

JAMES READ: TOWARDS A REASSESSMENT

by

Christopher Saunders

It has of late been unfashionable for historians concerned to establish the present significance of the South African past to give much attention to missionaries other than from the point of view of "missionary imperialism", in which missionaries are seen as agents of conquest. To focus attention on the career of one individual missionary may suggest a return to the earliest school of mission historiography, one that still survives in South Africa, in which the lives of missionaries and the spread of mission activities receive purely descriptive, almost hagiographical, treatment. In fact, as Ranger has recently shown for Central Africa (1), there are all sorts of interesting questions that can be asked of Christian mission history, and it is hoped that this paper, though limited to the career of one missionary, may shed light on some of the wider questions thrown up by a consideration of the missionary role in South Africa.

James Read (1777-1852) is usually referred to in works on South African history in derogatory terms: as over-credulous, a crank, "the feeble successor of van der Kemp". William Macmillan described him as "indiscriminate and even rash" and said that he "had not the personal qualities or mental equipment of a leader". Sir George Cory, the historian of the 1820 settlers, called him "the most dangerous and wicked man on the frontier". Though much criticized, however, Read has never been given extended treatment. Cory's remark was made in passing, and the only "life" of Read is the brief sketch by Donovan Williams in the first volume of the Dictionary of South African Biography. Williams's comments suggest that he did not think Read's career important enough to warrant more detailed examination. He argued that Read's "efforts to protect the Hottentots and to raise their status were sustained by a strong government in the Cape Colony and by a propitious climate of opinion in Britain. To these factors, rather than to his limited ability, must be ascribed such success as he seems to have achieved". Williams concluded that: "Zachary Macaulay's estimate of him as a young man ('very ignorant and uninformed, but decent') is overdrawn, but significant." (2)

Read has been criticized by historians for the same reasons he was criticized in his lifetime, and perhaps no other person living in early nineteenth century South Africa was the target of more vituperation and abuse over so long a period of time. His "ill-timed zeal", wrote Macmillan, "made him the obvious target of outraged feelings ...". (3) His marriage in June 1803 to "a young Hottentot girl, the inventory of whose earthly possessions are two sheep-skins and a string of beads to ornament her body" (4), upset many whites, including many of Read's colleagues in the LMS in South Africa. Almost fifty years later he and his eldest son, who bore his name, were charged with having been responsible, through their "subversive" activities

in the Kat River Settlement, for inciting a portion of the Kat River settlers to rebel against the colony during the war of Mlanjeni. (5) Between 1803 and 1851 many of Read's activities and views stirred deep hostility against him. In South African history textbooks he is the man who brought Khoi complaints before the second ('Black') circuit in 1812, and it is said that the verdicts were "a vindication for the colonists" and that the white farmers were with good reason "filled with indignation". (6) His close association with John Philip and his evidence before the House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines in 1836 condemned him in the eyes both of most white colonists of the time and of those later historians who wrote from a "settler" point of view. Put simply, he seemed to commit the unforgiveable sin of always being on the side of the blacks.

But what of those who wrote within the LMS tradition and were sympathetic to efforts to "improve the lot of people of colour"? Those who were concerned with the early years of Bethelsdorp focussed their attention on the brilliant, eccentric van der Kemp. (7) Some would seem to have been embarrassed by Read's confession in 1816 that he might be the father of a child born to a daughter of one of the elders at Bethelsdorp. (8) Macmillan, the greatest historian to have written on South African mission history, sought in his two famous books to vindicate and to establish the importance of Philip. His books themselves and his notes on the Philip papers, destroyed in the Witwatersrand University fire in 1931, suggest that he argued his case for Philip at the expense of Read, minimizing his importance both as an influence on Philip and as an independent force. This impression is supported by the voluminous material on Rand in the LMS archives and by the ninety-odd letters from Read to the Rev. James Kitchingman that have survived. (9) This evidence enables something new to be said about Read's activities and ideas.

