Of ‘Native Skulls’ and ‘Noble Caucasians’: Phrenology in Colonial South Africa

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This article traces the origins of racial science in South Africa back to the first half of the nineteenth century. Metropolitan racial theory attracted a substantial following among white settlers in British colonies and the Cape was no exception. Local scientific thinking about race focussed on phrenology, a popular science of character analysis based on the configurations of the brain and skull. But phrenology had differential appeal for British colonial intellectuals according to their broader political affiliations. While humanitarian liberals were critical of new-fangled theories of cerebral determinism that might contradict their cherished belief in the immediate transformative powers of religion and education, anti-liberal ideologues, and especially medical men, used the new racial science to buttress their hostile attitudes towards Africans. The Xhosa Wars of the 1830s and 1840s proved a particularly fertile terrain for sowing the seeds of scientific racism. Frontier violence generated both African skulls, the raw empirical materials that fuelled metropolitan racial science, and a hatred of the Xhosa that made the settler population increasingly receptive to theories of the innate inferiority of the African mind. This case study of phrenology in the early nineteenth century Cape Colony therefore explores the intersection of racial science with colonial politics, medicine and frontier violence.

Introduction

The storage and display of the bodies of indigenous African peoples in European museums is becoming a highly politicised issue in South Africa in the mid-1990s. The campaign to have the remains of the humiliated ‘Hottentot Venus’ returned to her native Cape has now reached the highest political echelons with South African Minister of Arts and Culture, Ben Ngubane, informing the French Minister of Co-operation that ‘the process of healing and restoring of our national dignity and humanity’ would be incomplete without the removal of Saartjie Baartman from the display cabinets of the Musee de l’Homme. A traditional leader, Chief Nicholas Gcaleka, has claimed to have retrieved from Scotland the skull of his descendant, the Xhosa warrior chief Hintsa, and the discovery of five Khoisan heads stashed away in cardboard boxes in the British Museum seems set to provoke further diplomatic controversy.¹

Like the body of Saartjie Baartman and the skull of Hintsa, the macabrely preserved Khoisan heads were taken from the Cape Colony by the British in the early mid-nineteenth century. These campaigns and their dismembered subjects highlight the predatory nature of medicine and racial science in the colonial era and the importance of this historical legacy.

in South Africa. But, until recently, academics have remained peculiarly reluctant to investigate the intellectual roots of racism. The history of racial ideology only began to evoke interest in the early mid-1980s with the publication of George Fredrickson’s comparative study of white supremacy in America and South Africa, Du Toit and Giliomee’s introductory volume of primary documents on early Afrikaner political thought, and Leonard Thompson’s exploration of the key mythological struts of apartheid. More recent literature has challenged their exclusive association of racism with Afrikanerdom by highlighting the role of British settlers in propagating a discourse of ‘empire and savages’ on the Eastern Cape frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century.

While these studies make a powerful argument for the entrenchment of white racism in the pre-industrial era, they confine their attention to mythologies and stereotypes. In the most comprehensive study of intellectual racism to date, published in 1995, Saul Dubow emphasises that the local importance of scientific concepts of race has all too often been ignored. In following the ‘Illicit Union’ between racism and science through a series of interconnected fields – physical anthropology, comparative philology and diffusionist theory, Social Darwinism and eugenics, psychology and Christian-nationalism – Dubow makes a compelling case for the entrenchment of theoretical racism in South Africa by the early decades of the twentieth century. But the nineteenth century antecedents of the ‘full-fledged’ racial science of the segregationist era remain obscure, as Dubow links scientific racism too closely to university structures and underestimates the extent of ethnographic study in an earlier period.

By taking the racial science of phrenology as a case study, I will argue that scientific concepts of race in South Africa considerably predate the twentieth century. Although it would be misleading to exaggerate the pervasiveness of theoretical racism before 1880, there is evidence to suggest that metropolitan theories of racial difference were already filtering through to the Cape Colony as early as the 1820s.

