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Dr. Lara Atkin is an ERC Postdoctoral Fellow at University College Dublin on the SouthHem project. This is a five-year ERC funded project examining settler and indigenous writing in the British controlled Southern Hemisphere, 1780-1870. Outside of the project she is working on a monograph entitled 'Representing South Africa: Ethnographic Poetics and Indigenous Representation in Nineteenth-Century Anglophone Literature', which examines the production and circulation of representations of southern African peoples in Anglophone print culture, 1800-1850. Her research interests are in Romantic and Victorian literature; travel writing; ethnology and displayed peoples; and the literatures and institutions of British colonial South Africa.

Lara Atkin  
School of English, Drama and Film  
University College Dublin  
Belfield D4  
Lara.atkin@ucd.ie

‘The South African “Children of the Mist”’: The Bushman, the Highlander and The Making of Colonial Identities in Thomas Pringle’s South African Poetry (1825-1834)

**Keywords: Thomas Pringle, Walter Scott, Bushman, Cape Colony**

**Abstract:**

This article examines the circulation of the first anglophone poem to be written in the voice of an indigenous southern African, Thomas Pringle’s ‘Song of the Wild Bushman’, in the newspapers and periodicals of Britain and the Cape Colony in the years preceding the abolition of slavery in the colonies in 1834. In both the Cape and Britain, Pringle positioned the poem in dialogue with contemporaneous travel writing in order to reflect critically upon the relationship between colonists and indigenous peoples in Britain’s fledgling settler colonies. By placing the poem in the newspapers and popular periodicals of both Britain and the Cape, Pringle was able to disseminate to a range of colonial and metropolitan readers an image of a trans-imperial Britishness that could accommodate a range of national and colonial identities, including those of the European and indigenous subjects of the expanding British Empire.

**‘The South African “Children of the Mist”’: The Bushman, the Highlander and The Making of Colonial Identities in Thomas Pringle’s South African Poetry (1825-1834)**

**Introduction**

The name Thomas Pringle cannot be unknown to any of our readers, and wherever it is known, it will vouch for the modest and substantial worth of the volume to which it is prefixed. [...] We are in want of a geographical term to describe the region of the Cape Colony and what has been barbarously denominated Caffaria; i.e. pagan land. But, til a better is found, we must be content to use the term South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

In this review of Thomas Pringle’s *African Sketches* (1834), the *Eclectic Review* carefully counterpoints the fame of the work’s author with the obscurity of the subject matter. By 1834 Pringle had become a familiar figure in British literary culture. As secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society between 1827 and 1834, Pringle was a prominent abolitionist and is perhaps best known today as the editor of *The History of Mary Prince* (1832).<sup>2</sup> Between 1828 and 1834, he was also editor of the popular annual *Friendship’s Offering*, where he published many of the era’s leading poets, including the juvenile offerings of Ruskin and Tennyson.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to his early failures in Edinburgh in 1817-1819, Pringle was also a poet and journalist of some note. In particular, Pringle’s accounts of settler violence against indigenous San ‘bushmen’ and amaXhosa were instrumental in drawing the attention of the metropolitan abolitionist lobby to the mistreatment of indigenous labourers at the Cape in the years immediately proceeding

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<sup>1</sup> ‘African Sketches by Thomas Pringle’, *Eclectic Review*, 11 June 1834, pp. 425-41 (p. 425).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Matthew Shum ‘The Prehistory of *The History of Mary Prince*: Thomas Pringle’s ‘The Bechuana Boy’’, in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 64 (2009), 291-322; Jane Stafford, *Colonial Literature and the Native Author: Indigeneity and Empire* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 107-47.

<sup>3</sup> During Pringle’s time as editor of *Friendship’s Offering* he published works by Robert Southey, S. T. Coleridge, Alfred and Fredrick Tennyson, James Hogg, John Browning and Bernard Barton. *Friendship’s Offering* also published poems by Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Felicia Hemans and tales by Mary Russell Mitford.

the abolition of slavery in the colonies in 1833. These were published both in the Cape press and in the *Oriental Herald* and *New Monthly Magazine*, where they came to the attention of Thomas Fowell Buxton and the Evangelical, anti-slavery party in Britain.<sup>4</sup>

Yet so remote was the Cape Colony both geographically and imaginatively from the metropolitan core in 1834 that the *Westminster Review* quipped: ‘The Cape is only known as a place somewhere or other [but] whether it belongs to India or England, or to nobody at all, would puzzle most of our countrymen to declare’.<sup>5</sup> During the 1820s and 1830s, the Cape Colony was a nation that was coming into being and Pringle, along with his friend and fellow Scot, John Fairbairn, was instrumental in helping shape the ideological contours of an emergent Cape-British settler identity through the establishment of an independent, anglophone press. In particular, Pringle’s writings on indigenous peoples were interventions in a broader discourse of ‘humanitarian governance’ that became hegemonic among the liberal elite in Cape Town and in the British colonial office in the 1820s and 1830s. As Alan Lester and Fae Dussart have argued, ‘humanitarian governance’ contained a paradox: ‘[that] the governmental responsibility to protect emerged at the same time and in the same spaces as the government assumed the right to colonize.’<sup>6</sup>

In Pringle’s poetic representations of indigenous peoples, we can trace some of the ways in which this discourse of ‘humanitarian governance’ was disseminated to a range of reading publics in Britain and the Cape Colony. In this article, I will look in detail at Pringle’s ‘Song of the Wild Bushman’. This poem is significant because it was the first poem in the English language to be written in the voice of an indigenous

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Pringle’s journalism see also Damian Shaw, ‘The Writings of Thomas Pringle’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 1996), pp. 136-41.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Hottentots and Caffres’, *Westminster Review*, October 1836, pp. 93-107 (p.93).

