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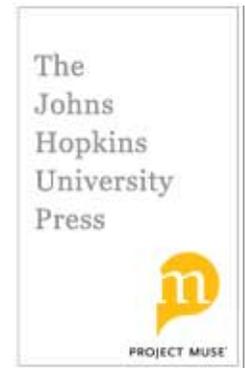
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Guns, Race, and Skill in Nineteenth-Century Southern Africa

WILLIAM K. STOREY

In colonial southern Africa there were plenty of guns and plenty of skilled shooters, or so it seems. South Africa's "gun society" originated in the seventeenth century, when the Dutch East India Company encouraged the European settlers of the Cape of Good Hope to procure firearms and to serve in the militia. The European farmers (called Boers) who crossed the colonial boundaries into the African interior distributed guns to Africans, in spite of company regulations forbidding the practice. Such regulations remained on the books even after the advent of British rule during the Napoleonic Wars. During the early nineteenth century, British liberals overcame conservative opposition and helped trade and labor become technically free. Liberals also encouraged the spread of evangelical Christianity among Africans. Partly through the encouragement of traders and missionaries, more Africans took up firearms. They did so for many reasons, most prominently to gain security and to kill game. By the time game began to grow scarce, in the middle of the century, British and Boer settlement had extended north and east, while conservatives were gaining the

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upper hand in colonial politics. Settler perceptions of the threat posed by armed Africans persuaded British conservatives to portray Africans as skilled with firearms, even as they otherwise characterized Africans as racially inferior. The common perception that Boer frontiersmen were superior marksmen had, by the end of the nineteenth century, become more myth than reality.

What is real and what is myth when it comes to skill? As far as southern African shooting skills are concerned, the sources contain many contradictions. Enemies were described as skilled and dangerous; friends were described as unskilled and harmless. The contrast highlights a significant methodological problem. If descriptions are ideological and biased, how can historians use sources to assess technological skill?

It is an issue of fundamental importance because skill exists at the intersection of the human and the material. Even so, historians tend to overlook the methodological challenge, shortchanging analysis in their discussions of skill. Historians of industrialization in Europe and North America, for example, have written about the ways in which the loss of skill related to the loss of worker power. High-status workers fought to preserve old skills as industrialists introduced new technologies that depended less on them.¹ Were worker and capitalist descriptions of skill so heavily freighted with ideology as to mislead historians? Only a few authors have raised the possibility that perceptions of technological skill may reflect perceptions of order.²

Seemingly neutral descriptions may harbor ideologies. Historians of technology need to recognize this, and—more to the point, in this particular case—so do historians of firearms and colonialism. In the best available study on that specific subject, *The Skulking Way of War: Technology and Tactics among the New England Indians*, Patrick Malone describes how European settlers introduced guns to New England, pointing out that Native Americans adapted them most adroitly to the local environment. The Native Americans learned to shoot well and combined that capability with their skills in forest warfare to gain a temporary military advantage, until English colonists learned how to fight with guns in forests, too.³ Malone's study is based largely on colonial sources, though, and he does not

1. Göran Rydén, "Skill and Technical Change in the Swedish Iron Industry, 1750–1860," *Technology and Culture* 39 (1998): 383–407, esp. 386–87. Rydén cites Harry Braverman's well-known *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1974). Another study that makes a similar point is Joan W. Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

2. Nina Lerman, "'Preparing for the Duties and Practical Business of Life': Technological Knowledge and Social Structure in Mid-19th-Century Philadelphia," *Technology and Culture* 38 (1997): 31–59. Christopher Evans, "*The Labyrinth of Flames*": *Work and Social Conflict in Early Industrial Merthyr Tydfil* (Cardiff, 1993), 71–73.

3. Patrick Malone, *The Skulking Way of War: Technology and Tactics among the New England Indians* (Lanham, Md., 1991).

consider the possibility that English descriptions of Native Americans' skill with guns might have aimed at portraying them as more dangerous than they really may have been, which would have furthered the colonials' aims to dispossess them.

There is only one place to find a scholarly discussion of shooting skills in southern Africa: a special issue of the *Journal of African History*, published in 1971, on the social history of firearms. The contributors greatly advanced our knowledge of firearms in southern Africa, but they arrived at some unexamined and contradictory conclusions about skill. Relying on colonial descriptions of African peoples of the region, they characterized the Khoisan and Griqua as skilled with weapons, a facility that enabled them to resist colonialism for a while. The Xhosa were both good and bad marksmen, while the Mfengu were skilled and dangerous. The Sotho were "indifferently armed and were poor shots" before the 1870s, when they became "crack marksmen." The Zulu never integrated firearms completely into their military tactics, but by the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 some Zulu shot well because, according to a British government source, they had received instruction from redcoat deserters.⁴

Contradictory views of skill are not unique to historians of firearms and colonialism. Little in the historiography of technology goes beyond labor historians' concern with worker de-skilling. Some of the best analyses of skill have been written by ethnographers and not historians. The most thoughtful of these studies is Douglas Harper's *Working Knowledge*, which focuses on a mechanic named Willie in upstate New York.⁵ Willie not only fixes cars and tractors; he is deeply aware of the properties of materials, an apparently intuitive, kinesthetic sense that affords him great scope for improvisation and *bricolage*. At the same time, his preindustrial work habits help bind together a community experiencing postindustrial malaise. In a similarly thoughtful study in the same vein, Wiebe Bijker, Harry Collins, and G. H. de Vries observed cardiologists at work and distinguished two types of skill: "mimeomorphic" skills, which are learned through repetition and, once thoroughly acquired, may be taken for granted, and "polimorphic" skills, or skills of judgment, which involve using technology while reacting to changing circumstances.⁶ Mimeomorphic skills are easier to

4. These African peoples are listed in rough order of their contact with Europeans. See three articles from the *Journal of African History* 12 (1971): Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, "Firearms in Southern Africa: A Survey," 518–19, 523–24; Anthony Atmore and P. Sanders, "Sotho Arms and Ammunition in the Nineteenth Century," 539, 542; Jeff Guy, "A Note on Firearms in the Zulu Kingdom with Special Reference to the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879," 560. The editors cautioned that these were preliminary studies; this has not stopped a number of scholars from citing them as authoritative.

5. Douglas Harper, *Working Knowledge: Skill and Community in a Small Shop* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987).

6. Wiebe Bijker, Harry Collins, and G. H. de Vries, "Ways of Going On: An Analysis of Skill Applied to Medical Practice," *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 22 (summer

replace with machinery, although in some circumstances they might be valued just as highly as polymorphic skills.⁷

The description of mimeomorphic and polymorphic skills may be enhanced by bringing together the interests of historians of technology, who have methods for situating technical developments within their cultural contexts, and historians and anthropologists of southern Africa, who have been debating the meaning of everyday practice in the colonial encounter. The work of two historical anthropologists in particular, Jean and John Comaroff, is especially to the point. The Comaroffs focused on the encounter between British missionaries and the southern Tswana, viewed through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. By juxtaposing Gramsci's theory and extensive historical evidence the Comaroffs explored the ways the Tswana debated customs, techniques, and habits that missionaries were promoting. The Comaroffs argue that the Tswana recognized that by accepting British dress, agricultural practices, and literacy they were accepting aspects of colonialist hegemony ranging from racial arrangements to epistemology and ontology. Perceptions of the world and the self, as well as perceptions of power, were bound up in everyday practice just as much as they were related to professing the Christian faith or pledging loyalty to the queen.⁸

The Comaroffs' approach offers a good starting point from which to investigate what everyday practice meant, ideologically, with respect to firearms—carrying them, caring for them, storing them, not to mention hunting and fighting with them. It happens that skills with guns and the perceived and real links to political power weapons and skills conferred were debated extensively in southern Africa in the nineteenth century. Everyday practice as it related to firearms, as well as the representation of everyday practice, was highly ideological, as may be seen in the efforts of those who wished to regulate the spread of guns. Nineteenth-century settler politicians often made highly politicized claims about skill and practice

1997): 267–85. To advance the claim further that ethnographic descriptions of skill have been more successful than historical ones, note that in Bijker's more historical work he has argued that skills are embedded in local cultures without supporting that point with much direct evidence. See *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 4.

