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The missionary as government agent on the Eastern Frontier: 1818-1830

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2011-05-19
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/9828

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Chapter V

The Development of the System

Since Brownlee's establishment in Caffraria Lord Charles Somerset had been desirous of inducing another missionary to join him. He had made overtures to Moffat in this respect, but that latter had refused (1). The reason for an additional missionary was not altogether in the interests of forwarding the Christian faith amongst the tribes in Caffraria. It is true that Brownlee had written from Caffraria on 9th August, 1821 that "several of the other chiefs are desirous to have teachers sent among them" (2). But in view of evidence previously consulted we are forced to conclude that Somerset had grown impatient at Brownlee's obvious lack of response towards his precise instructions. Since Brownlee had been situated in the vicinity of Gaika, Colonial Secretary Bird had deprecated,

> "there has been received from him not a single observation .... this is much to be lamented, as it is of vital importance that the frontier magistrate and the Colonial Government should be regularly and frequently apprised of the transactions of their agents in Caffraria" (3).

Somerset's presence in England gave him a chance to discuss with Dr Thom, the colonial ministerial recruiting agent, who was also in England at the time, the subject of a suitable candidate to join Brownlee (4). The choice fell on William Richie Thomson, a young Scot, of the Glasgow Missionary Society (5), who had expressed a desire earlier in the year to come and minister among the Kaffirs (6). Thomson having been selected, Somerset lost no time in informing Lord Bathurst, the British Secretary for War and the Colonies, that a suitable candidate to assist Brownlee in his

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(1) Macmillan (C.C.Q.), p. 125.
(2) C.O. 142/47, Thomson to Colonial Secretary (Brownlee's letter quoted herein), 4th September, 1821.
(3) C.O. 4845, p. 66, Colonial Secretary to Thomson, 3rd September, 1821.
(4) Theal (Records), XIII, p. 404, Thom to Somerset, 16th February, 1821.
(5) Ibid.
(6) Ibid., p. 365, Memorial of the G.M.S. to Earl Bathurst, 9th January, 1821.

mission amongst the Kaffirs had been found, and pointing out that

> "Mr. W.R. Thomson should be given clearly to understand, that his being continued in the service of the Colonial Government must entirely depend upon the success that may attend his and Brownlee's exertions in Kaffraria" (1).

Such a stipulation was probably not unacceptable to Thomson, who, through the Glasgow Missionary Society had expressed his willingness to conduct his work

> "in the most peaceful manner and with a spirit of loyalty and goodwill to the British Government" (2).

When Thom was informed that the appointment had been sanctioned, his attention was directed to Somerset's conditions of service (3). This is the first time that such a rigid tenor is to be observed in the conditions of service concerning missionaries entering Kaffirland. In the case of Williams and Brownlee no ultimatum was given where non-compliance with the wishes of the Colonial Government was evident. Now the open threat was apparent. There seems no doubt about what Somerset meant by "exertions in Kaffraria" (4). Unfortunately the evangelical spirit was still too strong to prevent Somerset from saying directly that the post would be relinquished should insufficient information - such as had been required of Brownlee - be forthcoming. Possibly Dr Thom had interviewed Thomson on the subject and found him willing to co-operate (5). Whatever the truth of the matter, it is certain that Thomson was not given specific instructions while still in Britain as to his role in Kaffirland, for he asked for these instructions on arrival at the Cape (6). Bird had received no specific instructions from

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(1) Theal (Records), XIII, p. 408, Somerset to Goulburn, 21st February, 1821.
(2) Theal (Records), XIII, p. 365.
(3) C.O. 142/44 (Enclosures), Goulburn to Thom, 15th March, 1821.
(4) To Colonial Secretary Bird, at least. See the way in which he interpreted this phrase: below, p. 69.
(5) The meek way in which Thomson received his instructions on arrival at Cape Town indicates that he was not completely unfamiliar with their nature.
(6) C.O. 142/44, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 31st July, 1821.

the Colonial Office in London, and had to act upon Gouldburn's letter written on 15th March, 1821 to Thom (1). He referred Thomson to Brownlee's instructions of 30th December, 1818, stating that it was not necessary for Thomson to alter them in any way (2). In his letter to Thomson, Bird drew attention to Brownlee's shortcomings as a Government Agent (3). It appears that Somerset's trust in Bird to carry out his policy was the cause of the non-receipt of instructions from Somerset to Bird regarding Thomson. Bird had therefore acquitted himself well; he and Somerset saw sufficiently eye to eye to enable continuity in policy, regarding the missionaries, at least (4).

