

Lessons on the frontier: aspects of Eastern Cape history*

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It is an honour to have been invited to deliver a key-note address to a conference on the Eastern Cape. My pleasure at being present is partly professional: like all the other delegates, I appreciate the opportunity of attending an ambitious inter-disciplinary gathering, and look forward to the discussions stimulated by so many fine papers. But my delight is also more personal. I am not quite a son of the soil. I was born in Vryburg, now in North-West Province. But from the age of four until the end of high school I lived in the Eastern Cape: my childhood and schooling were spent in Nqamakwe, Alice, Umtata, and Grahamstown. And whenever I now return to this region, I realise just how deeply inscribed in my unconscious, lodged in my neural channels, is the sense of place, *this* place. The Eastern Cape's rolling, folded hills, scored by deep river gorges, and stippled with aloe, acacia and euphorbia remains the most familiar, most natural, most credible landscape for me.

This conference invites us to consider historical legacies and contemporary challenges. While I shall refer briefly to some of the central themes of Eastern Cape history – its frontier identity, its brutal record of warfare and dispossession, its salience in the missionary encounter, its formative role in Afrikaner and African nationalism – the main focus of my remarks is the distinctive place of education. Nineteenth century colonists and twentieth century white English-speakers invested a great deal of cultural capital in replicating what they could of the metropolitan models, in both private and state schools.¹ But the salience of education is even greater for the African majority in the Eastern Cape. In Xhosa communities, being schooled or non-schooled assumed a decisive cultural significance. Schools like Lovedale, Blythwood, St Johns and Clarkebury ensured that the social identity of an educated African elite crystallised here earlier than anywhere else in southern Africa. This address concentrates on the particular contribution of the missionary boarding schools for Africans, and their turbulent twilight years; and on the unparalleled significance of the University of Fort Hare in the inter-war years. This is, after all, an appropriate emphasis for a conference co-sponsored by Fort Hare; and which takes place in East London, where the new Fort Hare campus will create the first urban historically African university in South Africa.

* This is a revised and expanded version of a key-note address to the conference on the Eastern Cape, 'Historical Legacies and New Challenges' held in East London in August 2003. I am grateful for readers' comments on the original version.

1. P. Randall, *Little England on the Veld: The English Private School System in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1982), esp. 55-59, 65-68.

The Eastern Cape as a frontier zone

For historians, an obvious and fundamentally important theme is the uneasy, edgy, indeterminate and complex identity of the Eastern Cape as borderland, as frontier. This liminal identity is rooted in physical geography and climate. Offshore, the confluence of the Benguela cold-water flows and wind systems with the warmer waters of the Mozambique current is the geophysical basis for its reputation as the Wild Coast. Consequently, the Eastern Cape straddles two rainfall zones: winter rainfall peters out grudgingly somewhere west of the Fish River; to its east, rains come in the spring and summer, with increasingly reliable rainfall levels as the Transkei nudges towards the sub-tropical east coast. And because of this transition, this blurred divide between different patterns of precipitation, the region as a whole is subject to climatic unpredictability, ecological diversity, and variable population capacities.

This physical divide had profound implications for the human geography and history of the region. Hunters and herders – Bushman and Khoi – had long traversed the more arid territory of the Karoo and southwestern coastal reaches; and from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Xhosa clans had begun to test the westerly limits of the 500 mm annual rainfall zone, running their herds, sowing their crops, establishing larger scale polities and denser settlement. Hunters, herders and mixed farmers traded, fought, and inter-married. The extent of their interaction can be traced in linguistic borrowings and in the genetic make-up and pigmentation of some Xhosa clans. Subsequently, these patterns of contact were disrupted and overlaid by others: by the pressures of trekboers in the eighteenth century on Khoisan peoples and then by competition over water, grazing land and cattle between boer and Xhosa. Finally, of course, British settlers and troops unleashed forces – cultural, economic and military – that shattered Xhosa society west and immediately east of the Kei river.

