The study of the direct and indirect exercise of power in colonial South African history is nowhere better surveyed than in Norman Etherington’s incisive works on the historiography of Empire. One form of the exercise of colonial or settler power was through the medium of school textbooks. For students of South African history, the work of George McCall Theal is impossible to ignore because of his influence in establishing the blueprint for this history.

The influence of settler historiography was felt not only in academia but also in officially approved school textbooks. This chapter compares a school textbook written by Theal in 1890 with those published by other authors between 1945 and 1996. I analyse descriptions of the events leading to the fifth ‘frontier war’ of 1818–19 and take the war itself as a case study, to gauge Theal’s influence on later textbooks. Although many textbooks continuously recycled Theal’s pro-settler messages, some aspects were modified to reflect the government policies of the day. When, during the mid-1980s, the South African government hardened its stance on extra-parliamentary opposition and declared a state of emergency, some textbooks openly challenged the assumptions of settler historiography. After the demise of apartheid in 1994, historical perspectives that had been long excluded from textbooks were incorporated. Paradoxically, however, textbooks published during apartheid or those espousing apartheid ideology still circulated.

THE SETTLER HISTORIAN GEORGE MCCALL THEAL

The Canadian-born George McCall Theal (1837–1919) had various occupations before turning in earnest to history. His historical writing was prolific. The most prominent was the 11-volume series *History of South Africa*, which stretched from prehistory to 1884. Theal is recognised as one of the founders of the settler school of South African historiography. The settler historians believed that people of European descent held the right to live in and govern South Africa. Their sense of this right derived from what they saw as the mission of Europeans, as possessors of Christian civilisation, to ‘open up’ the ‘dark’ African continent and to conquer the ‘heathen’ blacks.¹ The settler historians took ‘race’ for granted as a primary determinant of historical development. They regarded Europeans as ‘superior’ and ‘civilised’, and Africans by contrast as ‘inferior’ and ‘barbaric’.² When black people appear in their work, they are typically described as an obstacle to white progress.

Partiality to European settlers predisposed the settler historians to be critical of British colonial authorities for their alleged lack of sympathy for the settlers’ conditions and circumstances.³ They defended slavery and criticised the British government for its abolition. According to Theal, the abolition of slavery made matters worse for the whites as they then had to look after the emancipated slaves. Slavery ‘was worse for the white man, who had all the care and anxiety, than for the negro, who had only manual labour to perform’.⁴ Another legacy that Theal left in
South African historical circles was the myth of empty land (well known in the Australian context as terra nullius). He alleged that South Africa had been an empty land before the arrival of the whites and the blacks, who had arrived at roughly the same time. This argument justified the white settlers’ occupation of the land by means of conquest of the blacks who, he considered, had no legitimate claim to it.

By the end of the nineteenth century Theal was enjoying popularity in government circles due to his sympathy with the Boers and his attempt to forge a single white South African identity between the descendants of Dutch and British settlers. The Cape and Orange Free State education departments sanctioned his interpretations in their official textbooks. In her study of Theal’s work, Merle Babrow estimates that Theal wrote ‘at least half a dozen school books’, published both in English and Dutch.

Theal’s popularity did not last forever. In the 1930s, historians such as J A I Agar-Hamilton and J S Marais challenged his use of historical evidence and charged him with writing history based on personal prejudice. In later decades, settler historiography came under rigorous challenge as the liberal and radical approaches of new schools of history emerged. Today, in post-apartheid South Africa, settler historiography enjoys very little credibility among academic historians. However, we need to ask how this shift in academic circles was reflected in school textbooks during the 50 years encompassing the rise and the fall of apartheid. In doing so we must bear in mind inhibiting factors such as the cost of new textbooks, difficulties in delivering new textbooks, lack of suitably qualified teachers, and the lingering influence of ideology.

Analysis of school history texts and Theal’s work by liberal South African historian Leonard Thompson led him to conclude that Theal ‘provided the basis for virtually all the textbooks that were used in South Africa during the first half of the twentieth century’. But what of the second half? In this chapter, I extend and update Thompson’s findings. I analyse a school textbook written by Theal in 1890, together with a range of textbooks published during that second half, to ascertain the extent and longevity of Theal’s influence.

**A NOTE ON TEXTBOOKS AND THEIR FORMAT**

Theal’s *Short History of South Africa, 1486–1826, for the Use of Schools* was published in 1890, translated into Dutch in the same year and reprinted in 1891 as *Korte Geschiedenis van Zuid-Afrika*, which testifies to his popularity in government circles. To compare with this textbook, I have selected 30 Standard 6 textbooks written in English and published between 1945 and 1996. Of these, 17 deal with the 1818–19 war and events leading to it, making it the most intensely covered war of the period. The timeframe, 1945–96, is important because it captures not only the 50 years after World War II but also, crucially, the entire period of the National Party’s official rule (1948–94), when departments of education heavily regulated the publication of textbooks. Each textbook had to be screened and approved by panels appointed by education departments before going onto a list from which teachers and schools could select titles for classroom use. These approval procedures inevitably imposed constraints upon the authors and publishers of the textbooks.

