

**1820 Settlers, open spaces, and theology:
a reflection on how the 1820 Settlers' theological views
shape our understanding of uninhabited land**

Peter S Grassow

Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Abstract

Not only did the English believe it was their right to colonise open spaces, they also believed that they had a God-given calling to cultivate all uncultivated land. They developed a theology of the land that held the Garden of Eden was ordered and cultivated, whereas those banished from the Garden were in an uncultivated wilderness. A successful English missionary would cultivate land as a sign of moral and spiritual success. This is illustrated through an account of how one group of settlers, the Sephton Party, placed a village on the African map. More specifically, I draw attention to how their chaplain, the Rev. William Shaw, provided religious sanction for the occupation of uninhabited land.

*So geographers, in Afric maps
With savage pictures fill their gaps
And o'er unhabitable downs
Place elephants for want of towns¹*

Thus wrote Jonathan Swift, the eighteenth-century poet and political commentator. England, says Swift, was a nation that assumed the right to fill what it saw as empty spaces with its own images, and with its own colonists.

Introduction

The colonising imperative was supported by what can be viewed as an English theology of the land: not only did the English believe it was their right to colonise open spaces, they also believed that they had a God-given calling to cultivate all uncultivated land. Anthropologists and colonial history commentators Jean and John Comaroff, in their ground-breaking study on the theological anthropology of South Africa, point to an early nineteenth-century “paradise lost”. The English of the early nineteenth century remembered an idealised world of independent peasants who worked the land for the market, and a mass of poor smallholders honestly engaged in agriculture.² This was “England-as-garden, its expanses divided into neatly-walled or hedged fields.”³ This memory of an ordered land of demarcated fields was then translated into the religious ideals of the English missionaries. Jean and John Comaroff argue that the English Christians understood the Garden of Eden as recorded in the Old Testament book of Genesis to be ordered and cultivated, whereas those banished from the Garden were in an uncultivated wilderness: “The vastness of this unconquered terrain overwhelmed the small-scale tidiness, the nice demarcations of the British ideal of spatial order.”⁴ It therefore becomes clear that a successful missionary would include the cultivation of land as one of the signs of moral and spiritual success.

This point will be illustrated by an account of how one group of settlers, the Sephton Party, placed a village on the African map. More specifically, I will draw attention to how their chaplain, William Shaw, arrived in Africa and provided religious sanction for the occupation of uninhabited land.⁵ This is not to say that Shaw did not shift his position over the next thirty years of African experience. The particular point made here is the view of land that Shaw brought with him from England as a young and enthusiastic missionary to the Cape Colony, as revealed in his journals from the period.

The Eastern Cape border

¹ Jonathan Swift, “Poetry, a Rhapsody” in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations: A Collection of Passages, Phrases, and Proverbs Traced to their Sources in Ancient and Modern Literature*, 10th ed., revised and enlarged by Nathan Haskell Dole (Boston: Little Brown, 1919).

² Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (University of Chicago Press 1991), 71.

³ Comaroff & Comaroff, 322, note 33.

⁴ Comaroff & Comaroff, 174.

⁵ William Shaw, *Memoir of the Rev. William Shaw* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1874), 74–75.

The autumn of 1816 ushered in a period of extreme misery for most people in England. Demobilised soldiers and sailors returned to England and soon discovered that there was no employment in their villages. This initiated a period of civil unrest, a general dissatisfaction with the harsh living conditions of England, and a society characterised by what E.P. Thompson describes as a “battle between the people and the unreformed House of Commons.”⁶ He notes T.F. Buxton’s allegation that in Spitalfields alone “there were 45 000 in want of food, and clamouring to enter the workhouses.”⁷ At the same time, halfway around the world, the Cape Colonial Governor, Lord Charles Somerset, saw settlers as a solution to the Eastern Cape border conflicts.

