

## Long overdue publication

**Martin Chatfield Legassick, *The Politics of a South African Frontier: The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Missionaries, 1780–1840***

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For those familiar with South African historiography and in particular its revisionist trend which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Martin Legassick's doctoral thesis, *The Politics of a South African Frontier: The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Missionaries, 1780–1840*, requires no introduction. This landmark thesis, submitted in 1969 to the University of California at Los Angeles, has become one of the most influential studies on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century South African frontier. Given that it is one of the “most widely cited dissertations in Southern African historiography” (p ix), it is indeed surprising that it is only now, some 40 years after its original production, that this masterful work has been published.

It serves little purpose in stating the obvious – that the moment for this book has long passed. For Basler Afrika Bibliographien ought to be commended for finally providing easier access to a scholarly work still highly in demand, despite its age; a work that continues to inspire much respect for its groundbreaking re-conceptualisation of the frontier in the Southern African context, as well as for the meticulous research upon which this revisionist dynamic is based. Indeed, the current publication of Legassick's dissertation serves as a fitting tribute to its legacy over the past four decades; a legacy which has provoked debate, encouraged further revision and informed other, more recent influential studies of southern Africa's historical frontiers.

Accompanied by a Preface by Ciraj Rassool, offering insight into the origins of the thesis along with a discussion of the reasons for its delayed publication, and an Introduction by Robert Ross (“Martin Legassick, the Griqua and South Africa's Historiographical Revival: An Appreciation”) the text remains unaltered, appearing as it did at the time of submission in 1969. Rather than detracting from the merits of what is a dated study, the decision to publish as is, or rather, as it was, on the part of those involved in the production of this book, serves two useful, and I trust intended, purposes. It reveals

the contemporary ingenuity of the thesis, and it preserves the original, adroit handling and delivery of the central argument concerning the nature and advance of the Cape's northern and north-eastern frontiers and the implications this had for the Griqua polities that emerged there in the early nineteenth century. Both motifs stand unveiled in their unaltered form and are all the more remarkable given the lack of any sort of thorough narrative of the history of the Trans-Gariep frontier region at the time of writing. As Ross points out in his Introduction, this was a work researched and written "before the great expansion of Cape Colonial historiography of recent years" and it is "sobering ... to realize how little [Legassick] actually had to go on" (p xvii).

At the heart of the thesis lies the continual theme for which it has become most famous: Legassick's theoretical refinement of the concept of the frontier zone. In contrast to the predominant conceptualisation of the southern African frontier zone at the time (espoused by liberal historians seeking explanations for the twentieth-century defeat of Cape liberalism by what they termed, the "frontier tradition"), Legassick questioned the rigidity of the categories in which the related frontier history had been framed. Drawing on the work of I.D. MacCrone and W.K. Hancock, both of whom had pointed out the limitations of a straightforward application of F.J. Turner's American frontier thesis to the southern African context, Legassick argued that the frontier zone, rather than being a place of defined extremes, was a fluid space where there was no single source of legitimate authority, even though this would in time emerge (pp 3–10). He also placed equal emphasis on acculturation as an important theme in studies of the South African frontier. Again, contrary to the established interpretations of the day, Legassick favoured the notion of mutual acculturation; a process wherein the "new modes of life and new institutions" which MacCrone had referred to, occurred "through the interaction between different cultures" (p 6).

These theoretical innovations concerning the frontier zone rested upon two themes, theretofore neglected despite their significance in the nineteenth-century history of South Africa, and two related qualifications, which underpinned Legassick's conceptual revision of the "frontier tradition". With regards to the two dominant themes of the nineteenth century, the first involved "the erosion of the political power of non-whites through their absorption into plural communities in a subordinate political status" (p 1); and the second related to "the integration of the peoples of South Africa into a market economy linked ultimately with the industrializing, capitalist economy of Europe" (p 2). With these two broad themes established as points of departure for the study, Legassick forwarded two accompanying qualifications: firstly, that the fact of the establishment of white supremacy had "been too often unquestioned" and that "the prior existence of autonomous non-white political communities" had been regularly "ignored or regarded as irrelevant", stressing the military conquest of these communities while overlooking the "slow, complex, varied and partly peaceful manner in which non-white political power was eroded" (p 2); and secondly, that acculturation, or mutual acculturation, had been likewise neglected in the histories of the subordination of frontier societies to white-dominated political, economic and social modes. The instability, dynamism and temporary nature of the frontier zone, together with the initial "absence of any single source of legitimate authority", meant that an intriguing in-between stage of

integration occurred for frontier communities – occurring after independence and before total subordination (p 7). Legassick refers to the communities at this stage of incorporation as “plural communities” (p 8).

