

Inventing Xhosa Voice: Thomas Pringle's "Makanna's Gathering"

Matthew Shum

Summary

This article examines the informing conditions and conventions of Thomas Pringle's poem "Makanna's Gathering". I argue that despite its ostensible endorsement of Xhosa retaliation against colonial rule, the poem exhibits an obvious unease about Xhosa alterity that it attempts to contain by casting this threat within the conventions, borrowed from Walter Scott's novelistic treatment of gypsies, of the "wild" picturesque. Contrary to a received consensus that the poem is manifestly anti-colonial, I argue that, considered in the full implication of its context, it must be understood as an exhibit in the spectacle of empire rather than an indictment of it.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die ontstaansagtergrond en -konvensies van Thomas Pringle se gedig "Makanna's Gathering". Al lyk dit asof dit Xhosaweerwraak teen die koloniale gesag onderskryf, is my argument dat die gedig duidelik ongemaklik is met die andersheid van die Xhosas en dat dit hierdie bedreiging binne die konvensies van Walter Scott se romans oor sigeuners of die "wild picturesque" probeer bevat. Teenoor die oorgelewerde konsensus dat die gedig duidelik anti-koloniaal is, betoog ek dat, gelees binne al die implikasies van sy konteks, die gedig die skouspel van empire vertoon eerder as om dit aan die kaak stel.

It is well known that apocalyptic and millenarian imaginings were a recurrent feature of indigenous resistance to nineteenth-century colonial rule in the Eastern Cape. "[I]n their evocation of an idealized world and the resurrection of the dead in which the entire past became alive again," writes Clifton Crais, "the millenarian movement challenged, if at moments only indirectly, the new colonial order which was emerging in the Eastern Cape" (Crais 1992: 207). The most famous of the prophetic figures associated with these movements was Nongqawuse, the teenage girl to whose prognostications the cattle killings of the 1850s are attributed. Yet Nongqawuse was by no means unique: since the beginning of the nineteenth century and the deepening impositions of British colonial rule, there had been a number of

such prophets who fused aspects of Christianity (in particular, as noted by Crais, the notion of the resurrection from the dead) with local beliefs to form new eschatologies of action against the colonial state. One such prophet was Nxele, or Makanna, as he was known to the colonists (for clarity's sake I shall follow this latter usage), who in 1819 led an assault on the British garrison in Grahamstown, and very nearly overwhelmed it. He was subsequently imprisoned on Robben Island and drowned while attempting to escape. Makanna clearly engaged the imagination of colonial writers: in addition to prompting Pringle's well-known poem, he was also the (partial) subject of the anonymous three-decker novel *Makanna; or, the Land of the Savage*, published in London in 1834. The latter work invests only crudely in Makanna as a historical figure, preferring instead to use him as a device around which to contrive a narrative of colonial adventure. Pringle's poem, in comparison, makes claims to historical veracity (especially in its extensive annotations), yet it is also embellished with invention. But, as we shall see, these imagined details are richly revealing both of the poem's informing models and of the acute degree of apprehension which they express.

Pringle appears to have written the first draft of "Makanna's Gathering" in 1825. He enclosed a draft of the poem in a letter to his Scottish associate, John Fairbairn, in October of that year, informing him that

"The War Song of Lynx' [the poem's original title] is not a bad subject; but what I have made of it does not much please me You may either keep it by you, or print it first & criticize it afterwards, as you see fit. You may show it to Wright & see if he can find any flaws in regard to history or custom. I am not quite sure whether the attack on Grahams Town was in 1818 or 1819. Inquire & correct."

(FB 1: 98)

Pringle's comments indicate that he set no great store by the poem and that he was not entirely certain of its historical details; additionally, it seems he did not envisage it as being in any way contentious. This raises again the difficult question of what motivated the writing of the poem and how it was regarded by its intended audience: for how can we enter any kind of dialogue with the world of the poem if we cannot, in some measure, understand it on its own terms, rather than those we retrospectively read into it? This is especially the case with "Makanna's Gathering" which is, on the face of it, a polemical endorsement of Xhosa retaliation against colonial injustice. Pringle had tinkered with the idea of a poem about Makanna for some time, as though unsure of how to pitch it. In a previous letter, for instance, although their substance remains unclear, he had talked of attaching various "notes" to the articles he was writing on the Cape and intending to send to the *New Monthly Magazine* in London. One such note was to be "a speech of one of Lynx's heemraden demanding back his chief

after he was taken & detailing the whole history of European injustice toward[s] his natives. It is a noble piece of savage eloquence" (FB 1: 78). This speech – we shall look at it shortly – might have provided some of the inspiration for the poem. It is worth bearing in mind here that at the time that Pringle wrote the poem, he was drifting rather aimlessly around the colony after he had lost, or renounced, his Cape Town livelihood following his fallout with Governor Somerset. It was also a time when he greatly strengthened his ties with the humanitarian group for colonial reform led by John Philip, the head of the London Missionary Society.