7. With respect to guns, mimeomorphic skills would include loading and firing a gun repeatedly at a target, day after day, until the shooter achieved proficiency. Polymorphic skills would include hunting animals; every shot fired will be loaded and aimed in different circumstances that must be interpreted by the shooter.

8. John L. and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1, *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991), and vol. 2, *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago, 1997). A third volume is planned. See the special reviews published in *American Historical Review* 108 (April 2003): 434–78, and the review essays in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 3, no. 1 (2001): 5–126.

that highlight the ideological nature of descriptions of skill, as well as the methodological problems that historians face when we attribute skills to people in the past.

As a way of meeting those methodological challenges, this article seeks to explore two stories together. In one, southern Africans of the early nineteenth century adapted guns and skills to local circumstances, and mimeomorphic firearm skills that would appear to be universal turn out to be subject to local variation. As local adaptations occurred, guns improved, game disappeared, and skills declined. This is an empirical argument that contradicts cherished myths about colonial frontiersmen in southern Africa being natural marksmen, as well as less pleasant myths about the technological incompetence of Africans. Meanwhile, a related body of evidence emerges that is best examined through discourse analysis. This is the story of changing settler representations of firearms and shooting skills. Over the course of the nineteenth century, depictions of guns shifted emphasis. Early on, settlers described guns as ordinary frontier artifacts, but by the 1870s they depicted them as dangerous tools that, in skilled hands, could be used either to support or to undermine the emerging colonial order. In what follows, the political nature of skill descriptions will be explored, yet some skill descriptions will still be treated empirically, as a way of advancing the closely related argument about the verifiable decline of game and shooting skills.

Skill and Environment

What skills were required to fire a gun in the nineteenth century? How were they changing? At the beginning of the century, most of the world's soldiers used muzzle-loading, smoothbore, flintlock muskets.⁹ When the musket was fired, the ball bounced down the sides of the barrel and out in the general direction in which it had been aimed; the smoothbore was an inaccurate weapon. Soldiers were drilled to load and fire in volleys, a social skill that compensated for the musket's technical shortcomings. Volley fir-

9. To load a muzzle-loading flintlock, the gunner measured out a quantity of coarse black powder (or opened a premeasured charge) and poured it down the barrel. Next he placed the ball on a patch (typically made of something like linen) and pushed it down the barrel with the ramrod to rest on top of the powder. He then primed the lock by placing a pinch of powder in the pan, cocked the hammer, aimed, and pulled the trigger. It was a slow (thirty seconds even for a reasonably skilled gunner) and awkward procedure, which left soldiers exposed to enemy fire. Flintlock muskets were vulnerable to wet weather as well. To further complicate matters, fouling of the barrel caused by the black powder, which does not burn cleanly, made the weapon progressively more difficult to load during a battle or other prolonged use. To compensate, soldiers often loaded with balls that were smaller than the caliber (diameter of the barrel) nominally used by the weapon. See Malone (n. 3 above), 31–35, for rich descriptions and illustrations of matchlock and flintlock muskets.

ing worked well for armies but had little application outside the military. Civilians loaded smoothbore muskets with shot or purchased rifles, much more accurate weapons thanks to grooves cut into the inside of the barrel that imparted spin to a tight-fitting ball. But rifles were even slower to load than muskets, and so were favored more by hunters than by soldiers.¹⁰

In the early nineteenth century, military and civilian firearms incorporated a number of technical improvements. Percussion locks came into wide service by the 1840s.¹¹ At around the same time, improvements in ammunition persuaded most soldiers and civilians to replace their smoothbores with more accurate rifles.¹² And, finally, by the 1860s design improvements in breech-loading firearms made it possible for most soldiers and civilians to switch from muzzle loaders to breechloaders.¹³

The technological development of firearms in the nineteenth century is a story of innovation and skill. The mimeomorphic skills involved in loading and aiming were replaced by better bullets, better ignition systems, and better materials, combined with better overall design. Shooters could have fewer of the old mimeomorphic skills and, using the same polymorphic skills, still succeed in damaging their targets. With some shooters, the elimination of the elaborate mimeomorphic skills involved in using muzzle loaders may have made it easier to hone their polymorphic skills. By the same token, gunsmithing now involved increasingly complex skills.

The spread of firearms and shooting skills along the southern African frontier is best understood in an environmental and social context. In the

10. M. L. Brown, *Firearms in Colonial America: The Impact on History and Technology, 1492–1792* (Washington, D.C., 1980), 28–31.

11. In a percussion lock, a percussion cap containing fulminate is placed over a nipple on top of the touchhole; the hammer strikes the cap, which explodes and ignites the charge in the barrel. This is a much more reliable ignition system, especially in damp weather, and it allows a weapon to be more quickly loaded, takes less skill, and entails fewer risks than the flintlock. By the 1850s most armies had switched to the percussion lock. See Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1981), 85–88.

12. In the 1840s, Captain Claude Minié of the French army invented a bullet with a hollow base that expanded outward when fired. The minié ball could be slightly smaller in diameter than the rifle's bore, and therefore more easily loaded, yet still grip the rifled grooves when the weapon was fired. See Headrick, 85–88.

13. For centuries, gunsmiths had been experimenting with guns that loaded from the back end, or breech. In the early nineteenth century newer and better breechloaders began to gain acceptance. The main problem that kept breechloaders from widespread adoption was continued reliance on black powder and paper cartridges, which caused them to blast hot gases back in the user's face and made them unpleasant to fire. In the 1860s, Colonel Edward Mounier Boxer of the British army solved this problem by placing bullets in brass cartridges, which made it possible to obtain a tighter seal in the army's new rifle, the Martini-Henry. Metal cartridges also did a better job of protecting the powder from damp weather. Black powder still caused barrels to become dirty quickly, but this problem was solved in the 1880s and 1890s, when smokeless gunpowder came into use. See Headrick, 98–100.

earlier part of the nineteenth century, people living in remote areas killed wildlife for food. At the same time, hunting was an important economic activity, as ivory, hides, and ostrich feathers commanded high prices on world markets. Hunting could even provide a better income than cattle farming. The naturalist William Burchell, who traveled in the interior in 1812, observed how Africans became involved in a cash economy as European trade networks reached into the interior.¹⁴ Many African hunters worked for European traders, who employed them as trackers and supplied them with guns and ammunition.

