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The Fish River Bush and the Place of History

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The Great Fish River Bush would be better understood if denominated Jungle, according to Indian nomenclature, the meaning of which is well appreciated, from the numerous descriptions we possess of that country. The word Bush is, as it were, conventional only in this colony; and what is generally taken as its meaning at home is inexplicable here. A sheep refers to a single member of the sheep, so a bush signifies a part of the Bush. The extent of the Colonial Bush cannot be estimated by any conception of one who is a stranger to its features. A small clump of bushes gives one no criteria to judge of its interminable extent, just as finity can give almost no conception of infinity.

W.T. Black¹

I realise just how deeply inscribed in my unconscious, lodged in my neural channels, is the sense of place, *this* place. The Eastern Cape's rolling, folded hills, scored by deep river gorges, and stippled with aloe, acacia and euphorbia remains the most familiar, most natural, most credible landscape for me.

C. Bundy²

When I first wrote about the Fish River Bush, a decade or more ago, I was primarily interested in those imperial and colonial representations, constituting a landscape, which served as a text by which to read the ideology of the colonial frontier.³ That interest has persisted, and is outlined here, but what has overtaken it is a sense of the persistence of colonial ideology in landscape – the way in which the historically intense moment of the frontier has persisted in latter-day representations of the eastern Cape, as if the landscape, after a century and more, were still encrypted with the codes of identity extended and contested across it back then. What is more – and more intriguing – is that the landscape of the frontier, being as intensely historicised as a frontier is, has become also an historiographical landscape, that is, a landscape significant not only to the local

1. W.T. Black, *The Fish River Bush, South Africa* (Edinburgh and London, 1902), 9 – first published in the *Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal*, 54 (107) (Edinburgh, 1853).
2. C. Bundy, 'Lessons on the Frontier: Aspects of Eastern Cape History', *Kronos*, 30 (Nov. 2004), 9.
3. P.R. Anderson, 'The Human Clay: An Essay in the Spatial History of the Cape Eastern Frontier, 1811–1836' (MLitt thesis, Oxford University, 1993). This is the direct source for several sections of this article.

occasion of its history, but also to subsequent histories' ideas of history itself. What we see when we look upon representations of the frontier – in particular the Fish River Bush – whether these be carved in the Bush itself, or marked on paper, variously, are images not only of colonial ideology, persistent in the landscape, but also images of the project of history carried across that space and time by the historians who have written and continue to 'write the frontier' (as literary scholars would put it) as they 'write about the frontier' (as historians would like to think they do).

This essay is concerned to demonstrate something of the metaphorical complex that attends the formulation of the frontier landscape in the eastern Cape in the nineteenth century, and to point to ways in which this idea – the landscape itself – continues to attend the idea of the frontier. In addition – though not systematically – it suggests also something of the way in which the historical invention of the frontier place is continued historiographically, even in histories which might consider themselves revisionist or Africanist in relation to the colonial institutions and versions that first throw up the landscape that is discussed here. Whether complacent or complicit, the historiographical adoption of the colonial landscape must compromise accounts of the frontier, insofar as that frontier is a place expressive not only of colonisation, but of the encounter between the colony and a polity or polities independent of it and different in character. For the most part, this article considers representations of the frontier in its 'high' aspect – of military and civilian colonisation, explicit conflict and a propaganda or rhetoric of pronounced binary opposition – which might roughly be thought of as the period between John Graham's clearance of the Zuurveld and the Cattle-Killing, thus 1811 to 1857. But as this essay is concerned to express the persistence of the colonial landscape of the frontier and its prevalence in even contemporary histories, it is not sensible to fix too rigid a chronological frame and thereby suggest a self-consciousness of moment and place that rarely attends anyone in history and certainly should not be thought to attend the authors of those texts under scrutiny here.

The best of the good reasons for being interested in the spatial history of a frontier is that a frontier is popularly imagined as a place.⁴ The landscape that attends this historical instance might indeed be expected to connote that instance, with ciphers of conflict characteristic of contested ground. There is a reservoir of attributes common to frontier space anywhere: elements of danger (deserts, flooded rivers, high mountains, wild animals) and of distance from a metropolitan centre, of almost gnostic binaries (oppositions between, say, wilderness and garden, animal and human, civilisation and barbarianism) which quickly extend themselves

4. I use the word 'place' to signify historical space. If space is the province of geographers, then place is the concern of the spatial historian: it is space made meaningful by acts of inhabiting, acts of history.

across patterns of other structural classification, like race and sex,⁵ elements of extremity (whether extremes of temperature or of such aesthetic-emotional complexes as sublimity) and elements of barrier (whether Great Fish River, Hadrian's Wall, Offa's Dyke, the trenches of the Western Front). Some, if not all, of these overlap and compound one another – a desert, for example, is classic frontier country, since it is a barrier, extremely hot and dry, a wilderness and usually far away from heavy human settlement. But the important thing is that the generic types of frontier space are readily rendered as metaphors for the historical character of a frontier – as a site of 'hot' conflict, of contestation and violence, of powerfully opposed ideologies and social systems. Indeed, the way the noun 'frontier' compels prepositional relationships (on the frontier, over the frontier, behind, along, across, beyond the frontier) suggests something of its relational character.

What the historian is ordinarily at pains to point out is that this character of relation, whether of distance, limit, volatility or hazard, is historical – that is, it is not intrinsic to the space thus represented, but the imposition of historical – mutable, temporal – attributes upon a space unconcerned with the dimension of time. Up to a point this is true, but even the geographer will tell you that space is far from immutable, and the spatial historian, concerned with the way in which space becomes place, must insist upon the mutability of place and its character of *idea*. There is a way in which places come to be made in the image of themselves. Thus it is that a history of the images of space belongs to the history of a place. Moreover, as I hope to show, landscape speaks not only of the history of place, but also of the place of history.

The ubiquity of the type of the frontier, and particularly its relational character, teaches us that it is a contingent space, real only under specific conditions requiring the recognition of human beings. The frontier is a place, not a space – consequent upon the action of people in time (is temporal and social) and also upon the recognition or imposition of a local geography of values (is ideological). It is an extraordinarily historical space. Its attributes are an ideological gloss on somewhat more inscrutable and paradoxical historical contests; they are an intriguing simplification of historical incoherences,⁶ and together they add up to a fairly consistent and recognisable idiom of space – a discernible landscape.

5. See, for example, A. Kolodny, 'Honing a Habitable Languagescape: Women's Images for New World Frontiers', in R. Borker, N. Furman and S. McConnell-Ginet, eds, *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (New York, 1980).
6. This 'simplification' is worth watching; it provides for the mask of space employed by writers – historians among them – in 'fixing' as self-evident the contours (we use a spatial term) of their stories. This 'simplification' is obfuscation, in Althusserian theory, where the purpose of ideology is to render coherent the contradictions of political economy, to stabilise the social subject by effacing real conditions and projecting imaginary ones: L. Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (London, 1971).

Finite and Infinite

On the Cape's eastern frontier it was the Fish River Bush that best represented the notional space of a frontier, in which the attributes of symbolic frontier cohered and were recognised. Along with the similar riverine bush of rivers to the east and west, the Fish River Bush presented an environment exemplary of the frontier: it was a natural barrier, particularly to the mounted or rolling transport of the empire; it was a wilderness, and an obdurate one at that, which resisted the assaults of human agency upon land; it resisted farming and settlement; as a natural refuge for the threatened fauna of the region it abounded in large (and dangerous) game; it was an environment which aided Xhosa guerilla warfare, which provided cover for the parties of plunder or illicit trade – 'a place for skellims';⁷ it was a very long way away from Cape Town, and absurdly distant from London; and on its other side lay the unchartered tracts of Xhosaland, occupied by people different in colour, language, economic and political organisation.