Thomson's official status and the position of his mission station in relation to the Colony were defined by Major-General Bourke some years later. He looked upon Chumie as

> "a mission station supported by a missionary society and on Mr Thomson as a missionary of the society, though receiving a salary from the Government, as Government Agent" (5).

Thomson's receipt of salary (1,000 Rixdalders (6)) seems to have been conditional, therefore, upon the receipt by the Government of certain services rendered, mainly in the form of information which was to be supplied about the tribes in the interior. Accompanying Thomson was John Bennie, another missionary from the Glasgow Missionary Society (7). He, too, had been instructed by the Secretary of the Society

> "to conform in the most careful manner to the

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(1) C.O. 4845, p. 66, Colonial Secretary to Thomson, 3rd September, 1821.
(2) Ibid.
(3) Ibid.
(4) This kinship enabled Somerset's policy regarding the missionaries on the Eastern Frontier to be carried on without a break throughout the Governorship of Donkin (See above, pp.63-65).
(5) Minute Book, p. 49, 3rd January, 1828.
(6) C.O. 4845, p. 66, Colonial Secretary to Thomson, 3rd September, 1821.
(7) Bennie, with Thomson, asked to be allowed to do missionary work "within or near the ... Cape of Good Hope ... and particularly in the Caffre country" (Theal (Records), XIII, p.365). Thomson appears to have superseded Brownlee in authority at Chumie by virtue of his position as Government Agent and Bennie appears to have been subordinated to Thomson by virtue not only of the fact that Thomson was Government Agent but because Thomson was a minister and Bennie an elder (See below, p.84).

> regulations of the Colonial Government as observed by Mr. Brownlee" (1).

Thomson was not unaware of the spiritual requirements which the Government demanded of his services, however much lip-service that institution paid to them. He understood that it was the

> "particular wish of the Colonial Government, to introduce among the natives, a knowledge of the useful arts of civilised life and to train them in the habits of industry; as well as to instruct them in the principles of the Christian religion ..." (2).

But in spite of this hopeful sentiment there is a cheerless finality, from a liberal missionary point of view, in the business-like letter which Thom wrote to Bird in April, 1821. He described Thomson as "a steady, able and learned young man", regularly ordained, who had belonged to the Glasgow Missionary Society but who has been "given up by them to the Colonial Government" (3). He also introduced Bennie. "I have .... instructed Mr Bennie to be very careful to submit to the regulations of the Government" (4).

In the meantime Brownlee had defended himself against the charge laid against him by the Colonial Government of not corresponding frequently enough. He pointed out to Bird that nothing had happened along the frontier except the frequent depredations of the tribes and the Officer Commanding knew of these in any case (5). But in the light of later actions on Brownlee's part we shall see that this was but an excuse; the reason for his reluctance was that he did not consider that he was doing justice to the missionary cause by playing the role of informer on behalf of the Government (6).

Government favour continued to smile upon Thomson. He was granted 500 Rixdalders to cover expenses accrued until he arrived at Chumie in addition to a passage in a Government brig to Port Elizabeth (7). On landing no difficulty was experienced in removing

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(1) C.O. 142/44 (Enclosures), Love, and others, to Governor or Acting-Governor, 22nd March, 1821.
(2) Ibid., Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 31st July, 1821.
(3) C.O. 142/31, Thom to Colonial Secretary, 23rd April, 1821.
(4) Ibid.
(5) C.O. 142/69, Brownlee to Colonial Secretary, 23rd November, 1821.
(6) See below, pp. 85-86.
(7) C.O. 4848/66, Colonial Secretary to Thomson, 3rd September, 1821.

to Chumie as he was met by seven wagons which loaded his luggage (1) which must have included much of the formidable list of articles and provisions which he had submitted to the Governor before leaving Cape Town (2). These demands, ranging from ploughs to potatoes, were regarded as Government property and housed in a store specially built for the purpose (3).

