

# **RIGHTS, INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE AND SETTLER COLONIALISM IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOUTH AFRICA: THOMAS PRINGLE AND SCOTTISH COLONIALISM AT THE CAPE, 1820-1834**

**Elizabeth Elbourne**  
McGill University

## **ABSTRACT**

Thomas Pringle, a Scottish settler at the Cape Colony and later secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society in England, was both a settler in territory recently conquered from the Xhosa and an advocate against violence on Eastern Cape borderlands. This article examines both aspects of his career in the 1820s and early 1830s, and asks how they relate to one another. While working to put accounts of abuse into trans-imperial circulation, Pringle was caught up in the structures of settler colonialism at the Cape, including militarization and the quest for African labour. The evidence he provided was nonetheless politically significant. The article places Pringle's work in the context of a larger history of the development of human rights and their interaction with both humanitarianism and colonialism. The article further asks what difference, if any, Pringle's Scottishness made to his own sense of identity, political activity and views of colonialism.

In 1833, the Scotsman Thomas Pringle, formerly a settler in South Africa but by then Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, strategized in London with Englishman Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, one of the founders of the Society and parliamentary leader of the abolitionist forces, about how to nail the South African government on charges of what might anachronistically be termed human rights abuses. Pringle was concerned in particular to provide actionable documentation of killings that resulted from the way the frontiers of the Cape Colony were policed by "commandos," militia groups of armed men on horses that were called out to attack cattle thieves or trace the spoor of stolen cattle

across the frontier to African homesteads, often abusing and even killing those who were accused of theft in a wider context of violent struggle over a contested frontier.

‘Agreeable to your suggestion I have examined all the publications and documents within my reach, which serve to throw light on the history and results of what is called the “commando” system, at the Cape of Good Hope, with a view to bring it under Mr. Stanley’s notice in as brief a space as possible,’ he wrote to Buxton on August 19, 1833.<sup>1</sup> He selected four cases in particular (to which I will return later in this article) that he felt were both telling and easy to corroborate through credible witnesses. In suggesting what evidence would be most compelling for British politicians, Pringle drew on longstanding information networks in the Eastern Cape and adroitly used the politics of personal knowledge. For example, he wrote that he had ‘inclosed [sic.] some notes (which were appended to a little volume which I published in 1828) giving the history of one Commando and some atrocities connected with it, the facts of which I had an opportunity of investigating on the spot shortly after they occurred. The slaughter of the Caffre [Xhosa] Envoys I ascertained distinctly from the reluctant testimony of eye witnesses. The field cornet Vandernest, and his accomplices were all perfectly well known to me and I went to his own house and questioned him on the subject.’<sup>2</sup>

This campaign aimed to persuade the Colonial Secretary, Lord Stanley, to implement a new frontier policy in the Cape Colony. The strategizing of Pringle, Buxton and others, including South African-based missionaries, would eventually lead to the creation of a parliamentary committee headed by Buxton. As I and others have explored, the Select Committee on Aborigines (British settlements), which issued reports in 1836 and in 1837, extensively criticized the British government for the treatment accorded to Indigenous peoples in British settler colonies, although its ultimate recommendations were not very extensive, promoted assimilation and Christianity, and were generally watered down in the aftermath of political push-back.<sup>3</sup> The committee had nonetheless

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand 89-096-2, Papers of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton (hereafter: ATL 89-096-2): Thomas Pringle to Thomas Fowell Buxton, London, 19 Aug. 1833.

<sup>2</sup> ATL 89-096-2: Thomas Pringle to Thomas Fowell Buxton, London, 19 Aug. 1833. The colonial term ‘Caffre’ or ‘Caffer’ (which has a complicated history) was used in Pringle’s circle and among other English-speakers at the Cape and in Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century generally as a term for the Xhosa. It slid through time, however, into a generic and insulting racialized term, with variant spellings, including a version beginning with k. See also: Jochen S. Arndt, “What’s in a word? Historicizing the term ‘Caffre’ in European discourses about southern Africa between 1500 and 1800,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44, 1 (2018), 59-75.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Elbourne, “The sin of the settler: The 1835-36 Select Committee on Aborigines and debates over virtue and conquest in the early nineteenth-century British white settler empire,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 4, 3 (2003); Amanda Nettelbeck, “‘We are sure of your sympathy’: Indigenous uses of the politics of protection in nineteenth-century Australia and Canada,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 17, 1 (2016); Zoe Laidlaw, “‘Aunt Anna’s

been meticulously designed to entrap colonial authorities in the Cape Colony, among other things through the revelation of police and settler violence against Xhosa farmers and San hunter-gatherers in borderland regions.<sup>4</sup> Although Pringle died at the end of 1834, the evidence he helped provide was highlighted in the committee investigations, shaping the cross-examination of South African witnesses. Pringle's evidence also proved important in later persuading a new head of the Colonial Office, Lord Glenelg, to rescind territorial gains from frontier warfare in 1835, partially on the grounds that settlers had provoked the conflict with the Xhosa.<sup>5</sup>

Pringle obtained his insider information in part through his earlier role as a settler, however. Despite his trenchant criticisms, particularly of violence against the Xhosa, San and Khoekhoe, Pringle also wrote enthusiastically about settlement in southern Africa, most notably Scottish settlement. He himself, as Matthew Shum has recently pointed out, helped organize commandos against the San cattle raiders whose rights he defended in the abstract.<sup>6</sup> He was, in other words, inextricably linked to the systems that he sought to change. Such paradoxes might be taken as yet another indication of the limits of white liberalism. At the same time, it also seems revealing to ask how nineteenth-century conceptions of Indigenous rights, as well as of enslaved people, emerged from violent colonial environments. Furthermore, what can Pringle's colonial career suggest about the underlying structures of settler colonialism in southern Africa?

This article thus focuses simultaneously on Pringle's activity as a settler in territory recently conquered from the Xhosa, and on his advocacy against violence on Eastern Cape borderlands. Pringle played an important role in information networks that stretched across both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, as he joined with figures such as visiting East India Company officials and Scottish missionaries to try to convey actionable information about rights abuses in southern Africa to London. He also placed material into public transnational print networks, through poetry and journalism as well as through

---

report': The Buxton women and the Aborigines Select Committee, 1835-37," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 32, 2 (2004), 1-28.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term San in the absence of full knowledge of the identity of all the people Pringle identifies as 'Bushmen'. They were probably /Xam.

<sup>5</sup> This contrasted with an emerging settler narrative that it was, conversely, the settlers who were threatened by the supposedly savage Xhosa; it would be this latter narrative that triumphed by the late 1840s in the aftermath of the war of 1846-47. Richard Price, *Making Empire: Colonial encounters and the creation of imperial rule in nineteenth-century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 167-9 and *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Shum, *Improvisations of Empire: Thomas Pringle in Scotland, the Cape Colony and London, 1789-1834* (London: Anthem Press, 2020), 51-2

his autobiographical writings and political pamphleteering.<sup>7</sup> Much of this material attempted to ventriloquize Black voices, in an effort to promote humanitarian empathy.

The more particular role Pringle played in circulating information about murder and theft on the Cape frontier towards the end of his life is less well known than other aspects of his career, in part because he died before the Select Committee on Aborigines began work. Furthermore, some evidence that I discuss in this article has lain previously unnoticed in the Alexander Turnbull Library in New Zealand.<sup>8</sup> Pringle is probably better known as the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society in Britain, as South Africa's first English-language poet, as the editor of South Africa's first 'free' newspaper, the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, and as the editor of the iconic 1831 narrative of Mary Prince in the aftermath of her escape from slavery.<sup>9</sup> Although he was only ambivalently a political radical, he tangled extensively with the conservative aristocratic governor of the Cape, Lord Charles Somerset. In a number of ways, he was implicated in early nineteenth-century struggles over rights, whether settler rights, the rights of colonized Africans or the rights of the enslaved – issues that he did not see as contradictory. He died in 1834, before some of the evidence that he had collected at the Cape about the murder of Xhosa and San people in the eastern Cape and, more mundanely, cattle theft, came to the attention of the British parliament through the Select Committee on Aborigines.

At the same time, Pringle was also part of settler networks that normalized colonialism in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, as Britain pushed settlement along the sea lanes it now controlled more fully. For Pringle, as for a number of other reformers in his networks, British settlement was desirable (perhaps particularly as practised by virtuous Scots) but should rest on mutually beneficial consensual relationships with Indigenous peoples. Indigenous rights, in this sense, were tightly tied to colonialism. Furthermore, Pringle saw the Xhosa as more clearly wronged than the particular San raiders against whom he called out commandos, contrasting a settled people being dispossessed of territory to a supposedly disorganized group of raiders without a clear

---

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Pringle, *African Sketches* (London: Edward Moxon, 1834); Thomas Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* (London: Edward Moxon, 1835); Thomas Pringle, *Some Account of the Present State of the English Settlers in Albany, South Africa* (London: T. and G. Underwood, 1824).