These overlapping population movements still resonate in placenames. Think of the rivers that drop from escarpment to coast, flowing either in full spate or dried to a trickle during the year's seasons, and almost all ending in an anticlimactic, bland, sandy embrace of the Indian Ocean. From west to east: Gamtoos, Swartkops, Sundays, Bushmans, Little Fish and Great Fish, Bavians, Koonap, Thyume, Klipplaat, Keiskamma, Buffalo, Kei, Mbashe – Khoi, Dutch, British, Khoi, Xhosa, British, Dutch, Xhosa – it is a gazetteer of flux and ethnic overlap. Or think of the immediate hinterland of this conference: the land between the Fish and Kei, hemmed in by the Winterberg and Amatolas. Once its inhabitants would have regarded it simply as part of *iXhoseni*, where the Xhosa lived, but subsequently it was known successively as the Neutral Zone, the Ceded Territory, Queen Adelaide Province, British Kaffraria (divided into Crown Reserve, Ngqika district and Ndlambe district, and less convincingly named as Yorkshire, Middlesex, Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire counties!), the Border, the Ciskeian Territories, and the Ciskei republic. This is the cartography of conquest, to be sure, but also a chronicle of compromise, accommodation and resistance.

The Eastern Cape then was 'a perverse, erratic climatic divide',² a borderland of settlement by successive waves of peoples and life-styles, and a military

marchland for over a century. It was also an economic frontier, a frontier of labour and commodities, a platform of missionary endeavour, and an arena of cultural contestation. These are enlarged upon below. But there is another way in which the metaphor of marginality is used – to express economic or developmental sidelining of the region. Etienne Nel writes of the ‘marginal or peripheral status of the province’; its economy dominated by two industrial cores with the rest of the province ‘a marginal hinterland’.³ William Beinart has recently challenged the view that marginality reaches back through time. He emphasises the dynamism and significance of the region’s pastoral economy in the nineteenth century, ‘a crossroads for new species, new agricultural techniques and new ideas.’⁴ Even so it is clear that economic marginality in the contemporary realities of poverty, male absenteeism, underemployment and instability are part of the historical legacy.

C.W. de Kiewiet was dismissive of the Eastern Cape frontier. ‘It was not a romantic frontier like the American West or heroic like the North-west of India.’⁵ It is an oddly unimaginative comment, and atypical, by a very fine historian. In de Kiewiet’s defence, he did not have access to the studies of the frontier wars by Ben McLennan, Jeff Peires, Noël Mostert and Tim Stapleton. Romantic may not be the first adjective prompted by their books, but violent, dramatic and tragic are essential and accurate terms. Without attempting anything like a summary here, a few comments may convey something of the escalation and intensification of military conflict during the nineteenth century, as the British imperial presence brought ‘superior organisation, command, drive and firepower’ to bear.⁶

The short, savage war of 1811 was the first in which the destruction of Xhosa crops, homesteads and herds – scorched earth with a vengeance – was a key strategic component. The war of 1834-5 ‘was the first true guerrilla war in terms the twentieth century [came] to understand,’⁷ in which the invader’s superior technology foundered and flailed against skilful use of terrain and tactics by the indigenous defenders. In 1846, the War of the Axe (or the War of the Boundary, as the Xhosa more accurately called it) was marked by new levels of popular vehemence and violence, on both sides. The settlers, smarting at their inability to drive home victory in 1835, wanted to win the war, confiscate Xhosa land, expel the Xhosas from conquered territory, and make it available instead for speculation and use by settlers.⁸

This mounting crescendo of killing and conquest reached its conclusion in a war which began in December 1850 and persisted viciously and inconclusively for 32 months. This was Mlanjeni’s War, or the eighth frontier war, described by

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2. N. Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa’s Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 945-6.
 3. E. Nel, *Regional and Local Economic Development in South Africa: The Experience of the Eastern Cape* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 67, 86.
 4. W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment, 1770-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), xvii.
 5. C.W. de Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa: Social and Economic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 48.
 6. Mostert, *Frontiers*, 390.
 7. *Ibid.*, 751.
 8. T. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa and the Origins of the Racial Order* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996), 215.

Jeff Peires as ‘the longest, hardest and ugliest war ever fought over one hundred years of bloodshed on the Cape Colony’s eastern frontier.’⁹ Mostert reminds us that it was the second longest war in South African history – and ‘the biggest single conflict between black men and white men south of the Sahara during the nineteenth century.’¹⁰ The Xhosa lost more combatants than the Zulu did a quarter of a century later; but their defeat was deeper, more disabling, more terminal than any shift in the military balance of power. It helped precipitate the cattle killing of 1856, and thus achieved the terminal dislocation of Xhosa society west of the Kei River (and with comparable impact on the Gcalekas east of the river).