Dense with narrative and featuring ten maps, Theal’s textbook is 252 pages long. It develops a story that anchors South Africa in the Cape. Covering the period 1486–1826, Theal begins with the rounding of the Cape by European voyagers, thus making South African history an ex-
tension of European history. He then discusses the Dutch East India Company’s establishment of a Cape station, and the beginning of formal white settlement. He tells about difficulties the settlers experienced in contact with local Khoikhoi and other African peoples, and the settlers’ struggle against ‘unsympathetic’ colonial authorities in Britain. It is a story of Europeans marching into the interior of today’s South Africa. The text ends with the mfecane, a chain of warfare and dislocation of African chieftains, putatively caused by the Zulu.

Most of the post-1945 history textbooks in my sample were written by two or more authors. They conformed to the syllabi that prescribed equal proportions of ‘general’ and ‘South African’ history. Many devote from 40 to over 100 pages to South African history, often roughly half the text, and those published between 1972 and 1984 are the longest. The level of language varies. Texts aimed at English-speaking students tend to be more detailed and sophisticated in vocabulary and sentence structure.

**ANGLO-XHOSA RELATIONS AND THE 1818–19 WAR**

In this period, the Xhosa nation comprised two main components: the Rharhabe or western Xhosa, and the Gcaleka in the east. At the death of Rharhabe in 1782, his grandson Ngqika (also called Gaika) was to succeed him. To Ngqika’s chagrin, his uncle Ndlambe assumed the role of regent because Ngqika was deemed too young. By the late 1810s, various western Xhosa clans faced both internal feuds and British encroachment. The British, who had permanently occupied the previously Dutch colony of the Cape from 1806, exploited Ngqika’s political ambition. Cape Governor Charles Somerset wished to police the boundary and end cattle theft, and preferred collaboration with a Xhosa leader to direct intervention.

At the Kat River Conference in 1817, Somerset and Ngqika reached a mutual protection agreement, despite Ngqika’s initial reluctance. The British recognised him as the chief of the western Xhosa and granted him a trade monopoly. In return, Ngqika was charged with the task of preventing the Xhosa from stealing settlers’ cattle. This led to the Spoor Law (spoor refers to the tracking of animals by following their trail). In his *History of South Africa*, Theal explained that this was ‘the ordinary Kaffir law, which makes a community responsible for the acts of the individuals composing it, and cannot be considered unjust when applied to people in their condition’. He suggested that the law agreed with Xhosa customs and allowed both settlers and Xhosa to claim for stolen cattle. Recent historians, argue that the law was exploited to increase settlers’ livestock possessions.

The Spoor Law made Ngqika even more unpopular among the Xhosa. Ndlambe mustered support from his wardocor Nxele (also called Makana) and his ally Hintsa (Paramount Chief of the Gcaleka, and the nominal superior of Ngqika), and waged war on Ngqika in October 1818 (Battle of Amalinde). Upon his defeat, Ngqika turned to Somerset for assistance. For his part, Ndlambe asked Somerset for peace, and asked him not to interfere with Xhosa politics.

Governor Somerset ignored Ndlambe, and invaded his territory. In December 1818 the British, aided by Khoikhoi reinforcements, attacked Ndlambe and took 23,000 cattle. Nxele’s planned attack on Grahamstown in April 1819, for which he deployed 6000 Xhosas, backfired and brought victory to the British. Nxele surrendered himself to the British and was subsequently banished to Robben Island. Ngqika relinquished his 4000 square miles of ‘ceded territory’
between the Kat and Keiskamma rivers to Somerset. The territory became a ‘neutral zone’, subsequently settled by British immigrants.

TEXTBOOK APPROACHES

Textbook representations of the Eastern Cape ‘frontier wars’ have been analysed by several writers. F E Auerbach’s analysis (1965) focuses exclusively on the first ‘frontier war’ in four Standard 6 textbooks used until the 1960s. Elizabeth Dean, Paul Hartmann, and Mary Katzen (1983) found that these texts defended settler interests, and that there was much duplication between Standards 6 and 8 texts, with the latter naturally providing more detail. Discussion of the Ngqika-Ndlambe feud in Dean, Hartmann and Katzen is rather brief and focuses more on Standard 8, whereas my analysis focuses on how Standard 6 texts treat the Spoor Law and the fifth ‘frontier war’, the most narrated war among the texts examined.

THEAL’S TEXTBOOK

The war of 1818–19 appears twice in Theal’s 1890 textbook, in the main text and in his Chronological List. The latter, which is effectively a summary of the text, describes the background to the war as follows:

In 1817 Lord Charles Somerset arranged with the Kaffir chief Gaika [Ngqika] that kraals [cattle enclosures] to which stolen cattle were traced should make good the damage. This chief and his uncle Ndlambe had been at feud for many years. Gaika professed to be a firm friend of the white people and was regarded as an ally of the colony.