<sup>8</sup> ATL 89-096-2.

<sup>9</sup> John M. Mackenzie and Nigel Dalziel, *The Scots in South Africa: Ethnicity, identity, gender and race, 1772-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 51-7, 66-74; Randolph Vigne, *Thomas Pringle: South African pioneer, poet and abolitionist* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2012); Timothy Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (London: F. Westley and A.H. Davis, 1831). Pringle's life is also a point of departure (however ambivalently) for Zoë Wicomb's 2020 novel, *Still Life* (London: The New Press).

nationality. Pringle's colonial career thus sheds light on a period in which ideas about 'nations' influenced both settler colonialism and the adjudication of what was due to particular Indigenous peoples. Conceptions of the validity of claims-making in the early nineteenth-century British empire (to avoid for a moment the shifting language of rights) were shaped by ideas about settlement, mobility and nationhood.

This article builds on important previous work. Pringle has long been seen as part of a 'Cape liberal' tradition.<sup>10</sup> Liberalism's close association with imperialism in Britain and the British empire has been extensively problematized, raising questions about liberalism's emancipatory potential in a colonial context (even as its rhetoric might be used to anti-colonial ends and even as imperial liberalism did arguably form the conceptual basis for today's settler states).<sup>11</sup> Mid to late nineteenth-century settler liberalism led to settler democracies that extolled settler freedom and power and deliberately marginalized Indigenous peoples – or, more often, sought to dominate and exploit them, as Australian examples recently explored by Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell amply illustrate.<sup>12</sup> In this earlier period of greater faith in 'humanitarian liberalism,' in Andrew Bank's phrase, before the fuller development of settler autonomy, Pringle was not unusual in arguing that liberalism would lead to better relationships between settlers and Indigenous peoples, but perhaps more unusual in actually attempting to limit settler power.<sup>13</sup> Pringle's activism underscores both the sometimes underestimated significance of Cape liberalism and the fact that it also depended on colonial networks and was undergirded by settler colonialism and cultural assumptions about hierarchy. This latter insight has most recently been developed by Matthew Shum in his valuable study *Improvisations of Empire: Thomas Pringle in Scotland, the Cape Colony and London, 1789-1834*.<sup>14</sup> John Mackenzie and Nigel Dalziel place Pringle into the wider context of the history of the Scots in South Africa.<sup>15</sup> If the current article seeks to examine Pringle as both a genuine advocate for rights and also as a product of a colonial frontier, this blurs

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example: Stanley Trapido, "From paternalism to liberalism: The Cape Colony, 1800-1834," *The International History Review*, 12, 1 (1990), 76-104; Saul DuBow, *South Africa's Struggle for Human Rights* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the ends of liberal imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Price, *Making Empire*.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell, *Taking Liberties: Indigenous rights and settler self-government in colonial Australia, 1830-1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Compare: Andrew Bank, "Losing faith in the civilizing mission: The premature decline of humanitarian liberalism at the Cape, 1840-1860," in *Empire and Others: British encounters with indigenous peoples, 1640-1850*, eds. Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 364.

<sup>14</sup> Shum, *Improvisations of Empire*.

<sup>15</sup> Mackenzie and Dalziel, *The Scots in South Africa*.

some of the lines often drawn in historical scholarship between frontier conservatism and Cape liberalism. This article is further informed by the network paradigm of imperial history, developed by Zoe Laidlaw, Alan Lester and others, including the insight that humanitarian networks brought particular iconic stories of abuse into transimperial circulation in the hope of leading British people to feel responsible for the suffering of distant strangers.<sup>16</sup> I am also interested in histories of policing and violence: what low-level conflict, outside the more dramatic periods of open warfare, took place in Eastern Cape borderlands, how were those borderlands policed, and under what circumstances did information about abuses enter into transimperial humanitarian networks, while at other times violence was tacitly, and not so tacitly, accepted by the British as the price of empire?

The current article has significant gaps. Much of Pringle's writing was about the experiences of colonized people but it is difficult to access their own views. Pringle nonetheless tried to represent what he understood of the emotions of imperial victims in order to generate empathy, most closely in his publication of the oral testimony of Mary Prince. This process deserves to be problematized, as well as placed into the context of a larger history of humanitarian practices.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Pringle sought to reproduce with exactitude evidence of the suffering imposed on bodies by colonial violence, and in the process, he helped create an archive concerning violent conflict in the Eastern Cape and struggles over resources.

A study of Thomas Pringle also forms part of a complex larger history of 'rights,' humanitarianism, and the tangled relationships between them. Alan Lester and Fae Dussart have argued convincingly that in the late 1830s and 40s, a form of 'humanitarian governance' emerged from disputes about the violence done to Indigenous peoples in British settler colonies. Initially oriented to the 'protection' of Indigenous peoples and creation of reserved lands, and then shifting to assimilation in the name of humanitarianism by the late 1840s, such policies were carried out by relatively

---

<sup>16</sup> Alan Lester, "Humanitarian governance and the circumvention of revolutionary human rights in the British empire", in *Humanitarianism and Human Rights: A world of differences?*, ed. Michael Barnett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 123; Tony Ballantyne, "Moving texts and 'humane' sentiment: Materiality, mobility and the emotions of imperial humanitarianism," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 17, 1 (2016); Zoe Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815-45: Patronage, the information revolution and colonial government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Alan Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating identities in nineteenth-century South Africa and Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Thomas Lacqueur, "Bodies, details and the humanitarian narrative," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Ballantyne, "Moving Texts;" Sara Salih, "The History of Mary Prince, the Black Subject and the Black Canon," in *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and its colonies, 1760-1838*, eds. Brycchan Carey, Markman Ellis and Sarah Salih (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 123-138

authoritarian British governors, such as George Arthur and George Grey, who saw them as a solution to the problem of reconciling settler colonialism with morality.<sup>18</sup> In a contribution to a 2020 collection edited by Michael Barnett on the complex relationships between humanitarianism and human rights, Lester has argued that such policies of humanitarian governance might be seen as an example of ‘humanitarianism’ which, he suggests, had its origins ‘broadly in the amelioration of existing relations of power and privilege,’ in contrast to human rights, which ‘proposed revolutionary transformation.’<sup>19</sup> Although I would argue that the language of human rights does potentially also reinforce existing power relationships and that divisions may not be as neat as Lester suggests, in the early nineteenth century, ‘rights’ might indeed be seen as dangerously transformative, given their earlier association with the French and American Revolutions and with the ‘rights of man’ propounded by Thomas Paine and other political radicals.<sup>20</sup> A further twist, however, is that the ‘rights’ of Indigenous peoples, as expressed, for example, by the Aborigines Protection Society, might also be cast in terms of the ‘right’ to education and access to Christianity. In other words, the language of rights was fluid at the time, while the political implications of humanitarianism were also contested. Pringle’s work illustrates some of these ambiguities. He supported the rights of settlers to be treated fairly by the imperial administration, as well as the rights of Africans to life and property. He did not want to rescind colonialism, but he did oppose its further extension without African consent; on the other hand, he seems to have thought such consent would be forthcoming under the right circumstances. He did not uncritically support imperial governance; on the contrary he feuded bitterly with the administration at the Cape and in particular attacked the Governor, Lord Charles Somerset. Nonetheless, he did support better imperial administration, rather than abolition of colonialism. The white colony was to be accepted and shored up on all sides, but its violent margins were to be tamed and Africans protected from colonial violence and the non-consensual expansion of the colony. I would therefore argue that Pringle typified a period of settler colonialism in which violence was evident and democracy limited, before ‘humanitarian governance’ emerged as a supposed solution to problems and in the process paved the way for coercive assimilation policies.

---

<sup>18</sup> Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines across the British empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

<sup>19</sup> Lester, “Humanitarian Governance,” 107.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, ed. Claire Grogan (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2011 [first published 1791 (vol.1) and 1792 (vol.2)]; Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A history* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

## SETTLEMENT AND THE COLONIAL IMAGINATION

Thomas Pringle emigrated to the Cape Colony with a party of twenty-four in 1821, most of whom were family members and some of whom were farm servants on a four year contract.<sup>21</sup> They came as part of the British government's settlement of about 4,000 migrants from Britain, the so-called '1820 settlers,' selected from some 90,000 applicants at a time of high unemployment, on land recently taken from the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape.<sup>22</sup> A 'sort of Utopian delirium was somehow excited at the time in the public mind about South Africa,' Pringle would later write in 1824.<sup>23</sup> The settlers were largely unaware before they came that they were being placed in a violent conflict zone in order to provide a buffer between the Xhosa and the colony on recently conquered land.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps tellingly, an original group of five male farm servants, in addition to the wife and children of one of the servants, were dismissed by the Pringle group before departure. According to a letter from Pringle to Henry Goulburn, the Under-Secretary of State for War and the Colonies:

When nearly ready to sail from Leith, the servants, both those engaged by my father and our friend Mr. Sydserff, and who had all been engaged on written agreement for four years, refused to embark unless certain extravagant demands were conceded to them, quite inconsistent with the terms they had engaged upon and incompatible with our future circumstances. Rather than submit to this conspiracy or incur the trouble of seeking legal redress, my friends discharged the whole of them and engaged other men in their stead.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> On the four-year contract: Thomas Pringle to Henry Goulburn, London, 8 Jan. 1820, reproduced in: Randolph Vigne (ed.), *The South African Letters of Thomas Pringle* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society for the Publication of Southern African Historical Documents, 2011), 12 [RCC 12, 344].

