinforced for the planned offensive with more imperial troops from Cape Town and with a Naval Brigade in their blue and white uniforms from HMS *Active*, along with a Gatling gun
(an early form of machine gun that had come into service in 1871). Because so few of the Cape volunteer units came forward, and virtually none of the Boer commandos, two new formations were created under British – not Cape – command. One was infantry (sardonically nicknamed ‘Pulleine’s Lambs’ after their commander), and the other was mounted infantry, the Frontier Light Horse. Both units were made up of the dregs of railway gangs, diamond diggers and the like. These colonial roughs had no specific uniform, but usually wore yellow or buff corduroy with black trimmings and a wideawake hat with a red puggaree.

While Glyn, on Cunynghame’s orders, waited at Ibeka for reinforcement and concentrated his supplies, Khiva and a small escort slipped past his patrols and through the cordon surrounding the Ngqika Reserve. On 22 December Khiva brought Sandile a personal message from Sarhili in which the paramount begged him to bring all his adherents into the war. Sandile, despite his own misgivings, and the cautious warnings of his senior councillors, took the terrible plunge urged on by his son Mathanzima. The day after Christmas, his war parties broke out of their location to raid and ambush settlers as well as amaMfengu, and some went on to blockade the forts along the Colony’s side of the Kei. Thrown into panic, the white farmers and their families fled to the military posts or villages for protection, just as they had done in so many previous wars.

Cunynghame, meanwhile, arrived at Ibeka on Christmas day to superintend operations in the Gcaleka Reserve. He had had a narrow squeak on the way when he and his small escort only just evaded an encounter with Khiva’s party on its way to the Ngqika location. Aware that the Ciskei was bursting into flame behind him, Cunynghame decided that the best way of containing the conflagration was to deploy his troops in the Transkei to prevent the amaGcaleka from joining hands with the amaNgqika. In a conservative and equally futile repetition of Griffith’s strategy in October, on 27 December he ordered three columns to commence a drive to the coast, and then to swing east to the Mbashe. For two weeks Glyn’s columns, wilting badly in the heat of midsummer, traversed most of Gcalekaland but made little contact with the enemy, killing 120 of them and capturing a scant 2,000 cattle. Presuming that the Gcaleka warriors had fallen back into Bomvanaland as they had during Griffith’s campaign, Glyn had a series of earthworks constructed along the Mbashe intended to keep them safely bottled up east of the river.
But Glyn had been duped. While his columns were grinding east towards the Mbashe, the main body of Sarhili’s forces slipped past them in the opposite direction, crossed the Kei, and joined forces with the amaNgqika. Precisely what Cunynghame had planned to prevent had occurred. The combined Xhosa army was now concentrated to Glyn’s rear in the densely wooded valley of the Tyityaba River, which runs into the lower Keiskamma River from the south-west, halfway between King William’s Town and the coast. There the amaXhosa kept the scattered British forces in the area fully occupied. Guarding the approaches to Bomvanaland had been rendered embarrassingly pointless. Badly wrong-footed and his campaign a failure, Cunynghame had no choice but to order Glyn to pull his columns back to Ibeka. Once concentrated there, Glyn was to march them west towards the Keiskamma preparatory to engaging the combined Xhosa forces in the region of the Tyityaba valley. Meanwhile, Frere wrote to the British government on 31 December requesting reinforcement.

Molteno, the Cape premier, arrived at Frere’s headquarters on 8 January 1878. In lengthy, stormy meetings he rejected Cunynghame’s sole command over all the forces on the Cape frontier, and insisted that the colonial forces would undertake their own independent military campaign in the Ciskei under the command of Griffith, whom, on 15 January, he appointed commandant-general. Frere and Cunynghame were outraged. With good reason, they strenuously deplored the setting up of two separate military commands in the same areas of operations which, they gloomily predicted, would imperil the entire campaign.

Far away from the political wrangling in King William’s Town, Glyn’s campaign in the Transkei was faring well. On 13 January 1878 about a thousand Gcaleka and Ngqika warriors attacked the camp of Glyn’s right column near a small river called the Nyumaga, thirty kilometres to the south of his headquarters at Ibeka and about ten kilometres from the Kei. For the camp’s defence, Glyn had two infantry companies, two troops of FAMP, fifty bluejackets of the Naval Brigade, along with Royal Marine rocket launchers and two light 7-pounder guns. Critically, these white troops were augmented by Veldtman Bikitsha’s Mfengu levies. In deploying his small force for battle, Glyn adopted a winning tactical formation that reflected the British Army’s latest regulations concerning the proper conduct of ‘bush-fighting’. The infantry were positioned in extended skirmishing lines on either side of the fixed anchor of field guns, with a second line in support.
The mounted FAMP and Mfengu levies hovered on the flanks to foil an enemy attempt to envelop the formation and to act as a mobile force in counter-attack and pursuit. It remained to be seen, though, whether a thin skirmishing line, even if armed with Martini-Henry rifles, could develop the necessary volume of fire to stop a determined charge. At Nyumaga it did, and in what became essentially a firefight, the amaXhosa were routed and mercilessly pursued, dispersing into the surrounding bush.

Follow-up operations, however, achieved very little despite some sharp skirmishes, notably at the head of the Mnyameni valley on 30 January, and the amaXhosa easily eluded the plodding British, who were overcome by the summer heat. With no resolution in sight, Cunynghame decided to suspend operations until Glyn had built up more supplies and until the promised British reinforcements had arrived.

Meanwhile, on 14 January Griffith’s colonial forces opened their own campaign against the amaNgqika. They swept over the Ngqika Reserve, plundering and burning homesteads, driving off cattle and killing all the amaNgqika they encountered. At that critical moment, the colonial forces became involved in a distracting extension to the war. On 24 January the local magistrate of Queenstown, to the north of Griffith’s area of operations, called on him to help subdue an uprising led by Gungubele, Maphasa’s son who had succeeded him as chief of the amaTshatshu. Gungubele had contrived to remain in the Tambookie Location when other abaThembu had been moved to Emigrant Thembuland. But ever more resentful of the heavy-handed colonial authorities who invariably decided land disputes against him, he decided to take up arms in support of the amaNgqika. By 4 February 1878, after three days of heavy fighting, Griffith succeeded in dispersing Gungubele’s 2 000-strong army. But the violence that had been unleashed could not be contained. It spread east to Emigrant Thembuland where the colonial forces proved unable to subdue Sitokwe Tyhali, the disaffected chief of the amaVundle, who was at odds with Ngangelizwe, the Thembu paramount and colonial ally. Low-grade fighting would continue until the third week of March, when two British columns finally devastated and subdued the region.

At his headquarters in King William’s Town, Frere was seething at Molteno’s denial of his authority as high commissioner over the Cape forces, the very forces who were botching the unnecessary ‘Tambookie’ campaign. Matters reached a head at a stormy meeting on 31 January, and
Frere decided to have done with his insubordinate ministers. When they refused to resign, Frere dismissed Molteno’s ministry on 6 February. Beaconsfield’s government subsequently endorsed Frere’s coup, convinced that Molteno’s parochial insistence on separate and independent colonial operations was both absurd and dangerous. Meanwhile, Frere wasted little time in appointing the prominent eastern frontier politician J. Gordon Sprigg to replace the meddling Molteno as prime minister. The high commissioner at last had a ministry he could rely upon to be sensible about military matters, and to insist on African disarmament so essential for the cause of confederation.

The very next day after Frere’s dismissal of the Molteno ministry, on 7 February, the amaGcaleka were knocked out of the war. At the end of January Glyn had decided to establish a forward supply and operations base deep in Gcaleka territory to support further sweeps across the Transkei. Captain Russell Upcher was placed in command and pitched his camp on some high ground 275 metres from the southern slope of a high hill called Kentani, twenty kilometres south of Ibeka. To defend the position, Upcher laagered his wagons and built a strong earthwork surrounded by trenches and rifle-pits. The 600 white troops who held the defences consisted of British regular infantry, bluejackets of the Naval Brigade, and mounted men of the FAMP and the Frontier Light Horse. They also had two guns – a 7-pounder and a 9-pounder – and a rocket tube. Some 560 Mfengu levies under Captain Veldtman Bikitsha and Smith Poswa were deployed on the flanks outside the defences. Glyn anticipated that the amaXhosa must attack him there. Their crops had failed because of the long drought, while British patrols were destroying their remaining stores. The Xhosa leadership knew that their people would starve unless their warriors secured a military victory. The Kentani camp posed the most obvious strategic threat, and Sarhili decreed that this was where the decisive battle must be fought, brushing aside Sandile’s preference for guerrilla operations.