Yet however much the Fish River Bush satisfied the archetype of the frontier by providing a landscape that could be recognised and understood to *mean* all that a notional frontier is supposed to, it was as a landscape that suffered, like any frontier (indeed, perhaps any landscape) from precisely those social contradictions and historical contingencies which urge its being. On the one hand, the *constant* attributes of the frontier idea contradict its impermanence, the attribute of temporality. The natural, ordained and obvious indications of the frontier are always at odds with its historical condition. On the other hand, the more history intrudes on the space, the less the landscape is likely to be able to sustain its meaningful coherence. Its obdurate wildness and its wars compel attentions and actions that break those rules that the frontier exists to define, separate, judge and categorise.

Accounts of the Fish River bush are criss-crossed with representations that attest to the inherent paradox of a frontier landscape: that a frontier is too temporal and too human in character and origin to easily adopt the static, timeless and natural attributes of the landscape idiom. The more general the view of the bush (the further away the viewer) the greater the likelihood of inorganic representations, metaphors which supply the myth of immutable space, of a landscape ordained by nature and outside of history. As recently as 1988, one historian of the region, leaning heavily on nineteenth-century imperial accounts, wrote of the 'impression' afforded by the bush 'of a vast sea of dusty green, filling the valley from brim to brim and threatening to crawl over the edge'.⁸ It is a version of the landscape that displays its dichotomous make-up. The image of the changeless 'sea' is charged with the organic ability to 'crawl'. The inert and unchallengeable

7. The phrase is attributed to Ngqika. See *Report of the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*, 1835–6, OPB 1/3, 73, evidence of T. Philipps, 17 Aug. 1835.

8. B. Maclellan, *A Proper Degree of Terror: John Graham and the Cape's Eastern Frontier*, (Johannesburg, 1986), 153.

verities of the landscape-beyond-time are rendered volatile by the admission of the organic and temporal, the presence of history in the landscape.

Most imperial accounts of the Fish River Bush have as their overture a vision of an eternal landscape – a vision that lays claim to the authority of a universe beyond the contentions of humans and the vicissitudes of time. It is this authority that is used to sanction the presence of empire and to endorse a symbolic vocabulary for the landscape. Commentators endeavour to fix historical variables in landscape imagery that is expressive of constant relationships – so that the Xhosa, for example, become identified with the bush, or that clearing the bush provides a metaphor for war against the Xhosa. Such subjective associations require an endorsing background if they are to be acknowledged as symbolic landscape, as truth-telling representations of frontier country. The historical nature of frontier space is effaced by such claims as that the Bush has ‘in every respect ... the character of eternity implanted on it’.⁹ Such imagery, however, endorses not only the symbolic project of landscape, but supplies the first attribute of the quirky space of the frontier itself. It is an apologist idiom, stabilising the questionable presence of empire in the space by granting the frontier ‘the character of eternity’, a providential, natural ordination of empire. This landscape has the assured obviousness that the subjects of empire should assume of the imperial project, as faithful agents. It entrenches a world-view of hard distinctions, of absolutes, so that what is and is not empire is an objective decision, a moral order outside of time and – like geographical strata – as immutable as we are given to believe the Bush (and the frontier it symbolises) to be: ‘Inconsumable by fire, waveless by the wind, unharmed by the torrents, unchangeable in every vicissitude of season, having neither youth nor age imprinted on it, it partakes more of the character of a stratum of the earth than anything proper to organic life.’¹⁰ The moral and ideological certainty which such a landscape symbolises is conveyed to its observer in ‘something like a feeling of silent sublimity at its deserted repose ... its interminable extent’.¹¹

The idiom of immutability, of permanence and infinity, mineral and inorganic, is prevalent in the long-range account of the Bush. A catalogue of its forms would include – as with the ‘sea’ above – such images as of ‘chaos’,¹² ‘shrouds’,¹³ ‘shade’,¹⁴ ‘fastnesses’,¹⁵ and ‘screen’.¹⁶ For the military surgeon, W.T. Black, who devoted a whole book to the Fish River Bush, the fixity of this frontier landscape could be summed up in an image which overrides the obviously mutable

9. Black, *Fish River Bush*, 22.

10. *Ibid.*, 9.

11. *Ibid.*, 14.

12. *Ibid.*

13. MacLennan, *A Proper Degree of Terror*, 153.

14. H. Ward, *Five Years in Kaffirland*, vol. 1 (London, 1848), 243.

15. Black, *Fish River Bush*, 10.

16. *Ibid.*, 16.

and organic environment: to him it seemed that ‘we have here a living coal-field unmerged as yet by a deluge’.¹⁷ Geological time co-exists with historical time in any place; it is the business of landscape to efface the conditions of the latter with the more static attributes of the former, so that change and challenge are averted by the transcendent authority of symbols that appear to emanate from a timeless order.

Landscape is the mask of space, serving both to present a certain face and to conceal another. As ideological space, landscape conceals the conflicts and contradictions that beset historical space – primarily contests for access to the resources of space (such as land and water) and for the spatial ordering of social relations (such as who owns the land, who works it, and where they live). It conceals this country of political economy with a screen of ideal land, a version of space that simplifies or obscures conflict and locates people seemingly ‘naturally’ in roles and relationships. The significance of space, and of those who occupy it, comes to seem as incontrovertible as landforms.¹⁸ In the dual process of concealment and revelation, landscape mediates the raw material of *historical* space to the subjects of that place – that history – in such a way that those subjects recognise themselves within meaningful and sustained and unremarkable relations, constant and consistent, untrammelled by the passage of time and its implication of change. In so doing, the metaphor of place (which is what landscape amounts to) must relate the concealed domain of history to that of transcendent time and nature. It is a delicate operation, for any disclosure of the truly plastic nature of landscape would expose precisely those social contradictions and historical conflicts that ideology (and landscape, as ideological space) seeks to neutralise. It is unsurprising, in the context of this obfuscation, to find that ‘the darkness of night cannot afford a deeper screen for deeds of blood than the tangled thickets and dense foliage of the Fish River Bush’,¹⁹ that an idiom of concealment leaks into the making of landscape. Even language seizes up over the historical incident in the ‘gloom’, where ‘[s]uddenly, in this horrid shade, the combat opens hand to hand, &c.’²⁰ In practice, the traverse between history and ‘still nature’²¹ is not often flawlessly executed. In the Fish River Bush, the pursuit of a landscape to efface history engenders an imagery of concealment that adheres to the frontier:

17. *Ibid.*, 18.

18. In this, as in much else of my argument about ‘symbolic landscape’, I am following Denis Cosgrove’s *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (New York, 1985), chapters 2 and 3, and especially 61ff.

19. Black, *Fish River Bush*, 16.

20. Ward, *Five Years*, vol. 1, 293.

21. I am plundering the term from the preface to the London edition of Anders Sparrman’s *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, and Round the World* (1785), 27 and 29.



Figure 1 (a)
'View of the Kowie River and Bush.'
Thornley Smith, *South Africa Delineated* (London, 1850)



Figure 1 (b)
'View of the Great Fish River and Bush.'
Gustav Fritsch, *Drei Jahre in Süd-Afrika* (Breslau, 1868)



Figure 2. 'Kaffirs Bush-fighting.'
Illustrated London News (London, 25 July 1846)

One can scarcely survey [the Fish River Bush] as you would a battle-field, and point out such and such spots as marked by hairbreadth escapes from, and conflicts with, savage foes, as such events here all transpire under the surface of this gloomy mantle, the personification of lifeless perennial repose. One cannot survey it as you would a map, and point out the streams, the roads, the boundaries of property, and the habitations of men; all these, if they exist at all, are shrouded in view by the same impenetrable winding-sheet, which conceals the action of the savage passions of men and brutes, as well as any signs of the former's industrial activity.²²

Survey, property, habitations, foes, passions and industrial activity: this is the domain of history, the *journalisme* that contradicts the apparently 'lifeless perennial repose' of the bush. In the Fish River Bush the landscape of historical event is not forever hidden. The spatial description of the frontier event in the bush tends to be rendered in the close-up view – often in representations of the bush from within, rather than from without. Such landscapes are less and less lyric, and increasingly narrative, framed by incident rather than by screen of concealment. This is commonly evident in pictures of the bush, where the range of focus generally compels the mode of treatment, either lyric or narrative. So long-range