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Pringle to Henry Goulburn, London, 8 Jan. 1820, reproduced in: Vigne (ed), *South African Letters of Thomas Pringle*, 12-13 [RCC 12, 344]; Pringle, *Some Account of the Present State of the English Settlers*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Pringle, *Some Account of the Present State of the English Settlers*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> For more extensive discussions of wars with the Xhosa, see: Susan Blackbeard, "Acts of severity: Colonial settler massacres of amaXhosa and abaThembu on the eastern frontier of the Cape Colony, c. 1826-47," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 17, 2 (2015), 107-132; Noel Mostert, *Frontiers: The epic of South Africa's creation and the tragedy of the Xhosa People* (New York: Knopf, 1992); J.B. Peires, *The House of Phalo: A history of the Xhosa people in the days of their independence* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); J.B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the great Xhosa cattle-killing movement of 1856-57* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989); Robert Ross, *The Borders of Race in Colonial South Africa: The Kat River settlement, 1829-1856* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Pringle to Henry Goulburn, London, 8 January 1820, reproduced in: Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters of Thomas Pringle*, 12 [RCC 12, 344]



As this suggests, class dynamics were at play. Pringle himself had middle-class aspirations but was financially precarious. He came from a farming background in lowland Scotland; to be a small-scale farmer was to own land but not necessarily to be secure. Many members of his family had been affected by the crisis for Scottish farmers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that was accelerated by the commercialization of large-scale farms and related land clearances.<sup>26</sup> As Pringle put it in his memoir *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa*, ‘my ancestors, for four generations at least, had belonged to the class of plain, respectable Scottish husbandmen, and all their near connections were of the same class, or of a corresponding rank in society.’<sup>27</sup> His father had been a ‘respectable Roxburghshire farmer’ and his four brothers also farmers. ‘The change of time, however, and the loss of capital, had completely over clouded their prospects in our native country.’<sup>28</sup> His family background was, as Randolph Vigne demonstrates, somewhat more exalted than this suggests, since the Pringles had historically been local gentry.<sup>29</sup> Pringle nonetheless emigrated as part of a family dispersed by economic difficulty, trying to rebuild status and to chase the ideal of independence. ‘I had two distinct objects in view in emigrating to the Cape,’ he attested. ‘One of these was to collect again in one social circle and establish in rural independence, my father’s family, which untoward circumstances had broken up and begun to scatter over the world. To accomplish this, emigration to a new colony was indispensable.’<sup>30</sup> Pringle’s second objective was more personal: to make a living as a civil servant putting his literary talents to use in a way that was hard in Scotland. Pringle had a lame leg, apparently after having been dropped by his nurse as an infant, and so he could not do substantial manual labour. He had worked for eight years for His Majesty’s Commissioners on the Public Records of Scotland, transcribing old records. He had also worked as a periodical editor, and as a poet. In none of these pursuits had he made much money. ‘My prospects in this country were not bright,’ he wrote to his friend John Fairbairn before departure, ‘and I have directed my views elsewhere.’ Despite the anticipated difficulties, ‘*independence* is worth the seeking even in the lion’s den and the nest of the Cockatrice. I will not be a hanger on nor sink into distress and penury in this

---

<sup>26</sup> T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation, 1700-2007* (London: Allen Lane, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Josiah Conder, “A biographical sketch of the author,” in Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, vii.

<sup>28</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Randolph Vigne, *Thomas Pringle: South African pioneer, poet and abolitionist* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 3-6.

<sup>30</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 3.

country – if I must in another it is at least an alleviation that I shall be unseen – unknown – unpitied.’<sup>31</sup>

As Pringle’s memoir suggests, the colony was a space that was imagined before it was seen – rendered abstract, and often thought of as devoid of earlier inhabitants.<sup>32</sup> The colony was also a place to reconstruct what had been damaged in Europe, or even in North America – a location for reinvention not only of the self but also of community. It might also be a place to create what Kirsten McKenzie has termed a ‘colonial public sphere,’ characterized by male bourgeois respectability.<sup>33</sup> This vision facilitated the co-existence of ‘pioneering’ settlement with humanitarianism. Men such as Pringle accordingly struggled to make colonialism more moral.

Colonization might also be understood in more mythic terms. However ironically (all the more so in light of his subsequent criticisms of British settlement at the Cape), Pringle cast the migration of his family group to the eastern frontier of the Cape Colony in quasi-biblical terms.<sup>34</sup> The party arrived at their destination exactly six months after leaving Scotland. ‘For six long months we had been pilgrims and sojourners – without any other home since we left London than the crowded cabin at sea and the narrow tent on shore. Now we had reached the “Promised Land” which was to be the place of our rest [...].’<sup>35</sup> After exploring their domain for the first time, the group held a religious service, claiming the land for Christianity. Claims-making was framed by Scottish reference points. In this opening religious service, the group ‘selected one of the hymns of our national church.’ They called their new settlement Glen-Lynden, using a name that recalled the Scottish landscape. ‘It was, indeed, an affecting sight to look round on our little band of Scottish emigrants, then congregated for the first time to worship God in the wild glen allotted for their future home and the heritage of their offspring.’<sup>36</sup> Later, they would give ‘Scotch’ names to other features of the region.

---

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Pringle to John Fairbairn, Edinburgh, 28 Oct. 1819, in Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters of Thomas Pringle*, 5-6: Original in Brent Library, Johannesburg, MS 7205 ff140-1.

<sup>32</sup> On the explosion of Anglo settler colonialism after the end of the Napoleonic wars: James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The settler revolution and the rise of the Anglo world, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Compare: Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), on ways in which earlier anti-slavery arguments summoned up Sierra Leone as imagined utopian space in the late eighteenth century.

<sup>33</sup> Kirsten McKenzie, “‘Franklins of the Cape’: The “South African Commercial Advertiser” and the creation of a colonial public sphere,” *Kronos*, 25 (1998/99), 88-102. See also: Kirsten McKenzie, *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town, 1820-1850* (Carleton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> As Shum also points out: Shum, *Improvisations of Empire*, 40.

<sup>35</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 34.

<sup>36</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 36; Matthew P. Dziennik, *The Fatal Land: War, empire and the Highland soldier in British America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

Pringle's group was unusual in being Scottish, as the majority of the 1820 settlers were English. The party was 'consigned' to the landdrost, Andries Stockenström, who referred to the group in his later autobiography as 'the Scotch party under the Poet Thomas Pringle.'<sup>37</sup> As the head of the party, Pringle accepted the initial proposal of the Acting Governor Sir Rufane Donkin that all incoming Scottish settlers be located together 'in the mountainous country watered by some of the eastern branches of the Great Fish River, and lying adjacent to the Caffer [Xhosa] frontier.' These settlers would have included Pringle's party, as well as two other Scottish groups still on their way out, one of some five hundred Highlanders, and another smaller party from the west of Scotland. Donkin proposed that a separate town to be named New Edinburgh be built nearby with a resident magistrate and clergyman of the Scottish church, while the Highlanders were to be 'formed into a body of local militia, for the defence of that part of the frontier,' possibly reflecting stereotypes about the supposed martial characteristics of Highland men and their long history as imperial soldiers.<sup>38</sup> Pringle's group accepted this proposal rather than settle among the 'English emigrants' nearer the coast. The idea of a large Scottish settlement did not, however, come to fruition; the Scottish highlanders were dispersed elsewhere, while the smaller group died in a shipwreck. Donkin therefore would later offer to the group the chance to move. They decided to stay, but successfully asked for more land in order to carry out pastoralism like their Afrikaner neighbours. They eventually had some 20,000 acres, 'fully more than we could immediately occupy or adequately stock': the munificence of the gift only underscored the extent of the dispossession of the Xhosa.<sup>39</sup> At least in the short term, the group maintained a Scottish identity in South Africa, lent cohesion by settling separately and in a self-directed community.