Early on the wet, misty morning of 7 February, a joint Gcaleka and Nqika Xhosa army of about 5 000 warriors advanced on Kentani. The 2 000 or so amaGcaleka were under Khiva and Sarhili’s son, Sigcawu. Sarhili himself harangued his warriors before the battle, reminding them that he ‘was the tree their fathers had lain under, safe and sheltered, and for whom their fathers had often fought the white man. To-day they could show if they were the white man’s dogs, or if they were their fathers’ sons.’
Unfortunately for them, the amaGcaleka again hearkened to their war-doctors, who admonished them to fight in the heroic style of their ancestors, and to attack in traditional massed columns as they had at Nyumaga. The Ngqika contingent, however, preferred to advance in the skirmishing order they had learnt to adopt in previous wars.

British skirmishers went out to meet the amaXhosa and deliberately stung the Gcaleka contingent into committing themselves to the attack without waiting for the Ngqika to come up in support. Once in range of the fortified British camp, the amaGcaleka were cut down in swathes by the defenders’ concentrated, disciplined firepower. After less than twenty minutes the Gcaleka attack faltered, and Glyn’s mounted men charged out and routed them. The Ngqika contingent finally came on in their open order. They skilfully held their ground in the ensuing firefight until Sandile’s scouts warned him that the strong reserve Glyn had posted midway between Kentani and Ibeka was marching towards the battlefield. Sandile thereupon broke off the engagement and the amaNgqika retired in good order, hotly pursued by the British mounted troops. In the course of the battle the British lost only two amaMfengu and four horses, with nine men wounded. In stark contrast, an estimated 400 amaXhosa perished, mainly men of the Gcaleka contingent.

The fighting spirit of the amaGcaleka was utterly broken by their rout at Kentani, and they would never appear again in the field deployed as an army. Entirely daunted, Sarhili fled over the Mbashe to the sanctuary of Bomvanaland. When the war-leader Khiva was killed in a skirmish on 15 March, Gcaleka resistance completely crumbled, leaving the amaNgqika to carry on the war alone.

In the Colony, meanwhile, Frere’s sacking of the Molteno ministry had caused a great political stir among the settlers. To smooth ruffled public opinion, the British government decided on a placatory sacrifice, and offered up the mediocrelly performing General Cunynghame, whose disagreements with the former Cape ministry had been only too public. On 2 March 1878 Lieutenant-General the Honourable Frederic Thesiger superseded the deeply chagrined Cunynghame in command of the troops in the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and St Helena. The aristocratic Thesiger had spent the greater part of his military career in India prosaically engaged with the staff and administrative duties in which he excelled, and the Cape
was his first independent command in the field. Like Cunynghame, his conservative inclination was to cleave to conventional military doctrine, and it remained to be seen whether he could adapt his military thinking to the requirements of irregular warfare on the frontier.

Thesiger arrived by special train in King William’s Town on 4 March to take up his command. He found the town teeming with refugees because every farm within a radius of eleven kilometres to its north and east had been put to the torch by the Ngqika war bands that Sandile had pulled back across the Kei after the disaster at Kentani. Even so, Thesiger was confidently informed by his staff that the war was virtually over. Yet only five days later, on 9 March, Sandile and the bulk of his forces eluded the patrols Griffith had set to contain them and made for their traditional stronghold in the Amathole, leaving a swathe of burnt-out settler farms in their wake. There, among the graves of their ancestors, they were prepared to fight and die.

Sandile, long given over to drink, now abjured it and steeled himself to take on the role of stalwart warrior. He and his men took up position in the Pirie Bush, a rugged region of the south-eastern Amathole thirty kilometres west of King William’s Town. A fractured plateau fell away to deep clefts and ravines filled with great rocks through which meandered treacherous, stony stream beds. All was overgrown by impenetrable bush through which reared the enormous forest trees strangled in wiry creepers. This was ideal terrain in which to mount ambushes, yet what long-term hope was there for Sandile and his brave followers? The British would surely be able to contain the constricted area of operations and systematically snuff resistance out.

For his part, Thesiger was anxious to prevent the fighting from spreading further across the eastern frontier. His military secretary, Captain Hallam Parr, noted that even seemingly fully acculturated amaNgqika, men who had worked all their lives on white farms or in government service, were ominously exchanging ‘their clothes for a blanket, their pen for a rifle’ and were going off to join Sandile in the bush. The general therefore resolved to take immediate action. On 18 March the 3 000 imperial and colonial troops under his command converged in three columns on the Pirie Bush, where they commenced a sweeping pincer movement intended to squeeze
the amaNgqika out of the bush onto the plain below. Once there, the plan
was that they would be brought to battle on the open ground and destroyed.

This very conventional strategy, which replicated Cunynghame’s
deployment of columns beyond the Kei, was equally unsuccessful. The
amaNgqika probably numbered no more than 2 000 men, broken into three
main groups, but they were in their element in the Amathole wilderness,
staying out of sight and always keeping two jumps ahead of the blundering
British forces. They lured one British column into an ambush and the badly
demoralised troops had to extricate themselves ignominiously in the driving
rain, heavy mist and freezing temperatures of the early Cape winter. Heavy
shelling of the forests achieved nothing at all, and soon the offensive was in
complete disarray. Thesiger called a halt on 22 March, but he was
undeterred – and wiser. In preparation for the next round he ordered paths
cleared through the bush to facilitate the movement of supplies, and to
coordinate operations better he introduced flag-signalling between the units.

On 29 March Thesiger launched a limited new offensive onto the high
plateau across the Gwili Gwili Range and the Rabula Heights in the Pirie
Bush. The amaNgqika effortlessly melted away once more. It was not
surprising that recently arrived British regulars should be at a loss in this
completely unfamiliar environment and that their morale and health should
suffer, but the colonial forces fared little better. The failure to flush the
amaNgqika out eroded the volunteers’ confidence in Thesiger, and they
soon disintegrated as a force and simply went home. The defection of the
volunteers persuaded Thesiger to bring in another thousand Mfengu levies
from Fingoland. They were unwilling recruits, because they had become
rich on the Gcaleka spoils of Cunynghame’s campaign and were unwilling
to risk their skins so far from home. All the same, Thesiger used them on a
new sweep beginning on 4 April where they were to scour the bush and
identify Ngqika hideouts for follow-up action by regular troops. Their
performance was uninspiring, and British admiration was reserved for the
‘conspicuous pluck’ of the amaNgqika who skirmished with them.8

Despite his lack of success thus far in corralling the amaNgqika, Thesiger
could not afford to let up the pressure. As he had feared it would, Sandile’s
intrepid stand in the Amathole was inspiring several thousand more
amaXhosa between the Buffalo and Keiskamma Rivers to join the struggle.
Among their leaders were Siyolo, the Ndlambe chief and veteran of the War
of Mlanjeni who had spent many years as prisoner on Robben Island; Dilima, the son of Phato of the amaGqunukhwebe; and Tini, Maqoma’s son, who left his father’s old refuge in the Waterkloof – where he had taken up arms on threat of arrest by paranoid colonial authorities – with the intention of joining his uncle Sandile.

Caught largely unprepared by this new challenge, Thesiger swung his troops around to prevent these Xhosa forces from linking up with Sandile. He launched an offensive on 6 April into the Lotutu Bush on the western flanks of the Amathole, where Siyolo and his amaNdlambe warriors were ensconced on a prominent hill called Ntaba kaNdoda, close to the battlefield of Amalinde where Ndlambe had defeated Maqoma in 1818. Shelling it had little effect, and the amaMfengu who were supposed to clear the bush on its northern flank made no headway and fell back in disorder. The regular troops, too, made scant impression. After dark, Siyolo withdrew his men, but Thesiger was discouraged by the day’s poor work. He called off the offensive, returned to King William’s Town, and decided to rest his troops for three weeks, refit and garner new reserves. The Mfengu levies were sent home for mutinous conduct and plundering, and were replaced by a new Mfengu contingent Thesiger hoped would prove more reliable.