<sup>6</sup> Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.1.

southern African. Furthermore, the circulation history of this poem indicates it was disseminated to different ‘communities of interpretation’ both in the Cape and Britain.<sup>7</sup> In the Cape it was published in 1825 as a piece of occasional verse in a colonial newspaper, addressed to a composite audience consisting of the urban middle–class of Cape Town and settler farmers, eking out an often precarious existence on the colony’s eastern and northern peripheries. In this context, it operated both as an intervention in contemporary political debates about the treatment of the colony’s indigenous population and as an articulation of a new form of British-settler colonial identity.

When the poem migrated to the metropole, the readers it reached lacked the colonial readers’ geographical and emotional proximity to the poem’s subject. Its success was therefore dependent on Pringle’s re-fashioning of the tropes of popular Romanticism. Most notably, Walter Scott’s representation of the Scottish Highlander was mobilised by Pringle and mapped onto his representation of southern African San ‘bushmen’<sup>8</sup> in order to draw an analogy between the painful integration of Scotland’s Highlanders into the Anglo-Empire in the late-eighteenth century and the plight of the Cape Colony’s indigenous peoples, who were playing out a similar struggle against the expanding British colonial state in 1830s southern Africa.<sup>9</sup>

### **Humanitarianism, Ethnography and the Making of the Colonial Racial Order**

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<sup>7</sup> William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this essay, I will distinguish between the literary figure of the ‘bushman’ or ‘wild bushman’ and the San, an ethnic identity widely accepted by the indigenous southern African peoples described as ‘bushmen’ by colonial writers.

<sup>9</sup> While this analogy has been noted before by Pringle critics, its significance in relation to Pringle’s vision of British empire building and South African colonial nationalism has not been explored. See Vigne, *Thomas Pringle*, pp. 84-85; Damien Shaw, ‘Thomas Pringle’s Bushmen: Images in Flesh and Blood’, *English in Africa*, 25 (1998), 37-61 (p. 53).

Pringle's position as a journalist, editor and poet both in Britain and the Cape enabled him to intervene in debates about imperial policy and colonial nationalism in the years preceeding the abolition of slavery in the colonies in 1833. In particular, Pringle's writings can be situated within a wider discourse of humanitarianism that underpinned much British writing on the settler colonies during the 1820s and 1830s. This involved couching British colonial expansion in a 'moral vernacular' underpinned by an Evangelically-inflected Christian morality and British law.<sup>10</sup> Pringle's writings on indigenous peoples were underpinned by this moral rhetoric, which justified British colonial expansion on the basis that it would bring legal protection, legitimate commerce and the abolition of slavery to the indigenous inhabitants of the non-European world.

As we shall see, when Pringle published his ethnographic accounts of the San and the amaXhosa in British periodicals, he deployed this humanitarian discourse quite self-consciously. As such, Pringle's *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* (1834) in particular can be situated, as John O'Leary and Matthew Shum have argued, in a popular sub-genre of the Romantic-era travelogue that was concerned with drawing the European reading public's attention to the plight of indigenous peoples. As O'Leary has argued, by the 1830s there was a 'well established discourse about the ill-treatment of South Africans', which he traces from Swedish naturalist Anders Spaarman's *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope* (1785), through to colonial administrator, government surveyor and chief Lord of the Admiralty, John Barrow's *Travels to the Interior of Southern Africa* (1801), and reaching its apotheosis in missionary John Philip's *Researches in Southern Africa*. (1828).<sup>11</sup> John Philip's *Researches* played an

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<sup>10</sup> Lester and Dussart, *Humanitarian Governance*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> John O'Leary, "'Unlocking the Fountains of the Heart' – Settler Verse and the Politics of Sympathy", *Postcolonial Studies*, 13 (2010), 55-70 (p. 57). Similarly, Matthew Shum situates *Narrative* in a tradition of South African anglophone 'protest writing' (Shum, 'The Cape After 1820', p. 191).

important role in drawing the attention of Thomas Fowells Buxton and William Wilberforce to the coercive labour conditions at the Cape, thus imbricating ameliorationist arguments for improving indigenous labour conditions at the Cape with metropolitan abolitionist discourse in the run up to the abolition of slavery in the colonies in 1833.<sup>12</sup>

However, this humanitarian discourse was underpinned by contemporaneous theories of uneven development. These theories emerged in the eighteenth century from an ethnological discourse in which the distance between Europe and the colonies was imagined as temporal as well as spatial. This discourse, which Johannes Fabian terms the ‘denial of coevalness’, allowed late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century ethnologists and ethnographers to frame cultural difference within an evolutionary discourse structured around Enlightenment notions of ‘progress’ and ‘regression’.<sup>13</sup> In particular, Adam Smith’s stadial theory provided a conceptual framework through which Romantic-era ethnologists, historians and travel writers were able to draw analogies between different societies on a global scale.<sup>14</sup> Evan Gottlieb explains:

By teaching readers to apprehend that societies could co-exist in space yet seem to occupy different historical moments, Smith and those who took up his ideas were giving Britons the cognitive tools to grasp their world as an interconnected albeit uneven whole.<sup>15</sup>

The stadial theory developed by Scottish Enlightenment conjectural historians became a means whereby history and ethnography could be discursively elided, allowing readers to see time on a spatial as well as a temporal axis. This in turn enabled analogies

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<sup>12</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.79.

