

**William Kelleher Storey**

*Guns, Race, Power in Colonial South Africa*

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It may seem strange, but the significance of firearms as one of the crucial factors in South African history is somewhat overlooked. This statement needs some qualification. This researcher is aware of several texts written on this topic, especially a set of articles in *The Journal of African History* (1971) on the significance of firearms in different regions and communities in South and Central Africa. Many monographs, compilations, and general histories by South African authors mention the significance of firearms, horses and the commando system for the development of African and colonial societies (Penn 2005: 108-154). Several studies of the development of the commando system in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and of the influence of the Cape Colony on the surrounding African communities, both Khoisan and Bantu, are available. Some articles and essays on the proliferation of the commando system into the South African interior (Kinsman 1989; Kallaway 1982; Wagner 1972/1973) also deal with the question of the importance of firearms in the transformation of certain South African societies in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These also show, at least to some extent, the effects of the spread of firearms throughout the interior of South Africa (Bradlow 1981; Wagner 1974/1975). But what the historiography of South Africa lacks is the general study of the place, significance and effect of the use and spread of guns and a gun culture throughout South African societies and communities.

The historiography of other regions of Africa contains quite a few studies of the place and role of firearms in history, starting from early modern ages up to the time of European colonial expansion. To mention just a few: M.L. Martin, *L'Armée et la société en Afrique: essai de synthèse et d'investigation bibliographique* (1975) or Joseph P. Smaldone, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspective* (1977), and many case studies:

R.A. Caulk, "Firearms and Princely Power in Ethiopia in the Nineteenth Century" (1972), Robin Law, "Horses, Firearms and Political Power in Pre-Colonial West Africa" (1976) or Martin Legassick, "Firearms, Horses and Samorian Army Organisation, 1870-1898" (1966). Most of these were written during the sixties and seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Storey points out that in the eighties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the number of publications on the role of firearms in African communities diminished significantly as a sign of a decreased interest in the topic.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason I welcomed with great expectations the book by William K. Storey, *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa*. My interest was piqued by statements such as: "This book does more than assess the influence of guns over historical outcomes, as other scholars have done. It explores the ways in which people involved guns in changes in society, politics, and ecology" (Storey 2008: 1). Therefore I hoped to read an analysis of the development and decline of gun-societies in South Africa up to the end of the seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The wide scope of this book focuses on the period starting from the beginnings of Dutch settlement in the Cape Colony and lasting until the end of the seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is constructed along both chronological and subject lines, with the general outline being chronological. The book is divided into two general periods: the first from the beginning of settlement up to roughly the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and the second encapsulating the sixties and seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first chapter is an introduction to the topic and deals to a great extent with its existing historiography, in relation to the whole of Africa as well as the South African case. The second to fourth chapters deal with the first period mentioned above. They are constructed along chronological and geographical lines, and deal with the early encounters and proliferation of firearms in the Cape Colony and on its eastern and northern frontiers. The fifth chapter deals with the mineral and breechloading revolutions as the processes which were setting the scene for the further history of guns in South Africa. The last four chapters deal with the sixties and seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, starting with the Langalibalele Affair of 1873-1875<sup>2</sup> and ending with the beginning of the Cape Colony - Sotho Gun War (1879-1880).

Writing about the beginnings of the proliferation of firearms in South Africa (Chapter 2), Storey stresses that the introduction of guns helped, or in fact was a decisive factor, in constituting the new society (Storey 2008: 17). This is an important point. Storey is not the first to make it, but he does put it squarely in the technological, historical and social context of the Cape Colony. He draws an interesting portrait of the evolution of firearms, stressing that in the colonies the acceptance of new patterns of weaponry came

<sup>1</sup> He does not mention the book by Michał Tymowski (1987).

<sup>2</sup> An argument between the AmaHlubi chief Langalibalele and the colonial government over gun control. The colonial government tried to enforce a strict control of guns possessed by African subjects as a means of strengthening its control over the subject African communities. See more details in Guest (1976).

