

From

The Coleridge Bulletin

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge
New Series 28 (NS) Winter 2006

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<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

Home Truths:
Samuel Taylor Coleridge advises Thomas Pringle
Peter Anderson

IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN LIBRARY in Cape Town is what I imagine is the only Coleridge manuscript in a country that is, after all, very far from Coleridge's orbit—and it is, as they say, little to write home about.¹ And yet that is just what I intend by this paper: writing 'home' about Coleridge and writing about Coleridge and 'home'—not only in the sense of my home, South Africa, but also in the more academic sense that 'home' connotes, a space made place in the act of inhabiting, which inhabiting is an act of human culture and consciousness, related ultimately to the imagination. Thus it is that scholarship may locate Xanadu in Cartesian *space*, but anyone who reads the poem knows the *place*: Coleridge's compound of chasm and cavern and spots of greenery, the garden of Kubla Khan.

In colonial and post-colonial language, the word 'home' is a fraught instance. Across it old wars are fought again and new compacts sealed. If I turn this discussion upon the figure of anecdote then I do so necessarily, because my relationship to Coleridge and Pringle is itself entangled in the problematic of 'home', and I do so fairly, since what this paper concerns is a fragment of Coleridge in action, a scrap of textual history, which is itself of the quality of anecdote. When my great-grandmother was a baby her mother took her to the Catholic convent in Grahamstown to be held by a centenarian nun, not for a blessing (staunch low-church Anglican missionaries didn't get blessed by Catholic nuns), but because the old woman was French, and had been born in Paris in 1789. I dimly recall my great-grandmother, and I am constantly reminded of my extraordinary proximity, through her, to the modern moment of the Revolution. In the game of degrees of relationship I have touched someone who touched someone who was in the French Revolution.

This is no idle boast. My object is to elucidate the angle at which I am approaching my subject, which is really that angle itself—the tangent at which Coleridge abuts on this diffuse, *imaginative*, event called 'home'. (Remember that Hazlitt called Coleridge's mind, '*tangential*'.)² My great-grandmother's contact with the nun (and mine after her) is a sacramental laying-on-of-hands, an ordination within the creed of causes and origins that we call history. That is what I want to call the 'deep practice' of the instance that is my anecdote. The nun's touch is repeated countless through history *as history*. It is the practice of history enacted in every Christian ordination, in the healing hands of kings, in the presentation at the temple. The grace brokered in the beneficence of its *nunc dimittis* is that of a belonging in history, of being granted a home in time. My great-great-grandmother knew intuitively that the French Revolution

¹ South African Library, MSB 393,1 (8), 'Thomas Pringle' A M Lewin Robinson reported its acquisition in his article, 'Coleridge Advises Thomas Pringle', *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library* (23, 3: 1969), 68–80

² W Hazlitt, 'Mr Coleridge', Ronald Blythe (ed) *Selected Writings* (London: 1987), 233

was the Big Date, that somehow it launched things, and perhaps especially that it launched her journey to the Cape as a sixteen-year-old leaving 'home' (England, Dorset, Blandford, parents) for the 'doubtful act'³ of foundation in the colonies, and thereby launched the family which is her succession, including me, who calls South Africa home. She was right about the Revolution and the nun. The British occupation of the Cape was a strategic move in the Napoleonic wars—the long aftershock of the Revolution. That I teach English at an English-speaking university in Cape Town is the fault of the French. I am reminded of the fact every day by a blockhouse on the ridge above the university, still doggedly watching for Napoleon's fleet. In the nun's hands I am placed and displaced, passed back and forth across the history of my homing, which is also, more importantly, for others the history of dispossession and alienation.

These are my tangents on Coleridge, then: a few lines of his handwriting in a box file in Cape Town, the transmitted touch of a very ancient French nun (for perhaps unobvious but important reasons, to do with the event(edness)of home, of home's being a place and not a space), and a therefore complex sense of home, that makes me linguistically and imaginatively a native of Coleridge's country, but conversely makes me thrill to see, in Coleridge's own handwriting, words like 'Karoo' and 'Stormberg'—the names of my home accommodated in Coleridge's language and imagination.