<sup>13</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> On Scottish Enlightenment thinkers and their influence on nineteenth-century ethnology see Silvia Sebastini, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender and the Limits of Progress*, trans. by Jeremy Carden (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Evan Gottlieb, *Romantic Globalism: British Literature and the Modern World Order: 1750-1830* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2014), p. 32.



to be drawn between in ethnographic encounter narratives of the 1830s between ‘primitive’ non-European societies and European societies of the premodern past.

### **Settler Newspaper Poetry and the Creation of a Colonial Public Sphere in 1820s South Africa**

This newly globalised ethnographic history brought European and extra-European peoples into the same analytic frame in the 1830s, as travel writers of all stripes used representations of indigenous peoples in the ‘contact zone’ of the colonies to reflect upon their own national identities and historical narratives.<sup>16</sup> In the case of colonists such as Thomas Pringle, who were trying to forge a literate public sphere in the emerging settler states in South Africa, Australasia and Canada, representing these encounters also played a role in enabling new colonial identities to emerge. These new identities reflected, in Saul Dubow’s words, ‘elective, hyphenated forms of belonging’ produced by the overlapping of British nationalisms with emerging colonial nationalisms.<sup>17</sup>

After settling his family at their Eastern Cape farm, Pringle moved to Cape Town in search of a literary career. He arrived at the moment in which the city was beginning to establish a ‘bourgeois public sphere’ following the formal transition from Dutch to British ownership of the Cape Colony in 1815.<sup>18</sup> Industrialisation and the removal of government restrictions on trade led to the arrival of British merchants and their families. This, combined with the amalgamation of British and Dutch elites, gave

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Saul Dubow, ‘How British was the British World?: The Case of South Africa’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37 (2009), pp. 1-27 (p. 2).

<sup>18</sup> Kirsten Mackenzie, ‘Franklins of the Cape: The *South African Commercial Advertiser* and the Creation of a Colonial Public Sphere, 1824-1854’, *Kronos*, 25 (1998/1999), 88-102 (p. 90).

rise to a small but prosperous urban middle class with a thirst for print culture. The symbolic manifestation of this marrying of commercial and literary interests came in 1822, when the South African Public Library was moved to the Commercial Exchange building, a site that ‘became the focus of middle-class economic and social life’.<sup>19</sup>

After gaining the position of under-librarian at the South African Public Library, Pringle persuaded his friend and fellow-Scot, John Fairbairn, to move to Cape Town. In 1824, they together edited the *South African Commercial Advertiser* and the *South African Journal*, respectively the colony’s first independent newspaper and literary periodical. In a colony where British whites were in a minority not only among the indigenous, slave and free-black populations, but also within a settler society dominated by the longer-established and more numerous Cape Dutch community, the anglophone press became what Christopher Holdridge terms a ‘discursive mediator of identity’.<sup>20</sup> The role of the press in providing a means through which new forms of national belonging could be asserted and negotiated was outlined by Pringle and Fairburn in their ‘Prospectus’ to the *South African Journal*:

In the security enjoyed under the British dominion, the growth of wealth, activity, and intelligence, is rapidly maturing these results. No longer a disunited, wavering and temporary assemblage of adventurers, with our ultimate views rooted beyond the Atlantic, we are fast acquiring, as a community, self-respect, and home importance, in which the prosperity of every country has its foundation.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the Enlightenment discourse of improvement is adopted to argue that British control over the Cape has resulted in increased security and material prosperity. Yet Pringle and Fairbairn also point out that the Cape Colony is fast acquiring a distinct

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<sup>19</sup> Mackenzie, ‘Franklins of the Cape’, p. 91.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Holdridge, ‘Circulating the African Journal: The Colonial Press and Trans-Imperial Britishness in the Mid Nineteenth-Century Cape’, *South African Historical Journal*, 62 (2010), 487-513 (p.489).

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Pringle and John Fairbairn, ‘Prospectus,’ in *South African Journal Number One, January-February 1824*, centenary reprint (Cape Town: South African Library, 1924), p. i.

civic identity of its own, no longer ‘rooted beyond the Atlantic’ in Britain but instead acquiring a ‘home importance’. This is not an image of the Cape as a ‘little Britain’ whose institutions and culture would mimic those of the metropole, but rather a colonial nation state in its own right. It may be grounded in British culture and values but it has a distinct civic identity of its own.