The focus of the study then, is one such plural community: the Griqua state, which emerged under the leadership of Andries Waterboer at Griquatown in the course of the 1820s and 1830s (other notable Griqua lineages, such as the Koks and Berendse, also feature prominently in the analysis). In summary, the thesis is an exploration of how the Griqua polities, in association with the politically connected missionaries of the London Missionary Society, including its Cape Superintendent John Philip, “nearly succeeded in the late 1830s in establishing Griqua hegemony over much” of the Transgariep region (p 10). This push for Griqua hegemony was to be at the expense of the Southern and South-Western Sotho-Tswana, although in the end, this did not occur and Griquatown’s influence in the region began to decline from the early 1840s onwards.

Legassick traced the history of cultural interaction between the Sotho-Tswana chiefdoms of the Rolong, Tlharo and Tlhaping with the northward advancing remnants of Khoikhoi and San to the late eighteenth century. Competition for land and resources began almost immediately in the dry environment of the region and political leadership came to reside “in those who could maintain a following and access to resources” (p 325). Largely owing to the staunch political backing of the missionaries, the Griquas, a missionary inspired invention in name and, although not without contestation, identity, came to dominate the Transgariep. Indeed, John Philip, along with Peter Wright, missionary at Philippolis, and Andries Waterboer, sought to stamp out the divisions between the competing Griqua lineages and establish a “Christian Griqua republic” in the Transgariep (p 332). The hegemonic ambitions on the part of Waterboer and Philip were, however, not to be realised. The increasing numbers of white settlers in the region along with the London Missionary Society’s decision to reduce its support for missions in favour of self-supporting “coloured” churches resulted in a steady decline of Griqua power in the 1840s. Nonetheless, the history of the Griqua and their interactions with the Sotho-Tswana and missionaries constitutes a significant feature of the progression of the Cape Colony’s northern frontier. The process was fraught with uncertainties and ambiguities.

The key ideas of Legassick’s thesis would be elaborated on and developed in subsequent years. Legassick himself went on to debunk the “frontier tradition” in “a paradigm-smashing seminar paper” presented at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London in 1970 (but only published ten years later), which has become a hallmark of South African revisionist historiography.<sup>1</sup> Written on the cusp of the revisionist trend, Legassick’s thesis and subsequent seminar paper were shortly thereafter accompanied by

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1 Quote from N Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape’s Northern Frontier in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Double Storey Books, Cape Town and Ohio University Press, Athens: OH, 2005), p 10; M Legassick, “The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography”, in S Marks and A Atmore (eds), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (Longman, London and New York, 1980), pp 44–79

works by Shula Marks and still later, Hermann Giliomee.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Nigel Penn's *The Forgotten Frontier* and Susan Newton-King's *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier* have been consummate additions to the canon of literature stimulated, in one way or another, by Legassick's thesis.<sup>3</sup> While Penn has explored the implications of the frontier zone in its post-revisionist, theoretical form for the northern frontier Khoisan in the century prior to Legassick's period, Newton-King has described her own study "as an extended interrogation of the views of ... Legassick".<sup>4</sup> Arguing that Legassick's view of the frontier as an interstitial space "where enemies and friends were not (or not exclusively) defined by race" was in need of revision, Newton-King has shown that at least on the Eastern Cape frontier, relations between white colonists and the Khoisan were "fundamentally more antagonistic" than had been allowed and that historians, including Legassick, ought to be weary of exaggerating the permeability of boundaries in frontier contexts.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, the veracity of Legassick's ideas pertaining to the multiplicity of identities in frontier settings have been reconfirmed by Paul Landau's *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa*. Landau contends that with regard to the peoples of South Africa, "[h]ybridity lay at the core of their sub-continental political traditions".<sup>6</sup>

The substance of the arguments in Legassick's 40-year old thesis should not be diminished in any way by the historiographical reality that owing to its long overdue publication, it no longer stands alone or even above the crowd as a landmark work on the history of the Cape's northern frontier and its plural communities. Not even the numerous typographical errors in the text can detract from the importance of the publication of Legassick's thesis for historians who are continuing to research aspects of southern Africa's frontiers. Its true and continuing value lies in its pioneering role and scholarly legacy.

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- 2 S Marks, 'Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries', *Journal of African History*, 13, 1972, pp 55–80; H Giliomee, 'Processes in the Development of the Southern African Frontier', in H Lamar and L Thompson (eds), *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1981)
  - 3 Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier*; and S Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier, 1760–1803* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999)
  - 4 Newton-King, *Masters and Servants*, p 9
  - 5 Newton-King, *Masters and Servants*, p 9.
  - 6 P Landau, *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400–1948* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010), p xi