Scottish identity was clearly important to Pringle. Like Scott, Pringle wrote Scottish historical poetry and decried the wrongs done to the covenanters and other Scottish historical figures.<sup>40</sup> He also expected Scots to stick together.<sup>41</sup> In his autobiography, for example, Pringle recounted that when his party landed at Algoa Bay in the Eastern Cape, the soldiers who assisted them included Highland soldiers who helped to pull surf-boats to shore. He wrote proudly that, approaching the highlanders, he 'spoke

---

<sup>37</sup> Andries Stockenström, *The Autobiography of the Late Sir Andries Stockenström, Bart, sometime Lieutenant-Governor of the Eastern Province of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope*, ed. C.W. Hutton (Cape Town: J.C. Juta and Co., 1887), I, 171.

<sup>38</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, pp. 106-7.

<sup>40</sup> Shum, *Improvisations of Empire*.

<sup>41</sup> Angus Calder, "Thomas Pringle (1789-1834): A Scottish poet in South Africa," *English in Africa*, 9, 1 (1982), 1-13.

to them in broad Scotch, and entreated them to be careful of their country folks, especially the women and children.’ According to Pringle’s account, a ‘weather-beaten stalwart corporal responded “Scotch folk! Are they? [...] never fear, sir, but we sal be carefu’ o’ them”.’<sup>42</sup>

Pringle appears to have been aided in his quest to make settler colonialism virtuous by a sense of the Scots as particularly appropriate settlers, shaped by their long history of emigration and colonization. If lowlanders emigrated less frequently than highlanders, they were still mobile. They might also claim colonial credit from experience with ‘taming’ the highlands and reducing border violence. Furthermore, it is possible that a more assimilationist model of colonialism was familiar to the Scots who used family alliances with Indigenous peoples in North America to their own economic advantage. Pringle also brought to his analysis of abuses in southern Africa the tools of Scottish enlightenment theory, including stadial theory and Adam Smith’s stress on empathy as the defining characteristic of the civilized man.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, Pringle’s support for oral history and tendency to ventriloquize the voices of the suffering other drew on the work of elite Scottish artists and intellectuals ventriloquizing the voices of the Scottish poor, notably that of his own patron, Sir Walter Scott.<sup>44</sup>

More substantively, Scottish identity appears to have facilitated important political alliances for Pringle. A particularly crucial relationship was with fellow Lowland Scotsman John Philip, the activist African superintendent of the London Missionary Society, who spearheaded the struggle for Khoekhoe rights at the Cape. Philip played a central role in helping Buxton to coordinate the Select Committee on Aborigines, providing extensive expert testimony and (in a doubtless significant conflict of interest) helping to write the first iteration of the committee’s report. Another crucial Scottish alliance for Pringle was with his friend, John Fairbairn, another Lowlander, whom Pringle persuaded to come over from Scotland to work with him on founding a school and running a literary magazine. A small group mostly of Scotsmen would eventually try to take down the English aristocrat Lord Charles Somerset, who might be taken as a symbol of a corrupt aristocratic regime. In this sense, Pringle’s career also illuminates the pan-imperial trend of settler liberalism to challenge older aristocratic authoritarianism in the early nineteenth

---

<sup>42</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> As Smith argues in: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: A. Millar, 1759).

<sup>44</sup> I am grateful to Andrew MacKillop for this suggestion.

century, but also reminds us of the potential value of cross-cutting ethnic identities and social bonds in this process.<sup>45</sup>

There are, nevertheless, significant limits to a stress on Pringle's Scottishness. Pringle was very much a Scotsman in interaction with the English. He took part in a settlement scheme run from London, for example, while he played a key role in English politics in his abolitionist career in the metropole. He was a Scottish patriot but hardly a nationalist. He wrote in English rather than using Scots and aimed at a pan-British audience. This too, however, typified Scottish engagement with empire. Nonetheless, he was part of a large Scottish diaspora that retained a Scottish identity in the colonies, and he saw the colonial world through a Scottish lens.

In a pamphlet that he published in 1824 appealing for funds to help relieve the impoverished 1820 settlers, who had found great difficulties in farming the Eastern Cape, Pringle distinguished between English and Scottish settlers. The English, he observed, tended to build neat and attractive dwellings but were not as practical or as effective as the Scots. The 'English settlers' at the Cape had built appealing houses that were clearly under the flood line and apt to be swept away in storms. In contrast, Scottish settlers were practical and able to work out what best to do, whatever their occupations before becoming colonists; they did, however, Pringle conceded, tend to wait too long before turning to the embellishment of their environment. Indeed, Pringle cast his appeal for funds as an appeal to help to feckless *English*, who had neither the necessary experience of being farmers to help them nor, it would appear, Scottish common sense: the book was called *Some Account of the English Settlers*<sup>46</sup>

## CRITICIZING COLONIALISM

Despite the language of a God-given settlement in the wilderness, the region of southern Africa in which Pringle's family attempted to rebuild their lives had in fact relatively recently been taken from the Xhosa.<sup>47</sup> Pringle eventually came to argue that coexistence with the Xhosa was possible but that settlers consistently stole Xhosa cattle and violently attacked them, in part through the mechanism of the police and the commando system, even as the British state sent the army to invade Xhosa land, destroy foodstuffs and

---

<sup>45</sup> On aristocratic empire, see: C.A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>46</sup> Pringle, *Some Account of the English Settlers*.

<sup>47</sup> In addition to works cited in note 23 above, see also: Julia Wells, *The Return of Makhanda: Exploring the legend* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2012).

indiscriminately shoot men, women and children. Pringle also came to appreciate that Africans were forced into servitude by a variety of mechanisms.

I am persuaded by Matthew Shum's argument that Pringle probably became more critical of colonialism as time went on, rather than arriving with a set of pre-formed convictions, although conversely I would argue that Pringle shaped the British abolitionist perspective on South Africa as much as he was shaped by it.<sup>48</sup> Pringle may have initially understood the considerable abuses to which he witnessed with increasing fervour as a product of immoral colonists. Nonetheless, he did come to develop a structural critique of what might now be termed rights abuses that were inevitably intertwined with a certain way of practising colonialism that lent too heavily on assumptions of settler virtue.

According to his own narrative, Pringle was suspicious from the outset of at least some of his fellow settlers. On the same day on which he applauded the 'national sympathies' of the highland soldiers, for example, he also commented with dramatic foreshadowing on a number of people who had been brought out as servants to the better-off settlers and who were set up in their own tents on shore. They included 'numerous groups of pale-visaged artisans and operative manufacturers, from London and other large towns, of whom doubtless a certain proportion were persons of highly reputable character and steady habits, but a far larger portion were squalid in their aspect, slovenly in their attire and domestic arrangements, and discontented and uncourteous in their demeanour.'<sup>49</sup> Pringle's concerns about inappropriate settlers were echoed by his fellow Scotsman John Philip, the superintendent of the London Missionary Society (LMS). In 1820, Philip similarly expressed a preference for sturdy rural artisans over discontented and unhealthy urban factory workers as settlers, writing to the directors of the LMS that the settlers that the British government was bringing to the Cape Colony should ideally be rural Highlanders with 'sober and industrious habits' rather than 'dissipated Mechanics whose political principles have been acquired in the Schools of Sedition.'<sup>50</sup> Underlying these views in both cases seems to have been a particular idealized vision of a contented Scottish peasantry.

Pringle came to see himself as providing a voice to oppressed Africans and in so doing bringing truth and justice to southern Africa. In an unfinished poem, 'Glen Lynden,' written in 1824, Pringle apostrophised the river Teviot of his Scottish home, 'famed by

---

<sup>48</sup> Shum, *Improvisations of Empire*, 46 and *passim*.

<sup>49</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 12-13

<sup>50</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, Philip Papers, s. 216, 119-20: Philip to Hankey, 15 August 1820, cited in: Tim Keegan, *Dr. Philip's Empire: One man's struggle for justice in nineteenth-century South Africa* (Cape Town: Zebra Books, 2016), 39-40.

mighty Scott in deathless lays.’ He concluded, however, that his path now lay in Africa, a land of ‘foul oppression, fraud and wrong’ practiced on Africans by Christian Europe. The final verse proclaimed:

Adieu, soft lays, to love and fancy dear:  
 Let darker themes a sterner verse inspire,  
 While I attune to strains that tyrants fear  
 The louder murmurs of the British lyre,—  
 And from a loftier altar ask the fire  
 To point the indignant line with heavenly light,  
 (Though soon again in darkness to expire!)  
 That I may blast Oppression's cruel might,  
 By flashing TRUTH'S full blaze on deeds deep hid in night!<sup>51</sup>

Pringle again linked his imagination of a virtuous Scotland to the duty to reform evil and resist oppression in Africa. Tellingly, he persuaded Sir Rufane Donkin, the acting governor, to rename Bavian’s River, where their settlement was located, ‘Teviotdale.’