In the early years of Bethelsdorp, the site of which Read helped select in 1802, the young missionary did not live entirely in the shadow of the much older and more intellectual figure of van der Kemp. It was Read who wrote the famous letters in 1808 and 1811 which publicized the ill-treatment of Khoi by white farmers and officials, prompted Caledon to institute circuit courts, and brought about the most famous of the confrontations between Bethelsdorp and the government of the Cape. It was the very bringing of accusations against them which made the second circuit "black" for white farmers, not the fact that many were found innocent, in some cases because the complaints Read laid before the court related to the period before 1806 and were therefore not considered. Reyburn's careful reading of the evidence led him to conclude that the missionaries, and Read was the chief figure involved, "came out of the ordeal with reasonable credit". (10) The conditions under which the Khoi lived had been further publicized, and that was one of Read's major concerns.

After van der Kemp's death in December 1811, Read became Superintendent in his place. Macmillan wrongly believed that Read never took effective charge of that office. He did not have Philip's dynamism or breadth of vision, but he was no incompetent. John Campbell, whom he accompanied on an extensive tour through South Africa in 1813, thought him "a worthy, amiable and suitable man for his post". (11) In August 1814 he chaired the first meeting of LMS missionaries in South Africa at Graaff-Reinet and asked that he be allowed to give up his duties at Bethelsdorp so that he might give full attention to the superintendency. (12) This was not approved and, not surprisingly, Read found it impossible to be both missionary and Superintendent. Living at Bethelsdorp, he could not prevent George Thom, who had come out from England with Campbell, usurping his authority. It was Read, however, who negotiated with the government for permission to restart the Xhosa mission. When permission was granted, he escorted Joseph Williams across the colonial border to meet Ngqika in early 1816 and helped him select a site for the mission on the banks of the Kat River. The adultery scandal which broke on his return to Bethelsdorp deeply affected his career, but his suspension as a missionary by the meeting of LMS missionaries which Thom called in Cape Town in August 1817 had no practical effect. Read had left Bethelsdorp in mid-1816 for the north. Having revived the Xhosa mission, he wished to do the same for the Tswana, Griqua and San missions in Transorangia, and he put much energy into

his efforts to do this. They were not always rewarded - nothing came of his plans to create a chain of mission stations between Bethelsdorp and Griquatown, for example - but his arrival at Dithakong at the end of 1816 marks the effective beginning of the Tswana mission. He persuaded Mothibi in 1817 to move his capital nearer the Kuruman and did pioneer work in the use of "native agency", having brought with him from Bethelsdorp some converts to spread the Word among the Tswana. By the time he left he wielded considerable influence, something which Moffat, his successor, was never honest enough to concede.

Read's work in the north was cut short in early 1820. Philip and Campbell, who constituted the deputation sent out to South Africa in 1818 by the Directors in London, insisted that he return to Bethelsdorp and make a public profession of his repentance for his sin. At first, the deputation was very critical. Philip, in particular, blamed him for the state of disarray in which it found the South African missions. But after interviewing Read at Dithakong in March 1820, Campbell told Philip that "it was impossible not to feel with him, and for him ..." (13), and he realized that much of the hostility directed at Read had nothing to do with his "fall" but was the hostility of whites who disliked his commitment to social equality and that of missionary colleagues who did not approve of his style of missionary work. Philip took longer than Campbell to realize this and to understand Read. Back at Bethelsdorp, Read once again took up complaints of Khoi there and at Theopolis against white farmers and officials. When Donkin, the Acting Governor, held an enquiry which declared the charges false, Philip doubted Read's veracity, complained to the Directors in London of his imprudence, and spoke of transferring him. (14) But then Philip went to Bethelsdorp himself and made his famous "discovery" in September 1821 that Read had been right all along and that the charges were fully justified. Slowly Philip grew to respect Read, and Read in turn came to admire Philip for his campaign to change the legal status of "people of colour". Nominally a mere artisan, Read in practice participated fully in mission work at Bethelsdorp in the 1820s. He often preached at Theopolis and initiated various projects, including the opening of an out-station of Bethelsdorp at Port Elizabeth in 1825. (15) When he came to write his Researches, Philip called Read Kitchingman's "able coadjutor" (16), and readily gave his consent when he returned from England in 1829 and found that those who had moved from Bethelsdorp and Theopolis to the newly created Kat River Settlement wished Read to be their missionary there.