The text shows Somerset as brokering the Spoor Law and describes it as a regulation sanctioning compensation for stolen cattle. The narrative does not make clear the connection between the Spoor Law and the feud between Ndlambe and Ngqika. The latter is introduced as ‘a firm friend’ and ‘an ally’ of the settlers, prefiguring Ndlambe as the enemy not only of Ngqika, but also of the settlers. Thus, the line of amity and enmity is political and not ‘racial’.

Another paragraph in the Chronology describes Somerset’s intervention in 1818:

Lord Charles Somerset then sent a commando to help [Ngqika], and Ndlambe in his turn met with serious reverses. But as soon as the European forces were disbanded, Ndlambe’s adherents made a rush into the colony, and did a great deal of damage. In April 1819 they attacked Grahamstown, but were repulsed with heavy loss. A strong commando was then sent into Kaffirland, and Ndlambe’s power was completely broken, after which the territory between the Fish and Keiskama rivers was ceded by Gaika to the colony.

Settler historiography would be expected to defend the interests of settlers at the expense of others. So, the war is described as having simply ‘commenced’ and does not specify who initiated it. The text leaves out the question of precipitating causes, which leads readers to deduce that war was inevitable and that settlers and Xhosas were destined to fight. European action is viewed in a benign light, as when Somerset is described as fulfilling his part of the pact with Ngqika by
sending reinforcements. However, it is not at all clear that Ngqika had requested him to do so. What we learn is that Somerset’s reinforcements were so great that they saved Ngqika’s skin, and that the settler commando was ‘strong’ and broke Ndlambe’s forces ‘completely’. The conclusion of the war favours the settlers’ right to rule. A portion of land was ceded to the colony, and Theal implies that this land was a reward for aiding Ngqika to defeat his rival Ndlambe. Theal mentions the subsequent arrival of 5000 British immigrants to the ceded land, and reiterates the ‘empty land’ thesis that had become a tenet of settler historiography.

The main text is much richer in description than the Chronology and reveals Theal’s beliefs in even sharper relief. He describes conditions of the frontier:

A more serious grievance was the existence of the Hottentot regiment, on account of its irritating tendency as well as its cost … It was stationed on the frontier to prevent an inroad of the Kaffirs, but the farmers there believed that it was kept up with the object of ruling them with a high hand.28

Here, Theal reveals his sympathy with settlers. He evokes pity from readers by portraying the settlers as being subjected to predicaments. Theal describes the Khoikhoi as having an ‘irritating tendency’ and becoming an administrative burden. Yet, he justifies high-handed measures as necessary to warrant security for the farmers. Later in the section, Theal has this to say about the conditions in the Eastern Cape:

Although there was a line of military posts along the border, bands of Kosas managed to make their way into the colony and plunder the farmers. Shortly before Sir John Cradock left South Africa he sent an armed force into Kaffirland to punish the robbers, but it effected nothing of any consequence. Both this governor and Lord Charles Somerset tried to induce colonists to occupy the Zuurveld in such numbers as to form a barrier against the Kosas, and attempts at settlement were made, but on such a small scale that those who accepted grants of ground there were soon compelled to retire.29

Thus he abundantly defends settlers’ interests, describing the Xhosas as troublesome intruders who did not respect the boundary and who plundered the settlers’ property. Theal argues that the Xhosas deserved punishment for their robbery and that much harsher measures were needed, as the punishment given ‘effected nothing of any consequence’.

We learn nothing from the text about how the Xhosa might have perceived the arrival of the colonists, and how different the Xhosa and European concepts of the land might have been. At best, Theal hints that governors Cradock and Somerset struggled to populate the border with settlers, which might suggest that Xhosa resistance was dampening settlers’ willingness to fight, or perhaps point to the incompetence of the governors to devise effective policies. However, Theal does not explicitly raise such possibilities.

Theal goes on to introduce the Spoor Law and its benefits: ‘persons from whom cattle were stolen should be at liberty to follow the spoor into Kaffirland, and upon tracing it to a kraal, the people of that kraal should make good the damage’. He presents the law in practice:
Within a month after this arrangement some cattle were stolen from the colony, and a detachment of a hundred soldiers was sent in pursuit. The spoor was traced to the kraal of a captain named Habana, who refused to make compensation, so the officer in command of the troops seized some oxen, and was driving them away when the Kaffirs attempted to rescue them. A skirmish took place, in which five Kaffirs were killed, but the troops kept possession of the cattle, and returned to the colony without loss.  

The Spoor Law resulted in escalating reprisal. Defending the settlers, Theal describes the Xhosa as initiating cattle theft, but does not explain what compelled Habana to theft. Crucially, he represents the settlers as law-abiding people merely following the letter of the Spoor Law, and the deployment of European troops and the skirmish as rightful consequences of the theft and of Habana’s refusal of compensation. He does not question the legitimacy of the settlers’ reprisal, the capture of the cattle, or whether the alleged theft had actually occurred.