The weight of British arms tilted the balance of power on the frontier, but the imperial presence came in mufti as well as in uniform. For too long the 1820 Settlers were the scholarly preserve of antiquarians and genealogists. In recent years Clifton Crais, Tim Keegan, Alan Lester¹¹ and others have reconceptualised the role and reach of English-speaking colonists on the eastern frontier. They have demonstrated how trading circuits developed in the 1820s ‘undermined Xhosa self-sufficiency, eroded chiefly prerogatives, and re-oriented economic activity to new patterns of production and consumption.’¹² They have shown how the settler elite domesticated a landscape, shaped a new social order, controlled the local state and created ‘an identity constructed around notions of racialised class, gender and nationhood.’¹³ In the last couple of decades, the ‘centre of gravity of South African historical research’ has shifted from the mineral revolution to earlier periods.¹⁴ There has been an impressive body of work on slavery and post-slavery;¹⁵ there is an energetic historiography around the convulsions in African societies in the early decades of the nineteenth century; and the historiography of the Eastern Cape has been equally dynamic. Recent scholarship on the eastern frontier includes innovative monographs as well as the powerful syntheses by Mostert and Keegan. It is a body of work, says Martin Legassick, that ‘makes a powerful case that important foundations of modern South Africa’s racial order were laid in the nineteenth-century Cape, and preceded the mineral revolution.’¹⁶

Other themes: missionaries, intelligentsia, nationalism

There are other strong themes in the history of the Eastern Cape. A linked cluster of topics includes the missionary presence, the nature of Cape liberal-

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9. J. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle Killing of 1856-7* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1989), 12.
 10. Mostert, *Frontiers*, 1077.
 11. C. Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-industrial South Africa: The Making of a Colonial Order in the Eastern Cape* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992); Keegan, *Colonial South Africa*; A. Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identity in Nineteenth Century South Africa and Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001).
 12. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa*, 131.
 13. Lester, *Imperial Networks*, 48.
 14. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa*, vii.
 15. For the Eastern Cape, see especially S. Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier, 1760-1803* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
 16. M. Legassick, ‘The State, Racism, and the Rise of Capitalism in the Nineteenth-century Cape Colony’, *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 28, May 1993, 329-368, 366.

ism, the emergence of a new literate black intelligentsia, and the strength in the Eastern Cape of African nationalism and a lineage of militancy. The salience of the missionary presence in the Eastern Cape scarcely needs demonstrating; and nor does the role of missionaries as agents of social and political change. Missionaries saw their task in spiritual terms, as the capture of souls; but their impact in the secular realm was to dissolve, erode and displace indigenous political, social and economic systems. The encounter between Xhosa and Christianity involved what the Comaroffs called ‘a long battle for the possession of salient signs and symbols, a bitter, drawn-out contest of conscience and consciousness.’¹⁷ It was ‘a battle over the very shape of everyday life.’¹⁸

But even while indigenous capacities were drained and old allegiances weakened, the dialectics of the encounter generated quite new capacities and created new possibilities of solidarity and leadership. André Odendaal (in *Vukani Bantu* but with greater detail and precision in his unpublished Ph.D.)¹⁹ has demonstrated how social, cultural and intellectual developments within the Eastern Cape’s African societies fostered a self-conscious and self-confident elite. Its members were socially mobile, ‘forcing the boundaries of the missionary education which had produced them.’²⁰ It was also an elite that established fragile but fascinating links with various popular constituencies, across ethnic and urban-rural divides. More work needs to be done on the nineteenth and twentieth century African intelligentsia, its networks, attitudes and consciousness. Consider this suggestive comment by Noni Jabavu:

All my elders were part of the net of people linked by professions, business, blood, and for many of them Lovedale was the *Alma Mater*, the cradle where they shared a social and political background inherited from earlier generations of Bokwes, Jabavus, Makiwanes and others ... It had been an all-embracing net when I was growing up.²¹

There is rich potential for the kind of collective biography that has been so effective in other societies. The first steps have been taken in Catherine Higgs’ respectful and solid biography of Noni’s father, D.D.T. Jabavu.