The "noble piece of savage eloquence" referred to by Pringle is Andries Stockenström's transcription of a speech made by one of Makanna's counsellors when he berated several British officers after the defeat and exile of his leader. Pringle made serial use of this speech: it was first published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1827 where it formed part of an article entitled "Letters from South Africa. No II – Caffer Campaigns – The Prophet Makanna". Later, it was included in an article entitled "The Wrongs of Amakosa" which was published twice in 1833: first in the annual *Friendship's Offering* and subsequently in *The Tourist* magazine. It was also included in the final chapters of Pringle's *Narrative*, and it is to this publication that I shall refer. Since the speech is enclosed in quotation marks, we must assume that it is a faithful reproduction of Stockenström's words, described by him as a "bald translation" from "hasty and imperfect notes" ([1834]1966: 285); nowhere does Pringle give any indication that he altered it.¹ Whatever the relation of Stockenström's notes to the original oration might be, the speech is compelling and persuasive, not least because it has the feel of being rendered, however imperfectly, on its own terms. A representative section reads as follows:

"We lived in peace. Some bad people stole, perhaps: the nation was quiet – the chiefs were quiet. Gaika stole – his chiefs stole – his people stole. You sent him copper; you sent him beads; you sent him horses – on which he rode to steal more. To *us* you only sent commandos.

We quarrelled with Gaika about grass – no business of yours. You sent a commando; you took our last cow; you only left a few calves – which died for want, along with our children. You gave half the spoils to Gaika; half you

1. In his *Southern African Literatures*, Michael Chapman mistakenly attributes this speech to Makanna himself. He further claims that the speech was "rendered into English from Stockenström's eye-witness account" (Chapman 1996: 115) and that "Pringle developed Stockenström's account of Makanna's speech to the British forces into a powerful statement of dignity in defeat" (p. 106). There is, however, no evidence other than what has already been cited, to support the assertion that Pringle "rendered" or "developed" this speech in any way at all. To confuse matters even further, Noel Mostert informs us that Stöckenstrom did not speak Xhosa (Mostert 1993: 507).

kept yourselves. Without milk, – our corn destroyed, – we saw our wives and children perish; we followed, therefore, on the track of our cattle into the colony. We plundered and we fought for our lives. We found you weak; we destroyed your soldiers. We saw that we were strong; we attacked your headquarters: – and if we had succeeded, our right was good, for you began the war. We failed – and you are here.

We wish for peace; we wish to rest in our huts; we wish to get milk for our children; our wives wish to till the land. But your troops cover the plains, and swarm in the thickets, where they cannot distinguish the man from the woman and shoot all.”

(Pringle [1834]1966: 286)

The telegraphic directness of the syntax, with its rapid accumulation of detail, gives the speech a convincing immediacy. One reads it with the sense of another voice speaking, of an English adapted to accommodate cadences and styles which are not native to it. We are also informed that this speech was delivered in a tone of “manly remonstrance” which “affected some of those who heard it even to tears” (p. 287). We might briefly remark here that the unnamed Xhosa orator conforms to a model of behaviour much admired by Scottish Enlightenment philosophers: a stoic or masculine acceptance of suffering. This forbearance in the face of adversity, as Adam Smith argued in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, facilitated the transfer of sympathy between an afflicted speaker and his audience precisely because the suffering party “flatten[ed]” the “sharpness of [his] natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him” (Smith 1976: 22). Leaving aside the unequal economies of this exchange, which require that the feelings of the suffering party should be deliberately muted in order to gain the approval of others, the success of this particular transfer is evident in that most irrefutable proof of identification with the sufferings of another: the shedding of sympathetic tears. What is surprising is that despite having these examples of Xhosa conduct to hand, both the speech itself and the manner of its delivery, Pringle chose not to incorporate them into his poem, preferring instead to fashion Makanna as a figure of extravagant belligerence.