From June 1830 Read occupied a central position on the frontier as LMS missionary in the Kat River Settlement. The Settlement itself was an important experiment in social engineering: Stockenström, its creator, and Read and Philip, who approved of its creation, envisaged that Khoi and other "people of colour" settled there would become a prosperous community engaging in cash-crop production. Philip hoped that, as at Philippolis on the Cape's northern border, an educated Christian "Coloured" class would emerge, able eventually to hold its own in the wider Cape society. As it turned out, the Settlement became a sort of crucible, in which people from different backgrounds, linked to many different communities, lived together, between the settled "white" areas of the colony to the west and the lands of the Xhosa and Thembu to the east. An "interpreter" in Monica Wilson's use of the word (17), Read discussed with various Xhosa chiefs Philip's ideas on frontier relations in mid-1834 and then in September took Philip himself to meet the chiefs. After his return to the Settlement from England in April 1838, Read remained in close touch with Philip, advising him on frontier matters. From 1839 much of his time was spent out of the Settlement in the lands to the north-east, where the Philipton mission embarked on extensive work among the Thembu along the Black and White Kei and the San and others who congregated at the "Bushman station" founded north of the White Kei. In 1842 Read and Philip travelled through this area, on a grand tour which embraced Lesotho and the entire Transorangia region. Knowing he had the Superintendent's ear, and wishing to destroy his influence, some of his colleagues on the frontier worked actively to discredit him after his return to the Kat River Settlement in 1842. (18) Philip was at first hesitant in coming to his defence, for those who attacked Read wished to replace the superintendency with a system of district committees. When the attempt to discredit Read was taken to London, however, Philip told the Directors that any

weakening of the Reads' influence would have "a baneful effect on caffreland", for they "are more popular with the natives of the country than those who oppose them". In a later letter he added: "The Reads form the only party among our missionaries in whom the chiefs have confidence ..." (19)

Such evidence suggests that Read was a more important figure than Macmillan allows. How important depends in part on one's assessment of the importance of Philip and the LMS in general. Despite Galbraith's Reluctant Empire, which showed that Macmillan had overstated his case and exaggerated Philip's influence in the making of policy in London and Cape Town, that he was influential in the making of policy cannot be denied. More interesting and controversial is the question of his influence, and that of the missionaries, on the people themselves. Perhaps in part because of its polemical style, Nosipho Majeke's book on this theme has until recently received little attention. (20) Majeke accepts Macmillan's assessment of Philip's importance, but sees that importance in terms of his role as an agent of imperialism and the spread of capitalism in South Africa. Though in places he seems ready to concede that the development of capitalism was "progressive", Majeke is essentially critical of Philip's role in furthering white conquest and dispossession. To understand the impact of the LMS, however, one must draw a distinction for purposes of analysis between its work among the Khoi/Coloureds and among the African societies of the Cape eastern frontier. Just because the whole process by which the Khoi became an agricultural proletariat was so far advanced by the 1820s, Philip and Read had to intervene actively to create communities which would be economically viable as well as literate and Christian. This was not only a constructive aim; in its context it was a revolutionary one, in the sense that what was to be created was something new. (21) Philip, in particular, seems to have believed that rapid social change, of the kind which industrialization was bringing about in England, was possible at the Cape. The difficulties involved in trying to stop the Khoi becoming entirely an agricultural proletariat were underestimated, as was the extent to which white colonists would intervene to resist such an attempt if it seemed to be achieving success. Before the mid-century African societies, by contrast, were on the whole still able to offer substantial resistance to the various influences that would eventually undermine them. The most detailed study of mission work among Africans on the Cape eastern frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century is that by Donovan Williams, who concluded that the missionaries failed, for conversions were few and limited to "outcasts" from African society. (22) Those who follow Majeke go on to argue that the realization of their failure led the missionaries to decide that African societies should be undermined by force so that the work of conversion might proceed more rapidly. (23) Making this argument for Bechuanaland, Dachs claimed that Mackenzie and other missionaries in that area concluded that to "fulfil the tasks they had set themselves they needed to overthrow the [Tswana] order". For this, "The power to which the missionaries looked was the secular force of British imperialism". (24) My reading of the evidence does not persuade me that this argument holds either for Bechuanaland or for the Cape eastern frontier. In the aftermath of the 1834-5 war, Philip was prepared to accept the extension of British rule to the Kei, but to him, as to Mackenzie, "British protection" meant the protection of Africans in their lands, and the exclusion of land-hungry whites, whose intrusion the missionaries feared, would break up African society much more rapidly than "British protection". At a more subtle level, it may of course be argued that the missionaries, though not conscious agents of conquest, were in fact such agents, for the changes they introduced made conflict inevitable. Though Read believed he was working for peace on the frontier, was he not in fact furthering the process of white conquest and dispossession?