Another well-established strand of Eastern Cape history is the region’s role as the ‘cradle of African nationalism’. Much of the scholarly work on African nationalism – including Odendaal on the years before 1910, the survey by Peter Walshe, Gail Gerhart’s study of ideology, Leo Kuper on the Defiance Campaign

17. J. and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4.

18. Keegan, *Colonial South Africa*, 133.

19. A. Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu! The Beginnings of Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984); ‘African Political Mobilisation in the Eastern Cape, 1880-1910’ (Ph.D thesis, Cambridge University, 1983).

20. C. Higgs, *The Ghost of Equality: The Public Lives of D.D.T. Jabavu of South Africa, 1885-1959* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997), 12.

21. N. Jabavu, *The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life* (London: John Murray, 1963), 20-21.

22. Rather than attempting adequately to footnote this body of work, see instead excellent overviews of the literature in U. Özkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000); A.D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Oxford: Polity, 2001).

– was essentially empirical, an exercise in recovering a largely overlooked history. More recent surveys by Frederickse and Meli may politely be described as official history. There are a growing number of biographies of nationalist leaders. What do not yet exist are major studies of African nationalism in South Africa that draw critically upon the vigorous debates and important theoretical advances in recent comparative works on nationalism by Anderson, Breuilly, Gellner, Hobsbawm, Hroch, Nairn, Smith and others.²² Especially over the last two decades, work on nationalism has moved on from the ‘classic’ debates (ethnic vs. civic nationalism, organic vs. voluntarist, the modernity or antiquity of nations) and have tried to identify instead ‘the factors that lead to the continual production and reproduction of nationalism as a central discursive formation in the modern world.’²³

A rich vein of enquiry exemplified by Benedict Anderson (and his critics, such as Partha Chatterjee) pays specific attention to the ways in which nationalist identity is constructed, highlighting the centrality of cultural innovation, of creative imaginative ideological labour. And with virtual unanimity all the major historians of nationalism have stressed the active historical role of intellectuals. Nairn noted the need of the intelligentsia to build cross-class coalitions in opposition to external domination: ‘The new middle-class intelligentsia of nationalism had to invite the masses into history; and the invitation card had to be written in a language they understood.’²⁴ Nairn uses ‘language’ metaphorically; but the question of what language is available to nationalists is crucial to Benedict Anderson. He insisted that ‘the intelligentsia’s vanguard role derived from their bilingual literacy, or rather literacy and bilingualism.’ He continued:

Yet there is a characteristic feature of the emerging nationalist intelligentsia in the colonies ... Almost invariably they were very young, and attached a complex political significance to their youth ... Youth meant, above all, the *first* generation in any significant numbers to have acquired a European education, marking them off linguistically and culturally from their parents’ generation, as well from the vast bulk of their colonized agnates ... In the colonies, then, by ‘Youth’ we mean ‘Schooled Youth’, at least at the start.²⁵

Almost every word in this passage is directly relevant to the history of African education and African politics in the Eastern Cape. One is put immediately in mind of the role of the mission school network, the singular importance of Fort Hare, and the emergence of the ANC Youth League – and I will focus for the rest of my address on these aspects, drawing in part upon Govan Mbeki as an exemplar of his generation and class.

23. C. Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), 123.

24. T. Nairn, ‘The Modern Janus’, *New Left Review*, vol. 94, 1975, 12.

25. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991, 2nd edition, orig. 1983), 116, 118-9.

‘Calling the living to school’: mission boarding institutions

Nobody has stated more succinctly the relationship between the brute force of imperial conquest and the more subtle sway of colonial schooling than Kipling:

They terribly carpet the earth with dead, and before their cannon
cool They walk around by twos and threes, calling the living to
school.

Until the introduction of Bantu Education, almost the only schools that took pupils through to the Senior Certificate were high schools under mission control. Before the 1940s, these institutions were overwhelmingly concentrated in the Eastern Cape. Indeed, the cluster of Healdtown, Lovedale, St Matthews and Fort Hare ‘comprised the greatest concentration of well-educated black students in southern Africa’;²⁶ east of the Kei River Blythwood, Clarkebury and St Johns were further important centres.