The amaXhosa grasped this respite to strengthen their positions in the Lotutu Bush where Siyolo was concentrated, and also in the Pirie Bush to its east where Sandile remained ensconced. As for Thesiger, by the end of April he had concentrated 1 600 white and 2 400 African troops under his command and was ready for yet another new offensive. On 30 April four columns formed a cordon around the Lotutu plateau and converged in a tightening noose, sweeping the forested kloofs. However, the apparently corralled amaXhosa broke into small groups and slipped through the British lines. Siyolo, Tini and other leaders all succeeded in joining Sandile in the Pirie Bush. Yet Thesiger had at least finally cleared the Lotutu Bush of the amaXhosa, and was free to concentrate on Sandile’s strongholds in the Pirie Bush. On 8 May 1 122 imperial troops, 920 colonial volunteers who had drifted back into the campaign, along with 2 890 Mfengu levies, commenced their new sweep. Thesiger’s forces enjoyed some minor successes, but failed in their main objective of driving the amaXhosa out of their sanctuary.
As a result, Thesiger was forced to accept that he had failed to extinguish Xhosa resistance despite mounting five large-scale offensives. And, to his embarrassment, he was aware that colonial opinion was beginning to hold him in derision. He was a stubborn man, but even he could finally grasp that attempting to manoeuvre mass formations in the Amathole was impracticable and ineffective. His colonial commandants had been urging an alternative strategy on him for weeks, and at last he took their advice. The general divided the Amathole theatre of operations into eleven military districts with both a mounted and an infantry force stationed in each. Manned earthworks blocked favoured Xhosa routes, while patrols scoured the country at will, never far from their supply depots. Much depended on the effectiveness of tough colonial district commandants who knew the terrain, and on their determination never to ease up the pressure on the amaXhosa. This entailed surprising them in night attacks and searching them out in the caves where they were hiding. It also meant destroying their last, pitiable supplies of food, along with their wretched shelters. This was harsh, merciless warfare in which no prisoners were taken and in which the amaXhosa were systematically mopped up in each of the military districts.

This ruthless, redesigned campaign opened with a drive that pounded on for three remorseless weeks without a pause. Winter was beginning to bite and the defenders were cold, wet and famished. By mid-May many amaXhosa could take no more punishment and began trying to wriggle through the iron British grid. Siyolo made his escape to the Fish River valley where he had holed up in the previous frontier war, and Tini crept back to the Waterkloof. When they could neither hide nor escape, the starved and desperate Xhosa bands would not give themselves up as a matter of honour, and continued to fight back as best they could. The British became increasingly embarrassed by destitute Xhosa women and children from the devastated Ngqika Reserve and from the Amathole who flocked into the military camps for succour, and had to be fed from military supplies. The winter brought much hardship and sickness to the British garrisons in the Amathole highlands as well, but their sufferings were as nothing compared to those of the Xhosa fighters still pathetically lurking in the sunless ravines.

During late April and early May, concurrently with the launching of Thesiger’s new strategy in the Amathole, the British opened a new offensive beyond the Mbashe to finish off any residual Gcaleka resistance.
Several companies of imperial infantry, along with some troops of the FAMP and 3 000 Mfengu levies, invaded Bomvanaland and pursued Sarhili and the remnants of his forces as far as the Qora River, capturing what scant livestock the amaGcaleka still possessed. The British then withdrew, and no more fighting took place in that sector.

The campaign in the Amathole was also drawing to its cruel end. On 31 May 1878 Sandile and his Ngqika bodyguard attempted to break out from the Buffalo River valley where they had been hemmed in. Near isiDenge Hill in the north-eastern plateau country of the Pirie Bush they ran into a small FAMP and Mfengu patrol. Sixteen Ngqika were shot dead in the ensuing firefight. A Snider bullet smashed through Sandile’s right side, fracturing two ribs. His surviving companions carried their mortally wounded chief away with them, but after days of agony he died on 5 June. During this terrible war only mission-trained amaNgqika ever paused to bury their dead, so it was not exceptional for his companions to slip Sandile’s body into the bush under a great rock before resuming their flight. Word of Sandile’s death was brought to the British, and on 7 June a patrol was guided to the naked corpse. Wild animals had been feeding on it. The right arm was eaten almost to the bone and the left eye and cheek were badly gnawed. Even so, the body was clearly recognisable as Sandile’s on account of his withered leg and by items such as his walking stick, covered in blood.

The British slung Sandile’s body over a horse and brought it back to the isiDenge camp. They washed it and laid it on a sheet of canvas in a shed with its arm crossed over the chest and the head averted to hide the eaten face. There sensation-seekers viewed the body and trophy-hunters cut off the hairs of Sandile’s almost white beard and the still black hair on his head. Mfengu warriors were allowed to dance past the corpse, jeering, laughing, chanting and shaking their weapons in victory over their reviled enemy, the ‘Tiger of the Forest’. On 9 June the British finally gave Sandile a decent, but not military funeral. As we have seen, he still lies in that forlorn spot.

After Sandile’s death, desultory mopping up continued for several weeks more. Mfengu patrols killed other Xhosa notables, among whom was Siyolo, shot in the Fish River bush in early June. Many Xhosa warriors, rightly fearful they would be killed out of hand, continued to lurk in the Pirie Bush. Colonial forces, including the volunteers, were sent in to flush
them out. They performed their task with vengeful callousness, tracking the amaXhosa down and shooting them as if they were little more than vermin. Embarrassing reports of the abuse and summary execution of prisoners began to trickle out. At last, on 2 July the Cape government proclaimed an amnesty for any fighters still in the field, and the killing ended. The poor remnant of Xhosa warriors knew they had comported themselves as true men, and little honour would be conceded in surrendering when all was already lost.

An estimated 3 680 Xhosa warriors died in the Ninth Cape Frontier War, something like an appalling 50 per cent casualty rate among combatants. And this figure does not include other fighting men who died off the battlefield of their wounds or of privations, or Xhosa non-combatants who perished of starvation. In startling contrast, British and colonial casualties numbered no more than 60 white and 133 African soldiers killed. Only 171 Xhosa men were taken prisoner, testifying to the ruthlessness of the campaign. More than 45 000 cattle and some 579 horses were carried off by the victors. Most painful of all, perhaps, was the fate of the 4 000 starving Xhosa women who had taken refuge with the British. They were transported by steamer from East London to earn a bare living labouring in the environs of Cape Town, in a strange land far from home and family.

In July, Sandile’s sons, Edmund and Mathanzima, who had fled to Emigrant Thembuland, gave themselves up. They were sentenced to prison for life. Gungubele of the amaTshatshu was also taken. Tini, who also surrendered, was sentenced to death for treason, but the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Sarhili, however, remained at large. With a reward of £1 000 and 500 cattle on his head, the Xhosa paramount remained in hiding in an inaccessible refuge deep in Bomvana territory. He would decline to emerge even when offered a free pardon in 1881, but eventually acquiesced and accepted British rule, dying in 1892 at eighty-three.

In early August 1878 Colonel Glyn finally brought his forces back from Gcalekaland, thus signifying that the territory between the Kei and Mbashe was finally pacified. His withdrawal marked the official end of the terrible War of Ngcayecibi. Thesiger received the formal, relieved thanks of both houses of the Cape legislature and was appointed Knight Companion of the Bath on the recommendation of the satisfied government in London. As for the amaXhosa, their century of armed resistance against the relentless
colonial advance was over. Many of their chiefs were dead, imprisoned or in hiding, those still at liberty mere powerless shadows of the rulers they once had been. Their people were diminished, scattered and impoverished, their customs and way of life ruinously disrupted and disintegrating, left to eke out an existence as labourers for white colonists on land that had once been theirs, but was now at the disposal of their conquerors.
The Settlement the Cape government imposed on the defeated amaXhosa was unrelenting. Commandant Friedrich Schermbrucker of the FAMP set the tone when on 9 June he addressed the men of the Amatola Division who were drawn up in a hollow square around the grave where Sandile had been interred:

This is the last Chief of the Gaikas [sic]; let his life and death be a warning to you. The man who lifts arms against his Queen will sooner or later meet a fate like this. Sandilli [sic] has been laid low, his tribe dispersed, scattered, and stripped of all they once possessed; instead of being lords and masters in the country they once owned, they will now be servants.¹

The decision was taken to expel all the amaNgqika across the Kei, even pro-government chiefs and those of Sandile’s adherents who had not taken up arms. In early September 1878 Charles Brownlee informed them that their lands were forfeit and would be sold to white settlers, and that they would be relocated to a location set aside for them in the western half of the former Gcaleka Reserve. The pitiful exodus of nearly 8 000 people commenced on 6 September 1878. About half the amaNgqika managed to avoid expulsion by seeking work as wage-earning labourers on white-owned farms in the Ciskei, or by agreeing to be transported to the distant Cape Peninsula as indentured labourers. As for Sarhili’s adherents, most of the amaGcaleka were settled in a location next to the resettled amaNgqika, in the eastern remnant of the former Gcalekaland. With their lands otherwise occupied by Europeans, this was the dénouement of the protracted Xhosa tragedy.