Nonetheless, Pringle and his party quickly became part of a frontier system. The ‘frontier’ districts of the Eastern Cape had their own brutal interior logic. Pringle deplored the humanitarian disasters that flowed from this logic, but he still participated in the system. Indeed, to some extent, he claimed authority to speak precisely because of his prior participation.

One fundamental part of that frontier logic was the need, or at least perceived need, for a significant number of labourers to maintain very large pastoral farms with large numbers of cattle and (as the century developed) sheep. This was the argument that lay behind the coercion of African labour. Farmers felt entitled to African labour. They asked for refugees to be distributed among them. They used vagrancy laws and apprenticeship legislation to keep workers tied to farms and to bind their children to farmers, in this way entrapping entire families. They used violence against Africans who were perceived as unwilling to work. They took in, or alternatively purchased, the children of people termed Bushmen who were killed in commando raids. This happened against the background of under-monetization; farmers in frontier regions rarely had the capital to purchase slaves

---

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Pringle, “Glen-Lynden. A tale of Teviotdale,” in *Friendship’s Offering: A literary album and Christmas and New Year’s present for 1829* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1829).

and they used Khoekhoe and San labour instead. A related part of this logic was the deployment of large numbers of workers at once who were to be attached to specific places and people, rather than bound through a wage economy.<sup>52</sup> This further reflected African clientage patterns, by which families and individuals might become clients of wealthier individuals, exchanging labour for sustenance.

Under this logic, Africans who entered the colony were assumed to be fair game for farmers. Such logic underlay a petition in 1826 from farmers in the neighbouring district of Uitenhage as they wrote to request that refugees from recent conflict, the so-called ‘Mantatees,’ might be distributed among the inhabitants of Uitenhage as labourers. The petition plaintively stated:

That the Inhabitants & Burghers of the District of Uitenhage are unable to proceed with the breeding of Cattle, Building & management of these Lands & which inability constantly increases, on account of the scarcity of servants & labourers, and memorialists are not possessed of the means to provide for this deficiency by the purchase of male and female slaves – They humbly pray therefore, convinced of the paternal regard of the Government, that it may please His Excellency to consider us in the same paternal light as the Inhabitants of the District of Graaff Reinett, Somerset & Graham’s Town, and to distribute also among us some of the savages called Mantatees, on good and reasonable conditions, so that we may obtain assistance – And they the necessary food, clothing and civilization, as is the case in the above mentioned districts.<sup>53</sup>

The exchange of labour for minimal maintenance and ‘civilization’ exemplified farmers’ self-understanding as paternalists who were owed labour. Labourers also included

---

<sup>52</sup> See: Susan Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier, 1760-1803* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); numerous essays in: Elizabeth Eldredge and Fred Morton (eds.), *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labour on the Dutch frontier* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020; first published 1994); Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, missions and the contest for Christianity in Britain and the Eastern Cape, 1799-1852* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002); Nigel Penn, “The British and the ‘bushmen’: The massacre of the Cape San, 1795-1828,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 15, 2 (2013), 183-200; Jared McDonald, “‘Like a wild beast, he can be got for the catching’: Child forced labour and the ‘taming’ of the San along the Cape’s north-eastern frontier, c.1806–1830,” in *Genocide on Settler Frontiers: When hunter-gatherers and commercial stock farmers clash*, Mohammed Adhikari (New York: Berghahn, 2015).

<sup>53</sup> Western Cape Archives, Cape Town, CO 3932, #392, ff. 63-7: Memorial from E.J. Potgieter and fifteen others, Wolve Kop, 28 July 1826. The colonial term ‘Mantatees’ was derived from the name of the regent Mnathatisi of the Tlokwa.



Africans, notably Khoekhoe men and San war captives, who were expected to provide military protection arising from settler claims to African land.

Khoekhoe servants helped the Scots build and maintain a new settlement. They also hunted for food. Pringle paid them in cash but protested that it was hard to make them work.<sup>54</sup> Almost immediately upon arrival, however, he also applied for, and was granted, an armed guard of men from the Khoekhoe regiment, the Cape Corps. In requesting this guard, he wrote on June 30, 1829 to William Harding, Deputy Landdrost of the new district of Cradock, that he lived in constant fear of attack. His group had only ten men able to bear firearms, of which only three or four were experienced.

The nearest Boor's house is eight or ten miles off, and he only resides there occasionally. The Caffers [Xhosa] and Bushmen are known to be frequently roving in this neighbourhood, and within the last fortnight cattle have been stolen from the vicinity of Roy Wall. In these circumstances we confess we do feel alarmed, for the safety of ourselves, our families and our property, unaccustomed as we are to such a situation and unacquainted with the arts of the enemies we have to apprehend.<sup>55</sup>

The soldiers were sent temporarily. The following year, the settlers added to their security by placing tenants in their settlement, some of whom were more or less inherited (in a context in which Khoekhoe people were obliged by law to live on a white farm or mission station and to carry passes signed by a master) from 'an old German settler of the name of Stollz' after the latter's death. Pringle described them as Stollz's 'vassals' who would otherwise have been dispossessed and lost their stock. 'A dozen families or more thus found a temporary settlement in our valley, some of whom, under the sheltering patronage of old Stolz, had accumulated considerable property.' Pringle wrote in his memoir that he had fought successfully to be allowed to employ them as tenants (reflecting a Scottish model), obliged to protect the settlement in exchange for land use but able to accumulate stock, rather than as indentured servants; this model broke with colonial convention although it arguably reflected a southern African principle of clientage. Indeed, almost a hundred years later, the first significant act of the Union parliament in 1913 would be to

---

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Pringle to Andries Stockenström, Teviotdale, Bavian's River, 7 Feb. 1821, in Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters*, 42-4; original in CA 1/GR/10/2/59.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Pringle to W.W. Harding, Bavian's River, 30 June 1820, in Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters of Thomas Pringle*, 20-22.

outlaw sharecropping and the sale of land to Africans in the Orange Free State in order to compel Africans to work as servants, not tenants.<sup>56</sup> Pringle himself seemingly interpreted his situation through the prism of Scottish history, recalling Scotland's own unsettled violent frontiers. He was, he wrote, 'in the novel situation of a petty "border chief", 'being able to muster upwards of thirty armed horsemen (including our own party and the six Hottentot soldiers) at an hour's notice.' The group was now secure from 'any serious attack from the wild natives in the vicinity.'<sup>57</sup> In sum, militarization was key to frontier survival.

Militarization also depended, however, on the capacity to accumulate dependents. Pringle participated in the scramble to obtain the services of 'Mantatee' refugees, writing to MacKay to request allotments of refugees for six households to work as farm servants, including for himself 'a single young man or boy of 14 years of age.'<sup>58</sup> Pringle may also have participated in the exchange of children for labour, as did Stockenström in ways I am still seeking to unravel. In 1821, Pringle wrote casually to Stockenström '[p]ermit me to remind you of your very obliging promise to look out for a Bosjesman boy for me. It would be indeed a greater favour than I can easily expect, particularly as my endeavours to employ Hottentot servants have hitherto been entirely unsuccessful.'<sup>59</sup> It is not clear to me whether these 'Bosjesman' (Bushman or San) children would have been the victims of armed attacks that killed their parents, and what Pringle knew at this point about the trade in captive children. For his part, Stockenström tried to prevent both Africans and whites who attacked the San from killing women and children as well as men but this may have involved placing these children with appropriate masters, at least in the 1810s and early 1820s. In 1817, for example, a London Missionary Society agent, Robert Hamilton, recorded Stockenström on a trip beyond colonial territory trying to persuade Tswana groups who also attacked and killed San cattle raiders to hand children over to him rather than killing them.<sup>60</sup> Stockenström also intervened around this time to seize two San girls, whom he described in a later report as 'unfortunate (supposed) Orphans,' from a Dutch trader named Jacobus Theron who planned, Stockenström claimed, to traffic them. Stockenström placed the children instead with 'persons on whose humanity and good

---

<sup>56</sup> As the Tswana writer Sol Plaatje observed in protest: Sol Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa: Past and present* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1916).

<sup>57</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 112-4.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Pringle to W.M. Mackay, Somerset, 25 July 1825, in Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters*, 198.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Pringle to Andries Stockenström, Teviotdale, Bavian's River, 7 Feb. 1821, in Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters*, 44.

<sup>60</sup> School of Oriental and African Studies, London, Council for World Mission Archives, LMS-SA: Journal of Robert Hamilton, Aug. 1820.

treatment' he could rely, who would supposedly give them a good home.<sup>61</sup> Many of these distinctions between enslavement and the respectable fostering of children might have seemed clearer to the participants than they do today. Labour coercion through 'kinship,' child adoption and 'apprenticeship' was so deeply entrenched in the region that even an ardent abolitionist seemingly missed many of the implications.