Burchell predicted that the diffusion of guns would cause the extinction of game, which in turn would incline people to pursue settled agriculture:

The great and powerful cause which will long operate to check the extension of the cultivation of grain, is the abundance of wild animals to be met with in all parts of the country; and until these shall be reduced in number or driven out of the land, it is hardly to be expected that the natives will turn to settled *agricultural pursuits*. The introduction of *fire-arms* among them would ultimately operate to the promotion of tillage, notwithstanding that their first effects might occasion the neglect of it. By hunting, this people would obtain food in a manner so much more agreeable than by agriculture, that grain would probably become but a secondary resource; but the evil would remedy itself, and the more eagerly they pursued the chase, and the more numerous were the guns and the hunters, the sooner would the game be destroyed or driven out of the country.¹⁵

Burchell hoped for a significant transformation of the southern African economy, a transformation already under way as he wrote. Encouraged by merchants, Africans and settlers were pushing the hunting frontier far into the interior. In their search for ivory, hides, and feathers they drove many of the region's game animals to the brink of extinction. As a consequence,

14. William J. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* (London, 1822; facsimile reprint, London, 1953), 2:285. While Burchell was living among the Tlhaping, a man offered eight oxen in exchange for one gun, which seemed a high price until one considered the gun's usefulness for hunting. Guns remained relatively rare in this part of southern Africa until the 1850s. By the 1870s they were widespread, thanks in part to the availability of wage labor at the nearby Kimberley diamond mines. There, an old (but still powerful) rifled percussion musket could be bought for four pounds sterling, the equivalent of three months' wages, while a modern breechloader might cost twenty-five pounds. See Robert Turrell, *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1870–1890* (Cambridge, 1987), 61–62.

15. Burchell, 2:369, emphases in the original. In the next paragraph, Burchell wrote: "This, although an experiment not to be recommended in these regions, has actually taken place in the Cape Colony, and the result clearly proved that which has just been stated." Burchell's reservations about ecological transformation appear to contradict his pronouncements about the superiority of agriculture.

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more people turned from hunting to farming to earn money, a trend that settlers and their governments found enhanced their power.¹⁶ By contrast, African chiefs who once asserted their authority through the regulation of hunting and by the display of their hunting prowess lost one more prop to their authority at a time when the various colonial governments in southern Africa were working to undermine them.¹⁷

The relationship of hunting skills and marksmanship to the political, economic, and ecological transformation of southern Africa can only be understood fully when we consider the ways in which guns were adapted to the local environment. The everyday practices, skills, and technologies of colonialism were not just derived from Europe and imposed on Africans; they were sometimes cultural and environmental hybrids. The sheer size of African game animals, especially the much-sought-after elephant, fostered a preference for large-caliber weapons. By the eighteenth century a distinct local pattern of firearms design had begun to emerge, which can be understood as a technological response to the region's ecology and economy. Local settlers mainly used military-style flintlocks, similar to the British Brown Bess, or another and even larger type of musket. The earliest examples of the latter, dating from the eighteenth century, were made in the Netherlands for export to the Cape. Some were "four-bore," 1.052-caliber (26.72-millimeter) muskets that fired a four-ounce ball, and others were "eight-bore," .835-caliber (21.2 millimeter) muskets firing a two-ounce ball. They could be charged with as much as 14 drams (0.875 ounces) of powder, in contrast to the .75-caliber Brown Bess, which fired a 1.45-ounce ball using less powder. A .75-caliber musket could kill an elephant at short range with a well-placed shot, but the larger muskets fired a heavier, more destructive ball, and were made specifically for hunting elephants and other big-game animals.¹⁸

16. William Beinart and Peter Coates, *Environment and History: The Taming of Nature in the USA and South Africa* (London, 1995), 20–27.

17. Like many structural trends, this was a gradual and incomplete process; many settlers and Africans continued to hunt, and hunting for sport remains common in South Africa today, albeit under quite different circumstances. See William Beinart, "Empire, Hunting and Ecological Change in Southern and Central Africa," *Past and Present* 128 (August 1990): 162–86, and John MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester, 1988). For political and cultural comparisons to Kenya and India, see William Storey, "Big Cats and Imperialism: Lion and Tiger Hunting in Kenya and Northern India, 1898–1930," *Journal of World History* 2 (fall 1991): 135–73. For a nicely detailed exposition of the economics of hunting on the South African frontier, see Roger Wagner, "Zoutpansberg: The Dynamics of a Hunting Frontier, 1848–67," in *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa*, ed. Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (London, 1980): 313–49.

18. Barry Berkovitch, *The Cape Gunsmith: A History of the Gunsmiths and Gun Dealers at the Cape of Good Hope from 1795 to 1900, with Particular Reference to Their Weapons* (Cape Town, 1976), 10–12; Geoffrey Tylden, "Shoulder Firearms in Southern Africa, 1652–1952," *Africana Notes and News* no. 12 (June 1957): 204–6.

In the early nineteenth century, these large muskets were imported from Birmingham and London and also produced locally by skilled gunsmiths. When the British took over the administration of the Cape Colony in 1806 and sacked the armorers of the Dutch East India Company, many went into business for themselves; collectively they became known for their elephant guns and for a unique version of the .75-caliber musket. Cape gunsmiths adapted English designs to local conditions. They imported barrels and parts from Birmingham, Britain's gun-manufacturing center, and then assembled the parts together with locally made wooden stocks. Gunsmiths employed slave carpenters and blacksmiths in much of the work. Even after emancipation in 1834 many former slaves continued in the employ of their masters, but their children tended to find other occupations. Beginning about the 1860s, skilled labor became so scarce that southern African gunsmiths ceased assembling imported parts and began to import complete guns from Britain.¹⁹

Hunting guns occupied a special niche in colonial southern African culture. They came to be known affectionately as *sanna*, a word derived from the Dutch *snaphaan* (snaphaunce, an early type of flintlock) and were also called *roer*, a Dutch word for gun derived perhaps from the sound of a gunshot. Their design reflected the influence of the local environment: gunsmiths made the stock unusually long and heavy, with a special bend that resembled the hindquarters of a baboon—whence the nickname *bobbe-jaanboud*, “baboon butt” (fig. 1). In this way the guns were naturalized. They were also decorated according to Dutch custom. On the barrel the gunsmith often engraved a twelve-pointed star, a Dutch folk symbol for prosperity and freedom that is known in the United States as the Pennsylvania Dutch hex, and which was often engraved on eighteenth-century Pennsylvania and Kentucky rifles. At the Cape, Dutch settlers called guns decorated in this fashion *sterloop*, the star barrel.²⁰

Cape and American guns both demonstrate a hybrid vigor in design, as local needs interacted with traditional patterns. In eastern North America hunters tended to use smaller-caliber firearms because they hunted smaller animals, like deer, while westerners, who might encounter bison, elk, or grizzly bears, preferred larger calibers, though rarely as large as the southern African four-bore.²¹ Cape gunsmiths and their American counterparts alike were sensitive to both the needs of local hunters and recent technological developments. They refitted flintlock muskets with percussion locks, and in some cases made large-bore, muzzle-loading, percussion rifles firing minié balls. Over the course of time barrel length decreased signifi-

19. Berkovitch, 34.

20. Berkovitch, 13–14; Felix V. Lategan, “Firearms, Historical,” in *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa* (Cape Town, 1971), 4:520.

21. On U.S. guns, see Louis A. Garavaglia and Charles G. Worman, *Firearms of the American West, 1803–1865* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1984), 33–79.