Pringle’s fascination with the Makanna story is understandable: it is marked by dramatic and striking events and is historically “safe” insofar as Makanna, or others like him, can no longer directly threaten the security of the colonial state. The main part of Pringle’s prose account of Makanna is historically accurate, although his understanding of these events is inevitably restricted. Makanna’s career is briefly traced: his early contact with settlers, his fascination with Christian doctrine, his development of an idiosyncratic blend of religious beliefs, his elevation to prophet status among his own people and the doomed attack on Grahamstown which led to his imprisonment on Robben Island and subsequent death by drowning. If in the history of black South Africa, Makanna becomes an iconic figure, a

forerunner of black resistance to white colonial rule, for Pringle he is a curiosity of mixed appeal: Makanna's syncretic beliefs are "an extravagant religious medley", his self-representation as a prophet an "impious pretension" ([1834]1966: 280) and so on. Even his military ambitions are regarded with disdain: "Ignorant of our vast resources," writes Pringle, "Makanna probably conceived that ... once effected, the contest was over for ever with the usurping Europeans" (p. 281). Yet, alongside these dismissals, Pringle expresses his admiration for Makanna's voluntary surrender to his colonial adversaries as a means of ending the retaliatory violence after the battle of Grahamstown: "The course adopted by Makanna ... was remarkable", he concedes, "and gives us a higher idea of his character than any other part of his history which has become known to us" (p. 284). This sudden elevation of Makanna's character leads Pringle to praise his selfless act as evidence of "a magnanimity which would have done honour to a Greek or Roman patriot" (p. 284) and a pointed contrast is set up between the honour code of Makanna and the actions of the commandos which continued to harass and plunder the defeated tribes. This ambivalence towards Makanna might be explained by considering that when Pringle first published his account of these events, part of his intent was to attack the colonial government under Somerset. It is therefore strategic for him, in these prose accounts, to endorse Makanna's behaviour and praise his personal qualities during a period in which colonial policy was excessively punitive.

Given the wide scope of this story, it is interesting that Pringle's poem focuses not on any "higher idea of his character" but on an event that shows Makanna at his most bellicose: an address to his troops before the attack on Grahamstown. In the *Narrative* the address is described as follows: "[B]efore they were led on to the assault, [they] were addressed by Makanna in an animating speech, in which he is said to have assured them of supernatural aid in the conflict with the English, which would turn the hail-storm of their fire-arms into water" (p. 282). Makanna's rhetoric is notable only for the fervour of its militant superstition, yet it was on this inflamed oratory that Pringle chose to concentrate his freely imagined poem:²

2. In *Southern African Literature: An Introduction*, Stephen Gray makes the startling claim that in "Makanna's Gathering", as in "The Brown Hunter's Song", Pringle was working with pre-existing oral accounts and "rendering Xhosa songs into English" (Gray 1979: 165); he praises "the courage of the artistic statement" Pringle was making – i.e. that indigenous orality was a valuable expressive resource and deserved recognition. To the best of my knowledge Pringle was not fluent in Xhosa, and the only "translation" in which he was ever involved concerned "Sicana's Hymn". It was first published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in Britain in 1826, Pringle informs us, "from a copy furnished me by Mr Brownlee" (1989: 107). In 1833, "a literal translation" (p. 107) of the hymn was appended to a poem published in the evangelical magazine *The Missionary*. Pringle openly acknowledges

Wake! Amakhósa, 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!

He bids me call you forth
 Bold sons of Káhabee,
 To sweep the white men from the earth,
 And drive them to the sea:
 The sea which heaved them up at first,
 For Amakhósa's curse and bane,
 Howls for the progeny she nurst,
 To swallow them again.

(ll. 1-16)

In these opening stanzas, especially the second, Pringle invokes what must have seemed to readers of the time a veritable demonology of Xhosa aggression with its vengeful engorging sea and the desire completely to annihilate the white settlers. This is part war song (as the original title indicates), part invented oratory; it even has elements of the kind of patriotic verse Pringle wrote in Scotland ("There injured Scotland's patriot band/ For Faith and Freedom made their stand" (Pringle 1819: 16)). All these conventions are imbued with the novelty of Xhosa names and a Xhosa mythology that traffics in images of a natural world infused with supernatural powers. Here Makanna is transformed into a belligerent exotic, calling forth the revenge of the elements themselves on the usurping colonists.