Theal narrates the battle between Ngqika and Ndlambe that triggered the settler intervention. Acting upon Ngqika’s request, Somerset directed Colonel Brereton and his regiment to rescue Ngqika:

The British commander [Brereton] found it impossible to restrain the savage passions of the Gaikas, who were mad with excitement and joy at being able to take revenge, and were unwilling to show mercy when any of their enemies fell into their hands. He withdrew, therefore, before Ndlambe was thoroughly humbled.

Here Theal’s prejudice is obvious. Ngqika’s people are described as lacking emotional maturity and excited at the prospect of ‘taking revenge’, by reference to their ‘savage passions’ and unwillingness to ‘show mercy’. By stating that Brereton could not contain the emotions of the Xhosa people, this excerpt reproduces the pervasive stereotype of the African people as cruel and vengeful, rather than elaborating the political factors. It also reduces the causes of the war to personal characteristics. Theal does not even consider whether settler intervention might have heightened Xhosa emotions to the level that he derides.

In another passage, Theal narrates the attack on Grahamstown by the Xhosa in April 1819, which was defeated. This was not the end. The settlers’ revenge resumed three months later when ‘a strong army of colonists and soldiers ... drove the Kaffirs ... killed many of them, seized all their cattle, and burned their kraals. The old chief’s power was completely broken. The fifth Kaffir war ended by the surrender of Makana’.  

Theal introduces the settlers’ attack without any background information on their motivation or on events during the intervening three months. In hindsight, the settlers’ action look like a sudden invasion to bring the Xhosa under submission, rather than a final effort to bring the border conflict and strife to a much-awaited end. Typically, the settlers’ vengefulness is not accorded the same level of disdain that Theal gives to the Xhosa.

As an epilogue to the war, we learn of Makana’s surrender, again without any explanation. Theal does tell us that Makana was sent to Robben Island as a prisoner, and drowned while trying to escape. But he seems less eager to explain Makana’s surrender than to convey a didactic
lesson: do not attempt to subvert the white authorities, as it will spell one’s downfall. Theal then introduces a scheme to create a buffer zone between the settlers and the Xhosas by which Somerset ‘hoped to secure the colony against depredations and to prevent future difficulties with the Kosas’. The text attributes damage to the colony to Xhosa ‘depredations’, without considering what the settlers might have done to incur the Xhosas’ wrath, and Somerset is portrayed as the harbinger of peace and stability.

**POST -1945 TEXTBOOKS**

How did textbooks published after 1945 describe the background to, and the course of, the 1818–19 war? Some trace the origins of the war to 1817, when Ngqika and Somerset met. D C R Clear’s 1947 textbook describes the meeting in a dialogue form:

‘I have always done what I could,’ said Gaika, ‘to stop cattle stealing. Whoever steals another man’s beast shall be punished with death.’ … ‘Good,’ replied Somerset, ‘for I intend to hold responsible for the theft of the cattle that man to whose kraal the track leads.’

This exchange highlights Ngqika at the expense of Somerset. Ngqika looks to be the sole representative of the entire Xhosa population and a negotiator on equal footing to Somerset, and the outcome appears as a gentlemen’s agreement. The internal dynamics on both sides are overlooked. Students may well form the impression that the negotiation occurred between representatives of the whole Xhosa people, and of the British government and entire settler population. Furthermore, Ngqika is portrayed as the chief author of the law. He is shown as willing to prevent cattle theft by punishing the thieves ‘with death’. Somerset merely listens, and confirms his intention to hold the thieves ‘responsible’ without revealing his proposed plan of retaliation.

A textbook by E Syphus et al., published 40 years later in 1978, retains some of the same pro-settler sentiment. It describes these meetings in the following passage: ‘Somerset had arranged it with an eye to putting on a ceremonial display that would impress the Xhosas, so successful was Somerset that Ngqika and his retinue were too terrified to come to the conference and had to be escorted there’. Somerset’s effort ‘to impress the Xhosas’ might have made the exchange ‘a colourful affair’, but while this text accentuates Ngqika’s timidity, it does not state what made him so ‘terrified’. By eliding the actions of Somerset and his followers, this text excuses them from possible wrongdoing.

In 1985, a textbook by J Nisbet et al. devoted six full pages to the 1818–19 war and its background, an unusually copious amount, although four of these are marked as optional material. This optional section bridges the gap between school and academic history. For example, it incorporates the Reverend John Philip’s more critical *Researches in South Africa*, and sets students to examine the validity of eyewitness accounts during the Kat River Conference of 1817. Moreover, it introduces Jeff Peires’s revisionist scholarly history of the Xhosa, *House of Phalo*, which had been published four years previously. At the end of the section, questions test students’ critical reading of the text: ‘Why did Ngqika hesitate to meet Somerset without other chiefs being present? … Did Somerset regard this meeting of Ngqika and himself to be as a meeting of equals?’ On the outcome of the Kat River Conference, the text says: ‘Many chiefs were not pleased with Ngqika over the settlement he had made with Somerset … Many chiefs were not
present yet Ngqika had spoken for them’. The text is clear about the unfair way in which the conference was conducted, and how the Spoor Law favoured the settlers.

