

Nigel Penn

*The Forgotten Frontier:
Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape's Northern Frontier
in the 18th Century*

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The year 1994, marking the end of the apartheid era, brought about not only fundamental political and social changes in South Africa, but also caused deep changes in its historiography. First of all it got rid of its racist burden. Up to that time the majority of studies concerning the history of racial relations in South Africa were devoted to the origin of apartheid. Even the new generation of historians associated with the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London, who came to the fore at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s and were interested in the whole scope of social and economic history, did not change the situation much. In spite of the important changes introduced by those historians, the description of the history of South Africa between 1652 and 1902 still conformed to an old pattern: the coming of the Dutch, the expansion of the trekboers to the east of the Cape Colony, relations with the Africans on the eastern frontier, the coming of the British, *difaqane*, the Great Trek and the founding of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, the elimination of independent African chieftainships, the discovery of diamonds and gold, and the British-Boer conflict culminating in the Boer War (1899-1902).

As a result, serious gaps existed in studies of South African history, concerning subject matter, geographical territories, and specific historical periods. There was relatively little interest in the history of the Khoisan peoples and in their relations with the Cape Colony and European colonists. For a long time anthropologists, rather than historians, were interested in the Khoi-khoi and San peoples (formerly known as the Hottentots and Bushmen).¹ This does not mean historians did not deal with this subject matter, but they viewed it rather from the perspective of the origins of the Coloured (i.e. racially-mixed)

¹ See e.g. A. Winifried Hoernlé. 1925. "The Social Organisation of the Nama Hottentots of Southwest Africa", *American Anthropologist* XXVII. 1. 1-24; Isaac Schapera. 1930. *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa: Bushmen and Hottentots*. London: Routledge & Sons; Jan Anthoine Engelbrecht. 1936. *The Korana: An Account of Their Customs and Their History, with Texts*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Ltd.

community.² Even when researchers became more interested in this subject matter by the late 1960s, their work was characterised by a chronological gap. The majority of the studies focused either on the early phase of mutual relations up until 1713, when a smallpox epidemic decimated the Khoisan population in the western part of the Cape, or on the period beginning at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and the Khoisan people's then independence.³ The majority of studies written up to the mid-1980s treated the period between 1713 and the end of the 18th century in a cursory and random way, focusing on the expansion of European settlers and the retreat of the Khoisan under European pressure. Seldom was it noted that Khoisan resistance did not end in 1713, but continued throughout the 18th century.⁴

This omission of the confrontations with the free Khoisan people is directly connected with the omission of the Cape Colony's northern frontier from historians' studies. Descriptions of the history of the South African frontier, and especially of the Cape Colony frontier, focused above all on the eastern part of the country. For quite a while the eastern frontier was a synonym for the South African frontier in general. Its exceptional significance was due to the fact that it was here that European settlers met the Bantu peoples for the first time. It was also the frontier where the process of subduing the African population lasted the longest, i.e. till 1894. At the same time, in spite of the political repression of the local African peoples, the border of the European settlement was only slightly to extend beyond the Great Fish River, which marked the maximum reach of the Cape Colony in the 18th century. This understandable focus resulted in the neglect of studies on the history of the northern frontier in general, and especially in the 18th century.

Nigel Penn's book fills a significant gap in South African historiography. The gap is all the more significant as numerous institutions of the colonial community were actually formed, as the author points out, on the northern frontier. It was there that certain models of coexistence between the colonial community and local peoples took shape; models that determined their mutual relations up until at least the so-called 'mining revolution' – i.e. the discovery of rich diamond-seams in the 1860s.

² See e.g.: William M. MacMillan. 1927. *The Cape Coloured Question: A Historical Survey*. London: C Hurst & Co; J.S. Marais. 1938. *The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press; S.J. Halford. 1949(?). *The Griquas of Griqualand*. Cape Town: Juta & Company, Limited.

³ See: Robert Ross. 1976. *Adam Kok's Griquas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Richard Elphick. 1979. "The Khoisan to c. 1770." *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820*. Eds. R. Elphick and Hermann Giliomee. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman. 3-40; R. Elphick. 1985. *Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

⁴ Shula Marks' article (1972), "Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." *Journal of African History XIII*. 1. 55-80, is one of the exceptions to this rule. The second is the Ph.D. Thesis of Martin Legassick (1969) *The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries, 1780-1840: The Politics of a Frontier Zone* (University of California), a great synthetic work, alas only partially published in Elphick, R. and Hermann Giliomee, eds. 1988. *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840*. Middletown CONN: Wesleyan University Press. 358-420.