Gordon Sprigg, the new Cape premier, was urged on by Frere to ensure that his settlement of the eastern frontier – unlike those that had imperfectly concluded previous frontier wars – must be a conclusive one. Africans had
therefore to be left in no doubt that they were conquered, and that the whites were now the unassailable masters of the land. This meant ensuring that colonial forces defending the Cape would be exclusively white, and that there would be no place in future for African levies, not even for loyal allies like the amaMfengu. The FAMP were augmented and in 1878 renamed the Cape Mounted Rifles, the volunteer units were strengthened, and all other able-bodied white males were brought either into a yeoman force of reservists or the burgher commando structure. For, as Sprigg unequivocally stated in a public speech:

The defence of the colony ought to depend on European inhabitants alone, for otherwise there was a great danger of giving rise to a feeling on the part of the natives that the white men could not do without them … it would be a good day for them when they felt that there was no chance for them against the European race (hear, hear).2

To make absolutely certain this would be the case, it was essential to disarm all Africans without exception, including even those who time and again had proved their loyalty in war, and Frere and Sprigg made this the cornerstone of their native policy. Although the territories east of the Kei were not yet formally annexed to the Cape, Frere invoked his powers as high commissioner to disarm the amaGcaleka and amaNgqika, who were required by proclamation to surrender all their weapons. For his part, Sprigg pushed the Peace Preservation Act of 2 August 1878 through the Cape Parliament. The Gun Act, as it became known, not only disarmed all amaXhosa in the Cape itself, but the abaThembu and the amaMfengu as well.

Cape officials who set about implementing the Gun Act whipped up a storm. The defeated amaXhosa were resigned to being disarmed, but the abaThembu were wildly resentful. They regarded their arms as the insignia of manhood, and supposed that being deprived of them was but the first step towards their land being taken away from them and their wives and children being sent to the Western Cape as slaves. The amaMfengu, who had assumed they would be accorded privileged treatment for the loyal and vital role they had played in the War of Ngcayecibi, were even more shocked to be disarmed. But with the amaXhosa conclusively defeated at last, the amaMfengu had lost their significance as military allies. They were now nothing more than yet another subject African people, and their previously close association with the colonial power had ceased to count.
The amaMfengu understood that in these changed circumstances any attempt to hang on to their arms would be construed as a sure sign of their disloyalty, and handed them in. Between August 1878 and March 1880 Cape officials collected 10,860 firearms and 15,764 spears. Obviously, some arms were concealed and remained in African hands, but the crucial point was established that henceforth no African under Cape rule could legally own a firearm. Nor would there be any future military role for an African in the affairs of the Colony unless he took up arms against it as a rebel.

The Ninth Cape Frontier War and the final, crushing defeat of the amaXhosa after a century of warfare, did not entirely sew up the Cape eastern frontier. Over the next two decades the Cape consolidated its hold over all the territories lying between the Kei and the Colony of Natal. This was not a long drawn-out process of military conquest as the Cape Frontier Wars had been, but a more subtle, incremental procedure of penetration by missionaries, traders and administrative agents of the Cape government. And always at their back was the threat of military muscle and the dreaded presence of the Cape Mounted Rifles. So intimidating and domineering had the colonial state become, that the remaining independent African rulers in the Transkei felt they had no option but to cede their authority when pressed, and to accept the extension of the Cape’s rule over them.

Fingoland was formally annexed to the Cape in 1879, as was Griqualand East. The former Gcalekaland, Emigrant Thembuland, Thembuland proper and Bomvanaland were administered as though they were a part of the Cape until 1885, when they were all finally annexed. In 1886 the Mount Ayliff district adjoining Griqualand East, which the Cape had likewise administered since 1878, was also annexed. During the period of the Scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century, the newly unified German Empire began to cast a predatory eye on the unclaimed sections of the coast of south-eastern Africa. To close the territorial gap between the Cape and Natal so as to exclude the German interloper, in 1885 the British declared a protectorate over the Pondoland coast. Finally, in 1894 the Mpondo kingdom itself was induced by a strong show of force to come under Cape rule, and was formally annexed in September of that year. With that, all the Transkeian territories became part of the Cape. However, they remained a distinct administrative area governed through the magisterial system in which not all of the laws of the Colony necessarily applied.
The incorporation of the Transkei into the Cape was not entirely without violence. The undermining of chiefly power by white magistrates, the imposition of taxes and enforced disarmament provoked the Transkei Rebellion of 1880. As the final spasm of resistance to colonial encroachment in Cape-ruled territory, some historians have recently argued that this uprising would be more fittingly designated the Tenth Cape Frontier War even if, as other historians maintain, there is a disjunctive between it and the more closely related series of wars west of the Mbashe.

Whatever it should best be called, the Colony was profoundly shaken by the unanticipated rebellion. In late October 1880 the amaMpondomise under Mhlonhlo and Mditshwa in the central-west Transkei Territory rose up with the objective of ejecting the Cape magistrates and restoring the power and independence of their chiefs. The amaMpondomise were joined by some of the abaThembu (especially the amaQwathi) who had thought they would be independent when they were moved to Emigrant Thembuland, and resented being placed under a magistrate. The rebels burnt magistrates’ offices, police huts and other symbols of colonial authority, and performed carnivalesque parodies of court proceedings. They targeted neither missionaries nor traders because they singled out only the Cape government as their enemy. In the course of their uprising, the rebels audaciously penetrated as far as Fingoland, and attacked magistracies and the small settler villages, besieging them or driving away the terrified residents. Caught unprepared, the Cape military establishment had to turn cap-in-hand to the recently disarmed amaMfengu for help, and to various African groups in the Transkei who had remained loyal. With such an admixture of rebels and loyalists, the ensuing campaign was territorially complex. Both sides carried firearms, and since the combatants were mainly mounted and mobile, the field of operations was widespread.

The Cape military sent converging columns into the rebel areas and adopted their well-tried scorched-earth tactics. By December 1880 the rebellion was effectively over and colonial authority re-established. Rebel chiefs were replaced by loyalists, while some rebels were forcibly resettled elsewhere and their confiscated land given to loyalists – thus leading to bitter resentments and small-scale, localised violence for years to come. But, all in all, with the suppression of the Transkei Rebellion, Cape colonial control over Africans on both sides of Kei River had been so thoroughly secured that a further armed insurrection was out of the question, and by the
end of the century the government no longer required an intrusive armed presence to maintain its authority.

The incorporation of the Transkei meant a substantial increase in the number of the Cape’s African subjects, and the government passed legislation to ensure that they would not challenge settler control of Parliament. Successive acts in 1887 and 1892 made certain that although the franchise was extended to the Transkeian territories, the number of Africans (as well as coloureds) actually qualified to vote was substantially reduced by the raising of the franchise qualifications. The Glen Grey Act (Act No. 25 of 1894) established a system of individual land-holding in the Cape African reserves, but plot-holders did not qualify to vote for the Cape Parliament. Instead, they voted for location boards and district councils that dealt with purely local affairs in the reserves.

With the Union of South Africa in 1910, the Cape Colony became the Cape Province in the new country where the Union Parliament, firmly under the control of the white minority, would frame legislation affecting the lives of all people of colour. The Native Land Act (Act No. 27 of 1913) demarcated South Africa’s reserves, that is, the areas set aside for the residence of Africans, and made it illegal to sell or lease those lands under communal tenure to Europeans except in the Cape Province. (Communal tenure is where ownership of the land is vested in a community, not an individual, and where the chief is regarded as trustee, with power to allocate the use of land to individual heads of families.) The Act greatly strengthened the chiefs, who became part of the state administration, but deprived most Africans of the right to own land individually. In order to eke out a living, they were forced into white areas as wage labour on farms, on the mines, and in industrial urban centres. The Native Trust and Land Act (Act No. 18 of 1936), which increased the size of the reserves allocated to Africans from 7.13 per cent of the total area of South Africa to 13.6 per cent, also abolished the right of Cape Africans to buy land outside the existing reserves. To complement racial segregation on the land, the three Group Areas Acts of 1950, 1957 and 1966, enacted by the apartheid National Party government, assigned racial groups to different residential and business sectors in urban areas.

