What future for the past in the new South Africa?

David Renton

Dave Renton reflects on what the story of Nongqawuse tells us about modern South African dilemmas.

How should we remember a past which is unpleasant to us? In South Africa, this question is posed by the survival of apartheid-era buildings and monuments. Should they remain intact, or should they be removed? Should the government encourage new memorials to take their place, and if so which events should be commemorated? The history of different regions reveals some of the dilemmas involved. Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape was briefly the second city of the British-ruled Cape province. It was built by English settlers who first arrived in 1820. Promised their own farms by the Imperial British government, the settlers were left to fend for themselves on the arid and inhospitable lands of the region. Within five years, most had returned to the relative comfort of the town. The land was left and turned to weeds and dust, but the city prospered. Traders produced iron goods, wagons and clothes. Museums sprang up, a university, a daily paper, and all the several trappings of civilised life in her majesty's colonies.

Over one hundred and fifty years later, Grahamstown's monuments still reflect the original history of the settlement. The town's camera obscura, a
mirror which displays the outside world reflected backwards and upside-down onto a clear white table to form a living panorama of the city, is housed above a typical Grahamstown museum. Towering Victorian patriarchs in top hats address young children, who wear flowery skirts, caps and waistcoats. Beside the models are books authored by Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray, and old hoardings advertising Coleman's mustard. The images are already fading and dust has begun to settle on the walls. The effect is sobering. For all the undoubted achievements of the town's industrious founders, it is hard to see why they should be remembered now. The patriarchs are dead and their society has crumbled. You might have thought that South Africa could find a new history to complement the transition to democracy and the birth of the new rainbow society, but this new story of the past has yet to be written or agreed.

Elsewhere the images of white Grahamstown's past are less benign. In the place of stuffy patriarchs, you find symbols of the country's history of racial exclusion. On the walls of the town's cathedral, it is still possible to trace the marks where the plaques used to hang, indicating which seats were reserved by race. The town guardians have only recently taken down the clips in the church walls, where slaves could be held chained as their masters prayed for redemption. These are not merely the symbols of past inequality. Unemployment in black Grahamstown East stands even now at over 70 per cent. In the townships, basic facilities including water and electricity are absent. Less than half the city's black population registered to vote in the recent general election. Black faces beg today in the town centre, while affluent white citizens walk past.

The new South Africa is to be built on the basis of 'reconciliation'. But does this mean that the awkward details of the past should be forgotten? Is the only hope a future in which all traces of South Africa's history are ignored? This is one message of William Morris's famous Utopian novel News from Nowhere, in which the hero travels forward in time to discover a Utopian future, a Britain freed from the miseries of class and exploitation. In discussion with the narrator, Clara, a happy child of this future socialist society, expresses her disdain for the history books of the past, 'they were well enough for times when intelligent people had but little else in which they could take pleasure, and when they must supplement the sordid miseries of their own lives with imaginations of the
lives of other people.¹ For William Morris, one sign of a healthy society would be precisely its lack of interest in history. The houses of Parliament would be used to store manure, while the National Gallery would make little sense when art was equally accessible to all. Once the problems of poverty and oppression were resolved, and mankind had moved on, no-one would need to look back again at the awful events of the past.

In contrast to William Morris, most young South Africans believe that a new history is possible, one which remembers both victories and defeats; but they also recognise that the defeats were shaming and unworthy of pride. I asked Margot, a young black student at Grahamstown's Rhodes University how South Africa constructs its past. 'People in this country don't seem to care about the past, they aren't too bothered by culture. Everything gets divided up. People don't want to know about the history of other groups.' I asked Dave, an older student who had lived in Europe and was more optimistic. 'We've been force-fed a one-sided view of culture for too long. History in this country didn't begin in 1652 or 1820. We've had to review the history books since the change in government. Now we've got to understand the past from both perspectives.' Both wondered if an honest account could be written, yet both also desired to see a history in which all South Africans could share.

If there is one story which sums up the difficulties in remembering the past of black South Africa, it is the story of the prophetess, Nongqawuse. In Peter Worsley's account, Nongqawuse is the Xhosa equivalent of the millenarian religious leaders of early twentieth century Polynesia, the Tuka in Fiji; or of the champions of the so-called Vailala Madness in Papua New Guinea; each of these movements is described by Worsley in his history of millenarianism, The Trumpet Shall Sound. In each of these cases, ordinary people rose up against imperial rule, and used religion to justify their revolt. Their faith in miraculous deliverance led the oppressed to risk everything, sometimes with catastrophic results.² Nongqawuse can also be seen as the Xhosa equivalent of the adolescent heroines of European legend, such as Joan of Arc, whose visions helped to liberate France from British rule, or Sophocles's Antigone, who risked her life to give a proper burial to her brother Polyneices. Like Joan of Arc, Nongqawuse

became the champion of an entire people; her visions helped to decide the outcome of the wars between the English and the Xhosa. Nongqawuse is one of the most important figures in the history of her country, yet she is largely forgotten in today’s South Africa.