Secondly, this article seeks to locate early racial science at the Cape within the wider context of frontier wars and the contemporary ideological battle between liberals and their enemies. Biological determinism exerted a differential appeal for colonial intellectuals according to their experience of frontier conflict and their associated attitudes towards Africans. Thus, while humanitarian liberals in the Western Cape viewed phrenology with considerable skepticism, it was eagerly seized upon by British settlers in the Eastern Cape, whose military engagements with the Xhosa generated a growing pessimism regarding the African character.

**Phrenology and Race**

Phrenology was a science of character analysis based on the theory that the human mind could be divided into thirty-seven faculties with distinct locations in the brain. For any individual, the strength or weakness of these various ‘organs’ could be measured through an examination of the skull. Founded around the turn of the century by an Austrian anatomist, Franz Gall, this new science of the brain and skull was transported across to

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4 S. Dubow, *Illicit Union: Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1995); also published as *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* (Cambridge, 1995).
Britain where it enjoyed considerable popular support in the decades following 1820. A spate of phrenological societies were established, the British press featured regular articles on the phrenological system and its leading protagonist, George Combe, sold two thousand copies of his book within the first ten days of its publication. As the leading history of the subject emphasises, phrenology was viewed as a respectable field of enquiry and ‘anything but an apparent failure’ in early Victorian Britain.\(^5\) Long after its doctrines had been discredited, there was general agreement that phrenology had contributed indirectly to the later development of psychology by drawing attention to the mind–brain relationship and to the possibility of specific localised mental functions.\(^6\)

Although initially framed as a key to individual psychology, the phrenological system soon became widely applied as a theory of racial difference. The leading proponents of the new discipline almost uniformly adapted their science of the brain to issues of racial differentiation. In one of the first systematic expositions, J. G. Spurzheim explained to potential converts:

> It is of great importance to consider the heads of different nations. Several anatomists and physiologists have endeavoured to point out the particular shape of their heads; and though the observations of this kind which have been made are very defective, they are in favour of, rather than in opposition to, the physiology of the brain. The foreheads of negroes, for instance, are very narrow, and their talents of music and mathematics are in general very limited ... According to Blumenbach, the heads of the Calmucs are depressed from above, but very large laterally about the organ which gives the disposition to covet, and it is accordingly admitted that this nation is inclined to steal.\(^7\)

Such direct associations of brain structure with racial type were taken up by Spurzheim’s Scottish disciples, G. S. Mackenzie and George Combe. Many of the skulls in Mackenzie’s catalogued collection were classified by race: ‘11. Skull of a Turk; 12. Skull of a Carib Chief; 17. Skull of an American Indian; 28, 32. Skull of a Negro’,\(^8\) while Combe believed that the power of mental manifestation bears a proportion to the size of the ‘central organs’ of different ‘races’. Thus he insisted that:

> [T]he Hindoo head is small, and the European large, in precise conformity with the different mental characters ... The Hindoo brain indicates a manifest deficiency in the organs of Combativeness and Destructiveness; while, in the European, these parts are amply developed. The Hindoo is cunning, timid and proud; and in him Secretiveness, Cautiousness and Self-Esteem are large in proportion to the organs last mentioned.\(^9\)

When asked what light his science could cast on the issue of slavery, Combe offered a justification of the institution on the basis that the Negro’s skull was inferior to that of the white man.\(^10\)

In the view of Nancy Steppe phrenology, like the other new sciences of comparative anatomy, physiology and palaeontology, played a major role in the transition to ‘a sense of man as primarily a biological being, embedded in nature and governed by biological laws’.\(^11\) Phrenology contributed to the new racial biology in focussing its attention on the skull, by introducing new implements for the measurement of human crania, and through


urging the collection of a large number of skulls from different nations. Moreover, the doctrines of phrenology were ‘in essence innatist and deterministic, and [in] this aspect ... ed directly into the growing racialism of British thought’.12

The application of phrenology to deviance extended beyond the issue of race. Analysts of European racism and phrenology have often overlooked its close association with criminality in the context of Michel Foucault’s arguments for the growth of the human sciences and an associated transition towards a dominant model of ‘surveillance’ power in early-nineteenth century Europe.13 Crime was implicated in the very foundations of the discipline as Franz Gall initially developed his ideas on the basis of work in prisons in Vienna. His very labels for identifying the different organs of the brain were based partly on his criminal diagnosis by including ‘organs’ like ‘theft’ and ‘murder’. British phrenologists like George Combe were equally zealous in their applications of phrenology to penology. Combe insisted that criminal legislation and prison discipline be based on physiology, wrote numerous articles on phrenology and penal reform, and regularly visited British prisons in order to examine the heads of criminals.14 As a sympathiser with phrenology retrospectively explained, ‘the crucial experiments ... were not made upon average people, but upon abnormal people, such as criminals [his emphasis]’.15