Interestingly, the embryonic British-South-African national identity promoted by Fairbairn and the *Advertiser* in this moment of humanitarian idealism during the 1820s and 1830s was not predicated upon an ethnic affinity with Britain. Rather it was defined by a cosmopolitan aspiration towards the ‘cordial amalgamation’ of the many races and nations resident in the colony into one polity:<sup>22</sup>

In this Colony, being a mixture of many nations, we have insensibly conceded our peculiar prejudices to each other, and look with equal eyes on Dutch, German, and English. Religion, happily for us, forms no ground of distinction here, and Catholic and Protestant are content to go to Heaven in company. The aversion so long entertained towards the native tribes, arising from the dissimilarity of their features and mode of life, has so very nearly disappeared.<sup>23</sup>

In the heady period of humanitarian optimism that followed the passing of Ordinance 50 in 1828, which granted the indigenous peoples equality under the law with white settlers, Fairbairn’s vision of British-South-Africa included a place for the colony’s indigenous people within its citizenry (even if Fairbairn’s stadial view of human development still denied the indigenous southern Africans coevalness with the white settler population). Sadly, this moment of racial inclusivity was not to survive the intensification of tensions between colonists and the amaXhosa on the eastern frontier following the Sixth Frontier War (1834-1835), during which a hardening of racial attitudes towards indigenous people by frontier settlers occurred (along with an

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<sup>22</sup> *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 5 May 1824, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 31 December 1828, p. 1.

implacable opposition to those humanitarians who sympathised with them).<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, it does suggest that from its very inception Britishness in South Africa was less an ethnic marker than a set of symbolic affinities or values. These ‘liberal and just sentiments’ constituted what historians have termed ‘Cape liberalism’: a political discourse rooted in British liberalism, but adapted to the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic conditions of settler life in the Cape Colony.<sup>25</sup>

A look at the *Advertiser*’s correspondence pages gives us a sense of the ways in which British settlers were responding to Fairbairn’s Cape liberalism. Letters from settlers published in the *Advertiser* enabled the paper to function as a technology of communication linking settlers on the colony’s frontiers with the colonial centre in Cape Town. This helped unify spatially and economically disparate settler groups into one ‘imagined community’.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the reprinting of news from the British and European press enabled the geographically remote anglophone settler community to feel a sense of kinship and connectedness with the metropole.

Also playing an important role in maintaining the cultural and emotional affinity with Britain was the publication of short poems. These were both reprints from popular British writers of the 1820s and 1830s such as Felicia Hemans, Thomas Campbell, Letitia Landon and Thomas Moore, and original compositions by settlers. As Natalie Houston has argued, original newspaper poetry, by virtue of its location next to published news, ‘participated in the larger shared public discourse of current events’.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Alan Lester, ‘Reformulating Identities: British Settlers in Early Nineteenth-Century South Africa’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 23 (1998), 515-31 (p. 524).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Stanley Trapido, ‘Paternalism to Liberalism: The Cape Colony, 1800-1834’, *International History Review*, 12 (1990), 76-104; Bank, ‘Disillusion of Cape Humanitarians’. On the influence of Scottish institutions and literary culture on Pringle and Fairbairn’s brand of Cape liberalism see Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa, 1820-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 29-35.

<sup>26</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London and New York: Verso, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Natalie M. Houston, ‘Newspaper Poems: Material Texts in the Public Sphere’, *Victorian Studies*, 50 (2008), 233-42 (p. 239).

In contrast to journalistic reportage, poetry registered readers' 'emotional and aesthetic interpretations of different national events'.<sup>28</sup> In the correspondence pages of the *Advertiser*, prose accounts by settlers of proximate encounters with indigenous peoples were usually discursively framed as interventions into debates over the effectiveness of colonial policy. However, the two earliest poems to imaginatively render settler/indigenous encounters into verse—Thomas Pringle's 'Song of the Wild Bushman' and 'The Bushman' by a regular settler correspondent writing under the pseudonym 'Evitas'—operate very differently.

Of these two poems, only Pringle's 'Song of the Wild Bushman' has been subject to any critical attention.<sup>29</sup> In what follows, I will argue that both these poems use tropes for representing 'wild bushmen' established by ethnographic travel writing to reflect upon the affective relationship between settlers and their colonial homes. By placing these two poems in dialogue with prose accounts of settler encounters with 'wild' San 'bushmen' on the colonial frontier I will suggest that the poems were a response to debates in the Cape press about colonial policy towards the colony's indigenous population. However, Pringle's success in recirculating his 'Song of the Wild Bushman' from the newspapers of the Cape in the 1820s to the popular periodicals of Britain in the 1830s depended upon his ability to deploy the discourse of uneven development and the tropes of popular Romanticism in order to provide British readers with a recognisable framework through which they could understand settler-indigenous relations on the remote frontiers of the Northern and Eastern Cape by drawing an explicit analogy between Scotland's Union with England in 1707 and the integration of the Cape Colony into Britain's expanding empire in the 1830s.

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<sup>28</sup> Houston, 'Newspaper Poems', p. 241.

<sup>29</sup> Shaw, 'Thomas Pringle's Bushmen'; O'Leary, "'Unlocking the Fountains of the Heart'".

Letters printed in the correspondence pages of the *Advertiser* document the perceived threat so-called ‘wild bushmen’ posed to the livelihoods of settler-farmers throughout the 1820s and into the early 1830s. In August 1829, a settler from Beaufort in the Northern Cape called ‘Alfred’ wrote to the *Advertiser* complaining that:

The Bushmen, who stroll about this part of the District as beggars and vagabonds, have murdered not less than 25 people. [They] steal the whole or part [of farmers’ flocks], as may suit their convenience, and sometimes murder the herdsman. This has happened many times, and several industrious individuals have been reduced to the necessity of asking assistance from, or becoming servants to their more fortunate neighbours.<sup>30</sup>

In this account, the material losses resulting from ‘bushman’ stock thefts are presented as an existential threat to the frontier farmers living far from the economic and political centre of Cape Town. In November 1829, the same correspondent stated:

A Commando was to meet at the Field Commandant’s, Jacobs, on the 5th November to go in pursuit of these savages [...] and we hope some decisive measures will be taken to prevent the recurrence of what has passed.<sup>31</sup>

