

THE KHOIKHOI REBELLION

S. NEWTON-KING AND V.C. MALHERBE, *THE KHOIKHOI REBELLION IN THE EASTERN CAPE (1799 – 1803)*, CENTRE FOR AFRICAN STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN, 1981. 136 pp.

Reviewed by J. B. Peires

Some people prefer to believe that the Khoikhoi (Hottentots) were destroyed by the smallpox epidemics of 1713 and 1755, acts of God which conveniently absolved the white man of blame for the fate of the indigenous inhabitants of the Cape Province and made it possible to claim the region as part of the white homeland. This comfortable myth, like others of its type, has not survived historical investigation. The American historian Richard Elphick demonstrated in his unfortunately-named *Kraal and Castle* (1977) that it was the Colonial disruption which made it impossible for the Khoi to recover from the smallpox disasters of the eighteenth century. **The Khoikhoi Rebellion in the Eastern Cape** documents another episode in the history of Khoi subjugation. It shows that the Khoi reacted to their destiny with resistance rather than indolence, and it shows that the Colonial authorities were directly responsible for enforcing that destiny.

By 1795 there was not a single legally recognised free Khoi community west of the Fish River. Most Khoi lived as labourers on their old lands, now divided among the Boers, and even those who managed to maintain an independent existence in the remote corners of the frontier were insecure and without legal rights. The Khoi saw their opportunity in 1799, when British troops arrived to fight the rebel Boers of Graaf-Reinet. They flocked to the British standard in the hope of getting their country back. "Restore," said Klaas Stuurman, "the country of which our fathers were despoiled by the Dutch and we have nothing more to ask." However, it was the aim of the British authorities to restore the old order rather than to replace it, and when the Boer rebellion collapsed, they came to view their erstwhile allies with embarrassment and worse. When the British began to withdraw, the Khoi — left once again at the mercy of their old masters — began to plunder. They were joined by the Xhosa, who feared that the British sought to push them back across the alleged boundary of the Fish River.

In September 1799, Acting Governor Dundas arrived to make separate peaces with Boers, Xhosa and Khoi. The terms of the Khoi peace are instructive inasmuch as they illustrate the British view of the Khoi place in the Colonial scheme of things. Whereas the Xhosa were treated as an independent people, the Khoi were regarded as rebellious subjects, declared to possess no landed property of their own, and expected to enter the service of the Colonists as they had done before. The British did attempt to rectify what they saw as the legitimate grievances of the Khoi with respect to their conditions of service. The liberal Maynier was reappointed to the Drostdy of Graaf-Reinet, and he attempted to introduce a more just system of labour relations. This satisfied nobody. The Boers did not want interference with 'their' servants, and the Khoi did not want to be servants at all. Three hundred families of Khoi refugees, refusing to return to their former masters, camped out in Graaff-Reinet as tangible proof of the transient and

dislocated state of society. Others remained as warrior bands on the margins of Boer settlements which they raided with increasing frequency.

From the British point of view, it was now the Khoi rather than the Boers who were disturbing the order of the frontier. They authorised Tjaart van der Walt to form a commando, and he smote the heathen hip and thigh. The Khoi were weakened by Klaas Stuurman's defection to a precarious neutrality, but after Van der Walt was killed in action, they turned the tide once again. From the Tsitsikamma forest to the lower Fish, there remained only fifteen Boer families, including the ferocious Thomas Ferreira who dubbed his redoubt, "the last outpost of the Christian empire." Just at this point, the First British Occupation gave way to the Batavian regime. General Janssens bought off Klaas Stuurman with a small farm for his personal use. Boezak, the leading bitterender, was killed by his Xhosa allies. Slowly the Boers returned to their abandoned farms, and, for reasons that cannot be fully explained, the Khoi did not resist them. Never again were they to be in a position to reoccupy the lands of their forefathers.

Of special interest is the role of the missionary, Dr J. T. van der Kemp. On the one hand, Newton-King rescues him from the misrepresentations of **The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest**. Van der Kemp genuinely believed in the equality of all men in the sight of God. He said that his Khoi converts were destined for Heaven, and that Boers who opposed their instruction were servants of Satan. At great personal risk, he defended the right of the Khoi refugees in Graaff-Reinet to worship in the village church, and when this became untenable, he led them to a kind of freedom at Bethelsdorp. On the other hand, Van der Kemp's opposition to violence and his respect for Colonial jurisdiction led him to undermine Khoi unity, particularly with regard to Klaas Stuurman. Newton-King writes that "while he did much to alleviate suffering in the short-term, his actions were harmful to the long-term interests of the indigenous people, for by virtue of his personal integrity and his genuine desire to see their lot improved, he lent credence to schemes which offered no hope of permanent independence.. but were rather designed to meet the short-term needs of the government's pacification strategy." Indeed, the liberal dilemma in South Africa is an old one.

Khoi independence fell victim more to the Colonial need for labour than to the Colonial need for land. In 1803, there was land enough to spare for mission settlements and farms for the Khoi captains and their people. But neither Dundas in 1799 nor Janssens in 1803 was prepared to countenance the re-establishment of independent and self-sufficient Khoi communities. In the words of Landdrost Bresler, "great care should be taken .. that the Cattle-breeding be not at once deprived of the indispensable

assistance by an unlimited resort of the Hottentots, who .. will not now fail to leave the Farmers and resort to the aforesaid Establishment (Bethelsdorp); which deserting would very much reduce the Cattlebreeding." The Khoi should be well-treated, but they should remain a servile class.

The Khoikhoi Rebellion in the Eastern Cape consists of two separate long papers. Although they cover the same ground, they are by no means similar. Newton-King is more general and more interpretive; Malherbe is more detailed and takes more care to substantiate her arguments. The lucidity of Newton-King sets the stage for the slower-moving Malherbe, but Malherbe fleshes out the picture with details, such as

the following remark, addressed by a Khoi rebel to a farmer:

"Strike me, Louw van der Merwe, strike me. I will have you and all the (?) soon in the stocks, and you shall pull off your trousers and sit naked on the ground." A single joint account would probably have been better than the two presented here, but that would have been unduly hard on the authors, and, besides, the result is more than satisfactory.

The University of Cape Town is to be congratulated on making this little book available, more especially in a cheap and simple, yet attractive format. Four reproductions from Daniell enhance the pleasures of the text. It can be recommended to all serious students of South African history. □

NEWS COMMENTARY

by Vortex

We're appalled by the Polish Government:
it's sunk Solidarity.

It's clear the Russians were behind the scenes
with their lack of morality.

– You ask: do we like trade unions?
Ah, that's quite different, you see.

And poor dear Lech Walesa:
he's our hero on TV.

We're told he's been detained without trial:
such Communist tyranny!

– Have we detained trade unionists?
Ah, that's quite different, you see.

The Poles are enduring martial law
and the might of the military:
their lives are controlled at every point;
they're certainly far from free.

– Do we not rule by the gun? you ask.
But this is South Africa, you see.