Afrikaner textbooks describe the Spoor Law in various ways. E H W Lategan and A J de Kock (1978) summarise the Spoor Law as ‘a system of mutual responsibility. This system was well known in Bantu law’. This text has two implications. First, it affirms Theal’s understanding of the law as rooted in the Xhosa tradition and strengthens its legitimacy as ‘mutual responsibility’, but it seems to put the onus on the Xhosa more than the settlers. Second, it portrays the law as a precedent demonstrating that whites and blacks could not collaborate, and thus that war was inevitable. Read in the context of apartheid, this portrayal may be construed as supporting the government penchant for using ‘cultural difference’ as a subterfuge for segregation. C J Joubert and J J Britz (1985) reiterate: ‘This was a system that the Xhosa understood. It suited their philosophy of an eye for an eye’. In paraphrasing the Babylonian axiom ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’, this work intimates that Xhosa law was anachronistic and cruel but culturally appropriate. Theal had earlier justified the Spoor Law as being understood by the Xhosa or rooted in their customs, and these textbooks repeat the argument.

How did the Spoor Law operate in practice? Syphus et al. suggest that it ‘was not the solution to the frontier problem. In fact the Spoor Law was to become a source of great dissatisfaction among the Xhosas because of its misapplication’. Having explained the law, H A Lambrechts et al. (1985) claim that ‘chiefs were sometimes unjustly punished for thefts by others. As a result, hostility on the frontier was not a one-sided affair’. Neither text explicitly mentions the extent to which the settlers might have been responsible for the ‘misapplication’ and ‘unjust punishment’. By eliding this question, the texts seem to exonerate the settlers, thus displaying an element of settler historiography.

To some extent, Nisbet et al. fill the gap, writing that ‘those who lived nearest the Fish River could easily be visited often by colonial forces claiming that the tracks of cattle which had been lost or stolen led to their homesteads’. As a consequence, the text continues, ‘innocent people … could then be forced to hand over cattle demanded of them by the colonists’. Among the texts analysed, no other work discusses settler responsibility for abuse of the Spoor Law so explicitly. A more sophisticated and alternative interpretation is presented by the professional historians Albert Grundlingh and Louis Grundlingh. Their textbook was published in 1989, when the National Party began to wind up apartheid, and the seventh impression (1994) is explicit:

Often the chiefs, who did their best to prevent stock theft, were wrongfully accused of hiding cattle. At times Boer commandos destroyed Xhosa homesteads, though the Boers had no proof that cattle had been stolen. By simply taking Xhosa stock, under the pretence that it had been stolen, the Boers increased their own herds of cattle. The way the system was abused made the Xhosa very angry since they suffered heavy losses.

Nisbet et al. and the Grundlinghs, give more detail of settler culpability than previous textbooks. The above excerpt contrasts the Xhosa chiefs’ efforts to respect the law and the white farmers’ abuse of it, and the Grundlinghs highlight Xhosa anger. Although they express sympathy with the Xhosa, some might nevertheless interpret this as an example of impracticable cooperation between settlers and Xhosa, because the Boers acted as if they were outside Xhosa law. The im-
lication is that Xhosa anger and the war were inevitable because of the Boers’ abuse, and these consequences were beyond British responsibility. In a similar vein, Lambrechts et al. had argued that ‘Chiefs were sometimes unjustly punished for thefts by others. As a result, hostility on the frontier was not a one-sided affair’. The irony is, as two editions by A P J. van Rensburg et al. (1986 and 1994) put it, that the law originating from Xhosa customs ‘pleased White farmers, but angered the Xhosa’.

The production of all these accounts over several decades suggests that Theal’s influence, if still evident in the persistence of settler stereotypes in some textbooks, was being undermined by textbook publishers and authors, and in the government circles that screened textbooks, even at the height of the state of emergency in the mid-1980s.

In this light, how do the various texts evaluate Somerset’s action? Those published between 1972 and 1994 that evaluate his intervention in the Ngqika–Ndlambe rivalry acknowledge the tension mounting along the eastern frontier that compelled Somerset to bring stability to the area. The Spoor Law was one such example. But about Somerset’s intervention in the feud between Ngqika and Ndlambe, the various textbooks express different opinions.