It was a defining feature of the mission schools that they were boarding institutions. Attending them was not a daily engagement during class hours, shuttling between homestead and schoolroom and learning from each. It was a long term immersion in a rigorously planned and regulated environment, a submission to its criteria and a decisive rupture with life outside the school. In a real sense, the journey to boarding school was one to a different society. Lovedale, for example, struck Alexander Kerr when he first saw it as ‘the image in little of an organised community, with the recognizable elements of a simple society: church, schools, hospital, industries and farm.’²⁷

It was a closed society, set off from the unschooled by its architecture, its regimen, rules and routines. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, closed or total institutions like boarding schools set great store ‘on the seemingly most insignificant details of *dress, bearing, physical and verbal manners*.’²⁸ Those who ran the boarding schools were well aware that it was this closed or total character of the institutions that allowed them to create the desired subject – the educated native, loyal, orderly, rational, respectable and respectful of rank. The Warden of St Matthew’s College fretted in 1931:

When our students come back after a long holiday, or even after a month’s holiday in the middle of the year, we see a great change in their attitude ... we find that when they come back from their holidays that they have suffered so many pinpricks ... that I say, without hesitation, that it takes us some weeks to restore that nice tone which we have been accustomed to ... We teach them manners.²⁹

The boarding school closed its students off from the outside world, but

26. A. Sampson, *Mandela, The Authorised Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 18.

27. A. Kerr, *Fort Hare 1915-1948: The Evolution of an African College* (London: Hurst, 1968), 9.

28. P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, orig. 1972), 94.

opened them up to the flow of discipline and routine. In 1927 the Governor of Healdtown wrote to a colleague:

Will you kindly enforce the following rules: No girl to leave the Boarding Department except for school purposes. They must not pass the middle gate in the Avenue until the clock has struck a quarter past eight [there follow a number of similar guides to movement and the time of day] ... Girls may be allowed to go to Stuart's shop between four and five on Thursday afternoon and at no other time ... All girls talking any language except English must be reported to the Governor. All shouting and screaming must be rigidly suppressed. No permission is to be given to visit the Location except under very special circumstances. No locationers are to be allowed on the premises for any purpose.³⁰

The students (write John and Jean Comaroff) were 'enclosed in the rhythms and rituals of quotidian European life for every waking and sleeping hour,' internalizing 'a whole manner of being in time and space, one that would indeed make them "strangers" in many respects to their own kind.'³¹ They were writing about the Tswana students at Tiger Kloof, but the analysis is equally apt for the flagship Eastern Cape institutions.

Four decades after he left school, Joseph Coko reflected: 'Honestly speaking, I think Healdtown has left a mark on me which shall go with me to my grave.' When he returned home for the July holidays in his first year, his family thought so too. 'Granny said "This *Nxukhwebe* has changed you my boy ... you are now a new boy.'³² Ellen Kuzwayo also experienced this sense of translation, of becoming a stranger. When she entered boarding school (she wrote later) 'the new life just swallowed me up ... There was the adjustment to the routine of classes, scheduled meals and study times ... I was quite overwhelmed by this new and foreign atmosphere.' Subsequently, she attended Lovedale, and her memories are equally telling:

Lovedale Institution had established traditions, values and practices of its own, and a unique atmosphere ... The surroundings and amenities ... reflected the ideals of the college. The dormitories, the dining-room, the classrooms – all were well equipped and orderly. Being a student in this college influenced your outlook, values and way of life.³³

Boarding school students in the interwar years were recruited for the most part from a distinct social stratum 'composed of the most successful land-owning farmers and the most highly educated ministers, teachers, clerks, interpreters and their spouses.'³⁴ A substantial gulf existed between the lives of boarding school pupils and those of other Ciskeians. Wycliff Tsotsi writes vividly of the train journey to Lovedale, of ragged urchins begging along the track, and how

29. Quoted in A. Cobley, *Class and Consciousness: The Black Petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990), 65.

30. Healdtown Archives, Cory Library, MS 15,523 folder 2: J. Watkinson to Miss Boden.

31. I am deeply indebted to John and Jean Comaroff for sight of early manuscript versions of three chapters from the keenly awaited Volume III of *Of Revelation and Revolution*. This quotation is from the draft of a chapter entitled 'The School as Fortress: Colonial Pedagogy and its Contradictions'.

32. R. Moyer, ed., *Coko: Reminiscences of Joseph Scotch Coko, A Grahamstown Resident* (Grahamstown: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1973), 86.