‘Alfred’s’ call for a commando refers to the policy enacted by the Dutch East India Company during the eighteenth century of calling out settler militias to murder any San accused of stock theft. The brutality of this system of state-sanctioned genocide was the subject of humanitarian critique throughout the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.<sup>32</sup> When John Barrow travelled in the Cape in 1801 in the capacity of government surveyor, his account of the cruelty of a commando enacted against the San ‘bushmen’ was highly influential in shaping British attitudes towards the Cape’s boers.<sup>34</sup> Despite these critiques, even in the age of British humanitarianism, commandos against the ‘bushmen’ continued to be sanctioned by the colonial

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Alfred’, ‘Outrages of the Bushmen’, *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 25 August 1829, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Alfred’, ‘Bushman Depredations’, *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 21 November 1829, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Mohamed Adhikari outlines the case for defining the commando system as a genocide against the San in *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide: The Extermination of the Cape San Peoples* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> See Dirk Klopper, ‘Boer, Bushman and Baboon: Human and Animal in Nineteenth–Century and Early Twentieth–Century South African Writings’, *Safundi*, 11.1-2 (2010), 3-18.

administration. As ‘Alfred’s’ letter proves, such acts were often tolerated and even supported not just by boer farmers, but also by British settlers living on the frontier.

As a settler based in the colony’s second city, Grahamstown, ‘Evitas’ evinces an attitude more in line with Cape Liberals such as Pringle and Fairbairn. In his prose report of an excursion he made to the north of the colony, he presents an ethnographic account of the bushmen he encountered.

As objects for the benevolent and well directed steps of Missionary labor, the testimony of the Teachers living in the country itself is favourable to their civilization, because they possess natural habits of activity, induced of course by want, as few among them have progressed beyond the state of hunters.<sup>35</sup>

Here the conversion and acculturation of the San is couched within a moral framework that presents the indigene as the willing recipient of the missionary’s labours. Underpinned by a socio-evolutionary discourse informed by Scottish-Enlightenment stadial theory, this humanitarian ethnography adopts a Whiggish rhetoric of improvement to present the acculturation of the San and their integration into the colonial labour economy as both natural and desirable.

A second aspect of ‘Evitas’s’ text is its creation of a racialized moral sympathy between the reader and the indigene through an evocation of the ‘bushman’s’ bodily suffering:

The ant furnishes a luxurious repast; but a more touching picture of human degradation and misery, in the state of barbarism, cannot possibly be observed, than to see those poor creatures pacing their arid plains in search of this supply;- the man dejected in countenance, and pinched by want, with his belt drawn tightly around his middle, to allay the cravings of his hunger, wanders rapidly from heap to heap, which he breaks open with his assangai. (p. 1)

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Evitas’, ‘Notes on the Nature, Extent, and Promise of the Trading Intercourse of the Transgariepine Nations, and the Present State of some Tribes on the Northern Frontier of the Colony’, *South African Commercial Advertiser*, 11 January 1826, p. 1. Subsequent references are incorporated in the text with pagination in parentheses.

This sentimentalised rhetoric, which was also a feature of abolitionist writings, produces a form of limited sympathetic identification in the reader that, as Amit Rai has argued, is ultimately self-reflexive:

The movement of sympathy both appropriates and makes proper all forms of otherness: the other's body is embodied in pity; the savagery of the racialized other is both renarrativized into the story of the "social affections": the effeminacy of sentiment is made proper to the civilized, re-masculinised, universal human.<sup>36</sup>

Essential to the self-definition of the nineteenth-century humanitarian man—the figure who was to undertake the 'civilizing mission' in the colonies—was the imaginative ability to absorb the racial other into the British narrative of sociable affection. This sympathy for the other was necessarily limited by its expression as pity, a distancing mechanism that maintained the inferiority of the racial other in the moment of sympathetic identification.<sup>37</sup> In the long era of sensibility, the rhetorical use of this racialized moral sympathy across a range of textual genres enabled the indigenous African to be positioned asymmetrically in relation to the Briton: as a pathetic victim in need of the *guardianship* of a British protector.

It is the aestheticization of the indigene through this racialized moral sympathy that enabled humanitarian writers during this period to convert their encounters with indigenous people into a variety of media that could be circulated to a wide variety of audiences. In the case of 'Evidas's' encounter with the San of the Northern Cape, his prose account was a remediation of a poem 'The Bushman' that was published in the short-lived *South African Chronicle* in November 1825. As with his prose account, 'Evidas's' speaker invites sentimental pity for his subject by stressing the interconnection between the 'bushman' and the inhospitable wilderness of the desert.

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<sup>36</sup> Amit S. Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race, and Power, 1750-1850* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> Rai, *Rule of Sympathy*, p. 163.



‘O’er these wide wastes, immeasurably wild,|Roves the poor Bushman, nature’s modest child’.<sup>38</sup> Here, the hostility of the landscape serves to emphasise the pathos of the ‘bushman’s’ position. This allows the writer to shift into a sentimental rhetoric associated with the abolitionist poetry, which figures the indigene as both an abject victim and a ‘noble savage’, uncorrupted by modernity.

In the moment of limited sympathetic identification in ‘The Bushman’, the indigenous subject is denied coevalness with the speaker. This temporal distancing is reinforced by the comparison the speaker later draws between the ‘bushman’s’ mode of habitation and subsistence and their own. After having fixed the ‘bushman’ as a uniform racial type, the speaker proceeds in the remainder of the first stanza to relate a variety of ethnographic details about the San’s mode of subsistence, appearance and weaponry.