The story goes that in March 1856, a 14-year old woman by the name of Nongqawuse claimed to have seen visions, in which she met with ancestors and other long-dead warriors. Her first vision came at the edge of her garden, by the river Gxhara, when two strangers called her over. They entrusted her with a singular message, ‘Tell that the whole community will rise from the dead; and that all cattle now living must be slaughtered, for they have been reared by contaminated hands ... There should be no cultivation ... So says the chief Napakade, the descendant of Sifu-sibanzi.’ These strangers also announced that they had come from over the waters, from Russia, at whose hands Britain had suffered defeats during the Crimean War. If Nongqawuse obeyed their instructions, then they promised that the British troops would be destroyed as they had been elsewhere.

Nongqawuse told the story of her vision to her uncle, Mhlakaza, a convert to Christianity and a councillor to the Xhosa Chief Sarili. Soon afterwards, he too claimed to see visions, including his long-dead brother. These supernatural warriors told him that if the Xhosa people would kill all their cattle, destroy their stores, and not plant any more grain that year, a whirlwind would come, and blow the English into the sea. Then, their heroes would rise from the dead, bringing with them vast herds of cattle and huge quantities of grain. Not all the councillors believed this message, and indeed several attempted to prevent the sacrifice of the cattle. Yet the situation of the Xhosa was desperate. Under-armed and ill-prepared, they had fought a losing battle against the English settlers for 80 years. The people had already lost the greater part of their land and saw no other means by which they could defeat their better-organised enemy. Peter Worsley suggests that it was this feeling of powerlessness and decay, this sense of despair following the defeats that the Xhosa had suffered, which prompted Chief Sarili and the majority of his people to accept Nongqawuse's word (p238). For whatever reason, the Xhosa set to work. Up to 400,000 cattle were killed and many fields were burned. Nongqawuse's spokesman, her uncle Mhlakaza, predicted that on 8 February 1857, the sun itself would turn round and the skies would be red. Yet on the
day itself nothing happened. Soon it became clear that the Xhosa had inflicted upon themselves an extraordinary disaster.

Within a year, the Xhosa population had declined by three-quarters, and up to 40,000 people died. Meanwhile, a similar number fled into the Cape Colony to seek employment with the white population there, as the only means to survive. As the people fled, the governors of the Colony sent troops to harry the survivors. They confiscated the deserted lands, and placed settlers upon them. The survivors were offered charity in the British towns, and when they refused it they were jailed. In the aftermath of tragedy, the English imposed a humiliating military defeat on the starving Xhosa. The Xhosa saw their land taken away from them and their civilisation destroyed. It would be a further fifty years before there were any signs in the black Eastern Cape of a renewed political optimism, with the formation in 1912 of the South African Native National Congress, the parent of today's African National Congress, the ANC.

The interpretation of these events has long been questioned. Not surprisingly, many black South Africans see the tale as a fiction, a distraction from other accounts which concentrate on the more important role of the English colonialists in taking Xhosa land. This cautious attitude is summed up by a Black Consciousness song from the 1970s, 'Sir George Grey took our country/ He entered in through Nongqawuse.' Today's descendants of the Xhosa of the 1850s are right to be cautious of the story of Nongqawuse, for among South Africa's whites, the opposite attitude has prevailed. The history of the cattle killing has been used to demonstrate the necessary and civilising effects of white rule.

Sir George Grey was the English governor of the Colony at the time of the cattle slaughter. He is famous today for his work as a geologist and botanist, and is described in most histories as an enlightened liberal. Grey told his biographer that he had gone to warn the Xhosa against the killing, at 'undue danger' to himself. Yet, in truth, Grey punished those rulers who did not take part in the cull. He also attributed blame for the killing to mischievous chiefs, who had aimed to force their unwilling people into war, through starvation. Meanwhile in Alexandria, where Nongqawuse is buried, her story is used today as evidence of the primitive fanaticism of the 'kaffir'. This opinion is shared even by the white farmers who now own the plots around the land on which Nongqawuse's memorial lies.
Several historians have attempted to provide a history of the cattle slaughter free from the racism and celebration of the original English accounts. Allister Sparks' widely-read The Mind of South Africa places the story of Nongqawuse at the end of a succession of defeats, which saw the breaking of the power of the Ndebele and the Zulus, before the Xhosa. In this way, the cattle-kilings were 'a last desperate act of resistance': 'The result was a national disaster. Tens of thousands of Xhosa died. Thousands more left their scorched land to stumble starving across the frontier to the white farms looking for work. Xhosa power was broken at last, and another migration into servitude took place.' The advantage of this approach is that it respects the people involved. The dead are treated neither as primitive nor heroic, but they are mourned.