For instance, Joubert and Britz simply state that ‘unfortunately Somerset also interfered in the struggle for the chieftainship of the Xhosa’, and the text by F A van Jaarsveld (the then doyen of Afrikaner historiography and prolific textbook author) et al. (1974) that ‘getting involved in African affairs was a mistake’. Lambrechts et al., for his part, comments that ‘Somerset's policy did not take adequate cognisance of internal tensions among the Xhosa’. Lategan and de Kock judge that Somerset ‘acknowledged Gaika as paramount chief of the Xhosas. This was a mistake. The other Xhosa chief, Ndhlambe resented this jealously’. This account relates how Ndlambe’s defeat by Ngqika (aided by Somerset) made the former ‘extremely dissatisfied’, but does not extend the criticism or elaborate the ‘mistake’. B E Paynter (1974) goes further, explaining that Somerset’s ‘mistake in recognising Gaika as the paramount chief of all the Xhosas’ and in overlooking the claims of his uncle, Ndlambe, ‘led to a power struggle between the followers of the two chiefs’.

All these textbooks simply note Somerset’s mistake, without extending criticism or analysing why a high-profile figure like Somerset could have made such a mistake. Read in the time of ‘separate development’ promoted by the Nationalist government, such texts conveyed an opinion favourable to that policy: African people were better off managing their own affairs independent of the white authorities.

Several texts reveal a clearly articulated ideological stance. While most introduce Somerset’s alliance with Ngqika, van Jaarsveld et al. stated that Somerset’s intervention was a mistake. But he restores Somerset’s face by listing his policies after the war, and concludes that he ‘restored peace along the frontier for some time’. Van Rensburg et al. (1986 and 1994) also conceded that ‘Somerset made one big mistake. He interfered in tribal clashes’. While admitting Somerset’s mistake, these texts suggest he redeemed himself: ‘After the war Somerset personally went to the frontier and announced firm measures to keep the peace’. This approach ultimately excuses the settlers, suggesting that they were only following Somerset’s orders and measures, and had no independent agency in taking possession of the land and the resources in the frontier zone—which of course was not the case. The defence of settlers’ actions, a chief element of settler historiography, thus finds new expression.
Many history textbooks published in South Africa throughout the 50-year period under examination narrate the course of the 1818–19 war. As early as 1947, for example, D C R Clear wrote:

Citizens from all over the colony pursued the Kafirs, burning their kraals and slaying them in hundreds, until they had driven them across the Kei River. After about two months of warfare, an astounding thing happened. One day Makana of his own accord walked into the white men’s camp. He had determined to try to save his people by giving himself up. He was banished to Robben Island and afterwards drowned in trying to escape. So ended the Fifth Kafir war of 1818–1819.\(^{54}\)

This text reduces the war to a clash of two sides: white settlers and soldiers as ‘citizens’ of ‘the colony’, and ‘the Kafirs’. It calls the contested frontier zone ‘the colony’, and assumes that it belonged to the British and that the Xhosas were invaders. Notably, while Nxele is named, the Xhosa are generally reduced to a collective; further, it does not identify a single white individual, not even Somerset, but by emphasising the ‘citizens’ as a collective, diminishes the individual responsibility of settlers. This description of the war raises an interesting contradiction: how could two months of warfare have ensured that the ‘citizens’ had driven the Xhosa out if the prominent Xhosa leader, Nxele, could simply ‘walk into the white men’s camp’? The narrative swiftly moves on to Nxele’s surrender, suggesting he saw it as the best strategy to benefit the Xhosa nation. Finally, this text repeats Theal’s didactic message about Nxele’s drowning.

The messages conveyed in later textbooks vary. Paynter, tells us that ‘The Whites carried off 23,000 head of [Ndlambe’s] cattle of which they gave 9,000 to Gaika’.\(^{55}\) This sentence shows the reader that whites honoured the alliance with Ngqika, yet fails to point out the disparity of the share, or the damage inflicted on other Xhosa peoples. The text seems to suggest that blacks could gain material benefit by cooperating with whites if blacks remained subordinate to whites. This is a plausible twist, given the contemporary context of the South African government containing dissent by creating ‘independent’ Bantustans as ‘satellite states’. The shelf life of settler historiography was reaching its expiry, even in the apartheid period.

A decade later, Lambrechts et al. (1985) write:

Ndlambe, spurred on by the traditional healer Mabena [Nxele], invaded the colony at the beginning of 1819. Large numbers of warriors attacked the frontier post of Grahamstown, but the garrison succeeded in warding off the attack. In the meantime a British force was formed under the command of Colonel Willshire. Ndlambe suffered a defeat and was driven over the Keiskamma River.\(^{56}\)

This passage suggests that Ndlambe’s decision was rational from the Xhosa point of view, but not in Western eyes, because the Xhosa acted under the influence of a ‘traditional healer’. The success of the British force is related as being unproblematic: the single British garrison thwarted ‘a large number of Xhosa’.
Overall then, despite these various narrative twists and turns, settler triumphalism remained a prominent and constant theme in school history textbooks, which indicates a degree of continuity with Theal.