The Group Areas Acts impacted particularly heavily on the coloured and Khoisan population of the Cape Province, where it had enjoyed a long-
established urban presence. Families were subjected to forced removals from neighbourhoods where they had resided, sometimes for centuries, and established communities were heartlessly broken up. Coloureds suffered a further blow when the apartheid government attempted to remove them from the common electoral roll through the Separate Representation of Voters Act (Act No. 46 of 1951). The bill was invalidated by the Supreme Court in 1952 on constitutional grounds, but was eventually passed by an Amendment Act in 1956 once the government had amended the Constitution by packing the Senate.

Since the fall of apartheid, Section 10 of Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, which came into effect on 4 February 1997, has guaranteed universal adult suffrage, thus enfranchising the descendants of all those whose forebears in Cape Colony had never enjoyed the vote, or who had been deprived of it. The Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act (Act No. 108 of 1991) has likewise done away with the Land Acts and the Group Areas Acts, but what is the current situation on the land in the former Cape Colony, and how is it to be addressed?

During the height of apartheid, full separate development was consummated by the creation of independent homelands, or Bantustans, and the district councils established in 1894 by the Glen Grey Act became the basis for their parliaments. Two homelands were designated for isiXhosa-speakers, and the amaGcaleka were all forcibly resettled in the Transkei homeland and the amaRharhabe in the Ciskei homeland.

The Transkei was granted nominal self-government on 30 May 1963 and independence on 26 October 1976, although this was recognised by no government other than the South African one. In 1980 the Transkei covered an area of 43 798 square kilometres, encompassing all of former Gcalekaland, Thembuland, Fingoland and Pondoland. Its population stood at the same date at some 2 323 650 people, of whom less than 10 000 were white. Urbanisation was very sparse, and this was overwhelmingly a society of peasants holding the land on communal tenure and working as migrant labourers.

The Ciskei homeland west of the Kei was given its nominal self-government on 1 August 1972 and its ‘independence’ on 4 December 1981. In 1980 it covered an area of 9 000 square kilometres in what had once been the colonial district of Victoria and the south-western third of British
Kaffraria, and its population numbered 677,920. Unlike the Transkei, which was a solid block of territory with two small outliers, the Ciskei was a patchwork of amalgamated reserves interspersed with white-owned farms. It consequently required considerable consolidation to make for better territorial coherence, and to that end in the 1970s the government purchased many white-owned farms situated between the reserves. The Ciskei differed in its nature from the deeply rural and conservative Transkei, which remained firmly under the control of hereditary chiefs. In contrast, the Ciskei’s headmen were elected, and many of its people comprised a relatively educated working class which found employment in the industrialised towns and harbours of the region. Both homelands were officially reintegrated into South Africa on 27 April 1994, and became part of the new province of the Eastern Cape.

And what of the role of traditional leaders and their position as trustees of communal land in post-apartheid, ANC-ruled South Africa? What saved the day for them was the intervention of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa, or Contralesa. This extraparliamentary opposition movement was launched on 24 September 1987 by thirty-eight ‘progressive’ chiefs and grew rapidly, so that by mid-1989 eighty per cent of the chiefs in the Transkei were members. In August 1989 a Contralesa deputation, led by its president, Mhlabunzima Joseph Maphumulo, met with the ANC-in-exile in Lusaka, Zambia. The deputation’s mission was to secure a guarantee from the ANC that when it came to power it would recognise the institution of traditional, hereditary authorities. For a left-wing movement like the ANC, determined to establish a secular, constitutional democracy, the perpetuation of traditional rulers in a modern, democratic South Africa was indeed a stretch. But it had as a precedent those already independent African states that had pragmatically come to terms with traditional authorities because they exercised an irrefutable and age-old authority over their adherents, and had decided that in the long term it was more politic to work with them than to unleash chaos on the countryside by unseating them. The ANC decided, therefore, that it was possible to view traditional chiefs as the true representatives of their people, bound to them through mutual obligations, which meant that their leadership and democracy could coexist – but only if the chiefs were excluded from active participation in party politics. A difficulty was that chiefs in the reserves and Bantustans appeared to have been complicit in apartheid structures, but the ANC was prepared to accept

that they had been forced into a false position, and that the apartheid regime had manipulated and perverted the institution of chieftainship.

With the fall of apartheid, Contralesa campaigned for the constitutional recognition of the status, role and powers of traditional leaders in the new democratic South Africa, and the ANC stuck by the undertaking it had given in Lusaka. In 1996 traditional leadership was recognised in the Constitution,\(^7\) and the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2003 went on to define the three recognised positions of ‘King, Senior Traditional Leader and Headman/woman’.\(^8\) The Nhlapo Commission was then set up to determine who qualified for these positions, and on 29 July 2010 President Jacob Zuma announced its findings. Seven kings were recognised, and these included those of the amaXhosa, abaThembu and amaMpondo.\(^9\) In 2020 these are Nkosi Dumehleli Nongudle Mapasa of the amaXhosa (who became acting king after the death of King Mpendulo Zwelonke Sigcawu in 2019), King Mangaliso Ndamase of the amaMpondo, and King Buyelekhaya Dalindyebo of the abaThembu.\(^10\) As constitutional monarchs they wield no formal political power, but they owe spiritual and ceremonial obligations to their communities, which reinforce their customary status as king. The kings all receive government stipends and also collect allowances and other benefits paid at the discretion of the individual provinces.

Over 6 000 African traditional leaders in South Africa below the rank of king are also the recipients of state stipends and allowances. Many of them play a constitutional role in the Houses of Traditional Leaders. There are seven Provincial Houses of Traditional Leaders, one of them being in the Eastern Cape.\(^11\) The National House of Traditional Leaders is made up of delegates representing the Provincial Houses. This statutory body advises the government on matters relating to the preservation of culture and traditions in their communities (such as the fraught issue of initiation), on customary law and on rural development. Belatedly, on 20 November 2019 the government also recognised the role of Khoisan traditional leaders, set up their traditional councils and added them to the National House of Traditional Leaders, now renamed the National House of Traditional and Khoi-San Leaders.\(^12\)

In short, both African and Khoisan traditional leaders whose ancestors were defeated, stripped of their ancient authority and reduced (where they
survived) to obedient functionaries of the colonial – and subsequently the apartheid – state, have had a modicum of their former status restored, but not their political power. But pouring old wine into new bottles is seldom satisfactory, and these traditional rulers’ notional ‘subjects’ are not what they were in pre-colonial times. As Aran MacKinnon has pointed out, all features of African society have been relentlessly ‘corrupted, reconfigured, and made compliant with the demands of the white state and capitalism’. Many whose ancestors were hunter-gatherers or subsistence farmers are now proletarian workers in the urban-industrial complex, or through education have become white-collar workers, with some rising further to join the professional classes. The new educated African elites and the proletarians in the sprawling urban townships have distanced themselves from the peasantry living on the former reserves, have shaken loose from the hold of traditional custom, and have emancipated themselves from the authority of traditional leaders. Yet, even the most alienated, hard-bitten African workers in an industrialised world are conscious of an idealised connection to their warrior heritage, of their people’s history of courageous resistance to colonial conquest, and of the loss of their land as the consequence of defeat.

The ownership of land thus remains as much an emotive as a material issue. In the Constitution Eighteenth Amendment Bill of 2019, accelerated land reform in South Africa is justified as addressing ‘the historic wrongs caused by the arbitrary dispossession of land’. No fair-minded person could object to this goal. And, after all, land reform has historically been a programme pursued by many governments across the world. However, land reform is not the same as the state’s comprehensive confiscation of all privately owned land as has been carried through by Marxist regimes, and which remains the aim of the EFF. Thus, the Amendment Bill’s specific objective, which is to amend Section 25 of the Constitution of South Africa which enshrines the right to property as an international human right, is understandably controversial. The Bill states that the intention is to ensure ‘that the right to property may be limited in such a way that where land is appropriated for land reform, the amount of compensation payable may be nil’. What complicates the issue is that land reform does not apply exclusively to former African lands in white ownership, and African communal land is also involved. The committee drawing up the Amendment Bill was aware of this when it urged that it should be referred
to the National House of Traditional Leaders ‘since it contains provisions pertaining to customary law or customs of traditional communities’. If, as President Cyril Ramaphosa has declared, the government wants to ‘make sure that our people [that is, Africans] have equitable access to land and security of tenure’, then the government will have to accommodate the concerns of traditional leaders. They still hold communal land in trust, and because that is the foundation of their continuing sway over the rural population, they actively resent any meddling with the status quo on ‘tribal land’.