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FIG. 1 Engraving of Andries Africander, a mixed-race Khoi hunter. In the early nineteenth-century, frontiersmen like Africander were hired to hunt and track for European ivory merchants. While the drawing is plainly a caricature, it depicts some features of large-bore Cape muskets accurately. The gun Africander carries is large as compared to the hunter himself; it is a flintlock with a long barrel, both features common in early-nineteenth-century weapons; and the stock is a classic Cape *bobbejaanboud*, resembling a baboon's hind-quarters. (W. C. Harris, *The Wild Sports of Southern Africa* [London, 1839], 12.)

cantly. Southern African hunters usually hunted on horseback, firing and loading from the saddle. At first, 44-inch barrels were popular because hunters liked to stop the horse, lean over the saddle, and rest the stock on the ground while loading. But a gun with such a long barrel can be awkward to manipulate on horseback, which is why cavalymen preferred carbines and pistols. Later, as it became clear that shorter guns could be sufficiently powerful, mounted hunters also came to prefer them. In southern Africa the trigger mechanism was also adapted to riding: many African muskets required a heavy pull on the trigger to prevent accidental discharge during a fall from a horse.²²

22. Lategan, 524–25. Tylden, 204–6.



FIG. 2 Frederick Courteney Selous hunting a water buffalo in Southern Africa. Selous is armed with a large-bore muzzle loader typical of the middle of the nineteenth century, which features a percussion lock and a shorter barrel than the weapon in figure 1. In spite of these changes, some shooting skills remained the same. Here, the hunter is shown approaching very close to the buffalo, which he would have done with either weapon. (Frederick Courteney Selous, *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa* [London, 1881], following 290.)

Hunters offered rich descriptions of what it was like to use the old-fashioned large-bore muzzle loaders. England's most famous colonial hunter, Frederick Courteney Selous (fig. 2), reported that on an elephant hunting expedition near Kuruman in 1872 he used three such guns. One appears to have been made locally, while two were smoothbores made in Birmingham. All fired a four-ounce bullet and were charged with twenty drams of ordinary black powder, such as could be found at frontier trading posts. The results impressed Selous. Over the course of three seasons he used these guns to kill seventy-eight large animals, including many elephants. He commented that he had "never used or seen used a rifle which drove better than these common-made old muzzle-loaders." Even so, he did find the weapons challenging to use, as "they kicked most frightfully, and in my case the punishment I received from these guns has affected my nerves to such an extent as to have materially influenced my shooting ever since, and I am heartily sorry that I ever had anything to do with them."²³ Regular users of such weapons needed to be mindful not to develop a flinch.

If breech-loading rifles were available by the 1860s, why were well-to-do hunters such as Selous still using large-bore muzzle loaders? A promi-

23. Frederick Courteney Selous, *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa*, 4th ed. (London, 1895), 10.

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nent guidebook of the time recommended that, if hunters had to choose one gun, they carry a muzzle-loading, double-barreled, 11- or 12-gauge smoothbore percussion gun, about the same size as the old Brown Bess musket but with a shorter barrel. The guidebook, written by W. B. Lord, an artillery officer, and Thomas Baines, a landscape painter, recommended such a weapon because it was simpler and more reliable than a breech-loading rifle. Breechloaders, especially the later models, required special cartridges that might be hard to find in remote areas, while lead, powder, and percussion caps could be found at most frontier trading posts. An ordinary hunter could repair a muzzle loader, too, even out in the field; when a breechloader broke down, repairs had to be made by a professional gunsmith. Lord and Baines noted that some breechloaders were quite reliable. Even so, they recommended that hunters carry a steel block that could be dropped down the barrel in order to convert the gun from breech loading to muzzle loading.²⁴

There were other reasons why old guns retained their appeal in southern Africa longer than they did in other parts of the world. On the nineteenth-century southern African frontier, capital was scarce and game was plentiful; so long as plenty of game could be killed with primitive weapons, there was little incentive to adopt new guns such as the paper-cartridge breechloaders that became available in the 1850s and 1860s.²⁵ Older weapons were a more adaptable and flexible technology than the new rifles, and happened to be less expensive, too.²⁶

It was only the appearance of a brass-cartridge breechloader, the Martini-Henry, that signaled the demise of guns that had been uniquely adapted to southern Africa. Yet the adoption of the Martini-Henry cannot be explained simply by reference to technological progress in Europe. Any

24. William Barry Lord and Thomas Baines, *Shifts and Expedients of Camp Life, Travel, and Exploration* (London, 1876). The book was first published in serial form between 1868 and 1871.

25. By the late 1880s breechloaders were using smokeless powder, which fires a bullet at higher velocities and helps soldiers and hunters to conceal themselves. Nevertheless, a ball with slower velocity, like the old black-powder musket ball, does not go through a target as quickly, and is generally thought to have more stopping power.

26. Systematic statistical data on the costs of ammunition—relevant to calculating the “operating costs” of older and newer weapons—are difficult to calculate. In Cape Town, according to the customs figures in the colonial blue books from the middle of the nineteenth century, the price of gunpowder remained around one pound sterling for twenty pounds of powder, with variations according to quality and supply. From Cape Town, the powder would have had to be shipped varying distances, and would have arrived in varying conditions, making it difficult to estimate average costs on the frontier. In 1881, at the time when breechloaders would have been coming into wider use, the blue book estimates a value of 9,356 pounds for 2.9 million cartridges, or £0.003 per cartridge, but without saying what types of cartridges they were, or how much they would ultimately sell for. The costs of using various weapons is the subject of ongoing research. Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, *Blue Book for 1881* (Cape Town, 1881).

explanation must also take into consideration the ecological degeneration of southern Africa in the nineteenth century. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries people living in the interior carried large muzzle loaders in order to hunt game. Boer frontiersmen, Dutch farmers who migrated from the Cape northward in the early nineteenth century, gained a reputation as highly skilled marksmen. In 1898, one British hunter, George Nicholson, wrote that “a formidable amount of aggregate skill in the use of their weapons was a noticeable characteristic of the period I allude to (say, twenty years ago), and at the time of the Boer war with us [the First Anglo-Boer War, 1880–81] all the middle-aged men, and a good many of the youngsters, were as a rule, and as compared with trained soldiers, very efficient shots.” Nicholson added that as late as the 1890s some of the best shots still preferred flintlock muzzle loaders over modern breechloaders.²⁷

Even so, by the 1880s rural settlement was proceeding apace, and game animals were growing scarce. Young Boer men relied less on their guns to earn a living and therefore practiced less. The old percussion-lock muskets and rifles gradually lost their appeal. Though they remained less expensive to own and easier to repair, they also required more skill to use effectively than modern breechloaders. With a large-bore muzzle loader, every shot could be adjusted to the circumstances, but every shot had to count: guns had to be fired at close range, and it took so long to reload that a missed shot could result in the shooter being gored or trampled by the quarry. In contrast, a breechloader could be fired from far away and reloaded so quickly that accuracy was no longer a matter of life and death. As Nicholson noted:

With the virtual extermination of the larger kinds of game in the Transvaal, the Boers in a great measure ceased the pursuit of the scattered remnants of the survivors, and soon became but little interested in keeping up their efficiency as riflemen.

As a matter of fact, since the general introduction of long-range, breech-loading weapons, their shooting powers have steadily deteriorated, and from having been as a rule fairly good rough performers, the younger members of this generation have ceased to take any interest in field sports, and as regards rifle shooting are mere duffers. . . .