22. Black, *Fish River Bush*, 15. MacLennan also describes the bush as a 'dense winding sheet': *A Proper Degree of Terror*, 153.

views provide a lyric (and cosmic, screening, inorganic) landscape (Figures 1a and 1b) and close-range representations supply a narrative one (Figure 2). A great many narrative representations nonetheless allude to the frontier bush's attribute of concealment, as though the historical incident is only briefly glimpsed before being engulfed by the obscurity of the primal landscape – a formal device that colludes in the ideological tendency towards the effacement of history, whilst yet sketching a landscape symbolic of the imperial experience of the frontier.²³

The frontier characteristics of danger and subversion dominate the close view of the Bush landscape. Both of these are reinforced by the military vision consequent upon the successive wars in the first half of the nineteenth century. The landscape of the frontier comes increasingly to reflect a faltering in imperial initiative, a challenging encounter with another, and resistant, social order. If the distant landscape of the Bush evokes a monolithic imperial order, then the close-range landscape seems always to mark the cracks in that monolith. This historicised landscape supplies a new range of local – and often contradictory – associations, whereby the Bush assumes the negative attributes of the frontier, and the frontier emerges as a world beyond the *lucidus ordo* of empire.

'Like the lion, the tiger, the panther, and all the roaming tenants of the bush, the mountains or the Kloof, the Kaffir has become identified with the country to which he now belongs',²⁴ wrote the wife of one officer in the 1840s, later likening operations against the Xhosa to a battle with weeds, or with clearing the dense bush which is so essentially their terrain: 'As fast as they were put down in one place, they started up in another.'²⁵ Indeed it is hard to find a commentator from the Zuurveld Campaign of 1811–12 to the war of Mlanjeni (1850–53) who does not refer to 'clearing the bush' when recounting the numerous military encounters there. References to clearance demonstrate an apparent conflation of the Xhosa with the Bush in the idiom of the frontier landscape. To clear that space of its dense, unmanageable Bush – for military advantage, for settlement, for settler security – would be to erase the enemy and thereby remove the challenge to the autochthonous pretensions of empire. Far from being a static, geological landscape, the Bush becomes a correlative of the Xhosa. The violent conquest of Xhosaland is reduced to the status of land management, action upon 'useless' space in the altogether reasonable pursuit of cleared, and therefore productive, ground. On the

23. Several of F.T. I'ons's paintings might suffice to illustrate this, with their general character of gloom and concealment. One good example would be his 'Warriors fleeing across a river' which can be found in E. Bradlow and J. Redgrave, *Frederick I'ons, Artist*, (Cape Town, 1958). A similar effect is achieved by the illustration amended for the cover of MacLennan's *A Proper Degree of Terror*, which is called 'Pass of the Great Fish River' and derives from the *Christian Keepsake and Missionary Annual* (1835): one notes the manner in which the density of the Bush, as ink, threatens to subsume the incident – a wagon fording the river, as if sinking into it, being watched by human forms that recapitulate the aloes and euphorbia of their environment: see below.

24. Ward, *Five Years*, vol. 1, 122.

25. *Ibid.*, 289.

other hand, the more anthropomorphised the landscape becomes, the more subversive are the metaphors which emanate therefrom: the Bush on the frontier becomes exactly what the frontier is – alive, alive with Xhosa, alive with the possibilities of an ungovernable imagination, and, through these, alive with potential threat to the coherence of imperial identity.

W.T. Black's account of the Bush supplies an early version of a popular story still prevalent today: 'The tops and sides of the Koppies and ridges are garrisoned by stumpy aloes, with their bristling load of leaves, often giving the appearance of a picket or party of Caffres to patrols traversing the country during war time.'²⁶ A century later the identification of the aloes with the Xhosa had settled down in the canon of apocryphal yarns about the frontier. A children's book of the 1950s relates the tale pretty much as it is told today, a story passed down 'by an old woman who lived here in the early days of the colony':

The British troops were fighting against the Kaffirs, driving them out of a part of the country where they had no right to be ... One evening a small company of Britishers ... camped on the river bank near here, arriving after dark. When they awoke at the first gleam of daylight next morning they saw hordes of red-blanket Kaffirs coming down the hill across the river. Their officers ordered them to retreat as fast as possible ... They stopped their flight at the top of the rise and looked round, only to find that the hordes of red-blanket Kaffirs were nothing but the tall flame-coloured aloes in full bloom!²⁷

The author was my great-grandmother, and I heard her story from my grandfather reading to me when I had measles, as if from an old woman who lived in Grahamstown in the early days. (How cunning is the narrative disposition of time in that phrase 'the early days', with its ability to mark the subject's origin – here the colony, capitalised, as proper noun – as the origin of time itself, to measure time by its narrative, and ideological, significance.)

The association of the Xhosa with the bush was to some extent by other indigenous populations. The Xhosa '[were] distinguished by the more distant tribes, by an appellation signifying a "Bush Buck" or native of the thicket'.²⁸ This was chiefly recognition of their familiarity with the bush and their overwhelming competence at the conduct of guerilla warfare in that terrain. It is not an appellation which transfers values to the bush, and it stops far short of the infernal landscape of colonial imagination, busy with the hurried metamorphosis of the Xhosa into plant or animal: 'Lucifers were at a premium that night, I am sure: great was the smell of brimstone – fit atmosphere for the expected foe.'²⁹ Here 'the hunt through the bush ... to intercept the enemy ... more resembles the hunt of some wild animal than anything else.'³⁰ An officer in the war of 1835 narrated a similar

26. Black, *Fish River Bush*, 19.

27. W. M. Levick, *Dry River Farm* (London, 1964), 102–3.

28. R. Godlonton, *A Narrative of the Irruption of the Kaffir Hordes* (Grahamstown, 1836), 9.

29. Ward, *Five Years*, vol. 1, 245.

30. Ward, *Five Years*, vol. 2, 89.

landscape: 'It rained in pelting showers; the dark and dangerous Fish River Bush was below on the left; and we rode along green hills. It fell dark.'³¹ Entering the Bush,

[a] strange dog which had accompanied us, pushed forward into the obscurity; barked angrily; and ran back to us howling. We looked to our arms, again the dog went on and barked, when a rustle of assegais was heard: but it was only a porcupine angrily shaking its quills at the dog.³²

In yet another account, the Xhosa 'more resembling demons than men',³³ move to war 'filling the air with a strange whirr – reminding one, on a grand scale, of a flight of locusts'.³⁴ Conversely, the vegetation of the Bush is anthropomorphised: 'the stately giant Candelabra Euphorbia rears its hydra-headed form above its neighbours in the deep hollows'³⁵ – a personification replicated in many illustrations of the Bush (one detects it in several of the pictures reproduced here, but see also, for example, Thomas Baines's 'Detachment of 2nd of Queens' Regiment surrounded – Fish River Bush'). Even the darkness of the dense bush is to be identified with the Xhosa, who 'are aided by the black colour of their skins affording no contrast to the gloom of the recesses they have taken refuge in'.³⁶

That 'still nature', with which the empire and its colony might have like to see themselves identified, proves treacherously human. The identification of the Xhosa with the environment of the frontier undoubtedly recasts the frontier as one between civilisation and wilderness, humans and animals, but it also undermines the *natural* self-justifications of imperial landscape. Images of the frontier begin to reflect the historical truth: that the Xhosa presence appears natural and proper, while that of the European settlers or soldiers comes to seem intrusive, improper and unnatural.

The Great Rendezvous

From the very first frontier war it is evident that the preferred terrain of the Xhosa warrior was the Bush, and that the efficacy of colonial operations was dramatically curtailed in that environment. Even the scantily documented first three frontier wars yield Landdrost Maynier's record of 'the immense woods and dens which offer a safe retreat to [the Xhosa]'.³⁷ The form of colonial aggression and Xhosa

31. J. Alexander, *Narrative of a Voyage of Observation among the Colonies of West Africa, and of a Campaign in Kaffirland in 1835* (London, 1837), vol. 2, 31.

