PART ONE

AFRICAN POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND SPATIAL RESPONSES: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES
REACTIONS TO COLONIALISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: SOME HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REFLECTIONS

Chris Saunders

Why did it take so long for historians to explore reactions to colonialism in southern Africa? Relative to other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the impact of settler colonialism on southern Africa was much more intense and long-lasting. One must, of course, be wary of generalisations, and the colonial impact in, say, much of what is now Botswana was far less pronounced than in most of what is now South Africa, within the borders of which there were enormous differences. However, in general we are dealing here with a region where effective settler rule began in the seventeenth century and lasted until the late twentieth century and where the settler presence was greater than anywhere else in sub-Saharan Africa. What is also striking about southern Africa is that the indigenous people did not, as in Australia or North America, become numerically insignificant, but remained a majority population throughout, and in many parts of the region there was significant resistance before white rule was imposed.

Indigenous responses to colonialism were shaped by a variety of factors, from the environment in which they occurred to the way in which colonial rule was imposed and the nature and strength of the settler regime. Recent scholarship uses the term ‘genocide’ for the way in which Khoesan people were decimated, arguing for genocidal intent at times and genocidal consequences, as for the Herero and Nama in the first decade of the twentieth century. While genocide was the one extreme of colonial intrusion into southern Africa—and even in that

---

1 This chapter was commissioned not as a comprehensive historiographical survey of all the themes covered in this book (which are addressed in Chapter One) but, as the sub-title of the chapter indicates, to serve as personal pertinent historiographical reflections by one of South Africa’s most distinguished historians—the Editors.