The extreme ease with which breech-loading rifles can be loaded, and the long range of these weapons, contributed largely to the deterioration of their original skill by inducing habits of carelessness as to distances, and a preference for pumping a stream of lead into the “brown” [game animals] without much regard to aim.²⁸

27. George Nicholson, *Fifty Years in South Africa: Being Some Reflections and Recollections of a Veteran Pioneer* (London, 1898), 238–39, 241.

28. *Ibid.*, 240–41.

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At the beginning of the nineteenth century Burchell and others had looked forward to the demise of game animals and the rise of settlement. Over the course of the century settlers had indeed killed off the game; scarcity in turn ultimately reduced their opportunity to practice their marksmanship, and their skills consequently diminished. In the 1890s the Boers of the Transvaal had to be encouraged to practice shooting by no less an authority than Paul Kruger, the president of the South African Republic and the archetypal Boer frontiersman. Shooting targets did not require the same level of skill as shooting animals, but it was better than nothing. As the Transvaal government prepared for war in the mid-1890s, Kruger learned something else about the Boer marksmen. Of the 24,238 men eligible to be called up for militia service, 9,996 did not own a rifle. Those who did tended to own Martini-Henrys, which were inferior to the British army's new magazine rifles, the Lee-Netford and the Lee-Enfield. The revived Boer reputation for marksmanship during the war of 1899–1902 was due in good part to Kruger's wise decision, shortly before the war, to buy thirty-seven thousand Mauser rifles, which were superior to the British weapons.²⁹

It is difficult to demonstrate the extent to which people in the past were skilled or unskilled. It does appear that Boer shooting skills had been diminishing in the late nineteenth century, as many settlers turned from hunting to farming and wage labor. This is not a view commonly held by British soldiers during the Boer War, whose rifles were outclassed by the Boers' Mausers, but it is warranted, to a degree, by the widely observed disappearance of game in South Africa. As we shall see, there was some support for Nicholson's claims among the English-speaking settlers of the Eastern Cape in the 1870s, many of whom worried that they, too, were insufficiently skilled with weapons. Their claims were ideologically charged and closely related to their efforts to dispossess and disenfranchise Africans.

Guns, Race, and Imperialism

By the 1870s, pseudoscientific racism had taken hold among European policymakers, who increasingly believed that it would be difficult to transfer technical skills to colonial subjects. Colonial rulers agreed that transfers of skills would not be warranted, though the depiction of Africans and Asians as unskilled was a central element of imperialist ideology. No less than breechloaders, quinine, and steamships, ideas about technology were central to the New Imperialism.³⁰ As European empires expanded, techni-

29. H. A. Bryden, *With Gun and Camera in Southern Africa* (London, 1893), 197. Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (New York, 1979), 35.

30. Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989); Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Sci-*

cal knowledge and practices circulated in complex ways; they were not simply transferred from the European core to the colonial periphery, as the development of local firearms in southern Africa makes clear. People living in the colonies made end-user modifications to both imperialist technologies and imperialist ideologies.³¹

It was precisely in the 1870s—the Scramble for Africa—that Africans became more deeply enmeshed in southern Africa’s emerging capitalist economy, frequently using their wages to buy guns. African gun ownership concerned both British and Boer settlers, who saw firearms not only as tools of civilian life on the frontier but also as instruments of political power. It also concerned British and Boer officials, who incorporated disarmament into their plans to despoil Africans of their land. While developing plans to disarm, dispossess, and disenfranchise Africans, British settler-politicians argued that whites should take care to maintain their skills with arms—not to denude the environment of animals but to defend against attacks by dangerous Africans.

Disarmament was closely related to the efforts of Lord Carnarvon, secretary of state for the colonies under Disraeli, to combine the various British colonies, Boer republics, and African chiefdoms of southern Africa (fig. 3) into one unified state, in which Africans would be treated as second-class citizens under a uniform native policy. In order to build this regime, politicians in London and Cape Town created and managed a discourse about the threats posed by Africans skilled in the use of firearms that justified more extensive intervention.³² Ideological descriptions of African skills played an important role in this discourse.

ence, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World (New Haven, Conn., 2000); Daniel Headrick, *Tools of Empire* (n. 11 above) and *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850–1940* (Oxford, 1988).

31. Some representative works on science, technology, and imperialism that take local knowledge into account are David Arnold, *Science, Technology, and Medicine in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 2000); Saul Dubow, ed., *Science and Society in Southern Africa* (Manchester, 2000); James Fairhead et al., *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic* (Cambridge, 1996); Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism* (Cambridge, 1995); Paul G. Richards, *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution: Ecology and Food Production in West Africa* (London, 1985); William Storey, *Science and Power in Colonial Mauritius* (Rochester, N.Y., 1997); Jan Todd, *Colonial Technology: Science and the Transfer of Innovation to Australia* (Cambridge, 1995).

32. Ulrich Beck has written that debates about regulating technological risk became increasingly important to politics when European and North American societies made the transition to industrialization. Risk could no longer be attributed to events beyond the control of people, but had to be ascribed to human technological choices. See *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London, 1992), 183. Other scholars who write about technology and public policy, particularly Sheila Jasanoff, have argued that politicians, scientists, and regulators have manipulated discourses about technological risk in culturally specific ways to create new kinds of order. New technologies, whether computers

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FIG. 3 Southern Africa in the 1870s. (Map by author and Oertel Design.)

To understand colonial gun control, it is important to recall that the colonies of southern Africa had different native policies. There were two independent Boer republics across the Orange River from the Cape Colony, the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (also known as the Transvaal). These restricted citizenship to European men and deprived Africans of all civic rights, including any right to possess weapons. To the east, in the British colony of Natal, guns had to be registered with British magistrates who supervised African chiefs. (African chiefdoms remained substantially intact so that chiefs might administer customary law under the supervision of the colony's lieutenant governor.) Chiefs retained a degree of autonomy in certain other regions along the Cape Colony's borders, such as the Transkei, Lesotho, and Griqualand East, while the Mpondo remained independent.

or breechloading rifles, help to throw into question older modes of sovereignty and authority. Rulers who reformulate technology policies must often reformulate other aspects of governance, too. See Sheila Jasanoff, *The Fifth Branch: Science Advisers as Policy-makers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Ronald Brickman, Sheila Jasanoff, and Thomas Ilgen, *Controlling Chemicals: The Politics of Regulation in Europe and the United States* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985); Brian Wynne, "Public Understanding of Science," in *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, ed. Sheila Jasanoff et al. (London, 1995), 361–88.