32. Alexander, *Narrative of a Voyage*, vol. 2, 52.

33. Ward, *Five Years*, 249.

34. *Ibid.*, 248.

35. Black, *Fish River Bush*, 18.

36. *Ibid.*, 17.

37. J. Peires, *The House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of their Independence* (Johannesburg, 1981), 140–1.

resistance throughout the long century of successive conflicts was always in some measure a response to the Bush environment. The Zuurveld clearances of 1811–12 ushered in a landscape of attrition and scorched earth, recapitulated at various times in various wars and even in putative peacetime – one thinks of the apocalyptic Waterkloof of 1851 and of the expulsion of Maqoma from the Kat River Basin in 1829. Graham spoke of his theatre of operations in 1812 as ‘an immense and almost impenetrable wood’³⁸ and wrote later of how ‘European troops cannot act with any effect against the Kaffers in the Woods’, even proposing then that colonial troops should carry four assegais apiece.³⁹

The Bush played a major part in effecting the militarisation of the frontier, with profound consequences for the landscape there, and for the representation of history. As Theal remarked:

The Fish river along its lower course, being bordered by dense and extensive thickets, was a very bad boundary ... [t]he clearing of this bush during war had been an operation of such difficulty that the military officers were unanimous in opinion that the Xosas ought not to be allowed again to get possession of it.⁴⁰

The military implications of the Bush entailed a whole architecture of frontier space founded upon the dispossession and forced removal of the Xhosa population and the intense colonial settlement or policed ‘neutrality’ of whole swathes of Xhosa territory. The military exigencies of the Bush environment conduced to precisely those kinds of inroads upon the land, and those kinds of assault upon the Xhosa polity so readily conflated with that environment, that characterised the rapacious settler capitalism of farming, commissariat and trade.

What was to the imperial armies ‘a chaos of hills, kloofs and krantzies ... a range of disrupted burly hills, with intervening deep and rugged kloofs and ravines’⁴¹ was not so to the Xhosa, whose familiarity with the Bush prompted colonial paranoia and marked the landscape with it. Perhaps more than anything else, it was the suitability of the Bush for Xhosa guerilla warfare that has left the Fish River Bush with the mantle of the Cape’s eastern frontier in popular association. For war upon war, and long after the political frontier had moved from the Fish up to the Keiskamma and then right up to the Kei, large numbers of Xhosa would take to the Fish River Bush and to the bush north and south of it. War, therefore, was never fought along a front, but in theatres, and in almost every war one theatre was deep within the colony, and that was the Fish River Bush. It is hardly surprising then that the Bush figured as a fifth-column landscape, something

38. Cape Archives (hereafter CA), Colonial Office (hereafter CO) 2582, Letters Received, Landrosts of Graaff-Reinet and Uitenhage, Graham – Reynell, 8 Jan. 1812.

39. CA, CO 2582, Graham – Colonial Secretary (Memo), 5 Sep. 1812.

40. G. Theal, *History of South Africa since 1795* (Cape Town, 1964), vol. 1, 341–2.

41. Black, *Fish River Bush*, 14. MacLennan repeats the phrase ‘kloofs and krantzies’ and adopts the general tenor of Black’s passage: *A Proper Degree of Terror*, 153.

malignant within the body of the colony. Just as the military ‘solution’ to the frontier in 1811–12 only heralded an even more complicated and expensive military frontier, so attempts to recognise a characteristically ‘frontier’ landscape in the Bush only bred corruptible metaphors – idioms of space which, like the frontier itself, cut both ways.

Colonel Henry Somerset wrote in 1846 to the Civil Commissioner in Grahamstown of ‘having observed on my route that the whole of the Kowie Bush was thickly infested with Kaffirs’.⁴² Instructions for the Commandant on the frontier back in 1825 display the same idiom of infestation, speaking of ‘cases of alarm ... when any part of the country becomes infested with Caffres.’⁴³ The war of 1835 was termed an ‘irruption’⁴⁴ of the Xhosa and a ‘hurricane of savage inroad’.⁴⁵ Besides constituting instances of what Dan Wylie (writing of representations of the Zulu) has called ‘enterrment’ – figures which reduce the African indigene to a bestial or primal mass, and relate these societies to the most basic organic (or inorganic) forms,⁴⁶ such metaphors belong to a repertoire of disease and disaster that reach back through the Renaissance to such echoes of animism still to be heard in classical antiquity.

Imperial forces had to adapt in order to wage war in this environment. Officer after officer stated the need for ‘a very considerable body of infantry ... skirmishing force ... to clear the bush’.⁴⁷ Traditional models of engagement had to be jettisoned and new ones devised. One officer (whose skull was supposed to have found its way to the Mpondomise wardoctor, Myeki) summed up the military frustration of the Bush (according to Harriet Ward’s eloquent account): ‘Poor Captain Bambrick’s last words ... were, “This is no place for cavalry.”’⁴⁸ The *Cape Frontier Times* was no less forthright: ‘Captain Bambrick went out with his troops, and unfortunately entered too deep into the bush, where the Kafirs shot him.’⁴⁹ As in conflicts elsewhere, before and after, the imperial response to the guerilla advantage of the Bush was a war of attrition brought against the civilian resources of Xhosa society. With tones of biblical self-righteousness, the colonial press clamoured for a landscape of conquest: ‘Let the war be made against Kafir huts and gardens. Let all these be burned down and destroyed. Let there be no ploughing,

42. Ward, *Five Years*, vol. 1, 253.

43. Somerset’s ‘Instructions for the Commandant on the Frontier’, 25 Mar. 1825, *Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Inhabitants of Southern Africa*, 1835, OPB 1\2, 178.

44. Godlonton, *A Narrative*, and *Graham’s Town Journal*, 3, 191, 20 Aug. 1835.

45. Alexander, *Narrative of a Voyage*, 423.

46. D. Wylie, ‘Language and Assassination: Cultural Negations in White Writers’ Portrayal of Shaka and the Zulu’, in C. Hamilton, ed., *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History* (Pietermaritzburg, 1995).

47. Richardson – Lindsay, 1 May 1846, in Ward, *Five Years*, vol. 1, 264.

48. Ward, *Five Years*, vol. 1, 256.

49. *Cape Frontier Times*, 20 Apr. 1846.

sowing or reaping ... Shoot their cattle too ... Tell them the time has come for the white man to show his mastery over them.⁵⁰

This landscape, highly eventful, bearing all the marks of history, is not the landscape that Baines or I'ons painted. It is the Bush that persists, for, as W.T. Black noted, '[f]ire makes no deep impression on the everlasting verdure of the bush',⁵¹ indeed, the Bush was '[i]nconsumable by fire'⁵² (and yet, intriguingly, he also compared it to 'a living coal-field'⁵³ as if anticipating the fire latent there, the sign of history). Still today, the conservation of what the Eastern Cape's tourism authority calls 'Frontier Country' depends upon the tracts of Bush conserved at Addo or in the Fish River Conservancy, restocked with the big game that the colonists hunted (or paid to have hunted) out. The landscape of the frontier event itself has been effaced from popular consciousness, though it is still there. Maqoma's country in the wake of removals and drought between 1829 and 1835 was described as being 'as bare as a parade'.⁵⁴ If you drive out of Fort Beaufort in that direction you will find that it still is. Nor is the smouldering landscape of the nineteenth-century frontier as old or as lost as the 'timeless' Bush of the 'Frontier Country' would suggest. The 1980s Ciskei might as well be recalled as the Reverend Stephen Kay sketched Maqoma's ground to the Select Committee on Aborigines (and, interestingly, did so in terms of the opposition of the picturesque – that genre so founded upon the prospects of property⁵⁵ – to the unsettled and unsettling state of the frontier):

I traversed the whole of these grounds shortly after the chief and his clans were driven from them; and the scene altogether was not a little impressive: upon the face of an extensive and beautifully picturesque landscape, marks of the horrid ravages of war everywhere presented themselves in demolished cattle-folds and heaps of ashes, to which all the dwellings of the natives had been reduced by our troops. The recent account of settler's houses being burnt down in Albany by the Caffres is truly distressing; but are the latter, because Caffres, to be treated as if destitute of all feeling ...?⁵⁶

On 21 December 1834, the Military Secretary at the Cape, Colonel Wade, witnessed those removals:

These valleys were swarming with Caffres, as was the whole country in our front ... the people were all in motion, carrying off their effects, and driving away their cattle towards the drifts of the river, and to my utter amazement, the whole country around and before us

50. *Cape Frontier Times*, 6 Sep. 1846.