Pringle was in fact granted a 'Mantatee' refugee in the shape of an orphaned five year-old boy named Hinza Morossi. Pringle and his wife Margaret were childless. Merging complicated currents of labour coercion, kinship, and affection, the Pringles adopted Morossi, who accompanied them back to England. There he died of a 'pulmonary' complaint – another child lost in an imperial sea.<sup>62</sup>

Frontier logics also included the use of commandos. Commandos were militia groups of armed and mounted men. At this particular time and place they often included members of the Cape Mounted Rifles who were posted on the frontier and had white officers and Khoekhoe soldiers. Commandoes were usually organized by local officials at the request of settlers and were sent out to combat cattle theft as well as to quell aggressive conflict with the San (so-called 'Bushmen'), the hunter gatherers who had originally occupied much of what was by now the Cape Colony and who had been pushed by both whites and African farmers onto more arid land beyond colonial frontiers. On several occasions, Pringle and his group called out commandos against groups defined by Pringle as 'Bushmen,' despite the fact that Pringle decried the injustice and violence of what he later called the 'commando system.' Indeed, Pringle commented in a letter to a friend on the irony that he was being attacked by Bushmen even as he was writing to defend them. It is telling, however, that he cast the local belligerents as landless 'Banditti' who were without a core nationality and therefore were less worthy of protection. As he wrote to W.M. Mackay on June 30, 1825, '[y]ou are of course aware that one or more bands of predatory Bushmen and Hottentots have for some years found a lurking place in the unoccupied Country lying between this river and the Caffer frontier; and that frequent depredations and many murders have been committed by them upon the inhabitants of the Tarka and the Bavian's River.'<sup>63</sup> Pringle described these 'bands' as made up of diverse

---

<sup>61</sup> National Archives (UK), London, CO 48/99: Andries Stockenström to Cape Fiscal, Graaff Reinet, 27 June 1825 (copy), enclosed in "Report of the fiscal on the memorial of Jacobus Theron addressed by him to His Majesty's Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs," ff. 63-70.

<sup>62</sup> Shum, *Improvisations of Empire*, 145-6.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Pringle to W.M. Mackay, Eildon, Bavian's River, 30 June 1825 in Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters*, 193.

people and living from raiding.<sup>64</sup> This put these ‘Bushmen’ in a different category from those described by Philip as occupying ‘Bushmanland’ who implicitly had claims to the country.<sup>65</sup> The approach reflects difficulties with claims about Indigenous ‘rights’ tied to occupying a specific territory and possessing a legibly stable identity through time. As Pringle wrote, ‘whatever may be said of the justice of attacking the Bushman kraals in their own Country (in which doubtless much abuse and cruelty have sometimes occurred), – there cannot surely be a doubt either of the justice or necessity of extirpating (under proper guidance of course) a band of thieves and murderers from the territory ceded by the Caffers – a country in the first place, which were they even inoffensive Bushmen they can have no claim to occupy.’ These men were, however, runaway ‘Schelms’ from the colony, deserters from the Cape Corps and ‘other criminals.’<sup>66</sup> Pringle asked that they be removed, but he also asked for mercy, pleading that people not be killed but simply forced to surrender. From liberal Cape Town, Pringle’s friend John Fairbairn clearly criticized Pringle for ordering out a frontier commando. ‘Your denunciations against my Bushman Commandoes do not alarm me,’ Pringle wrote back jauntily. ‘There is no “damned spot” on my hands. But I am no quaker to turn my cheek to the smiter [...].’ He hoped instead, however, that Philip’s plans to re-establish missionaries among the San would prove that it was ‘better policy to convert than extirpate them.’<sup>67</sup> Pringle also sent a San skull taken by an Afrikaner neighbour from the battlefield to a phrenologist in Scotland, as part of a gentlemanly exchange of supposedly scientific knowledge.

Pringle’s exchange with Fairbairn about ‘my Bushman Commandoes’ came, however paradoxically, in the same letter in which Pringle pledged himself to the humanitarian cause. In it, he described a meeting of several days between himself and two men who would be crucial to later humanitarian campaigns in South Africa, namely Stockenström and Dr. John Philip of the LMS. Both men were developing plans to create treaties with the Xhosa. Pringle had brought the two together and was pleased to see them overcoming their previous differences as the three men pledged to work together. Indeed, Pringle later described this meeting at Stockenström’s house as a turning point in his own decision to dedicate his life to fighting injustice in South Africa, perhaps with an eye to the conventions of the conversion narrative. At the very end of his life in 1834, he wrote to Thomas Fowell Buxton’s daughter Priscilla that his projected return to the Cape Colony

---

<sup>64</sup> Compare Rachel King, *Outlaws, Anxiety and disorder in southern Africa: Material histories of the Maloti-Drakensburg* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>65</sup> Philip, *Researches in South Africa*.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Pringle to W.M. Mackay, Eildon, Bavian’s River, 30 June 1825 in Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters*, 194.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Pringle to John Fairbairn, Graaff Reinet, 5 Aug. 1825 in Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters*, 200.

would enable him to continue this life's work: 'Nevertheless, if God in his goodness see fit to restore me to health, I do not mean to be idle on the Caffer frontier. The Cause of the African must, while I live, be my [deepest?] concern - & alas! there is enough to do.'<sup>68</sup>

It would be wrong to describe Pringle as completely hypocritical. His argument, rather, was that it was impossible to live on a frontier and not become complicit. He commented to Fairbairn in another letter, for example, that he had become 'bloody' like those around him.<sup>69</sup> This echoed the argument of abolitionists that slavery inevitably corrupted slaveowners and therefore that slaveowners were also, in a sense, victims of slavery; indeed Pringle made the comparison explicitly and claimed that settlers were also damaged by colonialism. This in turn echoed a wider argument that empire corrupted Britain and that this corruption needed to be brought to an end, whether through ending slavery or making settler colonialism consensual and marked by treaties. Nicholas Dirks makes similar arguments about Edmund Burke's efforts to make empire moral in his attempted impeachment (over seven years) of the first Governor-General of the domains of the East India Company, Warren Hastings.<sup>70</sup>

Pringle's simultaneous embeddedness and distance echoed that of Stockenström, one of his closest collaborators (despite occasional lapses in trust), who was seemingly the source of much of his information about the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape, including direct evidence that the British military committed war crimes as well as Xhosa political perspectives on recent conflict. Stockenström provided key testimony to the Select Committee on Aborigines and would be tapped by the Colonial Office under the reformist Lord Glenelg to construct a system of treaties between colonists and Xhosa chiefs in the Eastern Cape. Born in a frontier district, Stockenström had participated since his youth in commandoes to recover cattle. His own father had been killed by Xhosa warriors during a frontier war, after having surrendered himself to the Xhosa camp in order to negotiate. There was an eerie parallel with the later British murder of a Xhosa chief, Hintsá, in their own camp for diplomatic negotiations in 1834, which Stockenström would do much to publicise in Britain.<sup>71</sup> Stockenström's aims are sometimes murky. He seems to have been

---

<sup>68</sup> Oxford University library, MSS Brit.emp.114, papers of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, vol. 13: Thomas Pringle to Priscilla Buxton, 6 Portman Street, 16 Oct. 1834.

<sup>69</sup> Vigne (ed.), *South African Letters*, 192; Shum, *Improvisations of Empire*, 41.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Scandal of Empire: India and the creation of imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> See also: Premesh Lalu, *The Deaths of Hintsá: Post-Apartheid South Africa and the shape of recurring pasts* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2009).

driven, in the end, by a desire to halt the cycles of violence which had shaped his own life, however much he himself participated in violence.<sup>72</sup>

Stockenström both supported Pringle and influenced his views. Nonetheless, whereas the London humanitarians tended to present Africans as innocent victims of colonial attacks, Stockenström was more equivocal. For example, Stockenström considered that the San were the victims of what might today be termed genocidal warfare but largely because they were squeezed between the Griqua and the Tswana. As he put it in his autobiography, the ‘Bojesmen’ were, in his view, ‘perhaps the most unfortunate beings under the sun. The most cheering reflection (if nothing can be done towards the amelioration of their state) would be, that the persecutions of the two tribes just mentioned will, if they be allowed to continue, in a few years put an end to their miseries by extirpation of their race.’<sup>73</sup>

## LEAVING THE EASTERN CAPE

Pringle was not happy to live permanently as a farmer. His lameness was also a factor in making it hard to live from manual labour. After spending two years farming at Glen-Lynden, Pringle moved to Cape Town. There he took up a position as Librarian of the South African Library and attempted to resume the type of literary career that he had had in Scotland, where he had a reputation as a poet and had worked as an editor. He nonetheless maintained good contacts with settlers on the Eastern Cape frontier, not least through his family connections. There is not space here to go into detail about Pringle’s well-studied Cape Town career. Suffice it to say, that at the Cape he co-founded South Africa’s first independent newspaper later followed by the more durable *The South African Commercial Advertiser*, both in conjunction with John Fairbairn. The two also founded a school and a literary society. These were classic liberal moves, in an era in which liberalism was identified with education and social mobility. Reflecting wider struggles, the duo rapidly ran afoul of the Governor of the Cape Colony, authoritarian and blue-blooded in equal parts, Lord Charles Somerset, who was a younger son of the powerful and wealthy Beaufort family. Somerset objected in principle to the existence of newspapers that were not under government control and attempted to close Pringle and Fairbairn down. Somerset also interfered in the efforts of the duo to set up their school to the point that they were compelled to shut it down. Pringle became an implacable enemy

---

<sup>72</sup> Stockenström, *Autobiography of the Late Sir Andries Stockenström*, 2 vols (Cape Town: J.C. Juta and Co, 1887).