Once transported to the Cape colonial context, phrenology was applied primarily to the issue of racial classification and deviance, although there are echoes of its association with crime. The Foucauldian transition to a new ‘disciplinary’ micro-physics of power remained only partial in the nineteenth century Cape context.16 In practice, the developing colonial discourse of surveillance should not obscure the extent to which the practise of power and punishment continued to exemplify quite direct and brutal disciplining of the African body.

The Cape Liberal Critique

The new-fangled theory of ‘organs’ and humps attracted little sympathy among a buoyantly optimistic generation of Cape liberals. Their belief in the possibilities of sudden civilisation contradicted developing doctrines of cerebral determinism. The ideology of liberalism, which took root at the Cape from the 1820s among missionaries, merchants and a rising middle class, was infused with an overarching evangelical belief in the unity of the human species and the potential equality of all its varieties. Early Cape liberals advocated a staunchly environmental theory of racial difference, often in explicit opposition to competing theories of innate and natural difference.17

The earliest indications of the transmission of phrenological ideas and works to the Cape come from the letters of the poet and 1820 settler, Thomas Pringle. Pringle was a personal friend of the influential Scottish phrenologists, Combe and Mackenzie, and sent them occasional empirical data. In June 1823 he informed Mackenzie of some forthcoming contributions to his skull collection:

I now avail myself of an opportunity by a medical friend to transmit you a Bushman or

14 For later examples of the association between phrenology and crime see the retrospective accounts of W. M Williams, A Vindication of Phrenology (London, 1894) and W. N. East, The Relation of the Skull and Brain to Crime (London, 1928).
15 Williams, A Vindication of Phrenology, p. 46.
16 See Crais, White Supremacy and Black Resistance for an incisive, but exaggerated emphasis on the pervasiveness of disciplinary power in pre-industrial South Africa.
17 See A. Bank, ‘Liberals and their Enemies: Racial Ideology at the Cape of Good Hope, 1820 to 1850’ (PhD, Cambridge University, 1995), pp. 82–140.
Bosjesman’s scull for the use of the Phrenological Society. Of the history of the subject I can say little except that he was shot by some Boors of my acquaintance on the Caffer Frontier in the act of stealing cattle – and being left till the vultures and hyenas had picked his bones I had the scull forwarded to me. I sent a Caffer’s scull to London by Dr McMunn in November last with the view of being forwarded to you. Mr Stevenson who takes charge of the Bushman’s scull has also been so good as [to] promise to present you with an Indian scull which he has brought from Calcutta and of which he can furnish the history.18

Pringle’s gifts to phrenological friends indicate the extent to which the rise of scientific racism in Europe relied on colonial raw materials and case histories. Although the travellers, Lichtenstein and Delalande, had transported Khoikhoi, Bushman and Xhosa crania back to the Berlin and Paris museums in earlier decades, Pringle was the first colonist to furnish European racial scientists with skulls. In the 1830s the colonial doctor, J. W. Fairbridge, followed his precedent by sending Xhosa and Bushman samples to his phrenological friend in London, John Epps.19 As will he noted later, medical and military men on the colonial frontier served as particularly active patrons of the new sciences of the skull towards the middle of the nineteenth century.