33. E. Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman* (London: Woman's Press, 1985), 79-80, 93.

some ‘uppish students’ told the hungry children ‘to put an end to their disgraceful behaviour.’³⁵ Z.K. Matthews, poignantly, recalled ‘being taught to live in two worlds’, of ‘reaching new horizons every year, and every one of them took me further and further away from my family’s past.’³⁶ This sense of social distance and dislocation in the consciousness of the schooled elite is a frequent motif in autobiographies, and merits closer examination.

And yet – as those same autobiographies and histories make clear – the alumni of Healdtown or Lovedale or similar schools often reconnected with other social groupings through political activism and leadership. While mission educators were determined to implement both the formal syllabus and an implicit curriculum of reculturation, they had little control over a third area of learning: a counter-curriculum, a deepening awareness amongst their students of social and political realities. Z.K. Matthews describes this process of radicalisation very precisely. Alongside ‘the pleasures and satisfactions’ of learning and the camaraderie of school life came ‘the discoveries, slowly accumulating at the same time, of what it meant to be black in a white man’s world.’³⁷ Such discoveries were all too frequent for students returning home to harshly policed locations or to a rural landscape of poverty; they presented themselves on the journeys between home and school; and there was no shortage of corroboratory evidence within the school itself. The top Eastern Cape schools drew students from all over South Africa, providing data by which the country could be mapped anew. Students learned from each other a topography of racial oppression, shading in local details of injustice, tracing the contours of domination, and poring over possible routes of resistance.

The counter-curriculum could surface, too, in the prescribed syllabus. A politicising experience for many students was their encounter with South African history in the form of racially biased textbooks. Several autobiographies attest to the shock of being on the receiving end of the colonizer’s view of the past, especially when this was implacably opposed by versions of the past which the students had heard from their elders. The counter-curriculum operated even within an ultra-respectable family such as the Jabavus. Noni Jabavu recalled being taken as a child outside Fort Beaufort to see the physical traces of the stockade that had housed confiscated Xhosa cattle in a mid-nineteenth century war. She also went to visit the aged Chief Maqoma: ‘Men of his lineage were walking archives. They could quote chapter and verse ... giving the reasons why the English disappointed the Xhosa.’³⁸

The counter-curriculum, in the 1930s and 1940s, fed directly into the crisis that seized the elite mission schools. Jonathon Hyslop has shown that the crisis was partly financial, but partly a collapse of authority; relations between white teachers and black students deteriorated rapidly during and after the 1939-45 war

34. Cobby, *Class and Consciousness*, 64.

35. W. Tsotsi, ‘Out of Court: Experiences of a Black Lawyer in Apartheid South Africa’, typescript (n.d.), 100-101.

36. Z.K. Matthews, *Freedom for my People: Autobiography of Z.K. Matthews* (London: Rex Collings, 1981), 15-16.

37. *Ibid.*, 41.

38. Jabavu, *The Ochre People*, 26, 37.

and precipitated a wave of disturbances.³⁹ In Anne Mager's close reading of the 1946 protests at Lovedale, she concurs: the mission schools were at an impasse. The continuous disruptions 'indicated their inability to retain the respect of the very elite they had partly fashioned.'⁴⁰ The spate of strikes and riots in the Eastern Cape's flagship schools was of course part of a larger moment, the upsurge in militancy during the war years, and the more radical content of African nationalism.

The links could sometimes be very direct. Bojana Jordan was a student at Lovedale in 1949, just across the Thyume River from Fort Hare, and he recalls how members of the Youth League 'regularly visited our dormitories to initiate us into the intricacies and complexities of African nationalism' – and the political emissaries included Robert Sobukwe, Duma Nokwe and Godfrey Pitje, all students at Fort Hare.⁴¹ Let me now turn my attention to that university.

'We used to debate and debate and debate': Fort Hare in the 1930s

Ten years ago, I grumbled that Fort Hare cried out for a history to supersede the existing treatments: Alexander Kerr's informative but guarded memoir, and Seboni's top-down institutional history. Today there is a larger body of scholarship on Fort Hare, starting with the valuable review by Sean Morrow and Khayaletu Gxabalashé of the University's own archives and collections. Newer work includes Higgs' biography of Jabavu; some studies of particular episodes; and two larger scale works. Donovan Williams, a member of the History Department at Fort Hare in the 1950s has written a dense, semi-autobiographical account of those years, covering both the internal politics of the institution and its deteriorating relations with the National Party government.⁴² Daniel Massey has written a valuable Masters thesis, covering student activism from the 1930s to the SASO protests in 1973, and based largely on an extensive programme of interviews.⁴³ It is an ambitious and engaging work, and one which I think reveals both the strength and some of the pitfalls of oral evidence.