<sup>73</sup> Stockenström, *Autobiography of the Late Sir Andries Stockenström*, I, 190.

of Somerset. So too did John Philip, as Somerset attempted to shut down the mission stations of the London Missionary Society. This reflected struggles happening elsewhere in both Britain and in the settler colonial world. Conflict over the liberal virtues of information exchange and government transparency merged with attacks on the old regime's maltreatment of Indigenous peoples who would be, it was argued, far better treated in a liberal political regime marked by economic exchange and the opening up of political benefits.

In the face of personal economic crisis, Pringle returned to Britain in 1827 to rebuild his shattered fortunes and defend his reputation. He was quickly named secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. Back in Britain, he also wrote a memoir called *African Sketches*, published in 1834 and later republished in 1835 as *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa*. In this memoir he devoted sections to the Khoekhoe ("Hottentots"), the Xhosa, and the San, in all cases outlining extensive colonial abuses in frontier districts. Such abuses included many murders of Xhosa people by settlers and by the army. Pringle further claimed that Somerset lied about Xhosa belligerency and tried to provoke war in order to create a position for his son. In essence, he described Somerset's complicity with what might today be termed ethnic cleansing. Pringle also made policy suggestions. In its first guise as *African Sketches*, the book included two hundred pages of poems, dedicated to Sir Walter Scott, many of which took up the issue of injustice against Africans, from a colonial perspective.

Interestingly, and famously, Pringle wrote relatively favourably in his *Narrative* about the Xhosa war leader Makhanda (nicknamed Nxele), who led an attack on Grahamstown and was then imprisoned on Robben Island; he drowned while trying to escape with other prisoners in a makeshift boat, but many Xhosa continued to anticipate his return.<sup>74</sup> Pringle described the Xhosa as goaded into action by British injustice. The previous war of 1811-12 had been a brutal conflict in which British troops swept the Xhosa from their land and waged warfare through starvation policies, including stealing cattle and forcing the Xhosa to leave their corn, and slaughtering people to make them vacate their lands. In describing that earlier war, Pringle stated 'I have now lying before me a journal kept during that campaign by my friend Mr Hart, who was then a lieutenant in the Cape Regiment. From this it appears that the Caffers were shot indiscriminately, women as well as men, wherever found, and even though they offered no resistance.'<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Wells, *The Return of Makhanda*.

<sup>75</sup> Pringle, *African Sketches*, 423.

He also detailed the atrocities carried out by the British in revenge after Makhanda war: ‘the villages of the hostile clans were burnt, their cattle carried off, their fields of maize and millet trodden down, and the inhabitants of all classes, driven into the thickets, were there bombarded with grape-shot and Congreve-rockets.’<sup>76</sup> In the hope of bringing peace, Makhanda surrendered himself, in an act that Pringle described as selfless and manly. In a typically dense nest of references, Pringle recorded the notes of Stockenström who had received Makana’s surrender and in turn took down notes from a speech made by one of Makhanda’s companions; Pringle thus ventriloquized a Xhosa victim, recounting the Xhosa side of the war. ‘You sent a commando – you took our last cow – you left only a few calves, which died for want, along with our children. You gave half the spoil to Gaika; half you kept yourselves. Without milk, - our corn destroyed, - we saw our wives and children perish – we saw that we must ourselves perish; we followed, therefore, the tracks of our cattle into the colony. We plundered and we fought for our lives.’<sup>77</sup>

Even more surprisingly, perhaps, Pringle directly assumed Makhanda’s voice in a famous poem called ‘Makanna’s Gathering,’ in which, it is worth noting, he used the term ‘Amakosa’ [‘amaXhosa’] to describe the Xhosa in their own terminology, rather than the colonial term ‘Caffre,’ and commented on Xhosa beliefs and language. The poem begins:

Wake! Amakosa, wake!  
 And arm yourselves for war.  
 As coming winds the forest shake,  
 I hear a sound from far:  
 It is not thunder in the sky,  
 Nor lion’s roar upon the hill.  
 But the voice of HIM who sits on high,  
 And bids me speak his will!

It continues:

He bids me call you forth,  
 Bold sons of Kahabee,

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 433.

<sup>77</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 436.



To sweep the White Men from the earth  
 And drive them to the sea:  
 The sea, which heaved them up at first,  
 For Amakosa's curse and bane,  
 Howls for the progeny she nurst,

In footnotes, Pringle commented at length on various usages in Xhosa as well as Xhosa genealogies. In the poem itself, ventriloquizing Makhanda gave Pringle an unusual licence to imagine a world in which violent opposition to settlers was the ethical choice. 'Hark now tis Uhlanga's voice/' (glossed by Pringle as God's voice), 'From Debe's mountain caves!/ He calls you now to make your choice -/ To conquer or be slaves.'<sup>78</sup>

This sympathetic ventriloquizing of the voice of an African resistance hero, as Makhanda now tends to be seen, sits oddly with Pringle's final assertion in his memoir that Africans would be happy to be part of the empire. As Pringle wrote in arguing that many Africans would be eager to come under the protection of the British empire: 'The Native Tribes, in short, are ready to throw themselves into our arms. Let us open our arms cordially to embrace them as MEN and as BROTHERS. Let us enter upon a new and nobler career of conquest. Let us subdue Africa by JUSTICE, by KINDNESS, by the talisman of CHRISTIAN TRUTH.'<sup>79</sup> This conquest via justice, truth and brotherhood might lead to actual territorial expansion, albeit via agreement rather than bloodshed. 'Let us thus go forth, in the name and under the blessing of God, gradually to extend the moral influence, and, if it be thought desirable, the territorial boundary also of our Colony, until it shall become an Empire, embracing Southern Africa from the Keisi and the Gareep to Mozambique and Cape Negro – and to which, peradventure, in after days, even the equator shall prove no ultimate limit.'<sup>80</sup>

This may not be such a contradiction as it seems, however. At the most basic level, Pringle in his memoir as well as in an article circulated in Britain described Makhanda not as a distant savage but as a person who had been interested in European technology, was friendly with missionaries and had experimented with Christianity; he was in fact a commoner interested in self-education.

---

<sup>78</sup> "Makanna's Gathering," in Pringle, *African Sketches*, 53.

<sup>79</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, 341.

<sup>80</sup> Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence* 341-2.

Before the present war broke out, he was in the habit of frequently visiting the British head quarters at Graham's Town and had evinced an insatiable curiosity and an acute intellect on such subjects as fell under his observation. With the military officers he talked of war, or of such of the mechanical arts as fell under his notice; but his great delight was to converse with Mr. Vanderlingen, the chaplain, to elicit information in regard to the doctrines of Christianity, and to puzzle him in return with metaphysical subtleties or mystical ravings.<sup>81</sup>

He had become a leader, a teacher and a prophet who used Christian teachings to develop his own views, eventually terming himself the brother of Christ. This was clearly not a program of which Pringle approved, but he appears to have admired Makhanda's brilliance in putting it into action. More broadly, many colonial critics of the 1820s and early 1830s believed sincerely that Indigenous people in many contexts would gladly enter into voluntary union with the British and thus become part of the British empire. It seems arguable, as Matthew Wyman-McCarthy among others has suggested in his PhD thesis, that abolitionism was part of an imperial reform movement to make the empire more moral and thus more robust.<sup>82</sup> This claim appears all the more plausible when Pringle's abolitionism is placed side by side with his writings about southern Africa. The empire was a big tent movement, which might bring benefits to Scots and Xhosa alike, if properly managed.