51. Black, *Fish River Bush*, 22.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*, 18.

54. Evidence of Capt. R. Aitcheson, *Select Committee on Aborigines*, 4, 27 July 1836, OPB 1\3, 9.

55. See Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, for a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between the picturesque and the rise of capitalism.

56. Evidence of Revd S. Kay, *Select Committee on Aborigines*, OPB 1\4, 63.

was in a blaze ... the soldiers were busily employed in burning the huts, and driving the Caffres towards the frontier ...⁵⁷

'Towards the frontier' is a felicitous phrase, for it might be used to suggest that the historian's approach to the landscape must remain forever an approach: the landscape is no more certain of recovery than the events that shaped it. Like the *amajoni* in the Fish River Bush, mocked by the unseen Xhosa calling 'Yiz' *apha!* Yiz' *apha!*' (Come here! Come here!),⁵⁸ the imperial and colonial idea of a frontier landscape – a settled entity – is confounded by ventriloquial echoes and ambushed by the presence, endlessly recurrent, of the Xhosa in that space. A young soldier noted, 'they have a saying that there [isn't space] for two parties in the bush'.⁵⁹ It is a comment as true of the symbolic landscape as the actual Bush. Inevitably, the Xhosa presence must prove unsettling to the stabilising self-justifications of the landscape of empire. The frontier should lie *between* any two parties, according to the logic of boundaries, but, of course, the truth of history is that a frontier signifies contestation, and properly it lies not between but *among* parties, and unhappily so. One consequence of scorched earth for the spatial history of the frontier is that space becomes not just a theatre of conflict, but one of its targets. The firing of Xhosa huts and settler houses is more than an assault on material resources; it is also an attempt to destroy *place* and thereby to sunder the connection between the people and their act of inhabiting, and between that act and the space inhabited. It returns the space to a void state, a 'chaos', which is one reason why even Africanist or revisionist histories can fall back so automatically upon colonial projections of landscape, and imperial myths of geographic stasis. One needs to see the landscape not as it is in seeming, but as it is in meaning: as this party of soldiers, capable of 'reading' fire did in late 1834 or early 1835, coming upon the very first colonial settlement to be overrun in that war, at the Clay Pits. There they beheld 'the ruins of the house still standing roofless and black with fire', and, moving on, 'approached the Kaffir Drift post, and found all the buildings roofless and scathed with fire; and boxes and iron bedsteads broken and scattered about'.⁶⁰ These scenes are precisely as intended – unsettling. They render the claims of settlement rootless, roofless, with strewn boxes and bedsteads that are a parody of the settler's arrival, an antithesis to the act of settlement. Here is the Reverend William Shaw recalling his arrival at what was to become Salem:

My wife sat down on one box, and I on another. The beautiful blue sky was above us, and the green grass beneath our feet. We looked at each other for a few moments, indulged in some reflections ... we were soon engaged in pitching our tent ... in a comparatively short

57. Evidence of Col. Wade. *Select Committee on Aborigines*, OPB 13, 314.

58. J. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg, 1989), 18.

59. Rhodes House, MS, Lumley Graham diary.

60. Alexander, *Narrative of a Voyage*, vol. 2, 51-3.

time ... the site of our future village presented a lively and picturesque appearance ... when the white tents of the Settlers were pitched and dotted down on their several homesteads, the scene presented to the eye was at once romantic and pleasing.⁶¹

By contrast, the military party at the Clay Pits and Kaffir Drift found the scene before them, towards the frontier, as they were meant to, 'rather humbling'.⁶² And Salem is where Lucy Lurie wishes, says her father, 'to humble yourself before history',⁶³ and where he is burned and she raped, in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*:

'A shocking business,' says Bill Shaw again in the car. 'Atrocious. It's bad enough when you read about it in the paper, but when it happens to someone you know' – he shakes his head – 'that really brings it home to you. It's like being in a war all over again.'⁶⁴

Necessarily, the idea of frontier landscape is fraught with the snares of paradox. However negative the correspondences intended between the Xhosa and their nightmarish Bush environment, those correspondences still only effect a closer identification between the Xhosa and the contested ground, as if the 'wild' Xhosa belong to the 'wild' country. In addition, Xhosa advantage in the Bush, and the Bush's location as the site of resistance, elicit colonial responses that jeopardise 'civilised' appearances. The problem is that – despite plans to escarp the banks of the Great Fish river as early as 1813⁶⁵ – the truth for the colony is that '[w]e cannot build a wall along our frontier'.⁶⁶ The landscape of the frontier, far from stabilising imperial myths of the land, is a vista of peripheral vision, challenging monolithic symbols with a subversive sense of otherness and alternative, and threatening to corrupt a landscape far broader than the narrow 'chaos of hills, kloofs and krantzes'. When W.T. Black wrote of 'the great Rendezvous of the Fish River Bush',⁶⁷ he meant its suitability to the guerilla warfare of the Xhosa, but the Bush was – and remains – also the rendezvous of historical space. It is the landscape of the Bush that expresses the confluence of historical contests, and on which is written the paradoxical 'view' of the frontier, wrought of contradiction, of simultaneous concealment and disclosure, lifelessness and infestation, finity and infinity.

61. W. Shaw, *The Story of My Mission among the British Settlers in South Eastern Africa* (London, 1872), 3–9.

62. Alexander, *Narrative of a Voyage*, vol. 2, 53.

63. J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London, 1999), 160.

64. *Ibid.*

65. CA, CO 6127, 'Moodie's Index', Military Secretary – Commissioner for the Frontier, 4 June 1813.

66. Rhodes House, MSS. Afr. S. I. f197, Southey – Godlonton, 10 Apr. 1852.

67. Black, *Fish River Bush*, 11.



The Place of History

There is not space here to begin a substantial analysis of the pictorial representations of the Bush since the nineteenth century, but I do wish to frame some thoughts about the historiographical representation of space, the landscape of historians, by referring to two paintings by F.T. I'ons.⁶⁸ There are two reasons for this. Firstly, I'ons paintings are a particularly rich resource for the historian, because they display some internal development and some local and 'naïve' adaptations of convention, and these attributes lend the pictures a kind of awkwardness that discloses the sleight-of-hand of ideology. In this they echo aspects of the contradictory verbal representations discussed above. Secondly, the two pictures I wish to consider here happen to provide the cover art for Jeff Peires's two canonical treatments of the history of the Xhosa, and thus gain historiographical gravity as 'illustrations' of those histories. I would not like to overburden the occasion of their use by Ravan Press, however, because it is hazardous to impute agency or deliberation to the act of publication. I have been a publisher and I know how straggling is the chain of production and how arbitrary can be the relationship of a book's packaging to its substance. Nonetheless, the bond of image and substance is forged in the press, and it lingers, for better or for worse. Moreover, there is an evident deliberation to the selection of 'Scene at the Kariega River' for *The House of Phalo* and 'Kaffirs Watching for the Return of the Dead Warriors, as Foretold by Nongqawuse' for *The Dead Will Arise*. And even if my choice of these pictures is as arbitrary as their occurrence on Peires's covers, they still do allow for some treatment of the stricter conventions of landscape that attend the fine arts, and that creep into popular apprehensions of space.