How land reform in South Africa will work out in practice over the coming years (for the process promises to be a long, complicated and contested one) remains to be seen. Its realisation cannot be divorced from the urgent need to rebuild South Africa’s economy after the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The legislative process to be followed requires that the Ad Hoc Committee hosting public hearings concerning the Amendment Bill must consider all the public input and then, during the course of 2020, return the Bill to the National Assembly. The members of the National Assembly will then vote on the Bill which, if passed, will be brought before the National Council of Provinces for ratification. Implementation of the legislation will then proceed. If expropriation without compensation is over-vigorously applied to secure the short-term political advantage of the ruling party, and a new category of dispossessed, resentful people is created, then a deep historic wrong will have been addressed only by perpetrating a fresh one. There is cause for optimism, however, if the government adheres to the intention expressed by the Presidential Advisory Panel on Land Reform: ‘The message of the land reform process is not to undermine the property rights of individuals but to realise the constitution’s mandate to deliver land reform as a corrective and restorative measure to historical issues.’
Picture Section

Khoikhoi repulsing a Portuguese raiding party under Francisco de Almeida in Table Bay on 1 March 1510
Western Cape Archives and Records Service
Khoikhoi and Dutch bartering sheep and cattle for copper and tobacco at the Cape of Good Hope during the 1650s
National Library of South Africa

Boers returning home from the hunt with their Khoisan retainer, a skilled huntsman (by Samuel Daniell)
Museum Africa
Trekboers on the move across the plains with their ox-wagon and Khoikhoi wagon-drivers and herdsman
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

British troops, supported by a barrage from their ships in False Bay, capture Muizenberg from the Dutch on 7 August 1795
From the Collections of the Library of Parliament
‘The military station at Algoa Bay’, the wooden blockhouse erected in 1799 on the eastern side of the Baakens River during the Third Cape Frontier War
Museum Africa

The meeting on 23 June 1803 in the Kat River valley between Janssens, the Batavian governor of the Cape, and Ngqika, the Rharhabe chief
Museum Africa
AmaXhosa journeying though the dense bush of the Fish River valley at the time of the Third Cape Frontier War
Museum Africa

Colonel Harry Smith knocking Hintsa from his horse during the Xhosa paramount’s attempt to escape his British captors on 12 May 1835 during the Sixth Cape Frontier War
Western Cape Archives and Records Service
Hintsa, the Xhosa paramount, 1794–1835; Andries Stockenström, lieutenant-governor of the Eastern Cape, 1836–1839; Major-General Henry Somerset, commandant of the eastern frontier, 1832–1852; Sir Harry Smith, governor of the Cape, 1847–1852

Western Cape Archives and Records Service

The meeting between Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Hare and Sandile, the Ngqika chief, at Block Drift on 29 January 1846 on the eve of the Seventh Cape Frontier War (lithograph after a sketch by Captain Carey)

Museum Africa
The amaNgqika ambushing a British convoy on 17 April 1846 in the battle of Burnhill during the Seventh Cape Frontier War (Illustrated London News, 25 July 1846)
The charge of the 7th Dragoons and Cape Mounted Riflemen against the amaNdlambe at the battle of Gwangqa on 8 June 1846 during the Seventh Cape Frontier War

Museum Africa
Maqoma, the Jingqi chief, Ngqika regent and greatest of the Xhosa military leaders
Western Cape Archives and Records Service
Andries Botha, leader of the Gonaqua in the Kat River Settlement, longtime British ally and unwilling rebel in 1851

Western Cape Archives and Records Service
King William’s Town, the administrative capital and military headquarters of British Kaffraria, depicted in 1864
Western Cape Archives and Records Service

Sandile, chief of the amaNgqika, sketched in 1877 with four of his wives in the Ngqika Reserve (*Graphic*, 1 December 1877)
Mfengu auxiliaries who, in the last four Cape Frontier Wars, played an especially prominent military role on the British side (painted by Thomas Baines)
William Fehr Archives / Public domain

Thembu levies operating from Fort Bowker against the amaGcaleka in the Ninth Cape Frontier War (Illustrated London News, 16 March 1878)
Cape colonial forces putting Holela, Sarhili’s Great Place, to the torch on 9 October 1877 during the Ninth Cape Frontier War (*Illustrated London News*, 24 November 1877)
British regulars, African levies and colonial mounted volunteers sweeping the Lotutu bush on 6 April 1878 during the Ninth Cape Frontier War. The amaXhosa were ensconced on Ntaba ka Ndonda, the flat-topped mountain in the distance (*Illustrated London News*, 11 May 1878)

Western Cape Archives and Records Service
AmaNgqika recovering their wounded during a skirmish with Cape and British forces during the Ninth Cape Frontier War. Note their combination of traditional and European dress (Illustrated London News, 22 June 1878)
Mfengu levies celebrating over Sandile’s corpse at the isiDenge camp on 8 June 1878
(Graphic, 31 August 1878)

Sarhili, the Xhosa paramount and chief of the amaGcaleka (d. 1892), photographed late in life after years in hiding as a fugitive in Bomvanaland
Ian Knight Collection, with permission
Acknowledgements

A s always, this book is dedicated to my wife, Fenella, without whose support it could never have been attempted.

The quality of an author’s work depends in the final resort on the skill, care and empathy of the editor painstakingly reading through it, making suggestions, undertaking corrections and warding off solecisms, infelicities and sheer mistakes. Robert Plummer was my editor at Penguin Random House, and I have been more than fortunate to have worked with him. Behind him were a team of designers, typesetters, proofreaders and indexers, and I must especially thank Ryan Africa, who transformed my congested sketches into elegant, clear-cut maps.

In a certain sense, this book is yet another victim of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was about to go into production when we were all locked down. I must especially thank the Penguin Random House team in Cape Town for dauntlessly pushing ahead from home (regardless of young children underfoot) to prepare this book for publication. The illustrations were largely selected before lockdown, and some already acquired. But as the print deadline approached, archives, museums and libraries were still not in a position to process requests for images, and we had to scramble as best we could.

My greatest debt is to the many historians (some of whom I have been fortunate enough to have known or to have been associated with) who have long worked in this field, and on whose fine scholarship I have relied so profoundly. I must also thank Nigel Penn, who reviewed the book in manuscript and made many helpful suggestions, and Bongani Ngqulunga and Tembeka Ngcukaitobi for their generous assessment. Any remaining errors or misjudgements in this book are mine, not theirs.

JOHN LABAND
GREYTON, JUNE 2020
Guide to Further Reading

This book stands respectfully in the shadow of Noël Mostert’s monumental and unsurpassed study, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa’s Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London: Pimlico, 1993). A full bibliography of all the other published works relevant to the themes of this current book would take up another forty pages or so. What follows is therefore a selective guide to some of the more essential or stimulating reading, ranging from the general to the very particular, which I have found of especial merit. Of course, another author in my place might well make a rather different selection. Be that as it may, the secondary sources and edited primary sources included below all carry footnotes and/or reading lists that will point the interested reader to the huge array of further works available.

**General studies**


More specifically, there are a number of fine, authoritative general histories of South Africa which run the historiographical gamut from the so-called ‘liberal’ to the ‘radical’, or materialist. Monographs range from Eric


A number of general histories are specifically concerned with the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa, such as Paul Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa: From the Early Iron Age to the 1970s* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), and David Hammond-Tooke’s introduction to African traditional culture, *The Roots of Black South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1993). The keeping of livestock was essential to the way of life of Africans, and Andrew B. Smith has examined

**The Actors**


Eric Axelson, Portuguese in South-East Africa 1488–1600 (Johannesburg: C. Struik, 1973) and John Laband, Bringers of War: The Portuguese in Africa during the Age of Gunpowder and Sail from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2013) deal with the limited impact of the Portuguese on southern Africa.