Majeke repeats the charge made by the Wesleyan missionary Boyce in the 1830s that Read conspired with Stockenstrom to oust Maqoma's Xhosa from their lands on the upper Kat so that this territory could be given to Khoi. (25) It is true that Stockenstrom was considering planting Khoi settlers in the "ceded territory" before Maqoma's raid on the neighbouring Thembu in January 1829, which was the reason given for his expulsion. Read, however, did not approve of that expulsion and co-operated with Stockenstrom in the settlement of the Khoi on his lands only because he believed

that the alternative was white settlement in that part of the "ceded territory". (26) Maqoma and Read often met in the early 1830s and were on close and friendly terms. After war broke out at the end of 1834, Read's friendship with Maqoma was cited as evidence to support the charge that he had incited the Xhosa to war. The "colonial party" in Grahamstown accused him of "intriguing" with the Xhosa and encouraging anti-colonial sentiment among the Kat River Khoi so that they would support the enemy. (27) D'Urban, having fallen under this influence, refused to allow Read to live in the Settlement and the embargo on his return there sent Read to England to persuade the British Government to overrule it. No serious examination of the charges made against him would sustain them. In the War of the Axe, he was allowed to remain in the Settlement, where he performed some semi-military duties at Eland's Post. They caused him much heart-searching, for he deplored the war, the blame for which he placed squarely on the colonial authorities, but he wished to show that he and his people were loyal, and believed that their demonstration of this would help preserve the Settlement. (28) He was not to know in advance that his efforts would be in vain, that he and the Kat River settlers would continue to be accused of disloyalty, and that the criticism that came from those who wished to see the Settlement destroyed would increase in violence, not cease. (29)

While it is difficult to view Read as an "agent in conquest", Majeke was of course right to stress that all of the missionaries brought with them to the frontier certain ideas about economic and social relations, which naturally helped dictate the sort of changes they sought to bring about in frontier society. In a letter to Stockenström in June 1829, in which he expressed his support for the grant of land to Khoi in the Kat River basin, Read spoke of the "Hottentots" having "tasted the sweets of civilisation" and approved of the new Settlement because "their wants will increase and this will give a stimulus to industry". (30) But such "bourgeois" considerations weighed less with Read than with Philip and his missionary colleagues, and Read almost alone, it may be suggested, carried the essence of the van der Kemp tradition into the 1850s. He never abandoned his commitment to social equality, which was rooted in his marriage and his early association with van der Kemp. On one occasion he was led to tell Kitchingman that he was "not made to act with these white men", for he was, he said, "too much of a Hottentot". (31) In his own life, he scorned material comforts, and often remarked how much pleasure he could derive from being able to continue his missionary work from one of the smoky mud huts of the people living north of the Settlement. His life shows the danger of generalizing about "the missionaries" on the Cape eastern frontier: no other white missionary in that area, after van der Kemp, identified himself as closely with those among whom he worked, or belonged less clearly to one side of the border. There were, especially in the early part of the century, other whites who became "trans-frontier men", but as time passed Read, as one of them, fell increasingly out of the LMS mainstream, and his colleagues either tolerated what they regarded as his "idiosyncracies" or, when they thought them dangerous, tried to remove him from his post. As a white missionary who both believed in social equality and practised it in his day-to-day life, he was, in the context of his time and place, a radical, and is therefore a figure no future historian of radicalism in South Africa should ignore. For this, as for his role in some of the most important developments on the South African frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century, his career seems worthy of reassessment.