But what was Coleridge doing writing words like those? He was tinkering, as it happens, with the proofs of another poet, a younger man, though destined to die in the same year as himself. Thomas Pringle is a figure of significance in Cape history, perhaps especially for his part in the campaign for a free colonial press, and for his role in the humanitarian ascendancy in Cape politics in the late 1820s and early 1830s. He died just before the Xhosa invaded the colony in 1835 and the liberal tide was turned by the backlash of an aggressively acquisitive and racist population of British settlers. But he died in London, neither his native Scotland nor his adopted Cape, and yet his last home, where he worked after 1825 as Secretary to the Anti-Slavery Society and as editor of *Friendship's Offering* and a small force in literary London, publishing there the senior Wordsworth and Coleridge, as also the young Tennyson and Ruskin.

Pringle is an important tangent because he was a poet also, a more than decent versifier, usually (if contentiously) reckoned 'the father' of South African poetry in English. It was Coleridge who initiated the friendship with Pringle that is my tangent today. He wrote in March 1828 to the younger poet:

It is some four or five Months ago since G. Thompson's travels etc. on South[er]n Africa passing its book-club course thro' our house, my eye by accident lighting on some verses, I much against my Wont was tempted to go on—and so I first became acquainted with your—*Afar in the Desert*. Tho' at that time so busy that I had not looked at any of

³ The phrase is Auden's 'A Summer Night', *Collected Poems*, (Faber, 1976), 103

the new Books, I was taken so compleatly possession of, that for some days I did little else but read and recite your poem ... With the omission of about four or at the utmost six lines I do not hesitate to declare it, among the two or three most perfect lyric Poems in our Language.⁴

Coleridge's estimation has not weathered well. Few would celebrate the poem so fulsomely today. 'Afar in the Desert' (which I don't propose to discuss here) used to be a popular first sally in school anthologies in South Africa. You can quickly see its value to the circumstance: a good galloping rhythm, nice tight couplets: easy to dun into dull heads. And then there is the splendid lexicon of Wildest Africa, the catalogue of animals and plants, and the Bushboy untroublingly silent. Now, of course, it is the silence which troubles and which complicates the poem and Pringle's progenitive status in South African English poetry.

Of course the colonial Pringle knew Coleridge before London. It is evident in so many of his poems. Compare, for instance, 'Kubla Khan's

It flung up momentarily the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

with Pringle's 'Pass of the Great Fish River':

The frontier ford is passed. Unyoke the teams
Let the tired oxen, drenched by Kaukai's streams,
Have pasture and repose. Seek we the shade,
Between the mountains and the river's brink
Which winds around in many a mazy link.

Quite apart from the alliterated murmuring mazziness of the river's course, there is recapitulated (albeit in a subdued, Augustan tenor) the sense of a 'sunny spot' of greenery, of 'fertile ground', forests, hills, mountains. Above all, Pringle's poem voyages beyond the colonial frontier (again, albeit in a landscape recovered as the metropolitan picturesque). In contemporary terms his subject is 'a savage place'.

And yet, of course, it is Coleridge's imaginary landscape, rather than Pringle's actual one, which is charged with the poetic energy of that savagery. Pringle's Xhosaland, in this and other poems, is markedly Arcadian after long European precedent. J.M. Coetzee has written of Pringle's picturesque sensibility, and I do not mean to recover that ground here.⁵ More important is to chart the distinctions and correspondences between Coleridge's imagined Xanadu and Pringle's real encounter with Xhosaland.