When he does try to give local specificity to the situation, Pringle calls on notions of lineage, birthright and freedom that are distinctly British in

"the assistance of my ingenious and learned friend, the Rev. Dr. Wright" (1989: 107) on this occasion. I think we may take it that Pringle worked from the translations of Brownlee and Wright in supplying these versions of the hymn. Gray cites no sources for his claim that "Makanna's Gathering" is a "rendering" of a Xhosa song. All the evidence points to an imaginative reconstruction of events about which Pringle had only second-hand accounts and of whose details (by his own admission) he was unclear. Similarly, despite the use of a Xhosa epigraph, there is no evidence that "The Brown-Hunter's Song" is a rendition into literary English of a Xhosa original. Certainly, Pringle never made any such claims for the poem. Assertions such as these work to create the impression that Pringle spoke Xhosa and was sufficiently accomplished to translate a vernacular archive into English; this was not the case.

character, although they are again cast within the framework of traditional Xhosa belief:

Hark! 'tis UHLANGA's voice
 From Dèbe's mountain caves!
 He calls you now to make your choice –
 To conquer or be slaves:
 To meet proud Amanglézi's guns,
 And fight like warriors nobly borne:
 Or, like Umlaó's feeble sons,
 Become the freeman's scorn.

(ll. 17-24)

"Umlaó's feeble sons" is a reference, as Pringle tells us in a footnote, to the "Colonial Hottentots" (Pringle 1989: 100), who act as the contrastive group to the Xhosa because they have (allegedly) surrendered their freedom to the colonisers. In this poetic hierarchy, the Xhosa occupy the first rank because they have not (yet) entirely surrendered their lands and way of life. The poem continues with two fairly formulaic stanzas urging the troops into battle, before concluding with a stanza that moves away from the militant emphasis of "To conquer or be slaves" and evokes the grisly possibility of fallen colonial soldiers being devoured by predators summonsed for the occasion by "Uhlanga's Call":

The wizard-wolves from Keisi's brake
 The vultures from afar,
 Are gathering at UHLANGA'S call,
 And follow fast our westward way –
 For well they know, ere evening-fall,
 They shall have glorious prey!

(ll. 41-48)

One might feasibly read these final lines as an arraignment of barbarous superstition, or at the very least a slightly macabre staging of Xhosa customs: it is impossible to imagine that Pringle would have approved such beliefs, let alone looked forward to their realisation. Whatever the case may be, there is throughout the poem an aura of threat, which sits uneasily with the ideality of Xhosa warrior-nobility and suggests an unconscious intimation of settler fright, or even an implied admission that Xhosa otherness is irreclaimable. This instability of position, the inscribing into the Makanna persona of irreconcilable attributes, could well be understood as an encoding of Pringle's contradictory colonial stance: he condemns colonial policy, which invites the vindictiveness of an oppressed people but at the same time believes that the imperial mission can be vindicated if undertaken in a certain way. Thus, in the passages in the *Narrative* where Pringle castigates the colonial government for their treatment of Makanna, he writes

that “it is melancholy to reflect how valuable an instrument for promoting the civilization of the Caffer tribes was apparently lost by the nefarious treatment and indirect destruction of that extraordinary barbarian, whom a wiser and a more generous policy might have rendered a grateful ally to the colony, and a permanent benefactor to his own countrymen” ([1834]1966: 288). This conciliatory humanitarian ideal is nowhere present in the imaginings of the poem, where, instead, the martial virtues of the Xhosa do not check their propensity for extreme forms of retaliatory violence.

The footnotes to “Makanna’s Gathering”, which gloss Xhosa words and provide pertinent genealogical and religious details, introduce another level of discrepancy into the poem’s apparent intentions. These notes comprise a miniature ethnography appended to the poem, a factual apparatus that brings Xhosa belief systems within the ambit of European knowledge and subjects them to evaluative scrutiny. An example of this is Pringle’s gloss on “Hark! ’tis Uhlanga’s Voices”:

The term *Uhlanga*, sometimes used by the frontier Caffers for the Supreme Being, is supposed by the missionaries to be derived from *hlanganisa*, to join together. But from Mr Kay’s account of the Amakosa genealogy, it appears that *Uhlanga*, or *Thlanga*, is also the name of the oldest of their kings of whom there is any tradition, and by whose name they always swore in former days. It seems to me, therefore, doubtful whether the god Uhlanga be not merely a deified chief, or hero, like the Thor and Woden of our Teutonic ancestors.