The only full-length study of the movement is by Jeffrey Peires. His moving history of the killings, The Dead will Arise, suggests that the cattle slaughter was a rational, even necessary, response to the arbitrary and cruel nature of British colonialism. The Xhosa had seen their land taken from them, through eight years of colonial wars, and were already suffering from an outbreak of cattle-lung disease, which left 100,000 of their cows dead. In his words, this epidemic 'was a necessary cause of the Xhosa cattle-killing'. In Peires' explanation, the cattle slaughter began as a legitimate, indeed sensible, cull of sick or dying beasts. It spread with the encouragement of the English, often through the intermediary advice of converted Christians among the Xhosa. A central figure was Mhlakaza, Nongqawuse's uncle. It was Mhlakaza who claimed that if the cattle were slaughtered, the dead would rise again. As for the vengeful god Sifu-sibanzi, he had been introduced to the Xhosa by Christian missionaries in the early 1850s, as a mythical figure to represent the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Sifu-sibanzi was also the hero in the first Xhosa translation of John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

Timothy Stapleton has further examined the roots of the movement, showing that it was the poorest of the Xhosa who took most part, with the poorer chiefs siding with their own starving people. Stapleton describes this

affair as a revolutionary war against the British, in which many Xhosa retained a healthy scepticism towards the chiefs and the rulers of their own side. One reason for the 'reluctant slaughter' by the Xhosas was to undermine an unloved ruling layer of chiefs who owned the greatest number of cows. The problem for the peasant pastoralists was that in waging a war against their own rulers as well as the British, they doomed themselves to defeat. In Tim Stapleton's account, Governor Grey is the chief villain: 'the governor both stimulated and accelerated an uprising against a failed pastoral aristocracy.' It is clear from his work that there is something heroic and tragic about the story of Nongqawuse. Her movement was a failure and its methods were flawed, but the Xhosa did fight, and in their war there was more than a whisper of the victory that has since come.

It says something about the new South Africa that Jeffrey Peires, Nongqawuse's biographer, has become an ANC member of parliament and indeed a junior minister, while Nongqawuse herself is largely forgotten. Two of us visited her memorial this February, and kindly Mrs Fick who owns the land showed us her visitors' book. We were only the fourth group to have seen Nongqawuse's grave all year. Why didn't more people come?, we asked her. Mrs Fick could only say that a civil servant had visited her, and the ministry was in negotiation. Following her directions, we found our way to Nongqawuse's grave. The prophetess's memorial sits on the side of a hill outside the hamlet of Alexandria. Alone in a working cattle field, it is marked only by six trees and a small concealed plaque, which is no larger than a metal card. It took us ten minutes to find the memorial. We knelt for the obligatory photographs, half-ashamed to be acting like tourists where something so awful was remembered.

I spoke to a third student at Rhodes University. Mmeli works as a teacher in the rural Transkei. His pupils are among the very poorest of South Africa's many poor citizens. He is taking a master's degree in Information Technology, so that when in the future there are computers for the schools, there will be someone who can train the teachers to use them. I asked Mmeli why so few people visited Nongqawuse's memorial. 'You have to think yourself into the minds of the people who put it there. They wanted to glorify colonialism and

minority rule.' But 40,000 people died. Shouldn't those killed be remembered? 'Yes,' he agreed, 'but nobody is proud of Nongqawuse.' Is there no way to remember events which you are not proud of? 'Maybe there isn't...,' he said and paused. Mmeli did not finish the sentence, so I will attempt to finish it myself. Maybe there is no way to celebrate the past when it still hangs over the present. Perhaps there are enough monuments to the dead already. Maybe there cannot be a reconciliation history, while unemployment in Grahamstown East still stands at over 70 per cent. Maybe it is impossible to look back at the history with confidence, when past poverty and past inequality still have such an impact on South Africa today.

If South Africa is to construct a society in which everyone can share, a historical memory must be created which comes to terms with the horrors of the past. Such a history would commemorate the dead of all peoples, while at the same time taking sides. For the dead to be properly remembered, a judgement must be made against the many crimes committed in the name of empire and race, and an honourable role should be assigned to those who took part in the struggle against oppression and racial inequality. This history could only be written as part of a general and thoroughgoing process of reconciliation, broader and also more forward-looking than anything which has been accomplished to date. When such a historical memory is created, one of its first tasks will be to make sense of the sad and disturbing story of the young Xhosa prophetess Nongqawuse.