

Chapter 10**Celebrating the Cedarberg's Stories**

The longing for human stories is pervasive and powerful, in tension with the VOC's propensity to list objects, a merchant company's interest in ledgers and balance sheets.¹ To make a list mean something more than the sum of its contents, imagination intervenes: seeing connections, discovering relationships, invoking human concerns, telling tales.² Although postmodern and postcolonial critics have mounted formidable intellectual challenges to its primacy, the structuring of narrative nevertheless can make sense of complicated events and processes, as this collection of stories about the Cedarberg attests.³ **1**

This book demonstrates possibilities of using statistical data to write narrative history, excavating the stories in lists, tallies, enumerations, and ledgers, recovering individual human experience from data that was created as a picture of aggregation, not individuation. In going beyond the written record to incorporate archaeological sources, I describe colonial society more broadly than the VOC did, actively including Khoisan who were not subordinated laborers. Structuring their stories around relationships of inclusion and exclusion brings slaves, Khoisan, women, and poor settlers into relief, in spite of their limited presence in the archives of the Dutch East India Company. **2**

The long eighteenth century in Southern Africa was a remarkable moment. Colonial relationships unfolded in all their messy complexity, as they did in the Americas and Asia. Understanding these events in the Western Cape shakes up some received wisdom of African history: colonization on an imperial model took place before the industrial revolution and the rise of social Darwinism; people with stone tool technology, no fixed abode, and no governmental structure succeeded in limiting European colonial presence for a century. **3**

Without a doubt, this is a history of brutal domination and violent resistance; it is impossible not to see colonial hegemony, land alienation, and labor oppression—a familiar saga of European conquest accompanied by the creation of a hierarchical, racialized society. The lines in this society were not drawn neatly or evenly, however. The boundaries were permeable; categories were elastic, leaving space—particularly in frontier areas like the Cedarberg—for individuals to negotiate the terms of interaction. Land claims, family formation, and identity creation ultimately privileged Christian, Dutch-speaking farmers. Evidence of the interactions that eventually asserted this hierarchy may have been painted on rocks,⁴ but contours of colonial society were not etched in stone. **4**

Settler kin networks sustained this dynamic society, spanning multiple generations and long distances, connecting people across the frontier region and linking the frontier to the established areas of the colony. These relationships were closely linked to patterns of land tenure and land use based on the concept of private property. It was these intertwined notions of family and property that enabled the spread of a cohesive colonial entity across the landscape. Understanding these frontier patterns is crucial to understanding how a far-flung and sparsely populated area could remain a contested frontier for over a hundred years and nevertheless maintain its colonial nature. **5**

Recovering the contested history of the Cedarberg is a version of Norman Etherington's "heartland" shift.⁵ Adjusting our field of vision lets us appreciate a different historical perspective. A lens trained on the Olifants River shows that the history of the Western Cape was not all about the Mother City. The frontier, however, could not have existed without the growing cosmopolitan hub on the shores of Table Bay that nourished the elements of social, political, and economic dominance evident in colonial society. **6**

The success of settler society depended fundamentally on land claims, whether it was the ground under the Castle of Good Hope or unfenced terrain for grazing sheep in the Cedarberg. The land equally sustains this book's overarching arguments: **7**

- Agrarian history offers a particularly insightful window into South Africa's past. The nexus of land and labor at the heart of agricultural production mirrors a critical intersection between frontier studies and slave histories.
- Colonial conquest, more domestic than martial, was rooted in frontier homesteads.
- Malleable elements of social identity—particularly those which came to constitute race—were gradually reified over the course of the eighteenth century, bound up in family connections and the related ability to make and sustain land claims.

The picture I have painted of a gradually domesticated, orthodox settler community that emerged over the course of the eighteenth century presents a sharp contrast to Lance van Sittert's analysis of the Cedarberg as a bastion of wilderness and a cradle of alpinism in the twentieth century.⁶ Of course the Cape Town Mountain Club members were not idealizing the farmyards and citrus groves along the Olifants, but rather the rugged peaks on the farmers' horizon. Middle-class Capetonians began to celebrate this mountainscape from the early years of the twentieth century. The national government subsequently declared 71,000 hectares as a conservation area in 1973, a result of an environmentalist campaign. **8**

This terrain, now construed as wilderness, had been part of the resource landscape for hunters and herders since long before colonial settlement. These same mountains remained in the orbit of seasonal transhumance for colonial farmers. Their laborers must have regularly walked routes over ridges and around peaks, both herding flocks of sheep and moving without livestock between farms, or back and forth to the mission station at Wupperthal. **9**