Somerset wanted a defensible border that would separate the colonists from the amaXhosa. The first official attempt at establishing such a border had been made in 1778. Joachim van Plettenberg, Dutch Governor of the Cape, had signed a treaty between the amaGwali (a vassal tribe to the amaRharhabe) and the Cape Colony, agreeing that the Fish River would be the colonial boundary. This treaty was to become a touchstone for all succeeding governors, who claimed that the amaXhosa had agreed to the border. In 1810, soon after the English took over the Cape Colony from the Dutch, the English military commander Colonel Collins visited the Eastern Cape and reported to the new governor, Lord Caledon, that the Fish River was the colonial boundary. Even more crucially they believed this to include the area between the Fish and the Bushman’s rivers, known as the Zuurveld, which had traditionally been seasonal grazing for Xhosa cattle. Naturally the amaXhosa denied being party to this agreement, and resisted being moved off the Zuurveld.⁸

The English wasted little time in claiming this land. Colonel John Graham’s military encounter with the amaXhosa drove the indigenous amaNdlambe and associated allies off their land and forced them across the Fish River into the territory of the amaNgqika. Then, on 14 October 1819, Lord Charles Somerset declared the region between the Fish and the Keiskamma rivers a neutral zone, to be cleared of all human habitation.

To further entrench English control over the land, Governor Somerset envisaged a “buffer zone” of farmers as a way of preventing the amaXhosa from moving their cattle over the Fish River. Somerset offered farmland to any who would emigrate from England. The farms of 100 acres allocated to the settlers were substantially smaller than the 6 000 acre Trekboer farms, but this was the only way to provide a comparatively dense settler population on the banks of the lower Fish River.⁹ The English never paused to consider whether the indigenous people of Africa wanted the colonisers. Their world view was shaped by the colonising imperative, and to them it was unthinkable that the recipients of English expansion should be resistant to it.

This need for a closely settled population led to government-sponsored inducements to create large parties of settlers: land grants would only be made to a leader of ten or more emigrants, and the Colonial Treasury fund would provide a sum of £100 per annum to fund a Christian minister for a party of not less than 100 people. At least 90 000 applications were received, with proprietors organising their extended family members into parties, or seeking volunteers from church congregations and local clubs. Among these was a party under the leadership of Hezekiah Sephton, a group sponsored by the Great Queen Street Wesleyan Chapel in London. Registering themselves as The United Wesleyan Methodist Society, they appointed as their chaplain the Rev. William Shaw.

“Full of missionary feelings”

On 12 July 1819 the English government voted £50 000 for assisted passages to the Cape Colony, and six months later some 5 000 people set sail from England to settle along the Fish River frontier. Among these were the Rev. William and Mrs Ann Shaw, who embarked on the *Aurora*.¹⁰

On 6 February 1820 the *Aurora*, accompanied by the *Brilliant*, set sail on what was to be a ten-week voyage from London to the tip of Africa. Shaw, reflecting on the pain of leaving home, remarked, “I must say with the poet ‘England with all thy faults I love thee still’ and I am confident I shall carry this sentiment with me wherever I go.”¹¹ It was almost inevitable that he would carry this love for England into the Eastern Cape, and across the Fish River into the culture of the amaXhosa, as an essential ingredient of his missionary activity. It was this sentiment that would infuse his missionary activity – and also his views on the way land was to be understood and used.

Many storms later, the travellers rounded Cape Point on 1 May 1820, and dropped anchor in Simon’s Town. William Shaw wrote in his journal: “I am entering into the Missionary vineyard. May God make me a

⁶ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 604.

⁷ See T.F. Buxton, *The Distress in Spitalfields 1816*, quoted in Thompson, 633.

⁸ J.B. Peires, *The House of Phalo* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981); T.J. Stapleton, *Maqoma: Xhosa Resistance to Colonial Advance* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1994) and Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain 1799–1853* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002) offer detailed histories of this period in the life of the amaXhosa.

⁹ See Margaret D. Nash, *The Settler Handbook* (Cape Town: Chameleon Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Nash, 16.

¹¹ Shaw, “18 February, near Dover, Friday”, in *The Journal of William Shaw*, edited by W.D. Hammond-Tooke (Cape Town: Balkema, 1972), 23.

good and successful labourer therein. I am full of Missionary feelings.” These missionary feelings included a thoroughgoing English theology of the use of land. While travelling from Simon’s Town to Cape Town, he engaged in what he termed “useful ruminations”:

The road, excepting about five of the twenty miles is very good and runs the greater part of the distance through an extensive vale. There is very little appearance of attempts at cultivation. In a few places, however there are some beautiful gardens, etc. which show what others might do in the same way, by laying aside that idleness the effects of which are but too plainly seen in most parts of this valley.¹²