After arrival at Chumie Thomson was zealous in discharging his duties as Government Agent. Letters reached the Colonial Office at frequent intervals giving detailed accounts of the events on the frontier. With this information is found much concerning the spiritual progress which was being made, as well as the missionaries' progress with the study of the Xhosa language, the study of which was commenced immediately on arrival (4).

Not long after Thomson's arrival Gaika visited him, accompanied by his "train of wives" (5). No reason is given for Gaika's visit, but it provided Thomson with an admirable opportunity to size up the man with whom he was to deal for some years to come. "He (Gaika) for a short time acted the character of a Kaffer chief with tolerable accuracy, but he afterwards fell from his dignity and displayed some of the meanest passions of mind" (6). Thomson took a strong line from the beginning. If the purpose of Gaika's visit was to determine what sort of man the Government Agent was (7), then Thomson was not prepared to allow him to leave with the impression that the new arrival was weak in approach. "I find a firm determined manner absolutely necessary with him", he wrote to Bird (8). Further, Thomson was from the start determined that he was not going to be indebted in any way towards Gaika. Before

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(1) C.O. 142/70, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 24th November, 1821.
(2) C.O. 142/47, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 22nd August, 1821.
(3) C.O. 142/70, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 24th November, 1821.
(4) Ibid.
(5) Ibid. (This portion of the letter is reprinted in Theal (Records), XIV, pp. 165-166).
(6) Ibid.
(7) It is possible that Gaika knew of Thomson's purpose. A peculiar bush telegraph seems to have worked in the case of Melvill's trip to Griqua Town (See below, p. 88).
(8) Theal (Records), XIV, p. 165.

Thomson's arrival Bromlee had made arrangements with Gaika for the loan of his house to Thomson until [illegible] could erect one himself. Thomson would, however, occupy the house no longer than was necessary, "that our obligation may be easier repaid" (1). Such an attitude could hardly be conducive to amicable relations.

Thomson had only resided at Chumie a few months when events occurred which caused him to become involved in the customary frontier troubles. In January, 1822, Maqoma descended upon the mission natives and removed 274 head of cattle. This action was in retaliation for the removal of two horses from Maqoma by a native acquainted with the Chumie mission. The horses had been recognised by him while visiting Maqoma's place, but their removal took place without Thomson's knowledge (2). Cory suggests that the mission native who removed the animals and returned them to their former owner was perhaps acting "under the influence of that good men's teaching" (3). Negotiations with Gaika followed in an attempt to regain the stolen cattle. But his conduct and language convinced Thomson that Gaika had "no design or wish that his son should restore the cattle", and a promise for the return of the cattle was at length "extorted" from Gaika by fear of Captain Aitcheson's threat to retaliate (Captain Aitcheson had been sent for from Fort Willshire during the heat of the excitement) (4).

By February 23rd, 1822, 201 head of cattle had been returned and Thomson pointed out to Lord Charles Somerset that it would be detrimental to the future of the institution to use force in regaining the remainder. He considered that an important point had been gained by conveying to Gaika that Chumie was under the protection of the Colonial Government and that though the people at the institutions were still his

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(1) C.O. 142/70, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 24th November, 1821.
(2) Theal (Records), XIV, pp. 264-265, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 19th January, 1822.
(3) Cory, II, p. 142.
Cory bases this assumption on his own statement, presumably, that the Kaffir was "residing at the Chumie Mission station". Thomson's letter to Bird, (2) above, on the other hand, describes him as someone who "occasionally resides here".
(4) Theal (Records), XIV, pp. 265-266.

subjects he was not at liberty to oppress them (1). Naturally Gaika resented this. He argued that the mission natives were his subjects, within his country and he had a natural right to do what he pleased with them "without interference from a foreign power" (2).