Yet there is an abrupt shift in discourse when the speaker contemplates the ‘bushman’s’ resistance to integration into the colony. Through this movement, the speaker’s limited sympathetic identification with the ‘bushman’ shifts into a more self-reflexive mode. Instead of being a way of looking at the other, it becomes a means of reflecting upon his own attachment to, and displacement from, home. He states of the ‘bushman’:

Yet would he leave the scenes where childhood grew  
And where, sad boon, his early breath he drew?  
No! – proffer all you value, but in vain  
You try to lure him from his native plain. (ll. 36-39)

Here, the speaker imaginatively draws the ‘bushman’ into a poetic discourse in which attachment to the place of one’s birth and the nostalgic remembrances of childhood are the markers of national belonging:

Say then what spell, within these deserts rude,

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Evitas’, ‘The Bushman’, *South African Chronicle*, 29 November 1825, p.3 (ll. 1-2).

Can bind the savage to his solitude?  
 What mighty talisman can make him scorn  
 Lean want, pale terror, and th' unheeding storm?  
 Search well the heart, - it is, where'er we roam,  
 In the warm charms of *freedom* and of *home*. (ll. 44-49).

This limited identification with the figure of the 'bushman' opens up new possibilities for representation: rather than distancing himself from the 'bushman', the speaker attempts a limited sympathetic identification as he constructs him as sharing the same fundamental values as himself. In a reversal of dominant modes of representation which constructed the San's peripatetic hunter-gatherer lifestyles as less evolved than the settled existence of pastoralists and urban dwellers, it is the emigrant who, having abandoned his home, roams restlessly while the 'bushman' remains firmly rooted to his desert abode. The 'bushman's' attachment to home also gives him a freedom that is both literal and figurative. He is free from being forced into servitude under the colonists and free from the despondency that frequently overcomes the settler who is exiled from his home.

However, the poem also suggests that such a life is only possible in the desert wilderness outside of the colonial boundary. Inside the colony, the only choice for the San was to become the de facto slaves of colonists or to be annihilated by the systematised genocide that was the commando system. The 'noble savage' can only exist in the pre-modern era, with his pathos lying in his inability to reconcile his independence with integration into 'civilized' society.

In Pringle's 'Song of The Wild Bushman' the heroic qualities of the 'bushman' are even more explicitly drawn. In the opening stanza of the poem, Pringle makes the familiar identification of the figure of the 'bushman' with the inhospitable wilderness. Pringle's San speaker takes ownership of his desert domain, using his local knowledge not merely to survive but to thrive where Europeans cannot:

Let the proud White Man boast his flocks,  
 And fields of foodful grain;  
 My home is 'mid the mountain rocks,  
 The Desert my domain.<sup>40</sup>

Pringle contrasts the pastoral mode of existence of the colonists with the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the San, positioning the San in a more primitive phase of social development:

The crested adder honoureth me,  
 And yields at my command  
 His poison-bag like the honey-bee,  
 When I seize him on the sand.  
 Yea, even the wasting locusts'-swarm,  
 Which mighty nations dread,  
 To me nor terror brings nor harm—  
 For I make of them my bread. (ll. 17-24)

Here, Pringle plays on the dual associations of both the adder and the locust with divine vengeance and with the unique lifestyle of the San.<sup>41</sup> The San's use of adder poison to construct their deadly poison arrows, a potent weapon that was still feared by frontier farmers during this period, inspiring feelings of fear and awe in colonial travellers, who cited the use of poison arrows both as evidence of the San's absolute mastery over their environment and the threat they still posed to settler-farmers.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the eating of locusts more often inspired feelings of disgust than awe in colonial travellers, but Pringle here represents the San's mastery of the destructive locust 'which mighty nations dread' as a symbol of their ability to use their local knowledge to resist the incursion of European nations into their land.

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas Pringle, 'Song of the Wild Bushman,' in *African Poems of Thomas Pringle*, ed. by Ernest Pereira and Michael Chapman (Durban: University of Natal Press, 1989), pp. 11-12 (ll. 1-4).

<sup>41</sup> The locust is figured as a minister of divine vengeance in Exodus 10. 12-15.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, John Barrow, *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798*, 2 vols (London: A. Strahan, 1801), II, p. 239; Henry Lichtenstein, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806*, trans. by Anne Plumtree (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1928), p. 249.

As in ‘Evitas’ poem, the figure of the ‘bushman’ is associated with unfettered freedom and a hatred of injustice. The difference here is that the ‘bushman’ is rendered morally superior to the ‘cruel white man’, whose integrity has been compromised in Pringle’s view first by slavery, and then by their continued subjugation of indigenous peoples:

Thus I am the lord of the Desert Land  
 And I will not leave my bounds,  
 To crouch beneath the Christian’s hand,  
 And kennel with his hounds:  
 To be a hound, and watch the flocks,  
 For the cruel White Man’s gain –  
 No! the brown Serpent of the Rocks  
 His den doth yet retain;  
 And none who there his sting provokes,  
 Shall find its poison vain! (ll. 25-34)

In a reversal of the Enlightenment’s progressive master-narrative, Pringle suggests that integration into the colonial labour economy would, far from improving the condition of the ‘bushman’, degrade him into nothing better than a servile beast. Meanwhile, the final couplet of the poem figures the ‘bushman’ as a defiant fighter whose resistance to colonial encroachments upon his land remains a potent threat to settler farmers who provoke the righteous outrage of the dispossessed indigene.