The idea of landscape – indeed the term itself (Flemish: *landskip*) – is coincident with the Renaissance painterly innovation of realism in representations of land.⁶⁹ Denis Cosgrove, most lucidly, provides the argument that landscape consistently implies a spectator's relationship to the land, and so severs the productive union of human activity and the land commodifying land as an ideological motif, as an object distinct from its use-value and from its primary relationship to human endeavour.⁷⁰ Landscape, therefore, estranges and complicates, and does so in the occasion of emergent capitalist relations on the land, particularly in Northern Italy and Flanders, where the artistic genre of landscape and the social and economic patterns of capitalist organisation make their first and simultaneous appearance.⁷¹ Landscape becomes the sign of land, forging an ideological image (not unlike, for example, a banknote) for a productive resource. Like a Claude-glass later, landscape is a framing device, within which the land is

68. I have written at greater length on some pictorial landscapes, and on the representative devices of survey, in Anderson, 'The Human Clay'.

69. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 21.

70. *Ibid.*, 61–4, 71–87.

71. *Ibid.*

rendered ideal, and by which it is measured as a purchasable prospect, an investment capable of appreciation and transfer (semantic echoes provide circumstantial corroboration of this thesis, but they do serve to illustrate it: we even speak of ‘appreciating’ a landscape, and we hang our landscapes ‘to advantage’, for example). The value of land is banked in landscape, not least by rendering the land timeless, politically neutral, secure, stable, not subject to the vicissitudes of history. Hence ideal landscape portrays rural life as effortless and arcadian. There are no ‘marks of the horrid ravages of war’;⁷² across the static space of landscape no historical currents roll like bad weather.

Alterations in the design of ideal landscape are held to accompany changes in the thrust and development of society, and they are reflected in the metamorphosis of the landscape genre. For our purposes it is the conventions of the eighteenth-century picturesque and the Romantic sublime of the industrialising and alienating nineteenth century that are most familiar to representations of the frontier – whether pictorial or verbal. But the idealisations of these genres are also threatened, undermined and syncretised by the encounter with the imperial periphery, its conflict, and with what lies beyond.⁷³

The I’ons paintings that appear on Peires’s covers are superficially schooled in the genre conventions of their time, and they run the risk of projecting for Peires’s reader a particularly vulgar appropriation of local space within metropolitan modes of ‘seeing’. However, they are also both awkward pictures, as I have suggested, and their relationship to the picturesque and the sublime suggests the considerable agency of both history and locality (where landscape is inclined to timeless generality). Even more than the better-known Thomas Baines, and altogether unlike the sanitised prospects of frontier watercolourists, I’ons’s art attests to the impossibility of picturesque landscape in the frontier bush. The cause, as ever, appears to be an overwhelming historicity, the heterogeneity of the frontier, and conflict along it. In such historical space, the neutralising impact of picturesque myth is frustrated and a sense of proper closure withheld. Instead, what closure I’ons’s paintings do achieve runs so counter to the vision of the picturesque that he appears to effect an empathetic engagement with Xhosa space, something

72. Thomas Baines, of course, does represent scenes of war on the frontier – as have other painters elsewhere. I have read Baines’s depictions of battle within the conventions of picturesque landscape and according to my arguments above: so that one finds, for example, the figures of the Xhosa conflated with the framing vegetation (or *coulisse*), and with points of depth (‘gloom’), while colonial forces and their points of emanation on the perspectival axes of the paintings tend to be associated with the luminous (and numinous) benediction of what the genre, deriving from Venetian forms, calls *grazia*.

73. See, for example, J.M. Coetzee, ‘The Picturesque, the Sublime and the South African Landscape’, and ‘Reading the South African Landscape’, in J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing* (Johannesburg and New Haven, 1988).

he almost certainly did not intend.⁷⁴ His paintings reflect, once again, the subversive impetus of the frontier, its innate resistance to exclusions imposed across it, and its tendency to oppose those closed homogeneities with a reality that is composed of plural possibilities and is at once local, coherent and outlasting – so that a trade grows up across the frontier despite strict prohibitions, both colonists and Xhosa cross the supposedly immutable boundary, war is fought in simultaneous theatres – within the colony and within Xhosaland, the cultural vernaculars of both sides begin to accommodate elements of each other, and even the picturesque mutates in acknowledgement of a history it is supposed to efface or, at least, transcend with a timeless myth of ordained and dominant empire. The metropolitan conventions of both I'ons paintings would appear less to assert an imperial prerogative in the space they depict than to imply an enviable liberty at large in the Xhosa world, as well as indigenous 'properties' of order and harmony – and, in the second picture, a disconcerting engagement between the Xhosa and the sublime.

The first of these two pictures is perhaps as picturesque as can be found in the art of the eastern frontier. 'Scene at the Kareiga River' depicts a party of Xhosa crossing the river. Various features of the painting place it squarely within the tradition of the picturesque: the framing of the landscape by the woody *coulisse*, its luminism, the formal perspective *designo* of the composition. The rendering of the Bush itself is unfaithful to the local vegetation, both in detail and in cumulative effect; the hard contours of xeric thicket, of euphorbias, aloes, lianas and so on, are softened to a featheriness of foliage that has its roots in representations of the Roman *campagna*. Significantly, however, I'ons's painting goes so far as to associate its luminist *grazia* with the Xhosa, and most particularly with the head of their party (who may even be a chief, to judge by the hint of a leopardskin kaross, as well as his authority in the composition). The leap just accomplished by this figure has interposed him between the artist and the sun, so that he is positioned in the spotlight created by the shaft of light running on the water. This composition not only bestows the benediction of *grazia*, but also works to ally the figure with the perspective order of the picture, since he enjoys the wedge of light as a personal background, and occupies the same perspectival axes as the artist – axes, moreover, which run to the sun.

Its fidelity to the picturesque places the picture within the corpus of the majority of painters and versifiers on the frontier, where formal devices and subscriptions to a vision of a Golden Age lie at the very centre of the picturesque.⁷⁵

74. His cartoons attest to a settler conservatism, vigorously satirising the government of Andries Stockenström during the years after the Select Committee on Aborigines and, specifically, the Glenelg retrocession (1837).

75. For his watercolours, see, for example, T. Pringle, 'Evening Rambles', *African Sketches* (London, 1834), 21; M. Hudson, *A Feature of South African Frontier Life* (Port Elizabeth, 1852), 82; R. Wilmot, *A Cape Traveller's Diary, 1856* (Johannesburg, 1984).

Given the significance of the myth of a Golden Age to the picturesque,⁷⁶ it is not at all illogical – albeit circumstantially surprising – to encounter in ‘Scene at the Kariega’ a band of Xhosa fulfilling the archetype of noble savagery, stepping out of the Kariega bush into the light of a somewhat idealised and Italianate landscape, as if into a Virgilian eclogue. It remains, nonetheless, a remarkable vision of the ostensible enemies of empire. One might contend that I’ons’s perspective is the tool of an imperial cartography of space, that it remains the agents of empire who have a monopoly over the ‘real’ meaning of space, who bring landscape into being and in so doing lay claim to the land (there is an element of the Xhosa’s being spied on in the picture, it is true). But, in fact, such a scene at the Kariega would only have been possible in the years before the Zuurveld clearances of 1812, before the conquest and dispossession of the Xhosa had begun. This means that the picture portrays the landscape at the time of Xhosa sovereignty, and (a feature of its retrospection) is implicitly nostalgic for the state of affairs which it depicts. It is a pre-lapsarian vista – an Eden to which the Fall must be the arrival of empire. It might even be argued, moreover, that the omniscience of perspective, that imperial prospect, is given short shrift by I’ons in this picture; after all, it is only able to describe the Xhosa once they have left the inscrutable domain of the Bush and, what is more, they are quite clearly about to return to that unchartable space, fringing with leaves the right of the picture. Where *depth* of vision is no obstacle to an imperious perspective, its omniscience founders on opacity. And, in any case, the historical implications of the picture are, since I’ons could not have been there, that the qualities inherent in harmonic proportion (a function of perspective) are present in the Xhosa landscape as much as that of empire.