It was not a mere matter of cattle which was at stake; it was the existence of the Kaffir people as an integrated social unit on land which they held by right of habitation. The missions were viewed askance as the vanguard of the approaching Colony:

> "I find," Thomson had written a little earlier, "that we and the institution are looked upon with a jealous eye, by the Kaffirs in general, and particularly by some of the chiefs; and I believe the safety of our person and property depends more upon their fear than their respect" (3).

In view of this Thomson had good reason for self-congratulation about the impression that had been made upon Gaika that Chumie was under Government protection; but his warning to Somerset not to use force against Gaika in regaining the cattle could not have been received until after that event had occurred. On 22nd February Somerset ordered a commando to be sent to seize Gaika should he fail to return the outstanding cattle. Somerset was convinced

> "that the present moment should be seized to prove to Gaika, that this Government will not be trifled with" (4).

Gaika escaped and fled to the hills (5). It is unfortunate that Somerset promoted this action against Gaika, especially as a short while previously Thomson and Brownlee were required to deliver messages to Gaika from Lieut-Colonel Scott to the effect that the latter wished to meet him at Fort Wiltshire (6). The close connection between the two events must have forced Gaika to believe that there was a necessary link between the mission station and

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(1) Theal (Records), XIV, pp. 298-299, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 23rd February, 1822.
I find no evidence to support Theal's observation that Gaika was informed that Thomson and Brownlee as Government Agents were under Government protection (Theal (History), I, p. 385).
(2) Theal (Records), XIV, p. 299.
(3) Ibid., p. 285, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 17th January, 1822
(4) Ibid., p. 296, Somerset to Lieut-Colonel Scott, 22nd February, 1822.
(5) For full account of the incident see Cory, II, pp. 149 ff.
(6) Theal (Records), XIV, p. 299, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 23rd February, 1822.

Government punitive action. Not that Thomson was the cause of this action, by any means; at best he was but one of the instruments. But it cannot be doubted that suspicion must have fallen upon him and the missionary station in general.

The missionaries in general and Thomson in particular must, however, be blamed for the method by which they sought to drive home to Gaika that any unacceptable action by him towards the missionary institution or the Colony would be met with immediate and violent retribution (1). It had become necessary during the course of the operations against Gaika to execute a Kaffir who was guilty of murder. The execution was carried out and Colonel Scott departed. Thereupon the Kaffir was buried "in a conspicuous spot" and Brownlee delivered an address on the law of murder (2).

> "By this time Gaika's people had nearly all disappeared except a few who remained on the top of a neighbouring hill to witness the ceremony" (3).

Thus was colonial aggression and the missionary institutions indissolubly linked in the mind of the Kaffir. It is unlikely that they interpreted the incident in the light of the moral it was supposed to represent.

If there had ever been any disposition on the part of Gaika to be friendly towards Williams and Brownlee before the arrival of Thomson, that amiable bent had undergone a fair change. The lamentable events discussed above are not solely to blame for this. Thomson's attitude towards the Kaffirs seems to have contributed a great deal towards the rupture of friendly relations. At his first meeting with Gaika he had taken up a "firm, determined manner" towards him (4). He had refused to acquiesce to Gaika's continued demands for presents on that occasion and Gaika had gone off in a "fit of sullenness" (5). It is difficult to judge a man's actions

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(1) Especially in view of Thomson's previous reluctance to allow Somerset to use force against Gaika in this special case.
(2) Theal (Records), XIV, p. 319, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 23rd March, 1832.
(3) Ibid.
(4) See above, p. 71.
(5) Theal (Records), XIV, p. 165.

in such a situation, but the evidence does seem to indicate that Thomson had no innate sympathy for the Kaffirs and had worked up an early resistance towards them. It seems as though he had come to the frontier determined by force, rather than persuasion to root out evil tendencies among them. His official satisfaction at the chastisement which Geika had received is evident in the letter to Bird, dated 23rd March, 1822:

> "Geika appears now to be both mortified and intimidated by the decisive measures which have been adopted ... it will, I hope, have a salutary influence upon his future conduct" (1).