The Cape was a slave society, and essential to understanding it are Robert C.-H. Shell, Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838 (Hanover and London: Wesleyan


between the Governor of the Cape Colony, Sir Henry Pottinger, and the Commander of the British Forces at the Cape, Sir George Berkeley, and Others (Johannesburg: Brenthurst Press, 1981), and Chris Hummel (ed.), The Frontier War Journal of Major John Crealock 1878: A Narrative of the Ninth Frontier War by the Assistant Military Secretary to Lieutenant General Thesiger (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2nd series, no. 19, 1989).

Also available are collections of published official correspondence such as George McCall Theal, Records of the Cape Colony from December 1793 to December 1831, 35 vols (London: Government Printer Cape Colony, 1897–1905), Sir G.M. Cory, The Rise of South Africa, 5 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1910–1930), and Donald Moodie, The Record; or a Series of Official Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Tribes of South Africa (Amsterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1960). The sequence of official correspondence and other papers relating to the Cape Colony put before the British Houses of Parliament began in 1795 and was published in multiple volumes over the years in the British Parliamentary Papers, or ‘Blue Books’.

Military Matters


The technology and development of firearms are described in Col. H.C.B. Rogers, Weapons of the British Soldier (London: Sphere Books, 1968), and the impact of firearms on colonial southern Africa is analysed in the stimulating study by William Kelleher Storey, Guns, Race, and Power
Horses, like guns, were the instruments of warfare, and are handled with panache in Sandra Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2001).


Eastern Cape 1780–1894’ (unpublished DLitt et Phil thesis, University of Fort Hare, 2015). This outstanding thesis goes beyond fortifications and comprehensively considers all aspects of the Cape Frontier Wars, making it an exceptionally useful and up-to-date source.


**Wars along the Cape Frontiers**


Integral to the causes and course of several of the Cape Frontier Wars were the intertwined matters of disease, religious faith and prophecy. Smallpox epidemics are addressed in R. Viljoen, ‘Disease and Society: VOC Cape Town, its People and the Smallpox Epidemics of 1713, 1755


Christopher Saunders has pioneered the investigation into the Transkei Rebellion – which some historians consider the Tenth Cape Frontier War – in several works, including ‘The Annexation of the Transkei’ in C.
INTRODUCTION: THE LAND HAS DIED


2. Carrington, although serving in the Ninth Cape Frontier War, was not present at Sandile’s death. The skull, which for many years he displayed as a trophy on the mantelpiece in his dining room, was likely fraudulently sold to him as Sandile’s by a vendor of war relics.

3. According to the Traditional Leadership Governance Framework Act (Act No. 41 of 2003), a senior Xhosa traditional leader should be addressed as ‘nkosi’, and not as ‘chief’ or any other title employed in the colonial or apartheid eras.


6. ‘Kaffir’ was originally a descriptive term employed by Muslims to denote a pagan African, and was adopted in the late sixteenth century by the Portuguese.


CHAPTER 1: THE AMAXHOSA AND THE SAN


3. Cushitic is part of the Afro-Asian family of languages, and suggestively much of the agricultural vocabulary in eastern Bantu languages derives from it.

4. Excavations have shown that by about 700 AD an Early Iron Age people were living nearby the Kei River in what would later be Xhosa territory.

5. The Xhosa term for diviner (*igqira*) is of pure San provenance.


9. For the Xhosa royal succession, see the Genealogical Table, pp. xviii–xix.


CHAPTER 2: THE KHOIKHOIN AND THE AMAXHRSA

1. The proportion of Khoisan genes in the Nguni-speaking population increases from north to south.


3. There is obviously a gender bias in this translation, and it has been suggested that ‘human of humans’ would be more acceptable.
4. The term ‘San’ is now standard in South Africa and is used by the people themselves.
5. The appellation of ‘Hottentot’ (for which no definitive origin of the term is known) was not used self-referentially and has become an insult. The description of an individual as a ‘Hottentot’ is now illegal in South Africa. The term ‘Bushman’ is likewise considered pejorative by many San, although by no means all.

CHAPTER 3: THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE
1. During the winter months, strong winds and heavy swells regularly drove ships in Table Bay ashore until the first breakwater was begun in 1860. It developed into the Alfred Basin, the first safe harbour in the port of Cape Town. Since then, the harbour has steadily expanded with the successive construction of the Victoria Basin, the Duncan Dock, the Tanker Basin and the Container Basin.
2. Dias first sighted the Cape Peninsula on his return voyage to Portugal.

CHAPTER 4: DE KAAP
3. Quoted in Marks, ‘Khoisan Resistance’, p. 64.
5. Some of the original Khoikhoi place names were retained, such as Grabouw, Gamtoos and Karoo.
6. There were further smallpox epidemics in 1755 and 1767.

CHAPTER 5: THE EXPANDING FRONTIER
1. Whereas the ubiquitous kakebeenwa of the 1830s (the ‘jawbone wagon’, so named because it was long in proportion to its breadth) carried a load of up to 1 815 kilograms, by the 1860s wagons were carrying nearly 4 535 kilograms.

2. For detailed descriptions of these roads and passes, see E.E. Mossop, *Old Cape Highways* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1927).

3. The exception was the short-lived mission of 1737–1744 which George Schmidt of the Moravian Brethren established among the Khoisan at Baviaanskloof under the lee of the Rivieronderend Mountains. The Moravians were hounded out by the established Dutch Reformed Church, but they subsequently re-established the mission in 1792 as Genadendal (‘the Vale of Grace’).


5. In Dutch the term ‘bastaard’ means ‘mongrel’ rather than ‘illegitimate’, and was applied without further qualification to those with a white father and a Khoikhoi mother.


8. It has been suggested that the term ‘métis’ is an appropriately vague one for applying to all these culturally and biologically intermixed people of the Cape and highveld borderlands.

**CHAPTER 6: THE FIRST AND SECOND CAPE FRONTIER wars**


CHAPTER 7: THE GRAAFF-REINET REBELLION AND THE FIRST BRITISH CONQUEST


2. In 1795–96 British expeditions from Madras in India took the strategic Dutch bases in Ceylon and Malacca in the Straits of Sumatra.

3. Retreat was so called because the Dutch retreated there after the battle of Muizenberg. It was ironic that the British subsequently retreated from there in their turn.


CHAPTER 8: THE THIRD CAPE FRONTIER WAR AND THE SECOND BRITISH CONQUEST

1. A comparable figure in Zulu history from the late 1850s to the late 1870s was John Dunn, King Cetshwayo’s ‘white chief’ and supplier of firearms.

2. Prinsloo was released in 1803 when the Cape was reoccupied by the Batavians.


CHAPTER 9: THE FOURTH CAPE FRONTIER WAR


2. Between 1851 and 1863 the average number of imperial troops garrisoning British colonies around the world (excluding India) numbered about 43,000. These troops included not only British regulars but small local corps raised in the colonies.

3. Caledon’s father, the first earl, had been what was termed a ‘nabob’, an East India Company merchant who had made a fortune in India and deployed it to establish a high social and political position in England.

4. An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which received Royal Assent on 25 March 1807.


**CHAPTER 10: THE FIFTH CAPE FRONTIER WAR**

1. In March 1814, following Napoleon’s defeat, Frederick William of Orange, the son of the deposed *Stadhouder*, William V, was officially inaugurated as the sovereign prince of the Netherlands.


5. Napoleon escaped from Elba on 26 February 1815 and regained the French throne during the Hundred Days. He surrendered to the British on 15 July 1815 and was exiled to the mid-Atlantic island of St Helena, where he died on 5 May 1821.

6. Nxele failed to raise the dead in a public ceremony from under Gompo Rock near modern-day East London.


10. On 2 October 2018, Grahamstown was officially renamed Makhanda in honour of Nxele.


**CHAPTER 11: THE ALBANY SETTLERS, THE CEDED TERRITORY AND THE BATTLE OF MBHOLOMPO**

1. Quoted in Sir George Cory. ‘The British Settlers of 1820’ in Eric A. Walker (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, vol. VIII,
Between August 1824 and March 1825 alone, more than 50 000 lbs of ivory were obtained, as well as 16 800 lbs of gum and 15 000 hides.

‘Cob’ construction involved kneading clay and gravel together with straw, ramming it tight on the walls and plastering it over with a mixture of lime and gravel.

In 1830 wool valued at £222 was exported to London; by 1841 this had risen to a value of £27 848.

This ordinance was aimed at stopping the deadly pursuit of escaping Khoisan or slaves who violated the vagrancy laws.