Penn's book is the culmination of over twenty years of research on the issues of the northern frontier, its communities and their reaction to European expansion.⁵

The book is divided into nine chapters grouped in four parts. The first four chapters are devoted to a chronological discussion of the Cape Colony's expansion to the north and north-east, the history of the conflict between the settlers and the Khoisan in 1700-1802, and the development of the institutions that made the expansion of the colonists possible (sometimes even against the Cape Town authorities' will). The author gives a detailed description of the situation on the frontier and of the causes of the conflicts, which, generally speaking, came down to water, livestock, and land. He explains why clashes and conflicts between the growing numbers of settlers and the Khoi-khoi and San were much more frequent on the northern than on the eastern frontier. The main reason is connected to the scarcity of natural resources, especially water. Control of water sources was crucial for survival in this region. As a matter of fact, difficult geographical and climatic conditions would be one of the two main factors halting the wave of European colonization by the 1860s.⁶

Another cause of conflict was theft of livestock, treated by both communities as the easiest, fastest and cheapest method of wealth accumulation. Mutual theft led to an escalation of conflict in which one side had the advantage of the size of the population and knowledge of the area, and the other side had the advantage of weaponry and organization. Penn shows that the use of allies and clients among the local population was crucial to the colonists' successes, but nevertheless he points out that victories were neither quick nor easy, and that the whole of the 18th century was full of conflicts.

Further on, in Chapter 4, the author discusses the birth of the institutions that helped the colonial community activate forces and resources and channel them into expansion. He primarily notes the institution of the commando.⁷ One's first impulse may be to see it as a form of Boer militia, but Penn shows that in fact it was much more than that. He presents the commando as a form of social and military organization, a tool of incorporating groups and individuals and of redistributing goods, and also as a tool of the hegemony of the local social elite. An important factor pointed out by Penn is the practically complete independence of the commando system from the Cape Colony

⁵ During this period he published numerous articles and essays on this subject. See: Nigel Penn. 1985. "Anarchy and Authority in the Koue Bokkeveld, 1739-1779: The Banishing of Carel Buitendag." *Kleio* 17. 24-43; Nigel Penn. 1989. "Labour, Land and Livestock in the Western Cape during the Eighteenth Century: The Khoisan and the Colonists" *The Angry Divide: Social and Economic History of the Western Cape*. Eds Wilmot G. James and Mary Simons. Cape Town, Johannesburg: New Africa Books. 2-19; Nigel Penn. 1995. "The Orange River Frontier Zone, c. 1700-1805." *Eritqualand: Studies of the Orange River Frontier*. Ed. Andrew B. Smith. Cape Town: UCT Press. 21-109.

⁶ See e.g.: Robert Ross. 1975. "The !Kora Wars on the Orange River, 1830-1880." *Journal of African History* XVI. 4. 562-568; Teresa Strauss. 1979. *War along the Orange: The Koranna and the Northern Border Wars of 1868-9 and 1878-9*. Cape Town: UCT Press. 24-27.

⁷ The rise and development of the commando institution was analysed by, among others: Petrus J. van der Merwe. 1937. *Die Noordwaartse beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek, 1770-1842*. Den Haag: W.P. Van Stockum & Zoon. 25-35; G. Tylden. 1959. "The Development of the Commando System in South Africa, 1715-1792." *Africana Notes and News* VI. 12. 303-313. However, it should be stressed that the commando system has not been thoroughly and exhaustively presented yet.

authorities. Thus the system became the basis for shaping separate and alternative socio-political structures within colonial society.

The next two chapters, comprising part three of the study, are devoted to the birth of new communities on the northern frontier, collectively known as the Oorlam, but better known as the Bastards or, for a later period, as the Griqua. The author focuses on two interconnected processes. The first one is the migration of members of the colonial community, i.e. impoverished settlers, fugitives, deserters, runaway slaves, and representatives of the mixed-origin population, whose status was steadily deteriorating in the 18th century. The second process is the spread of colonial culture and institutions to the communities living beyond the borders of the Cape Colony. Contact with the Colony, and especially the migration of representatives of the colonial community, helped transplant many colony-generated skills and institutions onto the territories beyond the reach of the Cape Colony's authority. Penn stresses the particular importance of the spread of horses, guns, and the commando system, which formed the basis for the development of new communities along the Orange.

Penn shows their evolution, often begun by groups of outlaws, who, by gathering clients from among local communities, gave rise to new authorities and peoples. Thanks to this book the reader can follow the process of ethnogenesis of peoples like the Griqua, the Koranna and the Oorlam Nama, who in the first half of the 19th century were to play a significant role in South Africa and on the territories of the future Namibia. The process is not analysed in depth, but the author explains the main mechanisms governing the emergence of new communities and the role played by the Cape Colony itself and by the settlers.⁸

The last three chapters are concerned with the process of closing the northern frontier. The author identifies three factors responsible for that. The first is the pacification of the frontier, especially after the coming of the British. The new administration, in fact not much interested in the new and temporarily occupied colony, had much bigger potential than the Dutch East India Company regime and strove to pacify public sentiment, especially on the frontier, for the sake of more efficient authority. The administration was even more determined after 1806, when the British returned, but with the intention to stay for good. It is then that the British administration took decisive measures to close the frontier in order to limit the possibilities of conflict with neighbouring African peoples.