Colonial farmers succeeded in wresting control of this land and its resources from hunting and herding Khoisan. In the process, the settlers increasingly identified not with the contested frontier but with values emanating from Cape Town. A century later, Capetonians looked back at the Cedarberg and recast it as a frontier region, in spite of evidence to the contrary. **10**

The higher elevations and remote areas of the Cedarberg certainly escaped the domestication of fenced kraals, plowed fields, and porcelain table settings, but along the Olifants and Doorn Rivers and in the mountain valleys where settlers established homesteads, land use and material culture connected farming households to colonial society. Those very sites of domestication would later provide staging areas for twentieth-century alpinist excursions into the Cedarberg wilderness. **11**

Fig. 10.1. Farm Ruin, Bidouw

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Had the modern mountaineers not been seeking to create a climate of exploration and discovery, they might have hired local shepherds as guides and saved themselves considerable effort.⁷ As it was, encounters with livestock and "out-of-the-way" farms occasionally spoiled the sense of untamed adventure.⁸ Twentieth-century outdoor enthusiasts willfully ignored extant maps and physical evidence in the landscape in order to see the Cedarberg as a wilderness, using the language of alpinism to distort historical memory. Settlers struggled to control this region in the eighteenth century; by the end of the nineteenth century the Cedarberg was considered so securely positioned within the dominant geography of the state that subsequent generations could consider it to be a frontier worth claiming all over again. Although the focus of the dominant society's exploitation of the Cedarberg shifted from economic survival to an urban, bourgeois glorification of an untrammelled natural world, an undercurrent of colonial conquest persists. In both the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, one group sought to exercise power over a landscape, its resources, and its inhabitants. The Cape Town alpinists could ignore the previous history of conquest in the Cedarberg because, it seems, they did not look at the tidy fields along the river or notice the evidence of permanent occupation even in the higher elevations.

Fig. 10.2. Farm Ruin, Olifants River Valley

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The centrality of the Olifants River to human endeavors in the Cedarberg is evident in long-term patterns of land use, the geography of colonial land claims, and the history of human interactions in the region. Various societies have, over time, imparted very different social meanings to the landscape. Khoikhoi, San, colonial settlers, and modern outdoorsmen used resources differently. Equally important, they had very different understandings of their place in the environment and their relationships to nature. Ideologies of nature, however, lie beyond the scope of this book, which documents the material conditions of colonial contest and the social implications of settler conquest. Evidence of possession and elements of identity emerge in the ledgers of colonial administration.

Fig. 10.3. An Olifants River Farm, Late Twentieth Century

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Belongings and belonging have a particular documentary presence that firmly situates the Cedarberg in the mainstream of South African history, despite its contested status throughout the eighteenth century, and efforts to categorize the region as a wilderness throughout the twentieth. Throughout this turmoil, the Olifants has flowed unabated. Dammed, drained, and redirected in recent decades, the river nevertheless continues to connect the Witsenberg Valley with the Atlantic Ocean, to link related biomes, and to serve as a conduit between people and their history.

Notes

Note 1: Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellaur (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

Note 2: Carmel Schrire, *Digging Through Darkness: Chronicles of an Archaeologist* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).

Note 3: As recent defenders of narrative argue, "In our emphasis of the need for narrative coherence, causal analysis, and social contextualization, . . . we are attempting to go beyond the current negative or ironic judgments about history's role. We as historians are nonetheless making our own aesthetic choices." Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 228.

Note 4: Simon Hall and Aron Mazel, "The Private Performance of Events: Colonial Period Rock Art from the Swartruggens," *Kronos* 31 (2005): 124–51.

Note 5: Norman Etherington, *Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815–1854* (London: Longman, 2001).

Note 6: Lance van Sittert, "Seeing the Cedarberg: Alpinism and Inventions of the Agterberg in the White Urban Middle Class Imagination, c. 1890–c. 1950," *Kronos* 31 (Nov 2005), 152–83.

Note 7: Many chronicles of colonial exploration in Africa gloss over the active contributions of local guides and interpreters, thus effacing the role of local knowledge and consequently aggrandizing the accomplishment of white adventurers. For example, see Adam Hochschild's description of Henry Morton Stanley's reportage in *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

Note 8: van Sittert, "Seeing the Cedarberg," 164–65.