‘Scene at the Kariega River’ also implies limitations to the purpose of fixity in picturesque landscape. There is something of a sense that the mobility of the Xhosa will enable them to elude the picturesque gaze that has alighted, momentarily, on them. They carry loads on their heads, and appear to be headed for their fellows camped at the edge of the Bush on the opposite bank of the river. It is a landscape populated by people whose lives seem less constrained by boundary and habitation, cultivation and property, than the very idea of landscape itself.⁷⁷ The elusiveness of the human subjects of I’on’s landscape, the way the eye’s propriety in the act of viewing the land seems continually threatened by agitation in peripheral vision – that presence of the Xhosa in the margins of the painting, left, right, and bottom, on the margins of the river, left and right, on the margins of the bush on both sides – has to do with the irreconcilable distance between being within and without the landscape, the different spaces of the insider and the outsider.

Circumstances have undoubtedly altered when I’ons comes to paint ‘Kaffirs watching for the return of their dead warriors’, which graces the cover of *The Dead*

76. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 66, 165–9.

77. *Ibid.*

Will Arise. The composition of the painting bears a remotely formal resemblance to the picturesque which so markedly constrained 'Scene at the Kariega River'; a token *coulisse* to the left yields the view, itself somewhat concerned with the sky's light, the apprehension of a luminist background. But, for the most part, it is hardly a painting that might be considered picturesque. It is as if I'ons has chosen to stare directly at that which so agitated the peripheral vision of 'Scene at the Kariega', in some admission of the limits of the picturesque in actually illustrating Xhosa space. 'Kaffirs watching' is a much more bluntly atmospheric piece, altogether devoid of subtlety in its handling of depth, paying virtually no attention to detail in its description of the *topos*, and hardly portraying a prospect of much comfort. It is no pastoral.

The substance of this painting is I'ons' concern with what is to be seen beyond the turgid *massif* of the foreground hill. His sky and water and their strange relationship to the drama of the watchers on the hillside all break the bounds of the picturesque. There is something sulphurous about the colouring and texture of the seascape, a luminosity not quite natural, not quite the benign *grazia* of his lit sky and water in 'Scene at the Kariega'. Such elements as his burnished sky and sea, the almost corrosive agency of the moonlight (a strangely vivid picture for the night), and his sentinel watchers with their blazing beacon, add up to something of a sublime vision of the space. The heroicism of the picture has to do with the transcendental rapport between the human attendants and their environment. It is a dramatic picture without there being any closure to the narrative it outlines in its title; its drama is that of a resurrection story, and its mood one of desperation, of fear, perhaps intimating disappointment.

It is, of course, plausible that this distressed atmosphere is meant to indicate the error and limits of heathen belief. But even this element has required of the artist an attempt at evoking the substantial otherworld of Xhosa cosmology, an atmospherically 'real' presence of the ancestors, the 'dead warriors'. This is the concession of I'ons' coagulate sky and almost fluid flames, his self-conscious transmutation of light in what are so clearly, visibly, oils. If this handling has generated an aura of disease and unease, then it is an account sympathetic to the Xhosa experience of lung sickness and famine, the cattle disease that prompted the form of the millenarian catastrophe, and the human consequence of the Cattle Killing.⁷⁸ It is a painting that more really invests its spectators with local eyes and apprehensions than any hut interior or pastoral reverie.

If, as Burke held and as the Romantics believed, the sublime involves an apprehension of terror at the incomprehensible, and invokes the will to survive, then this is a markedly sublime painting.⁷⁹ Its sentinel figures, dwarfed by the landscape and even by their burning tree (echoing that sublime archetype of Moses and the burning bush), supply another key to the sublime content of the picture.

78. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*.

79. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 227.

Somewhat isolated from one another, they confront the beyond. And yet I'ons's painting does not supply a wholly Romantic myth of individual sublimation in nature, of transcendent 'oneness', masking the real relations between humans and nature (and humans in nature), which are political and economic, destructive, exploitative, dispossessive, unequal and a theatre of conflict. For all their separateness, the figures in this painting remain a group, a community, and whatever terror they confront, they do so equally and together. Among them, the burning tree stands as a beacon to collective action – it is to be assumed that the firing of the tree was a communal purpose, just as the fire in 'Scene at the Kariega', now grown wilder and more sublime, was a collective venture and a node of social agency on the land. What the Xhosa warriors are burning is a landmark, what would be to the picturesque a static beacon defining the proprietorial bounds of landscape. Theirs, instead, is a landscape of flux, a use-landscape. If it appears a moral landscape in I'ons's painting, then that is because the artist has invested his sublime with a social malaise it has long sought to avoid or obscure. The horror of the sky is that of social distress, of lungsickness and disaster, as well as an intimation of the sublime beyond. It is a radical painting for all its limitations, and perhaps the logical consequence of the artist's turning aside from the prospect of imperial, chartered space to that marginal agitation at the edges, the real frontier.

What I'ons's paintings confirm is the 'great rendezvous' of frontier space, its character as a landscape of inversions and subversions, a median space in which the hard categories that are the presupposition of a frontier are translated into a new and local language, less rigid in its representations and more conducive to interaction. The carnival of the bush landscape is alert to the historicity of space, is less exclusive than the spectator prospects of ideology and more inclusive in its tendency to display the whole picture of historical conflict, all its players, their claims, setbacks, victories and exchanges. It brings an ironic detachment, born of social and subjective crisis, to bear upon the 'evidence' of ideological landscape, whether intentionally or not. It makes bastard forms of the picturesque and the sublime, disrupting the still vistas of autochthonous empire and drawing out the barbarism of the *force majeure* that governs political territory (burning, war against civilians). It frustrates the prospect of perspectival order with its impenetrability, its 'screen'. It exploits the myth of the Golden Age to unsettle imperial intrusion into Xhosaland, and it impedes the progress of those central institutions of imperial landscape and (historically) of the idea of landscape itself: valuation (exchange value, marketable land), survey, and property.

But the paintings on Peires's (original) covers do, of necessity, remind us of the triumph of the imperial and colonial landscape(s) and their persistence in the collective imagination of the frontier. What we 'see' when we look (back) to the frontier is something carried over to today, and among its chief vessels has been the historiography of African space. Even the first page of Charles van Onselen's apparently unrelated *The Seed is Mine* begins with claims as to the Highveld's providing 'the country with its most characteristic landscape' and does so apologetically:

I know that there are other, more attractive, verdant, and densely settled parts of the country. South Africa has a narrow, fairly well-watered east coast littoral where thick bush and occasional forest is the historic home of indigenous Nguni-speakers such as the Xhosa and the Zulu and many nineteenth-century European settlers.⁸⁰

It is a formulation that offers three things for our consideration: firstly, the primacy of the 'attractive' and 'settled' to the gaze of history; secondly, the generative ambiguity of the phrase denoting the Bush as 'the historic home'; and, thirdly, the general presumption that history has homes at all, that it occurs against static, identity-defining tableaux, whose character colours the histories that occur there. In truth, it is the lie of these landscapes – their myth of timeless character – which colours not the events of history (for they are among history's events) but the accounts of history, the work of historians.

I am plucking books at random from my shelves, but again and again they adopt the formula of 'setting the scene',⁸¹ and do so in ways that dust off imperial myths of landscape: timeless, typical, static, bucolic, determining, prior. The first sentence of Monica Hunter's anthropology of the Mpondo runs: 'A crowd of little hills tumble down to the sea, and grassy ridges, emerging like islands out of the sea mist which fills the valleys at dawn, are covered with round brown huts.'⁸² Here we have the anthropomorphised 'crowd' of hills, the evocations of an original infancy (in words like 'little', 'tumble', 'emerging', 'dawn', in such plain forms as 'round brown huts'), the peculiarly scholarly act of detachment in setting the land as 'islands', as if cut off from the mainland of history, and so on. This is the anthropology that Smuts, introducing the book, approves, having 'warned her against a common failing of South Africans to be unduly preoccupied with the larger political aspects of our native problems.'⁸³ Smuts, who has 'been in contact with the native mind all my life', describes Pondoland as no less than an 'Arcadia'⁸⁴ (the same word was used to evoke the Kat River Settlement in the 1830s and 1840s⁸⁵).