(Pereira & Chapman 1989: 100)

The confidently constative tone of this assertion, with its implication that Pringle is familiar with Xhosa beliefs and is able to evaluate them on a comparative European scale, is misleading. It seems that Pringle, or his missionary sources, were unaware that Makanna had in fact evolved a cosmology in which there were two warring Gods, Mdalidephu, the God of the black man and Thixo, the God of the white man. Makanna preached that this cosmological struggle was about to culminate in the defeat of Thixo and that various supernatural agencies stood ready to assist in the task (Peires 1989: 1-2). Pringle seems not to have understood this millenarian aspect of Makanna’s teachings, and to have regarded as dubious any syncretisation of Christianity by indigenous people into forms consonant with their own beliefs. In the poem itself, the cosmology Pringle ascribes to Makanna makes no mention whatsoever of these rivalrous Gods; even in the apparently authoritative notes, it is clear that Pringle is assuming that his sources speak with irreproachable authority. As in all Pringle’s South African poems, the often copious notes juxtapose the poem with another kind of text altogether: a taxonomy, an ethnography, a history, a local detail, a genealogy, as the occasion demands. These notes tether the poem to a discourse which is unashamedly imperial in its classificatory and normative

intents. Nigel Leask, commenting on the "depth of ethnographic detail" found in the footnotes to the oriental poems written by contemporaries of Pringle such as Byron and Southey, finds a similar "discrepancy ... between poetic text and annotation", which he reads as qualifying the text in a particularly constricting way: "[T]he absorptive pull of the exotic visual image ... is constantly checked and qualified by a globalising descriptive discourse which draws the viewer/reader away from dangerous proximity to the image, in order to inscribe him/her in a position of epistemological power: nothing other than the commanding vision of imperialist objectivity" (Leask 1998: 168). These considerations obviously bear on Pringle's annotation as well, with the qualification that their "factual" construction of African life could on occasion be inaccurate.

Once we have turned the poem through its various textual and contextual prisms, it begins to lose its status as a virulently anti-colonial poem, and begins to look more like a colonial poem of a particular sort. The question remains, though: what sort of status do we accord the poem? How was it intended to be read? "Makanna's Gathering", like many of the poems Pringle wrote about South Africa, had as its destination a literary marketplace dominated by metropolitan readers. I doubt very much that Pringle saw his miniscule local readership of 1824 and 1825/1826 as constituting any kind of market at all; he is likely to have imagined that his poems addressed a British readership, in the widest sense, metropolitan and colonial. There is also the simple fact that most of the poems, including "Makanna's Gathering" were published while Pringle was living in London. To address a wide British audience Pringle had, as he very well knew, to work within conventions of representation with which they were familiar. At that time the Xhosa, like other indigenous groupings, were a remote and barely known tribal people and Pringle must have been conscious of the need to render his unusual African subject matter in a way that was still within reach of his readers. In the case of "Makanna's Gathering" I would suggest that one familiar framing genre implicit in the poem is what we might call the ethnographic picturesque, and that behind it lies the ever-pervasive influence of Walter Scott.

In an appraisal of Scott's use of the picturesque, Peter Garside has argued that Scott, who was well acquainted with the work of the picturesque theorists Price and Gilpin and drew on it in the planning of his Abbotsford estate, created a form of historical picturesque in which figure, and not ground, was the principal focus. Garside quotes Scott on "the distinction between a sense of the picturesque in action and the picturesque in scenery" (Garside 1994: 148) and argues that Scott developed a historicised picturesque centred around vividly pictorial descriptions of character and incident. Garside develops his argument by examining the picturesque significance of Meg Merrilies, the protagonist of Scott's *Guy Mannering*, published in 1815. (As it happens, in 1817 Pringle published a three-part article in the *Edinburgh Monthly Magazine*, "Some Notices Concerning the

Scottish Gypsies”, in which he had, with Scott’s permission, quoted from Scott’s original research into Jean Gordon, the prototype for the fictional figure in his novel.) What interests me here is the notion that striking or dramatic figures had picturesque appeal; allied to this is Scott’s assertion that transitional historical moments, in which an older way of life is being superseded by the new, offer the best opportunities for such description: “the most picturesque period of history is that when the ancient rough and wild manners of a barbarous age are just becoming innovated upon” (quoted in Garside 1994: 169). It surely could have not escaped Pringle, who was steeped in Scott’s work, that the Xhosa, whose way of life was being “innovated upon” by colonisation, were candidates for picturesque description. Much of Scott’s work was set, as the narrator of *Rob Roy* puts it, “among a people singularly primitive in their government and manners” (Scott 1963: 5) and there can be little doubt that Scott influenced Pringle’s poetic conception of the Xhosa. If one isolates the only stanza in “Makanna’s Gathering” which has no Xhosa words and no specifically ethnographic characteristics, it could belong in any number of poems of the period describing a battle or intended battle of the middle or remote past:

Fling your broad shields away –
 Bootless against such foes;
 But hand to hand we’ll fight today,
 And with their bayonets close.
 Grasp each man short his stabbing spear –
 And, when to the battle’s edge we come,
 Rush on their ranks in full career,
 And to their hearts strike home.

