
Through a close examination of the cultural contact between the British and the Xhosa on the nineteenth-century eastern Cape frontier, Richard Price’s *Making Empire* seeks to explore the ways in which colonial knowledge is created through cultural interaction, as well as how knowledge systems contributed both to essentialising discourses of power and to actual imperial relationships. It was on the eastern Cape frontier where, for the first time, the British “had to decide how to rule” (p. 3). Through cultural encounters, which shaped the intellectual frameworks of contact, a “colonial knowledge system” (p. 156) was created that ultimately provided the lens through which the Xhosa, and the empire, came to be seen and understood. This knowledge system was based on observation, contact, and “colonial reasoning; that is, ways of thinking and recognising cognitive contradictions that allow the imperialists to maintain their belief in their own supremacy and superiority” (p. 8).

*Making Empire* is a book of two halves, in more ways than one. Structurally it is divided into two clear parts: the first dealing with missionaries as the primary mediators of knowledge about the Xhosa throughout the period covered by the book (c. 1820-1860); and the second addressing the systems of rule put into place by the colonial state and the ways in which these structures were based on the colonial knowledge systems created through cultural encounters on the frontier. The middle chapter, “The Closing of the Missionary Mind”, “is the pivot of the book, connecting the earlier emphasis on the missionaries with the later emphasis on the state” (p. 11). Qualitatively *Making Empire* is also divided, the first half frequently reductive, particularly to the mission historian, the second displaying some real analytical flair in the realm of colonial knowledge.

For historians of missions, the first section, which focuses entirely on missionaries, mission culture, and missionary-centred cultural interaction, holds the most interest. It is at once the most fascinating and the most frustrating, due in the main to the consistent conflation of missions and empire. In this section, Price concentrates on delineating the ways in which missionaries could, and often did, become racialists. In his sophisticated account, Price argues that evangelical culture “was an inherently unstable ideological formulation which fostered an equally unsteady mental frame of mind” (p. 28); that “there was a fragility and volatility at the heart of missionary culture that made it vulnerable to disruption, especially as it encountered the intransigence of indigenous cultures” (p. 28); and that when missionaries were faced with indigenous intransigence (and intelligence), the mission culture of open and optimistic cultural observation and engagement imploded, giving way to a “volatile, pessimistic despair” (p. 127). From that point missionary culture was able to intellectually house both evangelicalism and racist imperialism.

In his discussions on “missionary culture”, including the psychological and intellectual fractures that were built into the evangelical understanding of the world and the gradual implosion of mission culture through indigenous contact, Price’s analysis is cogently argued and seems to display both a sound and novel understanding of the missionary mind. What Price fails to note, however, is that the chronology he puts forward for this process (1840s-1860s) coincides...
completely with the rise (and fall) of “commerce and Christianity”. It is certainly true that from
around mid-century more missionaries than previously could accommodate their “missionary
culture” and intellectual world-view with racism, and even in some cases with imperialism.
“Commerce and Christianity” was a new conception of missionary work and a more common
reaction to the “implosion of missionary culture,” however. It became a slogan (short-lived
according to Andrew Porter) denoting the idea that civilisation had to come before Christianity,
and it overtook the earlier belief that Christianity would itself herald civilisation (and that the
two need not be intrinsically linked). While this view could certainly accommodate more easily
the cultural chauvinism, and sometimes even biological racism, of the later missionary enter-
prise, Price seems to unhesitatingly equate it with imperialism, a stance which surely displays a
lack of nuance in understanding the complexities of both “commerce and Christianity” itself,
and the mission-empire relationship.

This lack of nuance is particularly surprising given Price’s excellent grasp of the complexities
of culture-contact within the imperial enterprise. Price makes it clear throughout that cultural
encounters were not a one-dimensional process, but rather that the Xhosa’s relationship with the
British was “mutual and reciprocal; cooperative as well as contentious” (p. 7). At the same time,
the “Xhosa-missionary relationship was [also] interactive…[.] fluid and open” (pp. 65–6). Price
is particularly adept at analysing the position of the chiefs within both of these relationships –
and at reading through the historical sources to an understanding of chiefly strategies, primarily
of evasion and negotiation, in colonial interaction.

This nuanced understanding of cultural encounters between “Britishers” and the Xhosa does
not extend, however, to the fractures that existed within those groups. Despite some slight cave-
ats in the prologue, Price makes little effort to differentiate between missionaries, colonial offi-
cials, settlers, and imperial officials (all unquestioningly seen as imperial agents), let alone to
understand the complex fissures that existed within these groups themselves. The cultural
encounter he describes is between “Britishers” and “the Xhosa”, and while the Xhosa are under-
stood as a diverse grouping, the “Britishers” remain, for the most part, uncomplicated by inter-
nal fissures. “Missionary culture”, “imperial culture”, and “settler politics” are here monolithic
concepts. Particularly troubling for the historian of empire, is the conflation between colonial
and imperial objectives. For the mission historian, it is the continued and implicit understand-
ing of missionaries as imperial agents that causes the most frustration and concern.

These monolithic understandings of complex relationships, institutions, and social move-
ments frequently lead to problems in Price’s analyses of imperial culture. More problematically,
for the readers of this journal, is this book’s entry into the complex historiographical region of
missions and empire. The relationship between missions and empire has produced a huge level
of interest across a diverse number of disciplines, leading to nuanced and sophisticated accounts
and analyses. Without a bibliography (footnotes appear at the end of each chapter, but there is

1) Andrew Porter, “‘Commerce and Christianity’: The Rise and Fall of a Nineteenth-Century
2) See, for example, John and Jean Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity,
Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1991) and Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier,
vol. 2 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Elizabeth Elbourne, Blood
Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and