There is much more that needs to be done. We need a close-meshed, critical account of the each of the three decades from about 1930 to 1959. Here, I focus on the 1930s, the decade in which Govan Mbeki moved from Healdtown to Fort Hare, student years which constituted a formative period of his life, both intellectually and politically. The college during these years was very small – from under 150 students in 1930 to a peak of just under 500 in the 1950s – but its historical significance is quite disproportionate to its size. This is not simply because of the roll of famous alumni from this period; but also because of its key role as a laboratory and testing-ground for the black petty bourgeoisie. The 1930s

39. J. Hyslop, *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South Africa, 1940-1990* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1999), 10-19.

40. A. Mager, *Gender and the Making of a South African Bantustan* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999), 209.

41. B. V. Jordan, *We Will Be Heard: A South African Exile Remembers* (Boston: Quinlan Press, 1986), 53.

42. D. Williams, *A History of the University College of Fort Hare, South Africa – the 1950s: The Waiting Years* (Lewiston: Edwin Messen Press, 2001).

saw a burgeoning sense of African identity, and a more forceful assertion of African grievances and demands. These were articulated by members of a black intelligentsia more numerous, less submissive and structurally distinct from their predecessors.

While the numbers of educated professionals grew quite rapidly in the interwar years, they were acutely aware of economic, social and political forms of exclusion. Their parents had sought through education to win full citizenship in the modern state. 'Yet the terms in which this state was being formed were already ensuring their politico-economic exclusion, and making a mockery of the generalised liberal promises of mission morality.'⁴⁴ One key response was a re-evaluation and reshaping of the resources and symbols of traditional African culture. African intellectuals in the 1930s sought to affirm their African identities. Theirs, argues Alan Cobley, was 'essentially an effort to bring their social origins and their aspirations into harmony with their "African-ness."⁴⁵ These were the years of the 'New African': they called for an African Academy producing texts on African law and African music, a national African church, a national literature, and a national identity. These cultural initiatives laid the ideological base on which a more assertive nationalism would be built in the late 1930s and 1940s. The new discourse, typified by the Youth League Manifesto of 1943, appropriated the universal terms of bourgeois liberalism but spoke them with an African accent.

The Fort Hare residences were natural seed-beds in which these ideas could germinate and grow. In 1935 and 1936, the abolition of the Cape franchise and the invasion of Abyssinia stirred intense feelings. Phyllis Ntantala recalls passionate exchanges 'during leisure time, or in the reading room and C[hristian]U[nion], or on the lawn.'⁴⁶ Mbeki's evocation of those years is similar. He remembered favouring political organisation in the Transkei while his close friend Edwin Mofutsanyana insisted on mobilising urban workers: 'And we used to debate and debate and debate.'⁴⁷ Paul Mosaka led a protest against the employment by Fort Hare of white women as domestic workers while there were so many unemployed Africans in Alice. A.C. Jordan wrote a poem in Xhosa denouncing the invasion of Abyssinia. Students staged a successful protest against a segregated entrance at Alice post office, and with some staff members flouted the intended segregation of seating arrangements at a Lovedale athletics meeting.

Govan Mbeki was stirred by these political passions. He identified the awakening of his political consciousness to various events before he attended Fort Hare, but its maturation took place on campus. He was one of the students who attended the impromptu lectures by Eddie and Win Roux (on their honey-

43. D. Massey, "'Who would not have been aware?'" The history of Fort Hare and its student activists, 1933-1973' (University of Fort Hare, MA thesis, 2002).

44. J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, typescript of chapter 'Reclaiming black manhood: the mission school and the colonial state', 30.