(ll. 33-40)

Though it does not help that this stanza is rather flatly written, we see at once how much the poem loses when the Xhosa context goes; the poem gains whatever vividness it possesses from its description of unusual or distinctive local detail, which gives texture to its conventional verse forms. For theorists like William Gilpin, the picturesque figure, if it was not to be a mere appendage to the landscape, should have striking characteristics of its own. In the metropolitan context such figures are typically banditti and gypsies, who still retain the representational allure of exotic or foreign ways but are otherwise considered lawless. It remains open to considerable doubt that Pringle’s depiction of Makanna and the Xhosa in this poem falls outside this pattern of representation; a far more likely possibility is that the poem was understood as a “wild” African picturesque, part of the spectacle of empire rather than an indictment of it.

However, if we accept that a poem like “Makanna’s Gathering” might not have been intended or generally understood as an incendiary comment on the evils of colonialism, it still retains a signal importance in the canon of

white writing. The very fact that Pringle has ventriloquised indigenous voices and attempted to occupy them even while simultaneously "evicting" an indigenous position, points toward a recognition that colonialism cannot speak in a single voice, that representation is doubled. This incipient trans-culturalism might, in the case of Pringle, be heavily weighted toward the controlling interest of the poet himself, and inflected, as we have seen, by projections and fabulations in which indigenous people play an expedient role. Nonetheless, to recognise this should not be to deny the significance of initiating this move. Nor should it obscure the fact that, from its inception, South African literature written in English has never quite been free of a vein of paranoid apocalypticism which, to the best of my knowledge, finds its first expression in the apprehensive imaginings of this poem.

Readings of "Makanna's Gathering" as an anti-colonial poem have a genealogy (of sorts). Consider the following, written in 1835:

What!! A Briton! and one who is the conspicuous organ of all the real or apparent philanthropists of the day – the man (shall I call him a man) who pretends to shudder at the proper chastisement of a rebellious domestic ... and whose heart, one would suppose, would sicken at the very idea of blood – to sit down and pen such an oration as the one to which I allude – good God!

What have we done to call down this dreadful, this ferocious treatment? What have we done to this Pringle to draw down the horrid vengeance of the unsparing assegai upon our defenceless and, till now, peaceful homes It [will be] remembered [that] Mr. Thomas Pringle once was [a British settler in Albany], and would have remained so, had he not found that to be outrageously philanthropic and charitable at other people's expense, was a far more profitable and luxurious occupation. I hear that Mr. Pringle is now in Cape-Town, if so, why does he not hasten to take the lead of his beloved Kafirs, of the never-treacherous, never treaty-breaking Amakosa?

(*Grahamstown Journal*, 2 January 1835)

This little volcano of colonial indignation erupted in the correspondence pages of the *Grahamstown Journal* on 2 January 1835. Its occasion was a shocked response to "Makanna's Gathering", an "oration" which the correspondent evidently regarded as a quite literal sanction of Xhosa aggression. It would not have helped that the Xhosa were then invading the colony in numbers not seen since 1819, and the correspondent seems to have confused these events with the earlier ones, but even so this invective is by no means typical of the colonial response to Pringle's poetry. Yet critics often assume that this poetry offended colonial readers. John Wahl, for example, writes of "Makanna's Gathering" that "[i]t was bitterly resented by many of Pringle's fellow settlers, who regarded it not as historical verse but as dangerous and inflammable propaganda" (Wahl 1970: xxii). Aside from this hysterical outburst in the *Grahamstown Journal*, however, I can find no evidence that this or any other poem of

Pringle's was regarded as offensive by "many of his fellow settlers". We have, unfortunately, no detailed sense of the colonial response to Pringle's poetry at the time of its publication. The review of *African Sketches* printed in the *Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette* was taken verbatim from a London magazine, *The Spectator*. The anonymous reviewer did not mention the poetry at all, except to say that it was "pleasing and characteristic", but went on at some length, and in horrified tones, about the barbarous treatment of the frontier Xhosa reported in the *Narrative*. This review caused considerable offence, as we shall see, to the editor of the *Grahams-town Journal*. There are also grounds to suppose that the *Narrative* was provoking to others as well. In a short editorial excerpt, Alexander Jardine, the *Gazette's* editor, commented: "Pringle's new work is causing a shaking among the dry bones of the colony. It has been aptly termed a *bunch of whip cord*; it must certainly prove lacerating to much of the proud flesh around us" (*Gazette* No. 4. Vol. 4. 1834: 134).