This perspective on land is further made evident in the reaction of the Sephton Party on landing at Algoa Bay two weeks later. Shaw wrote that they arrived on Monday, 15 May 1820, “exactly three months from the day on which we left Gravesend”.¹³ While the settlers were glad to disembark from their ships, they were not enthusiastic about the sight that greeted them:

The scene was at once dull and disappointing. It produced a very discouraging effect on the mind of the people, not a few of whom began to contrast this waste wilderness with the beautiful shores of Old England, and to express fears that they had foolishly allowed themselves to be lured away by false representations, to a country which seemed to offer no promise of reward to its cultivators.¹⁴

They had come to a “waste wilderness” that required English cultivation. A month later, travelling between Algoa Bay and Grahamstown, Shaw looked on the land of the Eastern Cape and remarked that “the country appeared to me so beautiful, that I could not help regretting it should have remained so long without a population to cultivate it”.¹⁵ Mary Kingsley, who reviewed the writings of the missionaries to southern and eastern Africa before she embarked on her landmark trip to Africa, was amused by how much missionaries “wrote their reports not to tell you how the country they resided in was, but how it was getting towards being what it ought to be.”¹⁶

Dominating the land in God’s cause

Taming the environment applied not only to the land, but also to the indigenous inhabitants of the land. Inasmuch as the land was thought to be wild and untamed, so too – in the opinion of the settlers and their missionaries – were the local people. This is evident in the initial observations of William Shaw when he visited Bethelsdorp for a day. While waiting for the transport to take the party from Algoa Bay to the District of Albany, he found a guide to take him to the nearby London Missionary Society (LMS) mission of Bethelsdorp. Here he had the opportunity to observe the ministry of George Barker, the then resident LMS missionary. His opinion of the land is predictable: “the locality is very sterile, and unsuited to the purposes of a flourishing institution”.¹⁷ While unimpressed with the location of the mission, he was convinced of the civilising effects of Christianity: “The Hottentots certainly have more comfort and enjoyment than they could possibly have had in their former *much more* [sic] uncivilized state.”¹⁸ Later Shaw would reflect on this first visit:

Subsequently, I had abundant opportunities of forming an acquaintance with their condition before they had received any advantage from missionary training; and although the Hottentots at Bethelsdorp were certainly, at the period referred to, in a social state very far below that in which many of them may now be found on various Mission Stations and in other parts of the Colony, yet I am satisfied that even when I first saw them, they had been already greatly elevated above the very degraded condition in which the Missionaries first met them.¹⁹

It was Shaw’s opinion that the “native tribes” were in a “wild and untutored state”,²⁰ and that European Christian missionaries were obliged to civilise African indigenous people. Of course he was not alone in this perspective. It is somewhat ironic that Shaw believed that Bethelsdorp was civilising the indigenous people, as

¹² Shaw, “Cape Town Wednesday 3rd” in Hammond-Tooke, 32.

¹³ William Shaw, *The Story of my Mission* (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1860), 29.

¹⁴ Shaw, 1860, 30.

¹⁵ Shaw, “June 5th Monday” in Hammond-Tooke, 36.

¹⁶ Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa* (National Geographic 1897/2002), 12.

¹⁷ Shaw, 1860, 32.

¹⁸ Shaw, “27 May, Saturday” in Hammond-Tooke, 35.

¹⁹ Shaw, 1860, 33.

²⁰ Shaw, 1860, 33.

this was something vehemently contested by many of the colonists. For example, Fiscal J.A. Truter observed that “the manner in which the institution at Bethelsdorp is conducted, appears to me rather to impede than promote the good intentions of government towards civilization as well as of the farmers as of the Hottentots.”²¹

The Sephton Party had landed at Algoa Bay on Monday, 15 May 1820, but it was only on Monday, 5 June that the group was able to set out from the coast, crossing first the Zwartkops and then the Sundays and Bushman’s rivers. They finally settled at the farm Rietfontein and immediately began building huts, digging fields and planting their seed. Their hopes were dashed when, a month later, Major-General Colin Campbell used his contacts to relocate them – so that he could take possession of the land instead.²² The settlers reached their final destination in the Assegai River Valley on 18 July, where the village of Salem was soon to be established – and where the settlers became known as the Salem party.

