

**A gripping account although lacking in fresh insights**

**Julia C. Wells, *The Return of Makhanda: Exploring the Legend***

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Many people who stand at the front gate of Rhodes University in Grahamstown notice the striking view of Makana's Kop on the other side of town. The hill is named after a Xhosa man, also known as Lynx, Nxele, and now Makhanda, who led an ambitious, but disastrous attack by some 10 000 Xhosa on Grahamstown in 1819. Although Makhanda was imprisoned on the infamous Robben Island shortly after the battle and drowned trying to escape, many Xhosa people believed for a long time that he would someday return to lead continued resistance against colonisation. By the late twentieth century this hope had turned to cynicism and it became popular among Xhosa people of the Eastern Cape to refer to something that is promised but will never happen as "when Nxele returns".

Julia Wells, an American born Rhodes based historian who served in the local Makana municipal government, has written a biography that attempts to revive the reputation of Makhanda as an anti colonial hero. Wells' interest in Makhanda began in 2000 when she became a history consultant for the Egazini Outreach Project which mobilised 30 local artists to create images relevant to the 1819 Battle of Grahamstown for display at the city's National Arts Festival. While Wells noticed that many of the artists felt irritated with the different historical versions of Makhanda and his attack, she also saw that the excitement the project engendered revealed the potential for "opening up a whole new way of approaching the question of producing knowledge about the past" (p 4). The project raised ideas about popular history including that the story of Makhanda could be used to inspire people to overcome poverty and demoralisation, that knowledge about history should have tangible results such as creating jobs and that it was possible to empower local people by using their oral traditions to reconstruct the past. Wells' book represents "an attempt to reconcile both the popular and the written histories surrounding Makhanda and the battle of Grahamstown" (p 16).

The first chapter discusses the very few early nineteenth century eye witness accounts by literate Europeans who encountered Makhanda. These were mostly written by several missionaries who met him after his imprisonment, such as James Read in 1816 and John Campbell in late 1819. Frontier settlers and soldiers such as Andries Stockenström and Charles Lennox Stretch were present at Makhanda's surrender to colonial forces in 1819 and recounted their observations years later. During the 1870s, George McCall Theal, a Canadian teaching at Lovedale Mission who went on to become the founder of written South African history, wrote down information about Makhanda told to him by elderly Xhosa people. Based on these and other sources, Wells explains that Makhanda was an ordinary man of Xhosa and Khoi origin, perhaps a labourer on a Boer farm in his early life, who had been exposed to some of the first Christian missionaries in the region and incorporated parts of their message into his traditional beliefs.

Gaining a reputation for predicting future events, Makhanda eventually became a spiritual specialist and an important advisor to the Rharhabe Xhosa leader Ndlambe. Around 1816 Makhanda was involved in a now famous incident at Gampo Rock near present day East London where he promised an assembled crowd of Xhosa that their dead relatives would emerge from the water but when this failed to transpire he blamed the audience for spoiling the ritual by wading into the surf.

In her second chapter Wells maintains that a long line of historians, both black and white, demonised Makhanda as a deluded and superstitious witchdoctor. Given the ultimate victory of the Rharhabe leader Ngqika over his rival Ndlambe, Ngqika's spiritual advisor, Ntsikana, gained a positive reputation as the first Xhosa convert to Christianity and people from his faction accessed missionary education and literacy which enabled them to produce a version of history that portrayed Makhanda in a negative light. Ntsikana was seen as the advocate of peace and co operation with the whites while Makhanda was a warrior prophet who led his people to destruction. For Wells, these views were repeated by late twentieth century academics such as Janet Hodgson who worked on Xhosa religion and Jeff Peires who researched Xhosa history; and journalists Ben MacLennan and Noel Mostert who produced popular histories of the conquest period. Wells explains, unconvincingly for anyone who has read their work closely, that these writers neglected to pay enough attention to colonial dispossession of Xhosa land in motivating Makhanda to attack Grahamstown. However, with the exception of a few different interpretations, the subsequent history put forth by Wells is not very different from those written by these earlier writers, and is largely based on the same colonial accounts.