⁴ CL VI 732 The first treatment of this correspondence is E. L. Griggs, 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Pringle', *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library* (6, 1: 1951), 1-6 The 'book-club' volume was George Thompson, *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*, (London: 1827)

⁵ J.M. Coetzee, 'The Picturesque and the South African Landscape', *White Writing* (Johannesburg: 1988), 36-62

The name ‘Xanadu’ is shot through with the kind of euphony commonly attributed to the names of ‘other’ places, of languages outside of Europe. This is the same sort of toponymic assumption as seems to direct the naming of tourist destinations throughout Southern Africa: Moholoholo, Xakanaka, Mala Mala, Londolozzi. It is true that Bantu and especially Nguni languages are agglutinating and tend thereby to set up patterns of consonance, but the latter-day toponymic relish for such names—in colonial and post-colonial society—exceeds their real instance. What is being projected by them is an implication of the infantile in African discourse, an empty sonority, levity rather than gravity, ululating, drumming and glottal stops, instead of Ciceronian magistracy. The exotic ‘Xanadu’ participates in this ‘poeticisation’ of the savage elsewhere—even as it relays an important real-world (and almost typographical) echo of the Susquehanna River, on whose banks the pantisocratic pleasure dome was to be decreed, in a savage place, some square milage of fertile ground and bearing trees, where the milk of an earthly paradise and the honeydew of the poetical life were to be provided.

This is no less the case in Pringle’s representations. His river’s name is given both as the ‘Great Fish’ (in his title) and as ‘Kaukai’ in the body of his text. This latter euphony he also underwrites with a note: ‘Kaukai, or t’Kau-t’kai is the original Hottentot name of the Great Fish River.’ Clearly it is exoticism he is after: but to what ends? A clue lies in Pringle’s toponymy. The Great Fish River indeed appears to derive its name from the Khoisan (‘Hottentot’), as do most of the rivers of the south-eastern littoral (intriguingly the Khoisan names appear to outlast the later Xhosa hegemony: the same is said to hold true of the names of rivers in Britain, where Celtic forms predominate, or are disproportionately well-sustained, compared to, say, the names of towns or villages)—but the Khoisan version is //Oub!ab (//Oub—fish, lab—river). The ‘lab’ suffix is generally transliterated as ‘-ka’. Pringle has no means of transmitting the clicks of the Khoisan original (which become those of the Xhosa name for the same river, the Nxuba), but at least a version of the Khoisan name permits the alliterating ‘k’s and the resonant vowels, and, more importantly, the footnote with its even more exotic orthography. The exoticism is accomplished by a process of colonisation, in which the indigenous toponymy is appropriated and overwritten in a pidgin derived of metropolitan initiative, and strictly subject to the limits (the frontiers) of English enunciation. The title bears the name ‘Great Fish River’ in order to orientate the reader to the frontier in the Cape: this is an act of placement. The body of the poem carries the name ‘Kaukai’ in order to evoke the disorientation in putatively ‘unknown’, volatile frontier space, somewhere unpronouncably, *unspeakably*, savage.⁶ this is an act of displacement whose effect on the reader is strikingly derived of the actual instance of colonial displacement. The toponymic act is one of metropolitan incorporation and

⁶ In later years, in London, Pringle wrote of ‘the uncouth chuckling gibberish of the Hottentots and Bushmen’ Pringle, ‘A Party of Emigrants Travelling in Africa’, *Penny Magazine*, (London: 19 January 1833)

adjustment (to the ends of the empire). In delivering metropolitan readers their frisson, the poem recharts indigenous space, *replaces* it, and the central act of colonisation—the dispossession of land—is imaginatively effected.

There is no demon haunting Pringle's frontier because its colonisation is actually already undertaken and this is communicated in the accomplishments of poeticised toponymy. By contrast, Coleridge's visionary landscape is wholly given over to the initiative of the other, and it is without the closure that is the object of frontiers. We are specifically told that it is measureless, by which we understand that is not capable of subjection or comprehension, boundary or closure, within the compass of discourse that is scientific or rational or whole. We do not rue the fragmentary nature of 'Kubla Khan' because the poem could only ever be a fragment if it is to be about what it is about: the radically elsewhere, the incomprehensible. (Similarly and relatedly, the value of pantisocracy is invested in its unfulfilled promise, in its essentially imaginary character. The word 'pantisocracy' is itself part of the thrill, as evocative of the elusive, half-grasped, just-glimpsed, as 'Susquehanna' or 'Xanadu'.)