Peires frames his *House of Phalo* with two sections entitled 'An aerial photograph' and 'A view from the ridge', the former laying claim to a perspective and a technology wholly anachronistic to its subject matter (but wholly faithful to the scientific pretensions of the post-Enlightenment historian), and the second marking, not unlike Hunter's sentence, the survey of the 'original' eye, which is to say the outsider, schooled in the purview of the traveler come upon the

80. C. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (New York, 1996), v.

81. In noting this character of theatrical inevitability, and in contesting it, I am following Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (London, 1987); see specifically xiv–xvi.

82. M. Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest* (London, 1961), 15.

83. *Ibid.*, vii.

84. *Ibid.*, vii–viii.

85. A term with some currency. See, for example, A.G. Bain's letter to the London Geographical Society, 29 Apr. 1844, in M. Lister, *Journal of Andrew Geddes Bain* (Cape Town, 1949), 226.

watershed. The view from a high and demarcating place is a standard device and may be traced back to the Bible and Aaron's view of Canaan, or Christ's survey of the Devil's bargain. The ridge and the view it yields – as insight, and not merely scenery – is in the literature from *Piers Plowman* to W.H. Auden. What Peires 'sees' from the ridge is also oriented, like the Xhosa *imizi*, to 'the rising sun'.⁸⁶ His huts are, as in the standard school textbooks of my upbringing, 'beehive-shaped', despite the absence of domestic apiculture in Xhosa society and the fact that the beehive of this shape is the medieval skep not commonly seen in Europe for at least 200 years. These are petty cavils, and I do not level them as substantial criticisms in themselves, but as symptomatic of the kind of colonial descriptive resource that generally applies to the landscape of the colonial encounter, even when the history is produced to confute colonial versions. The same is no less true of Ben MacLennan's *Proper Degree of Terror*, whose debt to W.T. Black is often literal. Paul Carter makes the point that 'we have no grounds for presuming that aboriginal history can be treated as a subset of white history', nor can we 'suppose that the Aborigines moved in the same historical space as the Europeans – a space constituted culturally'.⁸⁷ At its extreme, this might mean that the spatial history of the colonised is essentially unknowable, since the act of colonisation entails a cultural reinscription of the consciousness of space (in other words rewrites place) and makes the former landscape irrecoverable. It is a good point, but he is writing of the aboriginal circumstance in Australia – on the one hand a more drastically traduced landscape, and on the other a more (sentimentally) recovered one – I am thinking of the interest in aboriginal dreamtime art, or Bruce Chatwin's (contentious) *Songlines*, for example. However that may be, and with whatever implications for the problem of writing history cognisant of the *difference* of space and the conflict over place, Carter's point persists to castigate the presumption in historical writing of landscapes that are, in fact, a product of that history, particularly in histories that seek a refutation of imperial and colonial historiography.

The best, and the worst, example of all this is Noel Mostert's *Frontiers*, a work whose own monumentality is but one aspect of its campaign to establish the Cape eastern frontier as the necessary successor to an ancient 'hemispheric seam to the world, between Occident and Orient'⁸⁸ and also the original faultline in all South African history. Mostert's opening pages display a dizzying variety of the idioms of landscape discussed here. At times he gazes upon the southern Cape coast as W.T. Black did upon the infinity of the Bush, pinning upon it a fixity that presages the inevitability and incontestability of his tale to follow. Even the tone is like Black:

86. Peires, *House of Phalo*, 3.

87. Carter, *Road to Botany Bay*, 325.

88. N. Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London, 1992), xv. This comes from the first sentence of the book.

Nowhere else on earth, I believe, do sea and sky, walled granite and shining sand, convey any impression of nature more placidly reposeful, more grandly and anciently benign. Calmly surfeited by its own overwhelming incremental fortune of light and colour, ceaselessly spent all around on sea, sand and forested slopes, it impresses one as being a natural world serenely dispassionate about itself, without connivance or hidden design.⁸⁹

As with Black, this ‘dispassionate’ landscape is a kind of prolegomenon to the frontier, a landscape of

contrasts that convey that intimidating and disquieting impression of being surrounded by a mistrustful, malign design. One moment it is a land that seems to be all English meadows, parkland ... Then, at no distance at all from these, mere yards it sometimes can seem, one confronts the other side of it all: drought, dust, despair. It is here that the aloes burn, among vast cracked granite boulders that radiate heat like furnaces, and serve as altars for coiled and venomous serpents ... And all about, mile after mile, stretches thick mimosa bush, a hardy greenery, wielding massed thorns the size of small daggers, which stab and strike at whatever passes.⁹⁰

This is Guy Butler out of Thomas Pringle, and it is a telegram of history arriving before the events it describes. The landscape prefigures what it is to become, and that is not as it should be. Already, before we have begun, we have all the frontier attributes: contrast, mistrust, malignancy, English, drought, dust, despair, aloes, burning, serpents, stabbing. How else might history turn out to be here? It is as if the landscape were perceived according to a doctrine of historical signatures. We can see this process (and the wellsprings of Mostert’s landscape) at work in this account of Harriet Ward’s visit to the Clay Pits in the 1840s, more than a decade after their ‘humbling’ destruction in 1835:

It is quite a fairy place, with a tiny valley of emerald green, and a crystal spring, flanked on three sides by steep rocks clothed with thick bush, and the stately euphorbia tree. There the coney has their dwelling-places; there the large starry jessamine of the Cape scents the air, and contrasts its graceful wreaths with the with the deep green foliage of the shrubs; there the wild convolvulus forms its own bright bowers, intermingled with the ivy geranium; and there the chandelier plant waves its bells near the clear spring where the lions come down to drink in the deep twilight so peculiar to South Africa. There the baboons shout to each other from rock to rock; and there, through the gay plants that enamel the turf, winds the glittering and fatal snake. There the pretty lizards, – ‘the friend of man,’ as they are called by those who assert that they warn the sleeping traveller of the serpent’s approach, – creep about in the sunshine; and there – ah! there we made one day a pleasant resting-place on a journey. We were very merry, *then*, and the valley rang with laughter and with song, as we tried the echoes. And *now* the savage lurks there, like the lion lurking for his prey. I remember that the day we did rest there, when I expressed myself enchanted with

89. Mostert, *Frontiers*, xxi.

90. *Ibid.*, xxiii.

the spot, some one said, in an indifferent voice, 'This is where poor — was killed in the last war; and where the waggon was stopped, and the poor creatures with it were murdered!'⁹¹

Reading these alongside one another, I, too am left with a 'disquieting impression of ... mistrustful malign design', though the author of that design is not the author of what happens – history – but the author of the account of what happens – the historian.

It is malign because it is designed according to the purposes of the historian rather than history. It is a prime instance of the sleight of hand whereby history (the account) is rhetorically produced to look like history (what happened), an act of apparent verisimilitude (for what could be truer, more self-evident, than the landscape before us, the witness of our eyes?). The determination of landscape according to the purposes of history afflicts all histories, not only those that subscribe to determinist philosophies of history, materialist or religious, say, and it is false because history has no purpose. The greatest danger in the writing of history, it seems to me, is the conflation of the historian's purpose with the causes of change that he or she seeks to disclose. The historian makes history; whatever map of aetiology is described in that making is a pattern but not a design. Ironically, to confuse a pattern and a design is a conceptual failing to do with time – the province of historians – in that it is a case of inducing agency where agency is only to be deduced, of imputing the propulsion of narrative (written history) to the unfolding of events. But pattern and design are spatial idioms, and it should come as no surprise that historians, sectarianly neglectful of the space in which they and their subjects happen, should be confused by the distinction. Equally, it is perhaps inevitable that the persistent error of determinism, of inevitable history, – that faulty concept of time – should be so displayed in the historical treatment of space. The twin failings of that error – idioms of stasis in the (culturally bustling) dimension of landscape, and idioms that use space as symbolic correlatives for events – are ultimately moral failings also, for they use space to ascribe, even to 'teach', values in history, which values are simply not there to be taught, and should not be.

91. Ward, *Five Years*, vol. 1, 296–7.