The Cape Colony, which the British had taken from the Dutch during the Napoleonic Wars, had a different set of regulations and practices. According to the 50th Ordinance of 1828, all Cape citizens were equal before the law. Any male citizen could vote, provided he possessed a certain amount of property. Guns had been subject to a variety of sporadically enforced regulations since the seventeenth century. In the 1870s, permits to purchase firearms could be issued by unsalaried justices of the peace as well as by salaried resident magistrates. Rules for issuing permits were spelled out in the colony's Circular No. 4 of 1874, which instructed resident magistrates to issue gun permits only to Africans who were "fit" to possess guns without defining how, exactly, they were to determine fitness. Justices of the peace received no such instructions, and many settlers felt that they were too liberal in issuing permits.³³ Permissive policies were defended by prominent liberals. The Cape Colony's secretary for native affairs, Charles Brownlee, observed that Africans wanted to know "why if they are really British subjects we should be so anxious that they should not possess guns."³⁴

The antiliberal architects of confederation were gaining the upper hand by the mid-1870s. They argued that the liberal native policies of the Cape had to be brought in line with the restrictive policies of Natal and the Boer republics. Depriving Africans of full citizenship would make the Boers and the Natal settlers comfortable with confederation. It would also simplify labor relations in an emerging capitalist economy in which European settlers hoped to turn Africans into miners and farmhands.³⁵ In 1876 the British settlers of the Eastern Cape began to protest what they considered irregularities in the regulation of African gun ownership. The debates that ensued acquired a broad significance for South African politics, and their prominence, in parliament and in newspapers, accented the importance of skills in the use of firearms and highlighted the everyday practice of carrying weapons.

In the mid-1870s, discussions about loyalty, guns, and citizenship took place in the context of settlers' fear of Africans. In the winter of 1876, settlers from the eastern frontier districts persuaded the Cape Parliament to form a Colonial Defence Commission to investigate the colony's preparedness against attack. The commission, which was sanctioned by Governor Sir Henry Barkly on 7 August 1876, dwelt extensively upon the spread of

33. Secretary for Native Affairs (Brownlee) to Resident Magistrate (RM) Cradock (Chalmers), 4 October 1876, *Cape Parliamentary Papers* (CPP) [A. 23] 1877, 23–24.

34. Brownlee to Chalmers, 8 November 1876, CPP [A. 23] 1877, 27–28.

35. Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore, "The Imperial Factor in South Africa in the Nineteenth Century: A Reassessment," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 3, no. 1 (1974): 105–39. Norman Etherington, "Labour Supply and the Genesis of South African Confederation in the 1870s," *Journal of African History* 20, no. 2 (1979): 235–53. Richard Cope, "C. W. de Kiewiet, the Imperial Factor, and South African 'Native' Policy," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 15, no. 3 (1989): 486–505.

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guns among Africans and the reorganization of settler militias. Its chair was a rising star in colonial politics, John Gordon Sprigg, a member of parliament from the Eastern Cape. Sprigg and his fellow commissioners held public hearings in Eastern Cape towns, where they considered evidence, mainly from settlers, about whether or not “loyal” Africans such as the Mfengu were loyal enough to be entrusted with arms and enrolled in the colonial “burgher force,” or militia. They also considered the militia’s potential enemies, especially the Xhosa, and whether or not they ought to be subject to more stringent gun control. Most witnesses opposed the arming of Africans.³⁶ Witnesses and commissioners linked gun ownership to broader policy debates about citizenship that had been going on for some time in the Cape Colony, and that were intensifying during the 1870s. Did all residents of the Cape have equal rights and obligations as citizens? Should all able-bodied citizens be entrusted with arms and obligated to serve in the militia? Such questions had long been subjects for discussion in the Cape Colony, but the 1870s saw at least one interesting change: the settlers and officials involved in the commission’s hearings debated whether or not Africans could shoot well.

This new turn seems ironic. The most racist imperialists, who doubted that Africans were likely candidates for “civilization,” argued that they had nevertheless become skilled and dangerous marksmen, while the liberals who encouraged their “civilization” and favored free trade in guns deprecated African marksmanship. The beliefs of liberal merchants were most famously assessed by J. A. Froude, Carnarvon’s emissary to South Africa. Froude wrote to Carnarvon: “The Cape merchants—themselves at a safe distance—refuse to lose the opportunity of a profitable trade, and shelter themselves behind a pretence that the natives are less dangerous when armed with guns than with assegais [spears], an opinion in which soldiers, who will have to deal practically with them if the danger becomes real, are not inclined to agree.”³⁷ One regular officer of the British army, Lieutenant Colonel Crossman of the Royal Engineers, agreed with Froude. In a confidential report to Carnarvon on diamond miners in Kimberley, he argued that only long-serving Africans ought to be permitted to purchase guns. “For my own part,” he continued, “I would not allow guns to be sold to the natives at all. They do not purchase them for hunting but for purposes of war. They are not satisfied with the common exported article, but endeavour to obtain the best rifles they can purchase, saying ‘that as the red [British] soldier uses good rifles they also must have them.’ Many of them

36. *Colonial Defence Commission*, CPP [G.1] 1877, Minutes of Evidence, Kingwilliamstown, 14 and 22 September 1876, lines 171, 189–90; Queenstown, 29 September–3 October 1876, lines 2722, 3222–505; Fort Beaufort, 6–7 October 1876, lines 4004–5, 4451–52.

37. Froude to Carnarvon, 10 January 1876, No. 50 in *British Parliamentary Papers* (BPP) [C.-1399] 1876, 75–76.

become expert shots, and whatever civilians may say, a Kafir with a rifle is a far more dangerous opponent than a Kafir with a bundle of assegais.”³⁸

The antiliberals sought to keep Africans at arm’s length, to strip them of their land and turn them into compliant laborers. In general they scorned African capabilities. But antiliberal settlers and officials portrayed Africans as so skilled with firearms as to threaten the new political order. In southern Africa, antiliberals used descriptions of skill to help build a new kind of racially exclusive state. According to the report of the Colonial Defence Commission, skill did not indicate civilization as much as it signaled danger. Most of the settlers who testified before the commission stated that they feared an attack and that the Xhosa were skilled marksmen. When the commission asked one Frederick Martin whether the Xhosa were “more to be dreaded with a gun or with an assegai,” he responded: “A gun, decidedly, and they will become more accustomed to the gun every day. In those times [the wars of 1835 and 1846] they were very indifferent shots, and the guns were very inferior.” Now, he implied, the Xhosa were becoming more skilled and were using better weapons.³⁹ Other settlers tended to agree, as did some of the soldiers who were stationed in the Eastern Cape; in addition to Martin, fourteen settlers testified to that effect before the commission, while three disagreed.

For some it was not easy to admit that the Xhosa might be skilled. The commission asked one magistrate, John Hemming, if he thought the Xhosa were more dangerous with guns. He answered: “Of course they are more formidable with guns; but they are bad shots.”⁴⁰ Assessments of skill did not reflect logic so much as colonial ideology. The chair of the commission, Gordon Sprigg, had heard that some Africans owned Winchesters, the advanced multiple-shot, lever-action rifles used most famously in the western United States.⁴¹ He expressed surprise that Africans could use such weapons: “How would they manage for ammunition for guns of that sort!

38. “Report of Lieut.-Colonel Crossman, R.E., on the Affairs of Griqua-Land West,” June 1876, Public Record Office (PRO) CO 879/9 Confidential Print (Africa) No. 96. The word *kafir* is a derogatory term, which I quote, with some hesitation, in the interest of presenting an accurate rendition of racial ideology. In the early nineteenth century, the word was typically used to describe Africans who spoke the Nguni languages, especially Xhosa and Zulu. Later in the century it became a blanket derogatory term for all southern Africans of African descent.

39. *Colonial Defence Commission*, CPP [G.1] 1877, Minutes of Evidence, East London, 18 September 1876, lines 856–58.

40. *Colonial Defence Commission*, CPP [G.1] 1877, Minutes of Evidence, Queenstown, 30 September 1876, line 2977.