Increased determination and the potential of the new authorities were paired with the second factor which, according to the author, influenced the closing of the frontier, namely the development of missionary activity. Together with the British administration, representatives of British missionary societies (like the London Missionary Society and the Wesleyan Missionary Society) appeared in the Cape Colony. They put pressure on the authorities to limit trekboer migration to protect African communities. On the other hand, they played an important role in the consolidation of Griqua chieftainships to

⁸ He points out that local notables used these groups as tools in both external and internal conflicts. See Nigel Penn. 2005. *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape's Northern Frontier in the 18th Century*. Athens, Cape Town: Ohio University Press, Double Storey Books. 187-201.

the north of the Orange, in an attempt to introduce more stable and lasting socio-political structures.⁹

This is connected with the third important factor pertaining to the closing of the frontier and the end of trekboer expansion: even before the coming of the missionaries, the new Oorlam communities were organized so well and had such military power (the commando system, horses, guns) that they were an effective barrier to further expansion of the colonial community.¹⁰

Penn stressed in his introduction to the book that one of the aims of his monograph was to throw light on a forgotten part of South African history and to bring the history of the Khoisan peoples and their confrontation with the settlers in the 18th century out from under the shadow of the big conflict of the Bantu-Boer-British triangle. He succeeded. The greatest value of this book is its engagement with subjects that so far have been neglected, and presenting them as a synthetic whole. Nigel Penn is a very thorough researcher; he makes use of many archival sources previously not used at all or used only cursorily, and also of archaeological material. Thanks to this he reconstructs a vivid picture of the frontier communities and the changes they underwent – changes resulting not only from confrontation and conflicts, but also from coexistence with the settlers. Therefore the chapters presenting the ethnogenesis of the new communities on the Cape Colony's northern frontier are especially important and interesting. It is not often that we have a chance to observe the processes of ethnogenesis in times that are both historically so close to ours and quite well documented.¹¹

In spite of my very high opinion of the book, which undoubtedly is a significant breakthrough in studies on the social and political history of South Africa in the 18th century, it is not free from errors. First of all, the author focuses on conflict, and positive and negative roles have been cast in advance. Penn presents examples of cooperation and peaceful coexistence, but they are lost among descriptions of conflicts and clashes. With it the complexity of mutual relations is somewhat lost. Also, no attention is paid to the similarities between the evolution and organizational forms of the frontier colonial community and those of the rising new communities. The author does point out the crucial role of the commando institution in the process of ethnogenesis of the new communities and peoples, but he does not pay any attention to the similarities of social structures or the client system between trekboers and at least a part of the representatives of the new communities. He seems not to notice that the position of such Griqua families as the Koks, Barendses or Hendrickzes closely resembles the position of Boer notables on the Cape Colony frontier.

⁹ See e.g.: Karel Schoeman. 2002. *The Griqua Captaincy of Philippolis, 1826-1861*. Pretoria: Protea Book House. 17-37.

¹⁰ See Nigel Penn 2005, pp. 210-217, 279-287.

¹¹ These parts of Penn's book are all the more important as the subject of ethnogenesis is treated very cursorily in other monographs concerned with these communities. See e.g.: M. Legassick. 1979. "The Northern Frontier to 1820: The Emergence of the Griqua People." *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820*. Eds. R. Elphick and Hermann Giliomee. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman. 250-263; Robert Ross 1976, pp. 12-21.

However, to me his most controversial thesis is that the northern frontier was closed at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries as a result of the consolidation of the colonial authorities' position, the evolution of the Griqua community, and missionary activity. It is a fact that the borders of the Cape Colony itself were frozen and after slight corrections in 1814 and 1824 stayed unchanged up until 1847, when land as far as the Orange River line was officially incorporated into the Colony.¹² But relative stability of political borders does not mean the actual closing of a frontier. After 1802, Oorlam communities were far from stable, and representatives of the colonial community were still migrating to the territories north of the Colony, and later north of the Orange.¹³ If anything, the migration wave was temporarily stopped, but in the 1820s it again moved forward and permanently crossed the Orange River line.¹⁴

Nevertheless, these remarks and doubts do not change the fact that we are presented with a very solid, even fundamental, monograph, based on exceptional source materials and throwing new light on a period and subject in the history of South Africa that are almost unknown. Thanks to this book one can view the nuances of the history of the region in the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries from a new perspective. Last but not least, a notable merit of the book is its lucid, reader-friendly narrative.

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¹² See: Robert Ross 1975, pp. 562-568; Teresa Strauss. 1979. *War along the Orange: The Koranna and the Northern Border Wars of 1868-9 and 1878-9*. Cape Town: UCT Press. 24-27.

¹³ The best known early emigrant was Coenraad de Buys, who came to Transorangia in 1814. See e.g.: Wagner R.G. 1972-1973. "Coenraad De Buys in Transorangia." *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries* IV (Oct.1972-June 1973): 1-8. It is worth remembering the migration of individual Boers, which started at the close of the 18th century (e.g. Adrian van Zyl). See M. Legassick. 1988. *The Northern Frontier to c.1840. The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. 368-369.

¹⁴ See e.g.: K. Schoeman 2002, pp. 64-66.