But in spite of the favour with which Thomson looked upon strict punishment meeting the crime (2), he was becoming increasingly aware that the connection with the Colonial authorities was tending to be a disadvantage:

> "These late events have, I am assured, rather increased than diminished the former jealousy existing towards the institutions in the minds of many and will for a time operate against us as regards the extension of our influence among the people. By constant perseverance in our duties I hope we shall be able to overcome the prejudices and conciliate their minds" (3).

And by "duties" Thomson meant Christian duties. At this stage he seems to have been trying to force himself to believe that the preaching of Christianity and the function of Government Agent could be combined satisfactorily. He felt that the duties of Government Agent restricted his religious duties (4). But he did not voice his objections officially. He is entitled to sympathy. To preach at all in Kaffirland entailed sacrificing certain liberties and he preferred, for the time being, to submit himself to the dualism. As for Geika, he shut himself away in the interior, prohibiting intercourse between the missionaries and himself except

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(1) Theal (Records), XIV, pp. 318-319.
(2) Thomson showed this attitude on more than one occasion. In 1828 a member of Chumie institution was sentenced to forty strokes and ignominious ejection from the mission station because of a sexual misdemeanour (Minute Book, p. 69, 10th July, 1828).
(3) Theal, op. cit., p. 319, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 23rd March, 1822.
(4) No. 583-1836, p. 187, Question 1576, Evidence of Andries Stockenstroom. There is no indication of when Thomson informed Stockenstroom that this was the case. It may be reasonably assumed that such a feeling would date from March, 1822 (see above, p. 74) but at that stage Thomson was not publicly acknowledging his failure to carry both offices successfully.

through the medium of a person in the neighbourhood appointed by himself to receive and carry messages (1).

The impression which had been made on the minds of Kaffirs in the Chumie area that the missionary institution was under the protection of the Government continued to grow during 1822. Towards the end of the year the missionaries received a reproachful note from the Governor gently rebuking them for the alleged offence of harbouring certain runaway slaves and Hottentots from the Colony (2). Thomson pointed out that some were being harboured (3).

> "Our sentiments are so generally known that I believe this to be the last place in Kaffirland where a deserter would take sanctuary" (4).

The tendency for colonial "protection" for Chumie to become colonial "patronage" was evident, and the Kaffirs sensed the change in the attitude of the missionaries (5). Patronage, in this case, was a more intense degree of protection; it is understandable that the Kaffirs would react more adversely towards the institution as the erstwhile appendage to the Colony gradually assumed the character of being part and parcel of it.

Gaika was doing his best to make the situation difficult for the missionaries at Chumie, without actively taking up arms against them. Thomson proposed a journey into Tambookieland and informed Gaika of the intention. Gaika replied that the missionaries were to remain at the institution. After all, he said, the missionaries were his "ears which he could not do without" (6). What Gaika's reply was to the missionary retort that Brownlee would remain at Chumie to be his "ears" is unknown, but the missionaries took the hint and remained. Thomson, however, headstrong as ever, decided

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(1) C.O. 143/66, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 23rd March, 1822.
(2) C.O. 4847, p. 153, Colonial Secretary to Thomson, 20th September, 1822.
(3) C.O. 143/78, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 5th October, 1822.
(4) Ibid.
(5) By 1827 Thomson was referring to Chumie as being "under the patronage of the Colonial Government" (C.O. 323/3, (Enclosures), Report from Chumie for 1826.
(6) C.O. 184/1, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 20th December, 1822.

that he would nevertheless make a journey in a S.E. direction to show Gaika that the missionaries did not consider themselves under his restraint (1). It was obvious that the underlying tensions were increasing by the day.

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(1) C.O. 184/1, Thomson to Colonial Secretary, 20th December, 1822.