Notes

- (1) T. Ranger and J. Weller, eds., Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa (London, 1975), esp. pp. 85-95. The Anglican rebel priest Arthur Cripps, on whom Murray Steele has a chapter in the Ranger and Weller book, was a sort of latter-day Read.
- (2) The Cambridge History of the British Empire, VIII (Cambridge, 1936), p. 285; W. M. Macmillan, The Cape Colour Question (London, 1927), p. 92; G. E. Cory, The Rise of South Africa, 5 vols. (London, 1910-30; reprinted Cape Town, 1965), III, p. 294; Dictionary of South African Biography, I (Pretoria, 1968), p. 668.
- (3) W. M. Macmillan, The Road to Self-Rule (London, 1959), p. 112.
- (4) W. M. Freund, "The Career of Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp and his role in the history of South Africa", offprint from Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis (?1973), p. 381.
- (5) Perhaps the fullest collection of criticism of the Reads is in J. Green, The Kat River Settlement in 1851 (Grahamstown, 1853).
- (6) A. N. Boyce, Europe and South Africa (Cape Town, n.d.), p. 49.
- (7) e.g. A. D. Martin, Doctor Vanderkemp (London, n.d.).
- (8) Read's "fall" is mentioned briefly in The Cape Colour Question, p. 93, and Jane Sales provides a little more detail in Mission Stations and the Coloured Communities of the Eastern Cape 1800-1852 (Cape Town, 1975), p. 57.
- (9) Macmillan's notes are in Rhodes House Library, Oxford, the LMS archives in the SOAS Library, London, the Kitchingman Papers in the Little Brenchurst Library, Johannesburg. A selection from the Kitchingman Papers, edited by Dr B. A. le Cordeur and myself, is to be published in 1976.
- (10) H. A. Reyburn, "Studies in Cape Frontier History", The Critic, III (1834-5), p. 55. Cf. G. M. Theal, ed., Records of the Cape Colony, 36 vols (London, 1899-1905), IX, pp. 54-128.
- (11) Campbell to Burder, 5 May 1813, Council for World Mission Archives, London Missionary Society papers, South Africa incoming (hereafter LMS), 5/2/C.
- (12) IMS 5/2/F; P. H. Kapp, "Dr John Philip se Koms na Suid-Afrika en sy Werksaamhede to 1828", unpubl. MA, Stellenbosch, 1966, p. 55.
- (13) Campbell to Philip, 30 March 1820, IMS 8/2/A.
- (14) Macmillan, Cape Colour Question, p. 136; Notes on the Philip Papers, Rhodes House Library, f. 167; Report of the Select Committee on Aborigines, I, q. 5503.
- (15) e.g. George Barker's diary (Cory Library, MS 14,258), entries for 5 December 1824, 10-12 June 1825, 13 April 1828; Cape Archives, Acc. 768 (Bethelsdorp Papers), folder 12.
- (16) John Philip, Researches in South Africa, 2 vols. (London, 1828), I, 203.
- (17) Monica Wilson, The Interpreters (Dugmore lecture, Grahamstown, 1972).
- (18) For details see esp. IMS 20/2/D.
- (19) Philip to Tidman, 10 October 1844, LMS 20/3/A; Philip to Directors, 11 March 1845, LMS 21/2/B.
- (20) Nosipho Majeke, The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest (Johannesburg, n.d., ?1952).
- (21) The assertion that the missionaries sought to bring about changes "in a manner as acceptable to, and least destructive and dangerous to, the established social order" (A. Atmore and S. Marks, "The Imperial Factor in South Africa in the Nineteenth Century: Towards a Reassessment", Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, III, 1 [October 1974], p. 117) would seem open to question.

- (22) D. Williams, "The Missionaries on the Eastern Frontier of the Cape Colony, 1799-1853", PhD thesis, Witwatersrand University, n.d. (?1959).
- (23) e.g. M. Kaplan, "Aspects concerning British administration on the Cape Eastern Frontier with special reference to the origins of the war of 1846", Honours essay, University of Cape Town, 1975, ch. 2.
- (24) Anthony J. Dachs, "Missionary Imperialism - the Case of Bechuanaland", Journal of African History, XIII, 4 (1972), p. 469.
- (25) Majeke, Role of Missionaries, p. 23.
- (26) Cape Archives, LG 5; Read to Ellis, 3 July 1834, LMS 14/1/C.
- (27) For the charges against Read, see, e.g., Green's work cited in note 5 above.
- (28) See esp. Read Senior to Kitchingman, 30 December 1846, Kitchingman Papers 3349/2/43.
- (29) Cf. Tony Kirk's excellent article, "Progress and Decline in the Kat River Settlement, 1829-1854", Journal of African History, XIV, 3 (1973).
- (30) Read to Stockenstrom, 16 June 1829, Cape Archives, LG 5.
- (31) Read Senior to Kitchingman, 13 May 1844, Kitchingman Papers 3349/2/31.