much quicker than in Europe (Storey 2008: 22-23). Some may find his elaboration on the technological aspects of the manufacture and use of firearms in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries a bit tedious, but it is also valuable. It shows an often forgotten factor that shaped the use of firearms in early South Africa and influenced the development of the commando system and its tactics in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time Storey's very technological attitude causes him to overlook certain social developments related to the proliferation of firearms. This is especially so in the case of the commando system. Storey regards it as just another military institution of the frontier society, while we know that its function and role in South African societies was much more complex and profound (Storey 2008: 35-36; Penn 2005: 108-154). One may argue that this is not a mistake, because the author is concentrating in the first place on the relations between colonial and native societies, and the role of firearms in this context. Therefore he does not need to go into details of social, economic or political nuances of this system. The problem is that in South Africa these two phenomena (proliferation of firearms and the spread of the commando system) were interdependent. And without an analysis of the pattern of the expansion of the commando system it is difficult to understand all the dimensions of the proliferation of firearms among African communities. This omission is even more significant if we consider that the spread of the commando system was to some extent a phenomenon separate from the expansion of the European colonial society.<sup>3</sup>

Analysing the place and role of firearms on the eastern frontier (Chapter 3), Storey takes into account the differences between the eastern and northern frontier of the Cape Colony. But again he concentrates only on the conflict and the spread of guns. Noting that AmaXhosa and other Nguni societies on the eastern frontier adopted guns with some reluctance, while not adopting associated tactics at all, he does not explore the reasons for this. He writes about Shaka's fascination with guns, but he does not explain why guns were not adopted by the Zulus as a main weapon (it always played an auxiliary role). He mentions the *amabutho* system and its functions in the Nguni societies, but he does not explain what part it might have played in slowing down the proliferation of firearms among the Nguni peoples, especially in Natal and the interior. Describing the adoption of firearms by the peoples on the eastern frontier of the Colony, he notes the limited effectiveness of its use in their wars. Again he does not explain the reasons for this ineffectiveness. He does not recognise that the AmaXhosa did not import the military structure or skills needed for the effective use of firearms. One may wonder at this omission, especially seeing as there are studies showing how some AmaXhosa communities were able to adopt the commando system and became an effective military force in the South African interior (Kallaway 1982: 143-160).

<sup>3</sup> At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries a much greater role was played in this expansion by Griqua, Korana and other Oorlam groups. See: Martin Legassick (1988).

In chapter four Storey deals with the northern frontier in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Again there are interesting reflections, especially concerning the technological side of the evolution of firearms in South Africa, and a detailed presentation of the types of guns used in the Cape Colony. The author points out that special firearms were made for South African needs and that the chief factor in this respect was hunting.<sup>4</sup> Storey was not the first to make such a study – Geoffrey Tylden, to mention just one specialist (Tylden 1957: 204-206), analysed these factors earlier. However, this study is still helpful, because the kind of handguns used in South Africa influenced the tactics and organisation of a commando.

One could speculate whether this interesting content would not sit better in the second chapter. At the same time, chapter four displays Storey's ignorance towards the commando system even more clearly. The Oorlam communities he refers to built their position and social structures around the commando system and the combination of firearms, horses, and commando tactics gave them advantages over other African communities. Finally, looking at the example of the BaSotho state of Moshweshwe, which is one of the case studies for the author, we see not only the adoption of firearms and horses, but also of commando tactics (Legassick 1988: 358-405) – a fact Storey seems not to notice. This is one of the great failings of his book.

A more general problem is the composition of the book and its incompatibility with its title. Despite the fact that this book focuses, in theory, on over two centuries of history, nearly two thirds of it deals with the sixties and seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, more than half of the book is devoted to the seventies. The first third of the book becomes, in effect, just a very long foreword, dealing with the origins of the problem of African gun ownership in South Africa. This would explain the problems mentioned above and the lack of an in-depth study of the earlier period, but it is still a serious shortfall. The first two hundred years of the colonial history of South Africa is treated too cursorily, especially when one considers that this is the period of emergence of South African gun societies. Furthermore, Storey's analysis is too schematic and does not take into account the complexity of the South African situation. In fact, he transfers models from other parts of Africa and uses them directly to analyse the situation in South Africa. Possibly this is the reason he concentrates on the seventies.

The latter part of the book is much better, although not without problems. The fifth chapter stands out especially. It shows the link between mineral (diamonds) and breechloading revolutions in South Africa. New opportunities created by the new labour market and a significant rise in income, also among Africans, enlarged the market for firearms. The Africans were obtaining not only more, but also better guns. His demonstration of how the breechloading revolution destroyed local, African workshops specialising in repairing old types of muzzleloading firearms is very interesting (Storey 2008: 137-140).

The last four chapters deal with several problems of the seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>4</sup> Hunting elephants, rhinoceros and buffalos required large calibres (up to 27 mm) and heavy bullets (over 113 g) (Storey 2008: 81-89).