41. Lever-action Winchester rifles were used by some hunters in South Africa. They were also used by some troops of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Even so, they were not used as widely as the single-shot Martini-Henry, or the later Mauser. Felix V. Lategan, *Die Boer Se Roer: Die Groot Geweerboek van Suid-Afrika* (Cape Town, 1974), 56, 67–68, 118–19, 130, 164.

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They could not use pot-legs for them?"⁴² Others took an even more jaundiced view of Xhosa capabilities. One settler, A. N. Ella, stated: "The Kafir does not understand a gun," and added, somewhat contradictorily, that "The Kafirs understood the old flint-lock musket" and could do more damage with it than with the new guns. Yet he proposed stricter regulations on African gun ownership. The problem Ella saw was not that guns themselves would make Africans more dangerous, but that the "possessor of [a gun] gets thoughts into his head which might not otherwise get there." Africans did not buy guns with the idea of attacking Europeans, but "when a lot of men with guns get together they might get ideas of that nature into their heads."⁴³ A superficial analysis of these settlers' statements would dismiss them as deterministic. But if we accept the Comaroffs' claim that the everyday material practices of colonialism were associated with hotly contested changes in ontology and epistemology, they take on new significance. Ideas about the use of guns were instrumental in racial politics.

The commission's investigations did overturn one stereotype. Throughout the English-speaking world, settlers on the frontier were supposed to be heavily armed and skilled with weapons. Yet the testimony before the commission revealed that settlers in the Eastern Cape were lightly armed and inexperienced. In 1876, as fear of a Xhosa attack mounted, some settlers and soldiers fretted about whether the Europeans living in the Eastern Cape were well-enough trained in the use of firearms. E. B. Chalmers of the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police testified that few Eastern Cape settlers even owned guns.⁴⁴ Several other settlers also called attention to the state of affairs. According to two witnesses, fewer than half the settlers owned guns, although more knew how to use them, and more of the young men were learning.⁴⁵ According to another witness, "farmers and their sons" not only lacked arms, they had also lost the skill of riding while carrying a gun.⁴⁶ It took a great deal of time to manage a farm or work at a craft, and settlers frequently lacked the leisure to hunt or take target practice. Patrick Malone noted a similar pattern in colonial New England.⁴⁷ Yet Europeans thought of themselves as superior fighters, given proper training. As A. N. Ella, put it:

42. Stereotypically, Africans loaded their muskets with any scraps of iron, such as "pot-legs," that could be found, an adaptation to local conditions that was derided as backward. *Colonial Defence Commission*, CPP [G.1] 1877, Minutes of Evidence, Queenstown, 28 September 1876, line 2395.

43. *Colonial Defence Commission*, CPP [G.1] 1877, Minutes of Evidence, Queenstown, 2 October 1876, lines 3056, 3084, 3127.

44. *Colonial Defence Commission*, CPP [G.1] 1877, Minutes of Evidence, King William's Town, 16 September 1876, line 709.

45. *Colonial Defence Commission*, CPP [G.1] 1877, Minutes of Evidence, Fort Beaufort, 6 October 1876, line 4028; Grahamstown, 17 October 1876, lines 5807–9.

46. *Colonial Defence Commission*, CPP [G.1] 1877, Minutes of Evidence, Queenstown, 28 September 1876, lines 2303–4.

47. Malone (n. 3 above), 60.

“The European Colonist is perfectly at home on horseback, and with a breechloading rifle and trained shooting horse . . . nothing native in Africa can stand against him” provided he was “well led.”⁴⁸

In the view of the Eastern Cape settlers, one way to redress the imbalance between a decline in European skill and an increase in African skill was to impose new regulations. At first a majority of the Cape Parliament balked, but in August 1877 war broke out in the Eastern Cape between the Cape Colony and the Xhosa, which further prejudiced settler opinion against Africans. The new governor-general, Sir Bartle Frere, appointed Sprigg to the premiership. In the 1878 session of the Cape Parliament, Sprigg succeeded in steering through a set of bills that created an all-white militia. He also secured passage of the Peace Preservation Act, which provided for disarming parts of the population; the governor was empowered to proclaim certain districts subject to the act, and could then instruct magistrates to determine who should turn in their arms and who might keep them.

The act was not in itself discriminatory, but it was understood that Europeans in proclaimed districts would keep their arms and that Africans would turn theirs in. Those who were forced to surrender their weapons would be compensated. According to Sprigg, this measure was necessary “for getting arms out of the hands of disloyal natives. . . . It was the intention of the Government to disarm the Fingoes as well as the Kafirs, for this was absolutely necessary for the security of the black population themselves.” Saul Solomon, leader of the liberals, supported the measure, even though he “objected to regarding in a wholesale way all the coloured classes as disloyal.” The only member to object strenuously to the bill was Charles Fairbridge of Cape Town, who stated that “the Bill was very little better than a sham and a delusion . . . for years past we had allowed the sale of arms to go on unchecked, and now, in the midst of a war, when we had so many loyal allies among the coloured classes, it was proposed to deprive all the natives of their arms.” He thought that “such a policy would be attended with a great deal of difficulty, and most probably danger, also.”⁴⁹ Everyone knew that the new law was aimed at Africans alone. As one Wesleyan missionary wrote to the *Grahamstown Journal*: “Ashamed to acknowledge the principal of class legislation, our Government brings in a Bill, by the provisions of which no man is to have the right (the natural right I call it) of carrying arms, only as the magistrate or other Government officer of his district may grant him special permission—but this with the tacit understanding that no black man shall have it granted!” Africans thus deprived of their guns would resent being made a “nation of women,” and European citizens ought to worry, too, lest these laws be extended to them.⁵⁰

48. *Colonial Defence Commission*, CPP [G.1] 1877, Minutes of Evidence, Queens-town, 2 October 1876, line 302.

49. *Cape Argus*, 21 May 1878, 3.

50. Reprinted in *Cape Argus*, 11 June 1878, suppl.

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No European would be deprived of a gun under this legislation until 1899, when the Second Anglo-Boer war broke out, but many Africans were disarmed immediately. The governor proclaimed all Eastern Cape frontier districts subject to the act. In some areas disarmament provoked opposition, although to what extent is difficult to gauge. Aside from limited objections voiced in the Cape Parliament, a handful of articles and editorials in the *Cape Argus* newspaper, and several official memorials from the Mfengu of the Eastern Cape to the governor, little evidence survives concerning the Xhosa and Mfengu reaction to being disarmed. The *Cape Argus* noted that the *Blue Book on Native Affairs for 1878* was silent on the subject.⁵¹ Yet between August 1878 and March 1880, officials and soldiers in the Eastern Cape collected 10,860 guns and 15,764 assegais.⁵² Gun control in the Eastern Cape was touted as a success, though it was difficult, then as now, to know how many guns remained in circulation.

After disarming the Xhosa and the Mfengu, the Cape government attempted to disarm the Sotho. The Sotho occupied Basutoland, now known as Lesotho, a remote country lying in the mountains on the northeastern border of the Cape. In the 1860s the Cape Colony had acquired Basutoland as a dependency. By then many Sotho had already adopted Western dress and tools, bought with money they earned as commercial farmers. Many Sotho men had also migrated to work in the Kimberley diamond fields. As the Sotho adapted to capitalism and Western ways, they also began to graft related Western ideas, such as property rights, onto older ideologies about the authority of chiefs. When the Cape attempted to disarm them, few of the Sotho chiefs handed in their weapons.⁵³

The Sotho chiefs resisted the Peace Preservation Act more strenuously than others. The mountainous, easily defended terrain of Basutoland worked to their advantage, as did the 1878 Zulu defeat of the British army at Isandhlwana, which made the British public wary of imperialist adventures. They also received support from liberals in the Cape Colony and in Britain who believed in the “civilizing mission” of colonialism. Liberal activists helped the Sotho resist the imposition of gun control laws even though those laws were designed, in part, to diminish the level of violence in African societies.