45. Cobley, *Class and Consciousness*, 230.

46. Interview, 1993.

47. Interview, 1992.

moon!); he first encountered Marxist texts, in the form of titles from the Little Lenin Library, lent to him by Max Yergan. He bought socialist pamphlets during his summers in Johannesburg, and was sent others by Johnny Gomas. But at the same time, he was in the grip of education and its pleasures. His studies provided him with a series of enthusiasms that persisted throughout his life. He ‘really loved’ poetry, especially the English nineteenth century romantics. He considered majoring in Latin, because he so enjoyed the clarity and concision of the language – and frequently later drew on Latin tags for emphases and illustrations.

Intertwined with the young Mbeki’s love of Wordsworth and Shelley was a fervent appreciation of another poet: S.E.K. Mqhayi, the greatest figure in Xhosa literature. By the time Govan Mbeki was at Fort Hare, Mqhayi had left his teaching post at Lovedale because he ‘object[ed] so strongly to the way Xhosa history was being presented in the school.’⁴⁸ He lived on an isolated hill-top at Berlin, near Kingwilliamstown, and Mbeki and his circle made their pilgrimage to hear Mqhayi recite *izibongo*. Phyllis Ntantala, when asked about the enthusiasm of her generation of Fort Hare students for Xhosa epic poetry, suggested that Mbeki and others were engaged in a broader project of cultural reclamation. They ‘were beginning to question some of the myths on which they had been fed, and beginning to see the old people in the villages to find out what happened this year and that, and around this, and so on.’⁴⁹

Latin poetry – and the Little Lenin Library. Wordsworth on Westminster Bridge – and Mqhayi on his hill outside Berlin. These were just some of the elements of the intellectual heritage of Fort Hare in the mid-1930s as experienced by Govan Mbeki and his generation. The new nationalist discourse – premised on action by Africans, for Africans, rather than in deferential alliance with white liberals – was a response by intellectuals whose politics had been shaped not only in mission institutions, but also in reaction against them. Mbeki is representative of a new strain in Fort Hare student politics; which in turn mirrored and fed into the ideological labours of those who sought to reconcile their education, their frustration, and their awareness of themselves as young Africans.

Conclusion

There were very clear connections between the student experiences of the 1930s Fort Hare generation and the wider political stage. But what of today, of the current generation of Eastern Cape students, at Fort Hare and elsewhere? Faced with the drastic, dispiriting and complex legacies of the Eastern Cape there is an urgent, daunting and compelling challenge for higher education. How should Fort Hare, Rhodes and the University of Port Elizabeth respond to the developmental needs of this province? Let me be very clear. The question makes

48. J. Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 93.

49. Interview, 1993.

intellectual, moral and political demands of these institutions. If the Eastern Cape's social order is scarred by 'disempowerment, discrimination and confinement', if its economy is plagued by 'uncertainty, labour instability, declining migrant remittances',⁵⁰ and if all levels of the local state inherited 'rampant fraud, theft, overpayments, destruction ... of vital records, absenteeism and idleness',⁵¹ then there are no simple, convenient, painless developmental answers.

But answers have to be sought. And they can – must – be sought through committed academic enquiry. *Engagé* or committed scholarship is not about having the right political credentials. It is about the unflinching, hard slog of analysis and argument. Academics can bring to bear on the problems what the historian David Cannadine calls the 'intense, original, brain-hurting, time-consuming labour' of research. This applies to students, too. In the 1950s, Fort Hare and Lovedale students were engaged in 'legendary "bush meetings"' of political debate and mobilisation – but they also travelled by bus and by bicycle to rural areas, to assist with self-help projects and the fight against rehabilitation.⁵² It is not a glib enquiry if one asks what might be the appropriate equivalent activities half a century later.

Fort Hare has an historical legacy of quite remarkable nature. But it cannot rest on its struggle laurels. It must also identify the impact of the apartheid years, and count the pedagogic, curricular, intellectual and institutional cost of these years if it is to transcend them. There is a challenge too for universities in the more affluent parts of this country to forge constructive academic links with the Eastern Cape – and, perhaps especially, for international delegates at this conference to find ways of cementing academic, intellectual and collegial links with this province and its institutions of learning.

50. Nel, *Regional and Local Economic Development*, 67, 91.

51. R. Southall, 'Making Government work for Poor People in the Eastern Cape', Report for the (UK government's) Department for International Development, 8. I am grateful to Roger Southall for access to this valuable report.

52. Williams, *History of Fort Hare*, 55, 89.