But the *disclosure* of the radically elsewhere—that elsewhere's capacity to misconceive and misconstrue, to interrupt, to fragment—was obviously not the desire or the experience of the frontier between emaXhoseni⁷ and the Cape Colony, where and of which Pringle writes. There and then, when Pringle evokes the great Xhosa wardoctor's call to arms in his 'Makanna's Gathering',

Wake! Amakosa wake!
And arm yourselves for war

he is invoking ancestral voices derived simultaneously from Coleridge and Xhosa belief. To the British settler community which had been Pringle's 'home' and which lay in ruins after the Xhosa invasion of Christmas 1834, the poet himself was the demon, identified at once with the demon(ised) Makanna. 'This blood-stirring harangue' is a phrase levelled at both poet and his subject simultaneously in a letter to the *Graham's Town Journal* of January 1835, and it is hard to know whether it is Pringle or Makanna who is 'like another Satan [heading] the legions of the Kafir pandemonium':

Did I say, Mr Editor, that this blood-stirring harangue *could* be interpreted to the Kafirs to excite them to war upon us;—I say more, Sir, it is whispered, or rather *murmured*, in the town, that *it has been done*, and more ready belief is given to this surmise since all the satanic advice therein contained appears to have been acted upon by our

⁷ It would be hazardous, and inaccurate, to render emaXhoseni as 'Xhosaland', not least because I do not wish to participate in precisely those acts of toponymic erasure and reinscription here criticised. The English usage '-land' is freighted with the discursive burden of nation and property (and their conjunction) – political and economic circumstances whose precise form is foreign to precolonial Xhosa ideology. Moreover, the Xhosa form 'emaXhoseni' is less spatially fixed, and less 'acquisitive', than the '-land' of English, being somewhat diffuse in describing 'there where there are Xhosa' or 'in among the Xhosa' or 'the zone of Xhosaness'. Perhaps the French 'chez' leans towards its fullest sense.

barbarous foes almost to the letter.⁸

To bother so much with diction—*almost to the letter*—particularly with respect to the toponymy of ‘savagery’, as I have above, is because a body of poetry that seems to us now awkward and awkwardly complicit in its colonial accommodations, once seemed to Pringle’s fellow colonisers ‘satanic advice’ murmured in the ears of the Xhosa. We need to have a care of the diction in this degree, because the place of the colony is spun out of its murmuration—this is how homes are made and broken—and also because Coleridge himself told Pringle to care about it, and then me, when I read the fragment in the South African Library. There, on a proofsheets of Pringle’s ‘The Bechuana Boy’, prefacing his suggested amendments, Coleridge has written to Pringle:

I am, I fear, becoming fastidious. I daresay there may be several ‘neaths’ in my own poems—worse barbarisms, I am sure, there are! But purity of style and even *severe* propriety of words, appear to me more and more, the especial Duty of a Poet—who whatever political party he may favor, ought in this respect to be at once a *Radical* and a *Conservative*. For this reason I suggest the following alterations.

S. T. C.⁹

Of course, by ‘barbarisms’ Coleridge meant those uncomfortable solecisms which are the worst result of ungoverned poetry, but we must not forget that the etymology of the word reaches back to the frontier of the Pax Romana, anticipating the frontiers of the Pax Britannica once occupied by Pringle. Nor should we forget that savagery and barbarism were associated by the Scottish Enlightenment (which was also Pringle’s inheritance) as stages in a social-evolutionary ‘progression’ towards civilisation; that, in other words, the savage and the barbaric are joined in a mutual failure to be civilised, and share, thereby, in differing measure, those attributes that provide for their exclusion. That these attributes participate in phenomena which excite Romanticism—very broadly speaking the Dionysian as opposed to the Apollonian—thickens our instance, since it allows us to remark how civilised, metropolitan discourse manages to condemn that which invigorates it—and this, once again, provides the pattern typical of colonialism. It is as if ‘Xanadu’ and ‘Kaukai’ are perfectly proper barbarisms, being proper nouns, plundered from beyond the English language, whereas alterations within English itself—these ‘neaths’ and whatnot—are corruptions which savage the language.