The limited sympathetic identification facilitated in the reader by the humanitarian discourse deployed by Pringle and ‘Evitas’ in their ‘bushman’ poems enables a tacit acknowledgement of the San’s sovereignty over their desert domain, and a humanitarian critique of their dispossession and extirpation at the hands of white farmers. Yet this poetic discourse simultaneously contains the potential threat to the British colonial hegemony in southern Africa that this acknowledgment contains by denying the San coevalness with the European settlers who, in the 1830s, were rapidly displaying the

San and other indigenous peoples as they encroached ever further into the southern African interior.

### **The South African ‘Children of the Mist’**

So it can be seen that even while representing this act of anti-colonial resistance, Pringle’s poem splits nineteenth-century southern Africa into two distinct ‘chronotopic zones’: the ‘primitive’ wilderness of the ‘wild bushman’ and the modern settler-colonial state.<sup>43</sup> The ‘wild bushman’ can maintain his integrity in the pre-modern realm of the desert, where his indigenous knowledge enables him to be the master of his environment. In contrast, the only position afforded to him by the modern settler-colonial social order is that as servile labourer bound to a European master. The ‘wild bushman’ is thus troped as a synecdoche for pre-colonial southern Africa: the remnant of a primitive but noble culture that was rapidly being displaced by the expanding settler-colonial state.

The persistence of the trope of the ‘wild bushman’ as synecdoche for pre-colonial southern Africa in the *longue durée* of imperialist writing was pointed out by J.M. Coetzee. In *White Writing*, Coetzee argued that the representation of the ‘wild bushman’ as the ‘truest native of South Africa’ was a remarkably resilient trope that he identifies in writings ranging from British naturalist William Burchall’s *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* (1822-1824) to South African author Laurens van der Post’s *Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958).<sup>44</sup> The circulation of the trope of the ‘wild bushman’ in Burchall’s travel writing, Pringle’s poetry and in settler accounts of proximate

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<sup>43</sup> Working with Bakhtin’s idea of the chronotope, James Chandler deploys ‘chronotopic zone’ to describe spaces represented as existing asynchronously with the present. Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 135.

<sup>44</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 177.

encounters with the San also points towards the interconnection between representations of indigenous peoples in travel writing and in imaginative writing during the early-nineteenth century.

It is evident that Pringle was aware of the important role ethnography would play in providing a historical framework through which his poetic representations of indigenous people could be read by British audiences during the 1830s. Hence, his decision to publish his travelogue *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* and his African poetry together in *African Sketches* (1834). Even his earlier poetry collection *Ephemerides: or, Occasional Poems, Written in Scotland and South Africa* (1828) included an appendix providing copious ethnographic notes on the history and customs of the indigenous subjects of his South African poetry. In September 1832, ‘Song of the Wild Bushman’ reached its widest audience after being published in *Penny Magazine*. Extracted from Pringle’s 1828 collection *Ephemerides*, the poem was published with an ethnographic note on the history of the ‘bushman race’ that was originally published in the appendix to the collection:

The Bushmen appear to be the remains of the Hottentot people, originally subsisting, like all the aboriginal tribes of Southern Africa, chiefly by rearing cattle; but who have been driven, chiefly by the gradual encroachments of the European Colonists, to seek for refuge among the inaccessible rocks and sterile deserts of the interior. [...] The Bushman retains the ancient arms of the Hottentot race; namely, a javelin or assangai, and a bow and arrows. [...] although the Colonists very much dread the effects of the Bushman’s arrow, they know how to elude its range; and it is, after all, but a very unequal match for the firelock, as the persecuted natives, by sad experience, have found.<sup>45</sup>

The regression of the ‘bushmen’ from the agricultural to the hunter-gatherer developmental stage resulted, in this reading, from the history of settler/indigenous

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas Pringle, *Ephemerides; Or Occasional Poems, Written in Scotland and South Africa* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1828), pp. 164-65, repr. in *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, vol. I, 22 September 1832, p. 243.

encounters since the Dutch East India Company first settled in the Cape in 1652.<sup>46</sup> This invites a limited sympathetic identification with the San that, as I argued earlier, was necessary to the construction of the Western self as a feeling subject in the long era of sensibility. Yet it simultaneously deprives the San of agency by presenting them as the passive victims of a historical process (settler colonialism) that is beyond their control, a process symbolised by the European colonist and his ‘firelock’. By binding the ‘bushmen’ once more to the chronotopic zone of the desert, Pringle therefore implies that the San are an anachronistic remnant of a pre-modern era doomed to be either incorporated into the settler-colonial state or extirpated.