Back in Britain, Pringle mobilized both his anti-slavery and his colonial networks to publish *The History of Mary Prince* in 1831. The process of production was also one of appropriation of voice: Prince dictated her story to Susanna Strickland. Strickland would later marry a Moodie, from a Scottish family with whom Pringle had been associated in South Africa. As Susanna Moodie, she would go on to write a Canadian classic of settler colonial writing, *Roughing it in the Bush*. The ties between settler colonialism and abolitionism are neatly encapsulated in this trajectory. It is worth noting that another Moodie in South Africa, Donald Moodie, whom Canby Malherbe has suggestively described as South Africa's first oral historian, took down oral evidence from Africans also in the early 1830s, first to investigate human rights abuse against Khoekhoe farm labourers, albeit later to the end of suggesting that Africans also participated in

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 296-7

<sup>82</sup> Matthew Wyman-McCarthy, *Rethinking Global Empire: The imperial origins and legacies of British abolitionism, c. 1783-1807* (Unpublished PhD diss., McGill University, 2015).

intense violence. In the process he garnered compelling oral testimonies about physical violence that were also then copied and placed into international circulation by another humanitarian activist with whom Pringle worked, a former Attorney General of New South Wales, Saxe Bannister, in his book *Humane Policy*.<sup>83</sup> My argument here is that Pringle and his circle put Black voices into transnational circulation but through the mediation of settler colonialism. Pringle in particular was responsible for multiple circulating stories that evoked empathy and deployed emotion in order to evoke sympathy for the suffering Black body.

A scrapbook of political sources compiled at the time of the Select Committee by either Priscilla Buxton (Buxton's daughter) or Anna Gurney (the partner of his sister and a cousin of his wife), including three letters from Pringle to Buxton as well as references to his feedback and advice, underscores how important Pringle was to framing the attack that the Select Committee would make on colonial policy in South Africa. The information Pringle gave to the Buxton circle was marked by very careful statements of provenance, in contrast to the different communication strategies of an emotional poem. Pringle outlined four representative cases of abuse of the 'commando system,' based in part on the possibility of finding corroborating witnesses in London. These cases included the casual murder of seven San people by 'Jacobson's Bushman Commando,' despite the fact that the men on commando knew that the San in question were not even those accused of stealing the cattle that the commando was seeking. On the way back, upon finding a San person sleeping in a kaross, the field commandant, 'without asking any questions, levelled his gun and fired. The caross heaved up – & an aged female in the agonies of death rolled out of it. The Commandant and his party passed on without taking any further notice.'<sup>84</sup> A second case was the murder of the Xhosa chief Sigcau and eight of his men while in the custody of a commando supposedly taking them to court where they wished to protest against cattle theft.

Pringle argued that almost all colonial functionaries and frontier settlers were complicit in the 'commando system':

---

<sup>83</sup> Saxe Bannister, *Humane Policy: Or, Justice to the aborigines of new settlements essential to a due expenditure of British money, and to the best interests of the settlers* (London: Thomas and George Underwood, 1830); V.C. Malherbe, "Donald Moodie: South Africa's pioneer oral historian," *History in Africa*, 25 (1998), 171-97; Elizabeth Elbourne "Sara Baartman and Andries Stoffels: Violence, law and the politics of spectacle in London and the Eastern Cape, 1809–1836," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 45, 3 (2011), 524-64.

<sup>84</sup> ATL 89-096-2 "Notes headed 'Pringle on Kaffir treatment 16 Jan. 1834'."

The frontier functionaries are almost to a man implicated in maintaining the Commando or vindictive system. The frontier settlers, with but few exceptions, are equally bent on its continuance; & they are generally so very unprincipled that most of them (I mean the Dutch-African Boors) will readily support by perjury the false representations they are ever ready to make. This may seem harsh – but I know them well, & can give sufficient proof of the justice of the assertion.

He also argued that this system had generally been overlooked: ‘neither Dr. Philip’s book, however, and the Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry (at least none of the reports printed) afford any distinct information respecting the operations of the Commando System as directed against the Caffer [Xhosa] tribes on the Eastern frontier.’<sup>85</sup> He cited the letters in the colonial press of the Xhosa chief Dyani Tshatshu as well as accounts from Xhosa chiefs themselves relayed in a series of letters in the *South African Commercial Advertiser* by visiting East India Company official ‘Mr. Bruce.’<sup>86</sup> This underscores the extent to which Xhosa leaders were also seeking to place information into circulation. In assessing the reliability of Bruce’s accounts, Pringle drew tellingly on the politics of the circulation of imperial reputation:

With Mr. Bruce personally I am entirely unacquainted; but my esteemed friend Mr Blair (who is also well known to you) assures me that Mr Bruce who was long & intimately known to him in India, is a man of high honour and integrity.<sup>87</sup>

He added that he himself had information from soldiers: when he lived on the frontier in 1820, 1822 and 1825 ‘several of the most questionable of these transactions were related to me by Officers who had been engaged in them – and substantially to the same effect as the statements of Mr. Bruce.’<sup>88</sup> Pringle benefited, it can only be assumed, from the presumed solidarity between white men, as white officers in the Cape Mounted Rifles told

---

<sup>85</sup> ATL 89-096-2 Thomas Pringle to Thomas Fowell Buxton, Holly Terrace Highgate, 19 Aug. 1833.

<sup>86</sup> The compiler of the portfolio included a lengthy extract from one of Tshatshu’s letters in the colonial press and commented on his many letters ‘in defence of the rights of his country men.’ On Dyani Tshatshu: Roger Levine, *A Living Man from Africa: Jan Tzatzoe, Xhosa Chief and Missionary, and the Making of Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>87</sup> On Bruce, see also: Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence*, p. 377 and *passim*.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

frontier stories. Pringle, however, brought frontier stories to the metropole, compelling a confrontation between the assumptions of different colonial spaces. In that vein, he called out Stockenström for allowing frontier violence to occur, most egregiously the ‘wanton slaughter’ of Sigcau and his men in June 1832 by a party under the leadership of P. Erasmus.<sup>89</sup> The case of the murder of Sigcau would become a centre piece of the evidence of murder that the Select Committee tried to uncover, with a number of local officials called to account (who in turn vigorously defended themselves); no charges would ultimately be laid.

Pringle himself did not see this committee come to fruition. He died prematurely, probably of tuberculosis, at the end of 1834 in a state of poverty. He tried to book a passage to the Cape Colony, where he hoped to recover his health, financed by abolitionist leaders Thomas Fowell Buxton and Zachary Macaulay, as well as by the charity of the Royal Literary Fund. He had, however, to disembark from the ship on which he was to sail because of illness. He died in London before he could book another passage. His role in curating evidence for the Select Committee on Aborigines was all the more obscured by his early death.

## CONCLUSIONS

In interacting with empire, Pringle did so as an insider-outsider, burning with a sense of injustice even as he himself profited from colonialism. It seems an apt metaphor for some of the paradoxes of Scottish empire. The importance of Scottishness of Pringle’s story was thus both central and yet unclear. Pringle interacted in the first instance with English imperial networks, for example, even as he exploited networks formed by a Scottish diaspora community, including information networks. Another sense in which Scottishness mattered was arguably in the role of print and of a burgeoning transnational print culture in Pringle’s life. He came from a society that valued literacy and he used his pen not to work as a farmer. He also participated in a Scottish-dominated evangelical culture that saw literacy as in itself a transformative tool in Africa, for better or for worse. This too was a key way in which Pringle and his circle might justify their role in colonialism: British settlement supposedly enabled the beneficial spread of civilization. In this, Pringle argued that Africa was like Scotland at a previous stage, deploying Scottish enlightenment stadial theory. And yet, the contradictions were hard to ignore. At the workface of empire, Pringle was endlessly optimistic and endlessly disappointed as he

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. The compiler of the scrapbook commented in the margin that Stockenström had explained and regretted the incident.

chronicled the grubby reality of police killings, cattle raiding and inexorable land theft of Eastern Cape borderlands. Abolition perhaps provided a safer route to bring together rights and humanitarianism, because former slaves were to be liberated into a supposedly more controlled society, in which colonialism in effect had already won.

This essay has suggested that Pringle was often trapped within settler colonial structures, in ways of which he was to some extent aware. Pringle consistently argued that the authorities at the Cape were brutal and inadequate stewards. The solution was, however, in large part to have better stewards. Rights language required better government from Britain that was capable of imposing order and redressing wrongs. Furthermore, African rights included the right to freedom from murder and physical abuse but not in all circumstances the right to self-government, even if Pringle was in fact sympathetic to at least some Xhosa claims. The paradigm that was developed by abolitionists, including Pringle, was pertinent to the ending of physical violence and enslavement but was more awkwardly applicable to colonialism. The temptation to support a strong state in response to perceived abuse is certainly an issue that continues to be important for contemporary debates about rights and indeed about humanitarian intervention. Pringle's ambivalences may have some pertinence for modern debates as well.