Working on this principle, then, Coleridge offered his suggestions. When ‘The Bechuana Boy’ appeared in *African Sketches* in 1834, Pringle had adopted more than he declined. The suggestions afford us several things: a late glimpse of Coleridge (and Pringle) *at work* in composition, Coleridge *tangentially* but directly affecting a colonial literature (itself an imperial-colonial instance), and

⁸ *Graham’s Town Journal*, 2 January 1835

⁹ SAL, MSB 393, 1 (8), ‘Thomas Pringle’

a sharp, sad footnote to the biography, for Coleridge's most significant amendment, minor though it may seem at a glance, is evidence of his close emotional attention to the poem and to its resonance in his own soul. They also afford us a remarkable insight into Coleridge's own insight into the true nature and implications of colonisation.

There is not space to consider more than this best sample here; it marks Coleridge's most extensive intervention in the poem. These are the first four lines of the third stanza of the proof sent by Pringle to Coleridge:

“Poor boy!” I said, “thy kindred’s home,
Beyond far Stormberg’s ridges blue,
Why hast thou left so young, to roam
This desolate Karroo?”

Coleridge's manuscript amendment reads:

“Poor Boy! (I said) I’ve seen thy Home
Behind yon Stormberg’s ridges blue; [‘Beyond’ is struck
through]
Why hast thou left it, Boy! To roam
This desolate Karroo?”

And this is the published version of 1834:

“Poor boy!” I said, “thy native home
Lies far beyond the Stormberg blue:
Why hast thou left it, boy! To roam
This desolate Karroo?”

The reason for the boy's roaming, as it transpires in stanza four, is that his family have been massacred by ‘Bergenaars’—‘banditti, of mixed colonial and African lineage’, Pringle describes them—and he is now all alone in the world.¹⁰ In Pringle's proof version the boy's reply to the question framed in the lines given above is this:

“I have no kindred!” said the boy

but Coleridge proposed to change this, thus:

“I have no Home!” replied the boy

and Pringle went with his suggestion, though he dropped Coleridge's characteristic (and here significant) capital ‘H’.

It seems to me that Coleridge is himself guilty of barbarisms here—that

¹⁰ Pringle, *African Sketches*, 360

parenthetic ‘(I said)’ and that arch ‘yon’—and that set against these the ‘kindred’ he would forego is a lesser evil (though he is right all the same). It is not the barbarism of ‘kindred’ that motivates Coleridge, though. It is his psychological insight, won at the expense of his own life’s long unhappiness. The true horror lies beyond even the loss of family: it is to have no home at all. And this, as we know, was the story of the last half of Coleridge’s own life. Similarly, it might be argued that it is Coleridge’s own *historical* grasp of psychology that makes him prefer ‘behind’ to ‘beyond’, as if knowing that present trouble is begun in past trauma, rather than in anticipating some future loss. (The distinction between the two is itself some marker of the relative age and maturity of the two poets). The trauma of colonisation is greater than eviction or orphanage—it is displacement, the attrition of identity, the loss not of land or others, but of self, the nun’s touch, the iterations of belonging-in-history out of which our sense of self is won. That Pringle adopted the actual Bechuana Boy, and called him Hinza Marossi (‘Hinza’ was the boy’s choice, ‘Marossi’ his father’s name, but the form and occasion of the denomination are Pringle’s), and that the boy travelled with Pringle to England, was baptised and died there, ‘of a pulmonary complaint under which he had for many months suffered with exemplary meekness’, is a sad and ironic extension of the instance so sharply understood by Coleridge.¹¹ It is over this instance that Coleridge presides in this paper, who properly understood the severe propriety of words, and sickness, and home, and therefore what might be lethal in homesickness.

Thus it is we find that we are back at ‘home’—or rather, we find that we do, after all, have something to write ‘home’ about—as Coleridge did.

¹¹ Pringle himself gives some of the history in his notes to ‘The Bechuana Boy’ (from which the quote is taken), *Poems Illustrative of South Africa*, (Cape Town: 1970), 115. See also Jane Meiring, *Thomas Pringle: His Life and Times*, (Cape town: 1968), 138.