The governor-general of the Cape Colony, Sir Bartle Frere, embodied the full range of colonial rhetoric. When liberals challenged the disarmament of Basutoland, Frere mocked liberal arguments that “a native tribe

51. *Blue Book on Native Affairs for 1878*, CPP [G. 33] 1879, 86, 91–92, 96. *Cape Argus*, 22 July 1879, 2.

52. Frere to Hicks Beach, 15 March 1880, Arms Returns, Encl. 4 in No. 13, BPP [C.2569] 1880, 24–26.

53. Sandra Burman, *Chiefdom Politics and Alien Law: Basutoland under Cape Rule, 1871–1884* (London, 1981). Elizabeth A. Eldredge, *A South African Kingdom: The Pursuit of Security in Nineteenth-Century Lesotho* (Cambridge, 1993).

armed with firearms [is] less formidable than one armed after their own fashion with assegais.” The Zulu War and a recent rebellion by a Sotho vassal, Moorosi, had amply demonstrated African marksmanship, Frere observed. Similar evidence was available from the recent war with the Xhosa, and from engagements with rebels along the border of Griqualand West. Frere agreed with the settlers, at least in his perception of the threat posed by African skill with firearms.⁵⁴

Frere then moved beyond local circumstances to make general arguments in favor of disarmament. “The general possession of firearms by natives,” he asserted, tended “to increase their martial pride and conceit in their prowess.” “In a vain uncivilised race the possession of a gun is apt to encourage the most pernicious amount of self conceit and belief in the invincibility of the owner. It is a direct incentive to insubordination and war.”⁵⁵ Frere’s argument resembles the Comaroffs’, that everyday artifacts are closely related to changes in epistemology and ontology, and especially to perceptions of power. The presence or absence of guns indicated that the world, and power, would be perceived in certain ways.

Frere believed that the lack of firearms in England was a sign of civilization. Disarmament did not tend to “emasculate or effeminate a race.” On the contrary: “The unarmed Englishman is not less manly than the Albanian or Epirot Candit, swaggering with his belt full of pistols and yataghans.” “To a man accustomed to the usages of civilised society, the question [of disarmament] requires little argument.” Violent crime was more likely in places where arms were habitually carried—in seaport towns, in Albania and Montenegro, in America and Australia. “It is self-evident that persons who do not carry arms professionally, or for purposes of sport, can have no legitimate use for them, or need of them, except for self-defence. In a well-ordered community where the police protects the unarmed, the carrying of arms is entirely superfluous.” Englishmen had come to believe that security was the concern of the state, not the individual. Orderly communities did not need individuals to carry guns. It was the duty of the state to protect people from criminals as well as from external enemies. The Sotho feared that if they were disarmed they would be attacked by the neighboring Boers of the Orange Free State. Frere rejoined: “This of course is an argument which cannot be admitted by any government really intending to protect the life and property of its subjects.”⁵⁶

Communities that were coming under British rule needed to be disarmed. That was the civilized way to diminish risk and increase security. Frere wrote that “a wise government cannot permit any portion of the population, whose attachment to the government is in the least doubtful, to

54. Frere to Hicks Beach, 15 March 1880, BPP [C.-2569] 1880, No. 13, 17–19.

55. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

56. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

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remain generally possessed of arms.” In the eighteenth century this had been government policy in Scotland. In the nineteenth century it had been policy in Ireland. In India during the Mutiny Lord Canning had disarmed sepoys suspected of disloyalty. It did not matter that the loyal and the disloyal were treated alike, because the government could not determine, at any given point, exactly who was who. General disarmament was the only practical policy. Even if it proved difficult to confiscate all weapons, if people got out of the habit of carrying guns in public disarmament would eventually be achieved. Based on this rendition of history, Frere proclaimed that the Peace Preservation Act would be enforced in Basutoland, effective 21 May 1880.⁵⁷

The Sotho responded in several different ways: a handful complied, some resisted, and the paramount chief, Letsie, on the advice of missionaries, continued to articulate resistance with loyalty, seeking lawful means of redress. Over the course of several years the Sotho obtained administrative separation from the Cape. Their territory came to be ruled by the chiefs under the direction of the Colonial Office in London. Despite the best efforts of Frere, Sprigg, and others, the Sotho gun war became part of the story of failed confederation in the 1870s and 1880s. Confederation would have to wait until the decade after the Anglo-Boer War.

The Construction of Skill

Debates over skill with weapons helped launch a new, openly discriminatory form of governance at the Cape. The racial politics of skill continued through the Boer War and into the twentieth century, when the Cape, Natal, the Orange Free State, and the South African Republic came together to form the Union of South Africa (1910). One of the hallmarks of segregation in the new nation was that skilled jobs were reserved for whites and unskilled jobs assigned to blacks. This was especially controversial in mines, where white miners sought to keep their skilled jobs even after many blacks had acquired the same skills.

Racial thinking about skill became so deeply embedded in South African political consciousness that even Nelson Mandela has admitted to it. In his autobiography, he describes an experience during a 1962 trip to visit newly independent African states:

We put down briefly in Khartoum, where we changed to an Ethiopian Airways flight to Addis. Here I experienced a rather strange sensation. As I was boarding the plane I saw that the pilot was black. I had never seen a black pilot before, and the instant I did I had to quell my panic. How could a black man fly an airplane?

57. Frere to Hicks Beach, 6 April 1880, BPP [C.-2569] 1880, No. 17, 43–45.

But a moment later I caught myself: I had fallen into the apartheid mind-set, thinking that flying was a white man's job. I sat back in my seat and chided myself for such thoughts.⁵⁸

An ideological construction of technological skill had entered into the thinking of the man who would do more than anyone else to deconstruct the apartheid regime. The pervasiveness of such ideological descriptions of skill present a challenge for historians, who must rely on witnesses from the past to describe skill's empirical characteristics.

Historians must narrate the history of real changes and continuities in skill while remaining sensitive to the ways in which descriptions of skill may be used to advance an agenda. New power relations that blend ideological, environmental, and technological practices may require historical analysis that draws on both empirical and discursive methods. The formation and elaboration of such representations may themselves constitute a story. That is certainly true of skills with firearms in nineteenth-century southern Africa, a story that cannot be understood apart from the story of the representations of those skills, representations that derived from the process of imperial expansion and closely related shifts in political culture.

No case is made here for a radical discourse analysis that insists that history is purely a text and would view the pursuit of any real understanding of skill as quixotic. Nor is a case made here for a radical positivism that holds that we can know how the past really was—in particular, what it was like for people to have a certain skill. Historians must recognize that when we connect ideology to material culture we must somehow mediate the differences between the ideological, the material, and the cultural. In this article, the story of local African skills proved inextricably linked to the history of colonial skill descriptions. When it comes to skill, the pairing of the material and the discursive proves inescapable.

58. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston, 1994), 254–55.