Because of the rains, the Shaw family were invited by missionary John Ullbricht to stay at the LMS mission Theopolis on the Kowie River mouth until the rains eased off. While grateful for the hospitality, Shaw was not impressed by the mission: “Mr U. has been here many years, and I trust some good has been done, but I wish I could say more respecting the progress of civilisation & religion in this place”.²³ Shaw was not alone in this assessment. A fellow settler described Theopolis as follows:

At the moment 700 beings were round him almost in a state of nature, eating only when they could kill game, tilling not even a garden, and existing only as they used to do on the curded milk of their numerous cattle. Instead of the School of industry, it was looked up to as a refuge of labour with the Boors.²⁴

Here was everything that would alarm a new missionary: the land was uncultivated, the people were uncivilised, and no useful labour was undertaken.

Initially Shaw struggled with inadequate housing, the illness of his wife, his horse wandering away, and no financial support. He worked extremely hard, and six months later, on Saturday, 13 January 1821 he celebrated the completion of the first room of his house. He expressed his relief that his wife would not be “destitute of a comfortable habitation”.²⁵ This home was blessed on 5 July 1821 with the birth of a new daughter, Mary Elizabeth.²⁶

Much of Shaw’s first year in the Albany district consisted of extending pastoral reassurance to displaced people. The settlers were ill equipped for the task they faced. Most settlers, says Shaw, were “much better acquainted with the works and ways of large towns and cities, than with the occupations and modes of life which most prevail in our agricultural villages and districts”.²⁷ Their English ploughs were not suitable for breaking up the soil of Africa, and once they had completed the backbreaking work of turning the soil with a spade and planting their seed, their first crops were a failure, and blight destroyed the wheat. Shaw organised food for the settlers when their crops failed,²⁸ assisted in surveying plots to establish the town of Salem, married and buried all who came to him, and gave “such advices as are necessary to the welfare of the people”.²⁹ Shaw celebrated the first anniversary of his time in the Eastern Cape with a review of the past year:

Within one year desert places have been taken possession of by a multitude of men, the beasts of the field have very generally retreated to make room for them, houses have arisen, & villages spring into existence as if by magic.³⁰

The contemporary view of England articulated earlier in this article is echoed in Shaw’s observations (also noted earlier) regarding the “unused” land in both Cape Town and the Eastern Cape. This motivated Shaw’s support for the surveying of Salem village, the establishment of farms, and the planting of crops. Thus, to sum up William Shaw’s views of land: open spaces had been occupied by people; wild animals had retreated; land had been cultivated, and therefore he had been spiritually successful.

Conclusion

²¹ Theal, *Records of the Cape Colony*, 8:439.

²² Hammond-Tooke, 190, note 22.

²³ Hammond-Tooke, 37.

²⁴ A. Keppel-Jones, “Philipps, 1820 Settler,” p.172 in Hammond-Tooke, 190, note 25.

²⁵ Hammond-Tooke, 42.

²⁶ Viewed in the Salem baptismal register, lodged at the manse at Seven Fountains.

²⁷ Shaw, 1860, 51.

²⁸ Hammond-Tooke, 192 notes that the first crops planted by the settlers were a failure, and blight destroyed the wheat. Governor Donkin issued rations to the settlers throughout 1821.

²⁹ Shaw, 1860, 111.

³⁰ Hammond-Tooke, 53.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that there remains a residue of this missionary understanding in our contemporary culture.

Christian churches continue to think that they ought to occupy vacant land. Organisations such as the Church Land Programme have clearly demonstrated that many churches still own unused tracts of land in South Africa.³¹ Graham Philpott and Mark Butler have offered a detailed critique of the troubled relationship between church and land in *Land in South Africa: gift for all or commodity for a few?*³² What makes this even more complex is the fact that we are no longer dealing with white missionaries looking for land for mission. The leadership of what were formerly mission churches is now black, yet these churches find it difficult to consider returning their land to the people.

Even the language that we use reveals traces of the kind of missionary language employed by Shaw: for example, when a company buys an open tract of land and builds houses on it, do we not call this developing the land? When we speak of property developments, do we really mean putting more people onto the land? And when we refer to reclaiming land, are we not in fact speaking of dominating land that was formerly not under human control?

Land remains a contested issue in South Africa, and many people continue to think that they have a God-given right to dominate it.

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³¹ churchland.org.za

³² This report was written by Graham Philpott of the Church Land Programme and Mark Butler of Critical Resource. Published in June 2004, it is available from the programme.