I do not think Jardine's remarks concern Pringle's poetry at all; they almost certainly refer to the often contentious treatment of colonial issues in the *Narrative*, issues which were still current at the time. At any rate, when the *Gazette* did get round to offering an anonymous "review", it was short and absolutely innocuous, informing its readers that

Mr Pringle's work has been so well received by the public, and has been so pleasingly analyzed by the periodical press, particularly in Tait's Magazine, that there remains nothing for us but to register the gratification we have derived from its perusal, and to recommend it, right warmly, to the attention of those who may be pleased to value our judgement in these matters

(*Gazette* No. 12. Vol 4. 1834: 81)

The anonymous writer then goes on fulsomely to praise "the excellent people of Glen Lynden" and the progress made by the Scottish settlement. This time Pringle's poetry is not mentioned at all, so one can only assume that there was nothing in it offensive to colonial sensibilities. In the review section in which Pringle's book was briefly mentioned, there were two other volumes under consideration. The first, *The Advantages of Emigration to Algoa Bay and Albany, South Africa*, by the 1820 settler Thomas Phillips, was briefly praised as a "practical tract ... which has condensed into thirty pages of unambitious, but excellent matter, a clear and distinct outline of what is required to be known respecting the colony" (p. 185). The rest of the review, however, just over four pages of tiny-packed type clustered into three columns per page, energetically refutes a comparative survey of European colonies in which the Cape is disparagingly treated. It is abundantly clear the now forgotten *European Colonies in Their Various Parts of the World, Viewed in Their Social, Moral and Physical Conditions, &c*, written by John Howison and published in London in the same year as

African Sketches, was considered very much more damaging to the colony's reputation than Pringle's book.

I raise the issue of Pringle's early reception in South Africa, and in particular the way in which "Makanna's Gathering" might have been read, because the assumption that Pringle's poems were seen as critical and confrontational by his colonial contemporaries can easily divert our understanding of them. Thus Pereira and Chapman assert that Pringle "initiated a 'tradition' of protest poetry which, in the case of 'Makanna's Gathering', saw him adopting another pseudo-persona in order to advocate retaliation by the Xhosa against the injustices of British colonial incursions" (Pereira & Chapman 1989: xxiv). Though I do not think, for obvious reasons, that the poem can sustain this reading, such assessments might in part rest on the reflex assumption that Pringle's poetry was perceived in this way by his contemporaries. But the general reception of Pringle's poetry in the decades following his death in 1834 was, as far as this can be accurately gauged given the relative scarcity of published response, unfailingly approving. While there might have been a significant number of settlers, especially in the late 1820s and 30s, who vehemently disagreed with the views on colonial governance and conduct aired by Pringle and the cohort of humanitarians, this hostility did not extend to the poetry, which appears to have been received not only without fuss, but with overwhelming approval – even by his detractors. Thus Robert Godlonton, a leading settler voice and editor of the *Grahamstown Journal*, denounced both *African Sketches* and its author:

It appears then that Mr. THOMAS PRINGLE has not been content with painting Lord C. SOMERSET as a modern *Verres*, but that he has depicted the frontier farmers, and some of the English settlers to boot, as a set of ruthless ruffians who are abetted and encouraged in their atrocities by the Colonial authorities! At least, so say his reviewers, of which the following is a specimen extracted from the *Spectator*, of the 17th May.

(*Grahamstown Journal*, September 4th 1834: n.p.)

Godlonton then goes on to quote from the offending review, which describes Pringle's book (it is obviously the *Narrative* that is referred to), as throwing light on "one of the darkest and bloodiest stains upon the page of history" and offering accounts of this "worse than slave trade". After condemning the review as a "flagitious libel", Godlonton returns to attack Pringle himself, accusing his family of illegal profiteering in the sale of government-granted land. He continues:

His contempt of the government, may therefore, have *some* shadow of foundation; but why he should travel out of his way to lay such a foul catalogue of crimes at the door of our farmers, both English as well as Dutch, is only to be accounted for on the grounds that Mr. THOMAS PRINGLE is a poet, and that poets have a licence to deal in fiction. We need not enter upon

a refutation, as we deem it hardly necessary that any of our readers should be assured that such charges are gross exaggerations and distorted facts The *fancy* of the *poet* and the *zeal* of the *partisan*, are in this production alike conspicuous; in the former case his *Pegasus*, for want of the needful curb, has carried him far into the regions of romance; in the latter, the reckless spirit of pact has led him to commit errors which can neither be palliated on the ground of expediency, nor excused on the plea of ignorance.