CHAPTER 12: THE KAT RIVER SETTLEMENT AND THE EXPULSION OF THE AMAKHOSA FROM THE CEDED TERRITORY

5. James Read to Andries Stockenström, 16 June 1829 in Basil Le Cordeur and Christopher Saunders (eds), *The Kitchingman Papers*: 

8. Quoted in Stapleton, Maqoma, p. 95.

CHAPTER 13: THE SIXTH CAPE FRONTIER WAR AND THE COMING OF THE AMAMFENGU

2. Quoted in Stapleton, Maqoma, p. 102.
4. Molyneux, Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt, p. 43.
10. In 1996 Xhosa traditional healer and descendant of Hintsa, Nicholas Gcaleka, supposedly guided by dreams, travelled to Scotland where he obtained a skull with a hole in it which he insisted was Hintsa’s. The Gcaleka royal family rejected the authenticity of the skull and refused to bury it. See Nomalanga.Mkhize, ‘Nicholas Gcaleka and the Search for Hintsa’s Skull’, Journal of Southern African Studies, 35, 1 (2009), pp. 211–21.
11. ‘Fingo’ appears to be an English corruption of their original name, the amaMfengu, from their supposed cry on reaching emaXhoseni: ‘siyamfenguza!’, meaning alternatively ‘we are hungry’, ‘we seek work’, or ‘we want something’.


18. Quoted in Mostert, Frontiers, p. 763.

CHAPTER 14: THE TREATY SYSTEM AND THE GREAT TREK

1. For the full text, see Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes, (British Settlements), reprinted, with comments, by the ‘Aborigines’ Protection Society’ (London: Lliam Ball and Hatchard & Son, 1837).


6. In 1834 the Cape exported 114 000 lbs of wool. By 1841 the figure was over a million lbs, and by 1851 reached 5.5 million lbs.

11. While in Canada, Maitland had proposed sending the children of Native Americans to industrial schools to remove them from the influence of their ‘savage’ parents and to ‘civilise’ them. His ideas were taken up in the notorious Canadian residential school system, which operated between 1876 and 1996 with the aim of forcing the assimilation of Native Americans.
12. In March 1845 Mtirara, the Thembu paramount, also signed a new treaty.
13. By the mid-1840s farmers knew that there was virtually no productive farming land in the Colony that had not already been granted, and that the only land available lay beyond its borders.

CHAPTER 15: THE SEVENTH CAPE FRONTIER WAR
2. This incident was a reprise of the springing of Adriaan van Jaarsveld in 1799 during the run-up to the Third Cape Frontier War. See chapter 8.
4. Levies during the War of the Axe were ad hoc units which were disbanded at the end of hostilities, unlike the commandos, which had a continuing existence. A bewildering plethora of irregular units were raised during the war. For details, see Major J.J. Hulme, ‘Irregular Units of the 7th Kaffir War 1846–7’ *Military History Journal*, 1, 3 (December 1968), [http://samilitaryhistory.org](http://samilitaryhistory.org).
5. The amaMpondomise were generally acknowledged by their neighbours as the greatest specialists in war medicine.
7. The Congreve rocket was in service from 1817 to 1867. It had an exploding eighteen-pound warhead on a long stick. Very erratic in
flight, its effect on the enemy was usually more psychological than physical.


12. Legassick and Ross, ‘From Slave Economy to Settler Capitalism’, p. 299.


**CHAPTER 16: BRITISH KAFFRARIA**

1. He became Sir Harry Smith, Baronet of Aliwal on the Sutlej, GCB.


7. East London was administered as a part of the Cape Colony and not of British Kaffraria to facilitate the collection of customs dues.

8. Fort Hare (named after the late lieutenant-governor) was on the site that was being provocatively surveyed in the lead-up to the War of the Axe.


10. Smith badly mishandled the organised and ultimately successful agitation in the Cape against the government’s plan to transport Irish convicts to the Colony.
CHAPTER 17: THE EIGHTH CAPE FRONTIER WAR AND THE KAT RIVER REBELLION

3. It is very difficult to assess correctly the extent of the Xhosa population in 1850. Smith ordered a census of British Kaffraria in 1848, but many amaXhosa were absent working in the Colony, or as refugees in Gcalekaland, and the figures arrived at are highly unreliable. Perhaps we can talk of about 70 000 amaXhosa in British Kaffraria, an equal number in the territory ruled by Sarhili, and a Thembu population along the Tambookie frontier of about 45 000.
4. *Pelargonium pulverulentum* is a member of the geranium family endemic to the Eastern Cape. It has large hairy grey leaves, and whiteish flowers with brown blotches on all five petals. The amaXhosa used it non-ritually to dress wounds.
5. *Plumbago auriculata* (Cape leadwort) is an evergreen shrub with small, sky-blue flowers.
12. Having conceded the leadership in the war to the chiefs, Mlanjeni was increasingly ignored by the amaXhosa in general and would die unremarked in August 1853.

14. Six years later, in 1857, the sepoys in India would mutiny, sparking off a widespread rebellion, and it would take until 1859 for the British to regain control.


20. Danger Point is near the coastal village of Gansbaai, founded in 1881. A lighthouse was eventually erected at Danger Point in 1895.


23. Among the volunteer units were Lakeman’s Volunteers, raised and armed at his own expense by the eccentric Englishman Stephen Lakeman. The unit was made up of the sweepings of Cape Town’s underworld, and these vicious thugs were responsible for some of the worst atrocities committed during the war.


27. Legassick and Ross, ‘From Slave Economy to Settler Capitalism’, p. 316.


CHAPTER 18: THE CATTLE-KILLING

1. A commission of inquiry was convened in 1858 to hear the requests of the dispossessed for their return of their erven. Most were rejected because the holders could not meet the original terms on which the land had been granted them, primarily that ‘civilised’ houses of stone or brick, of more than one room and with windows of glass be built on each erf.


3. Quoted in Legassick and Ross, ‘From Slave Economy to Settler Capitalism’, p. 313.

4. The franchise was open to all men who earned £50 a year or owned property worth £25. Men who met this franchise qualification were eligible to election to the House of Assembly, but a higher property qualification of £2 000 fixed or £4 000 unfixed property was required for entrance to the Upper House, or Legislative Council.


6. By 1857 the population of the Tambookie Location numbered about 20 000.


8. Between 1860 and 1863 only 1.6 per cent of British assisted emigrants made for the Cape. In the same period, the United States of America replaced Australia as the favoured destination.


11. Nongqawuse herself survived. She fled to Bomvanaland, where she was arrested in 1858 and sent to Robben Island. Finally allowed to settle near Grahamstown, she died in 1898.


13. This was the same Major-General Colley who was later appointed high commissioner of South-East Africa, and who would die at the battle of Majuba in 1881 during the First Anglo-Boer War.


**CHAPTER 19: THE NINTH CAPE FRONTIER WAR**


3. The Snider-Enfield rifle was a ‘transitional’ firearm. The hammer and firing pin were still on the right exterior of the barrel, and the expended cartridge had to be pulled manually out of the chamber, or dumped by turning the rifle over.


6. Thesiger succeeded his father as Baron Chelmsford in October 1878. He subsequently earned notoriety as the initially unsuccessful British commander during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, and was held responsible for the British defeat at the battle of Isandlwana on 22 January 1879.


9. In the Colony, a leopard was regularly referred to as a ‘tier’ in Afrikaans, translated as ‘tiger’ in English.

**CHAPTER 20: THE AFTERMATH**


3. Mhlonhlo, the main rebel leader, escaped and lived in hiding until he surrendered in 1903. He was put on trial the following year, but was acquitted.

4. The Cape Parliamentary Registration Act (1887) and the Cape Franchise and Ballot Act (1892).


9. The other four are the kings of the amaZulu, Bapedi, amaNdebele wakwaManala, amaNdebele and vhaVenda. In 2016 the president added the Rain Queen of the Balobedu.
10. King Buyelekhaya Dalindyebo, who had been jailed for arson, kidnapping, and defeating the ends of justice, was released on parole on 23 December 2019. His son, Azenathi Dalindyebo, who had been acting for him, stood down. On 13 March 2020 the king was arrested for assaulting his family with an axe.

11. Its current membership is made up of persons identified by ‘Royal Families’ as traditional leaders in terms of the Eastern Cape Provincial Notice 120 of 2018.

12. See the Traditional and KhoiSan Leadership Bill (Act No. 3 of 2019).


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