In this light, the following passage by Joubert and Britz 1985 stands out: ‘Ndlambe was defeated, but in revenge he invaded the colony. This led to the Fifth Frontier War. With the support of burgher commandos Colonel Willshire managed to drive the Xhosa back across the Keiskamma River’. One obvious feature here is the labelling of Xhosa actions as an ‘invasion’, to which the colonists responded by ‘driving out’ the Xhosa. Such descriptions imply that the territory was always under British possession. This was not a new theme, of course. What seems to reflect the National Party’s dominance is the emphasis on burgher commandos acting in concert with the British. Read at the time of publication, during the state of emergency of the mid-1980s, this theme seems to serve a new political purpose. The settler-African partnership shown in Paynter’s text of 1974 disappears. Instead, while Joubert and Britz may be interpreted as stressing British vulnerability, by bringing in the burghers they seem to underline the importance of unity between the burghers and the British in the face of an African challenge. Such white unity against an African ‘total onslaught’ was then a strategic aim of the apartheid government.

By the mid-1980s, history textbooks reveal other new aspects. F E Graves et al. (1985) disclose the fallibility of the British, pointing to Somerset’s failed efforts either to send a ship with reinforcements, or to get Britain ‘to provide cavalry to patrol the frontier’. On the surface, Somerset’s actions appear to be an embarrassment. However, those sympathetic to settler historiography might interpret them as yet another example of the negligence and unreliability of the remote British government in time of war, which encouraged white South Africans to achieve self-sufficiency.

These new trends began seriously to undermine settler historiography. Writing more sensitive to African agency is apparent in Nisbet et al., who introduce readers to Ndlambe’s position: that Ndlambe told Somerset that the battle was between himself and Ngqika and that Somerset should stay clear of it. When defeated, ‘Ngqika then appealed to Somerset for help’. Unlike other textbooks, this work suggests that it was Ngqika who solicited support; it was not a case of Somerset volunteering his efforts. This implies that Somerset had the opportunity either to decline Ngqika’s request or offer him conditions. The text moves on to the war itself:

Nxele led a huge Xhosa army into the colony and attacked Grahamstown. Taken by surprise the garrison town was almost overrun. But, helped by a band of Khoi hunters who rode into Grahamstown in the nick of time, the British were able to regroup. With their firepower they were able to drive the Xhosa back … The British, with the help of Dutch commandos, launched follow-up operations in the area between the Buffalo and the Kei.

Remarkably, given the context of apartheid, Nisbet et al. note that the British, in addition to receiving Dutch commando reinforcements, were assisted by Khoikhoi hunters. On the other hand, while this passage reveals the vulnerability of the British, it is possible that the defenders of apartheid might have welcomed the description. By the time of publication, a new constitution had established separate parliaments for whites, coloureds and Indians. Thus this text could be construed as a precedent for successful cooperation between British, Dutch and Khoikhoi in de-
feating African peoples. However, the text does not bow to settler apologia. It goes on to clearly relate how the British ‘burned Xhosa homes and crops, shot those who resisted them, and carried off 30,000 head of cattle. The suffering of the Xhosa was intense’.

This expression of sympathy for the ‘intense’ suffering of the Xhosa marks a rupture from settler historiography. Similar trends had been apparent in the academic historiography of South Africa for two decades, and the cumulative effects of first the liberal and then the radical/revisionist schools were well and truly entrenched in history writing by the end of apartheid in 1994.

Post-apartheid history textbooks give different emphases to the causes of these wars. Charles Dugmore et al. (1996) entitle the relevant section of their work ‘the fight for land on the frontier’. They do not provide detailed war-by-war accounts of the hundred years of war between the Xhosa and white colonists, but give a bird’s eye view of successive conflicts. The text consciously contextualises the conflicts in material competition and puts less emphasis on racial, cultural and personality factors: ‘The first frontier wars were fought over the land … The constant movement of herds led to many arguments, and to cattle raids and counter-raids. Sometimes it also led to war’. Although not dealing directly with the 1818–19 war, the book mentions its consequences, noting that whereas the 1820 British settlers ‘were given land’, they ‘did not know that the Xhosa had also claimed this land’. The omission of the course of the war makes it difficult for readers to understand how ‘the British were given’ the land, but the next sentence indicates that the Xhosa had not accepted that the British were ‘given’ the land, as they ‘had also claimed the land’. This short description leaves critical readers wanting to learn more about the ways in which the British acquired the area and how the contesting claims for the land originated and ensued.

Jane Rosenthal et al. (1996) do not devote much space to the wars, but rather focus on explaining the main factors behind the conflicts. They explain the initial encounter between white farmers and the Xhosa as due to the movement westward of ‘new or lesser Xhosa chiefs’ that was made difficult by ‘the presence of the white farmers’. When war came, the ‘successful British attack on the Xhosa in 1811–12 … pushed the Xhosa east of the Fish River. This event was a turning point, as it was the first attempt at the wholesale conquest of an African chiefdom by the white colonists’. This war also affected later settler-Xhosa relations: the British ‘were not entirely successful and conflict continued … Throughout their campaigns … the British exploited the rivalry that existed between different clans’. Here the authors allude to Somerset’s intervention in the feud between Ngqika and Ndlambe, although lack of detail might frustrate those readers wishing to find out exactly how the British exploited the tension among Xhosa clans.