In this period the right to own a gun became connected with one's place in the racial hierarchy of colonial society and also an indicator of social status. Storey states that there was a general tendency, with the development of modern society and administration, for a state to become more determined to limit free access to firearms (Storey 2008: 52-53). In colonial societies this tendency had a racial bias. While colonial administration was ready to accept settler ownership of firearms, seeing it as a means of strengthening local military forces and colonial defences against external and internal threats, at the same time African ownership of firearms was increasingly seen as a potential threat to the stability of colonial communities. Even loyal African societies and chiefdoms were seen as a potential threat and therefore treated with distrust. This tendency was strengthened by the proliferation of new breechloading guns, which were much more effective than muzzleloaders and caused much greater concerns (Storey 2008: 185-188).

Firstly he presents the case of Langalibalele (Chapter 6) to show the change in colonial attitudes towards African gun ownership. He points out dual standards: on one hand the oversensitivity to Africans owning modern guns and on the other hand the practice of using loyal Africans as an auxiliary force against internal and external threats (In this particular case, against Bushman raiders from Drakensberg). Another relevant factor was the unsure extent of the sovereignty of the chiefdoms. Storey rightly suggests that this was the main reason of conflict, also tied to an internal conflict among the AmaHlubi. It is also important to note that Langalibalele used in his argument the language brought there by British colonisers (Storey 2008: 153). In this way he shows the scale of acceptance of the language of the colonial discourse among Africans (at least African elites).

The case of Langalibalele leads Storey toward more general topics. He considers it an indication of the change in colonial policy towards the regulation of gun ownership. The policymakers' discussions of the regulations during the early seventies was targeted at Africans, and played an important role in the development of the idea of a South African Confederation. This original insight is important and should be seen as a great credit to this book. Even if one would concede that it is an overvaluation of this factor, it is important to take this dimension of the project into account.

Then Storey moves to the Cape Colony, its Eastern Frontier (Chapter 8), and the case of Basutoland (Chapter 9) to show the final change of attitude and the decision of introducing gun control and finally disarmament of Africans. This he describes as an effect of a long evolution of attitudes and perspectives on Africans and their role in colonial society. Another factor he points to is fear. The settlers were afraid of Africans with firearms. He stresses the importance of modern quasi-scientific racism, which dominated the colonial societies' way of thinking in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The decline of liberalism was another factor. It is important to see this perspective as evidence of changing racial and political attitudes towards Africans, who in theory, at least in the Cape Colony, were seen as fellow subjects in a colour-blind franchise system.

Understandably, Storey finally concentrates on the BaSotho case, which led to the Cape-Sotho Gun War of 1879-1880. The author is interested in the process whereby loyal BaSotho were alienated to the point of insurrection. As he is studying the 'official mind,' it is understandable that he focuses on the British or rather Cape-British perspective. But ignoring the BaSotho perspective, and the reasons why the Cape was not able to disarm the BaSotho, prevents the gaining of any deeper insight. There is no analysis of the role played by firearms in BaSotho society. And as before, the lack of focus on the expansion of the commando system is a failing.

Another misstep is Storey's attitude towards Boers, whom he sees in exactly the same light as the British settlers. There is no place here for the discussion of the character of Boer communities of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but Storey's attitude toward Boer Republics is anachronistic. To treat them in the same way as the British Colonies is too great a simplification. Such a view would be too bold even in the case of the Orange Free State before the presidency of Johannes H. Brand. By treating the Transvaal in this way, Storey proves that he misunderstands the situation. When he sees differences in Boer attitudes in relation to British ideas, he explains it in terms of a more flexible and pragmatic mind-set on the Boers' side (Storey 2008: 188). He does not see that the South African Republic was not a state in the modern meaning of this word – it was rather a collection of communities and client-groups, and the central government had limited control over them. Even in the case of African societies and communities, their status in Transvaal evolved, in many cases, toward wider autonomy, or even virtual independence. The arms control legislation was more a statement of intentions than a regulation *per se*, especially when quite large groups of Boer notables were not interested in enforcing them (*Blue Book* 1878; Wagner 1980: 313-347; Manson 1992: 85-98).

Disregarding the nuances of the social, racial, ethnic, and political patchwork of the South African reality is this book's main failing. William K. Storey's book is disappointing and very uneven. In its descriptions and analysis of the seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it is interesting and impressive, but it is as lacking in its first part. It is one-sided in its narrative and analysis. I regret to write that, while in many respects this book gives us enlightening and interesting information, while many of the author's insights are bold and original, and even if he turns our attention toward all too often disregarded factors in South African Policies, this book is too sketchy and too cursory to be accepted as a good monograph on the topic.

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