In his 1834 *Narrative*, Pringle brings the national and the global into the same analytic frame in his historical account of the origins of the ‘wild bushman’ in order to draw a parallel between Scotland’s integration into the Anglo-empire in the eighteenth century, and the Cape Colony’s integration into the nineteenth-century British Empire. In order to do so, he draws on his British readers’ assumed knowledge of the novels of Walter Scott by drawing an analogy between the history of the ‘wild bushmen’ on the colonial periphery and that of the ‘Children of the Mist’: the peripatetic Highland clan who lived on the peripheries of the expanding Anglo-empire in Walter Scott’s *Rob Roy* (1817) and *Legend of Montrose* (1819):

Whether any considerable hordes of these people existed in their present state previous to the occupation of the country by Europeans, seems to be doubtful; but it is certain that numerous tribes, once subsisting in ease and affluence on the produce of their herds and flocks, have by the incessant encroachments of the colonists been either driven to the sterile deserts, and of necessity transformed into Bushmen, or utterly extirpated. This process has been carrying on, as the authentic records of the Colony prove, for at least a hundred and twenty years. And thus on the outskirts of our ever-advancing frontier, numerous wandering hordes of destitute and desperate savages – the South-African “Children of the Mist” – have been constantly found in a state of

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<sup>46</sup> On settler/indigenous relations during the early years of Dutch settlement see, amongst others, Carli Coetzee, ‘Visions of Disorder and Profit: The Khoikhoi and the First Years of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape’, *Social Dynamics*, 20.2 (1994), 35-66.

precarious truce, or bitter hostility with the colonists.<sup>47</sup>

Two conflicting representations of the Highlander persisted into the early nineteenth century. Juliet Shields explains that in one discourse, arising from eighteenth-century anti-Jacobite propaganda and popularised by writers such as Samuel Johnson, Highlanders were portrayed as ‘thieving, belligerent, uncouth, and even cannibalistic savages’. The other, popularised by James Macpherson’s *Poems of Ossian* (1760-1763), represented them as ‘noble savages’ whose society was ‘the epitome of martial valour’, doomed through their heroic virtues to become ‘tragic victims of Southern Britain’s greedy corruption’.<sup>48</sup>

In *Legend of Montrose*, set during the Earl of Montrose’s Highland campaign on behalf of King Charles I during the English Civil War (1644-45), the hero of the story, the lowland aristocrat Lord Menteith, gives an ethnographic sketch of the Children of the Mist that bears a striking resemblance to the account of the ‘bushmen’ given by Pringle in the *Narrative*. He describes them as:

[A] small sect of banditti, called, from their houseless state, and their incessantly wandering among the mountains and glens, The Children of the Mist. They are a fierce and hardy people, with all the irritability, and wild and vengeful passions, proper to men who have never known the restraint of civilized society.<sup>49</sup>

Here, the MacGregors are constructed as lacking the emotional restraint that was a marker of civility, being subject to the ‘vengeful passions’ that locate them in the ‘savage’ rather than ‘civilized’ developmental phase and to which the ‘wild bushman’ is also subject. As well as being denied coevalness with their lowland neighbours, there is another similarity between the lifestyle of the ‘Children of the Mist’ and that attributed by Pringle to the San in the *Narrative*. Just as colonial expansion has made

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa [...]*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Edward Moxon, 1835), p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> Juliet Shields, ‘From Family Roots to the Routes of Empire: National Tales and the Domestication of the Scottish Highlands’, *ELH*, 72 (2005), 919-40 (p. 922).

<sup>49</sup> Walter Scott, *A Legend of Montrose* (London: Blackwood, Le Bas and Co., 1910), p. 33.



the San peripatetic outlaws, the Highland Clearances have made the MacGregors 'houseless' 'banditti' relegated to the inhospitable wilderness and operating outside the bounds of 'civilized' society.

The separation of Scotland into two chronotopic zones: the 'primitive' highlands and the 'modern' lowlands in Scott's Scottish novels is echoed by Pringle's division of South Africa into the 'primitive' desert and the 'modern' settler-colonial state. In the case of Scott, Katie Trumpener has argued that it is 'only through forcible, often violent, entry into history [that] the feudal folk community become a nation, and only through dislocation and collective suffering is a new identity forged'.<sup>50</sup> By explicitly drawing an analogy between the 'authentic records' of the San's dispossession at the hands of the colonists and Scott's aestheticized representation of the 'Children of the Mist', Pringle's ethnographic account simultaneously stresses both the authenticity and fictionality of the 'wild bushman'. Like Scott's Highlanders, his 'wild' excesses are troped as both characteristic of the 'authentic' indigene, and as belonging to a premodernity that, by the 1830s, had already given way to an expansionist settler-colonial state whose frontiers were violently contested.

## **Conclusion**

The belatedness of the San's struggle against the depredations of the settlers that characterises Pringle's ethno-historical accounts of 'wild bushmen' that circulated in Britain during the 1830s enabled him to re-frame colonial ethnography as a form of antiquarian enquiry. While the pathos of the San's position inevitably invites a degree of readerly sympathy, this is limited by the temporal distancing effected by locating the 'wild bushman' in a more 'primitive' historical stage to that of the British reader. This

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<sup>50</sup> Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 142.

enabled Pringle to map the well-known narrative of Scotland's integration into the Anglo-Empire onto the unfamiliar setting of one of Britain's newest colonial possessions. In this narrative the 'wild bushman' was an analogue for the Highlander: a symbol of primitive authenticity; a pathetic embodiment of the violence wrought on indigenous peoples by the colonial encounter and a means of drawing an analogy between British empire-building in early nineteenth-century southern Africa, and the making of the Anglo-empire in eighteenth-century Britain. The poem's circulation in both Britain and the Cape, enabled Pringle to disseminate to a broad colonial and metropolitan readership galvanised by the sentimental humanitarianism that animated the campaign for the abolition of slavery in the 1830s an image of a trans-imperial Britishness that could accommodate a range of national and colonial identities, including those of the European and indigenous subjects of the expanding British Empire.

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