The third chapter offers a fairly standard overview of the conflict between Xhosa, Khoi and Boer over the Zuurveld at the end of the eighteenth century, and the arrival of the British in the early nineteenth century which resulted in the expulsion of Xhosa communities east of the Fish River and the founding of Grahamstown in 1812. Wells' next chapter explains the conflict between Rharhabe Xhosa leaders Ndlambe and Ngqika, which the British quickly exploited, not as a power struggle as previous historians have assumed, but as a series of disciplinary actions by the essentially unified Xhosa royals to pressure the young Ngqika into maintaining traditional codes of behaviour. This, according to Wells, was typical of Xhosa politics just as Ngqika's "own sons also followed the traditional pattern of co operation, as the elder Maqoma nurtured his younger brother Sandile and then gracefully saw him installed as chief when he came of age" (p 103). Wells supports this claim with an erroneous citation to Peires' *House of Phalo* which actually states on page 130 that "all his life Maqoma despised Sandile".<sup>1</sup> Indeed, during the late 1830s Maqoma tried to put off Sandile's rise by delaying his initiation and in 1841 he tried to overthrow Sandile by having his mother accused of witchcraft. In both cases, the intervention of missionaries and colonial officials ensured Sandile's position.<sup>2</sup> Wells fails to explain a serious problem in Xhosa royal inheritance which meant that the ruler usually died before

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1. J.B. Peires, *The House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of their Independence* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987), p 130.

2. T.J. Stapleton, *Maqoma: Xhosa Resistance to Colonial Advance, 1798 1873* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1994), pp 116 120 and 124.

his heir was old enough to take over and meant that older, but junior ranked half brothers often led break away movements.

Surveying the much written about events of 1817 and 1818, the fifth chapter looks at Ngqika's acceptance of a "spoor law" which permitted colonial cattle raids against the Xhosa, the decisive defeat of Ngqika's army by the forces of Ndlambe and Hintsa at the Battle of Amalinde, and the destructive colonial Brereton Commando that intervened on behalf of Ngqika. The pivotal chapter is on Makhanda's ultimately failed attack on Grahamstown in 1819 which was the most ambitious undertaking in Xhosa military history aimed at eliminating the colonists from the area. While some historians have pointed out that the Xhosa would likely have overwhelmed Grahamstown had they attacked at night, Wells maintains that they conducted raids at night but the formalities of Xhosa warfare, including invoking the assistance of ancestors, demanded that such an important operation be mounted in daylight. It could be added that perhaps the Xhosa were aware of the difficulties of moving thousands of men into precise positions at night. For example, in January 1851 around 2 000 Xhosa and Khoi approached Fort Beaufort under cover of darkness but their planned dawn attack was aborted because part of the force became confused and assaulted prematurely.<sup>3</sup>

In the penultimate chapter Wells tells us that the colonial counter attack into Xhosa territory that followed the Battle of Grahamstown "has been little appreciated by previous generations of historians" (p 184). While this may be a valid point, it is slightly overstated because MacLennan devotes at least 20 pages to the campaign.<sup>4</sup> Wells offers a detailed account of continuing Xhosa resistance in the Fish River bush; the surrender of Makhanda; and the British clearance of land between the Fish and Keiskamma rivers which they forced Ngqika, now dependent upon colonial support, to cede them as a buffer. The next year would see the arrival of the "1820 settlers" from Britain to consolidate colonial control. The last and perhaps most original chapter looks with unprecedented detail at Makhanda's imprisonment on Robben Island and his death in a daring escape attempt. The conclusion stresses that Makhanda's main goal was Xhosa unity and that what he "stood for fully resonates with the spirit of the new democracy" (p 257). This is not substantially different from Mostert's assessment that "Nxele sought to bestow a new nationalistic stirring among the Xhosa through a military unity".<sup>5</sup>

Despite the hopes expressed in the early part of the book, Wells does not produce a history that is remarkably different from the many previous historians she sharply criticises. The basic historical narrative of the early nineteenth century Cape eastern frontier is the same; the sources are mostly the same colonial and missionary ones; and it appears current African oral tradition did not offer anything new. At times Makhanda almost disappears from the story given the paucity of primary sources directly related to him and his limited prominence of only three

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3. Stapleton, *Maqoma*, p 154.

4. B. MacLennan, *A Proper Degree of Terror: John Graham and the Cape's Eastern Frontier* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986), pp 199 219.

5. N. Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1992), p 492.

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years. These issues aside, Wells has produced a gripping account that will likely renew interest in the Cape Xhosa Wars.

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