All these post-apartheid textbooks aim to jettison the assumptions of settler historiography. They reverse the perspectives of apartheid-era textbooks. In explaining the conflict, post-apartheid textbooks add material causes to the political or personal causes raised by earlier generations of textbook writers. However, many details can be lost when focusing on the ‘big picture’. It remains to be seen how future history textbooks can reintroduce the fine points of history to better explain crucial lessons from British exploitation of Xhosa divisions.

**CONCLUSION**

Theal’s 1890 textbook is the prime example of South African settler historiography. Although the influence of Theal’s textbook in particular, and settler historiography in general, remained
strong in textbooks produced over the decades, we can perceive several phases of change as seen through the prism of narratives of the 1818–19 war.

In the post-1945 period, descriptions of the background to, and the course of, the 1818–19 war went through various shifts. In the apartheid era from 1948 to 1994, textbook authors modified their narratives to suit the prevailing zeitgeist, and even incorporated alternative interpretations. Thus, textual explication of the Spoor Law continued to hold the Xhosa solely responsible for its failure, while exculpating whites. Textbook authors consistently presented this war as inevitable.

My analysis finds that in these apartheid-era textbooks the way in which the authors describe the composition of the settlers shifts from an unspecified whole to an alliance of British settlers and Dutch commandos or burghers, and even with Khoikhoi reinforcement. While this exposes British weakness, it may also promote unity between the white forces and Khoikhoi subalterns against the Xhosa. The texts continually represent Ndlambe and Ngqika as the only representatives of the Xhosa population.

On the other hand, post-apartheid texts introduce events more from the perspective of the Xhosa and also add the material factors contributing to the war, which many texts of the previous era did not incorporate. In the New South Africa of the post-apartheid era, both professional historians and the authors of history textbooks challenge the legacy of Theal and settler historiography that aided and abetted the logic of apartheid.

ENDNOTES


7 Babrow, ‘George McCall Theal’: 5.

8 Babrow, ‘George McCall Theal’: 8–9, 110.

9 Thompson, *The Political Mythology*: 134.

10 Smith, *The Changing Past*: 34.

11 Standard 6 was the eighth year of schooling, and catered for students aged 13–14 years. Today, Standard 6 is known as Grade 8. The analysis here is based on Ryôta Nishino. 2007. ‘A comparative historical study of Japanese and South African school history textbooks, c1945–1995’, PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, which compares seven themes in South African and Japanese history textbooks and the level of governments’ control over textbooks.

12 Changes in historical periods prescribed in contemporary syllabi affected coverage.


Timothy Keegan. 1996. Colonial South Africa and the Origins of Racial Order. Cape Town: 63; Maclellan, A Proper Degree of Terror: 171, 218. Maclellan (171) suggests Ngqika realised the deal was unfair but other Xhosa representatives persuaded him to agree.


Keegan, Colonial South Africa: 137; Mostert, Frontiers: 450.

Peires, ‘The British and the Cape’: 482; Peires, The House of Phalo, 63, 70.


Theal, Short History of South Africa: 250.
Theal, *Short History of South Africa*: 204.


Theal, *Short History of South Africa*: 207.


D C R Clear. 1947. *Our Country: A Concise History of South Africa for Standard VI*. 3rd edn. Cape Town: Juta: 49. As Clear does not cite the source of the conversation, readers do not know whether the dialogue was genuine or reconstructed.


Syphus, *Man through the Ages*: 177.


Nisbet et al., *History Alive*: 188.


Lambrechts et al., *History 6*: 6, 73.


Joubert and Britz, *History*: 126.


Lambrechts, *History 6*: 73.


Van Jaarsveld et al. *New Illustrated History*: 179.


Lambrechts, *History 6*: 73.

Joubert and Britz, *History*: 126.


Nisbet, *History Alive*: 188.

Other textbooks also cited collaboration between settlers and Khoikhoi. See Van Jaarsveld et al. *New Illustrated History Std 6*: 178, which cryptically states that a ‘village was defended by 330 men, mostly settlers’ [emphasis added].
Nisbet, *History Alive*: 188. See also Angus MacLarty et al. 1995. *Discovering History Std 6*. 2nd edn. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter: 93, which replicates this passage with some terms modified: Nxele ‘was almost defeated. But, helped by a band of Khoikhoi who rode into Grahamstown in the nick of time, the British were able to regroup. With their guns they were able to drive the Xhosa back’. The modified words are indicated by italics.


### PRIMARY SOURCES

#### TEXTBOOKS


### REFERENCES