(*Grahamstown Journal*, September 4th 1834: n.p)

Despite the sarcasm, Godlonton – obviously an educated man – associates Pringle’s poetry with “fiction” and “romance”. Unlike the envenomed letter writer, he seems to have accepted that Pringle’s poetry employs a degree of figural licence not accorded to the reportage and polemic of the *Narrative*. Further evidence that he understood Pringle’s poetry in this way is found in Godlonton’s 1844 memorial celebration of the 1820 settlement, a compilation of documents which was prefaced by some “beautiful lines” from a Pringle poem along with the further observation that Pringle’s “name as a man of genius will add grace to the role of the early British immigrants” (Godlonton [1844]1971: 114). Throughout the nineteenth century, Pringle’s poetry was regarded with proprietorial pride whenever it was mentioned: “[I]t continues to live”, wrote John Noble in the introduction to his 1881 edition of Pringle’s South African poems, “in the hearts and minds of Cape and Natal colonists” (Noble in Pringle 1881: vii). This was, clearly, not poetry that offended the mores, political or otherwise, of an acquisitive and often violent colonial society. To the contrary: the poetry seems to have constituted a very welcome stock of cultural capital (“grace”) to a colony where artistic achievement was in short supply. In the case of “Makanna’s Gathering” we might remark on the irony of how this strangely fraught poem takes its place in the general assimilation of Pringle’s poetry into the “hearts and minds” of nineteenth-century colonial readers, thereby – one presumes – reinforcing a sense of nascent national identity, while for a later generation of twentieth-century academics it performs the opposite function of critiquing the injustice of an emergent colonial order and inaugurating a “tradition” of protest writing to which they too can lay claim. This paradox reminds that if we wish to interpret literary works across the “world” of their historical distance, we must be careful to maintain the tensions of the dialectic between identity and difference.

References

FB: Fairbairn Papers. Cape Town: Library of Parliament.

Magazines and Journals:

Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette

Edinburgh Monthly Magazine

Grahamstown Journal

New Monthly Magazine

The Tourist

Anon.

1834 *Makanna; or, the Land of the Savage*. London: Whittaker.

Chapman, Michael

1999 *Southern African Literatures*. London: Longman.

Crais, Clifton

1992 *The Making of the Colonial Order: White Supremacy and Black Resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Garside, Peter

1994 Picturesque Figure and Landscape. In: Copley, Stephen & Garside, Peter (eds) *The Politics of the Picturesque*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 145-174.

Godlonton, Robert

[1844]1971 *Memorials of the British Settlers of South Africa*. Cape Town: South African Library. Reprint Series.

Gray, Stephen

1979 *Southern African Literature: An Introduction*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Leask, Nigel

1998 Wandering through Eblis: Absorption and Containment in Romantic Exoticism. In: Fulford, Tim & Kitson, Peter (eds) *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 165-188.

Mostert, Noel

1993 *Frontiers: The Epic Story of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*. London: Pimlico.

Peires, J.B.

1989 *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-1857*. Johannesburg: Ravan; Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; London: James Currey.

Pereira, E. & Chapman, M. (eds)

1989 *African Poems of Thomas Pringle*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.

Pringle, Thomas

1819 *"The Autumnal Excursion", or, "Sketches in Teviotdale"; with Other Poems*. Edinburgh: Constable.

- 1881 *"Afar in the Desert" and Other South African Poems, with a Memoir and Notes by John Noble.* Cape Town: Green.
- [1834]1966 *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa,* edited by A.M. Lewin-Robinson. Cape Town: Struik.
- Pringle, Thomas (ed.)
- 1833 *Friendship's Offering.* London: Smith & Elder.
- Scott, Walter
- 1963 *Rob Roy.* London: Dent.
- Smith, Adam
- 1976 *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.* Oxford: Clarendon.
- Wahl, John (ed.)
- 1970 *Poems Illustrative of South Africa.* Cape Town: Struik.

Matthew Shum

Howard College, University of KwaZulu-Natal
SHUM@ukzn.ac.za