In an era which predates the development of the type of indigenous racial theory described by Dubow, the relationship between international and local centres of scientific knowledge may still be cast in terms of the metaphor of dependency theory: ‘raw empirical material is gathered at the periphery, manufactured as an intellectual commodity in the metropoles, and re-exported as finished ideological goods to the underdeveloped world’.20

For all his efforts at gathering the colonial raw materials, even Pringle appears to have remained sceptical regarding the finished ideological goods. In a letter penned to George Combe on the same day, he admitted to ‘not [being] a decided convert’.21 His friend and liberal ally, John Fairbairn, was considerably more outspoken in his criticisms. In a leading article of his pioneering newspaper, the South African Commercial Advertiser, Fairbairn subjected the ‘new sect of Philosophers’ in Europe to some lighthearted satire:

[Their] chief doctrine is – that man’s real character and dispositions arise entirely from the relative size of different portions or subdivisions of his Brain: – and, consequently, that a skilful eye may detect your designs and natural desires, by merely considering the configuration of your skull … Now, if these views be correct, the researches of the Phrenologist may bring a great many very useful truths to light. If, for instance, you carry in the corners of a square forehead a praiseworthy development of the Organ of Order or Arrangement, and your wife happens not only to be deficient in this respect, but exhibits an alarming protrusion immediately above the Organs of Combativeness and Language … you will he involved every day of the week in the most unfriendly altercations.22

By way of a more serious critique, the editor provided his readers with a brief history of phrenology:

When the leading doctrines of Phrenology were first promulgated by Dr Gall, the clergy denounced them as leading to Materialism and Infidelity; the Logicians condemned his division of the human mind as fanciful and inconsistent with reason and observation; and the odd names which he bestowed on many of the Faculties and Propensities, furnished abundant matter for sarcasm and merriment to the wits.

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20 Dubow, Illicit Union, p. 11.
22 South African Commercial Advertiser, 16 November 1825.
Despite conceding a measure of popularity and ‘a milder and more mitigated zeal in its present professors’, the article concluded:

Serious difficulties have lately been felt in protecting their theories against some stubborn facts that threatened the whole science with annihilation; and the manner of defence adopted by Phrenologists has not tended to raise our opinion of their modesty. Take for instance the case of John Thurbell. A gambler, swindler and murderer whose head was subjected to scrutiny, but the scull was declared to exhibit a ‘very creditable and gentlemanlike configuration with the Organ of Benevolence very large!!’

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The Cape liberal leader’s attitude towards phrenology showed little sign of softening in subsequent years. A later article relied on the authority of mainstream medicine to discredit phrenology and more outrightly dismissed the ‘absurdity’ of its doctrines:

A work has lately been published, entitled ‘Observations on the Phrenological Development of Burk, Hare and other atrocious murderers’ by Thomas Stone, President of the Royal Medical Society, Edinburgh, which contains facts which surely will, if any thing can, convince the partisans of phrenology of the absurdity of attempting to deduce the character of men from certain bumps on the skull, called organs. The first question discussed by Mr. Stone is ‘Does the phrenological development of Burk correspond with his acknowledged character?’ ... For Mr. Stone the ‘organ of destructiveness’ in Burk was below average size, the ‘organ of benevolence’ and the ‘organ of conscientiousness’ above average size.

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The literary periodical edited by the liberal librarian, A. J. Jardine, also made occasional reference to phrenology. In a review of a recent phrenological work, the author (probably Jardine himself) expressed a more favourable, though still cautious, attitude towards phrenology. While the reviewer recommended A Catechism of Phrenology (Edinburgh 1831) as ‘an excellent text-book for the student’ and one calculated ‘to inform and enlighten even the most obtuse intellects on the subject’, he remained unconvinced by the new science. Like Pringle and Fairbairn, he did not reckon himself ‘to be amongst the admirers or supporters of what is called the science of Phrenology’, later assuring his readers that he was ‘not one of the faithful’.

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The Phrenological Faction

While phrenology fell on stony ground among liberals in the Western Cape, it was received with enthusiasm among those ideologues with frontier experience and a more unambiguously ignoble view of the ‘savage’ state. The 1830s and 1840s witnessed a backlash against the relatively sanguine racial ideology of the liberals among the established Dutch colonial community and incoming British immigrants. The British settler community on the Eastern Cape frontier were the most receptive to scientific racism as theories of biological determinism were used to buttress their growing pessimism regarding the civilising mission. Although it is difficult to gauge exactly how widely phrenological ideas spread at the Cape, they were evidently taken up and disseminated by prominent figures in the colonial elite.

Better known as an intrepid explorer of the southern African interior and founder of the South African Museum, Andrew Smith was among the first local adherents of the phrenological system. Born in Scotland in 1797, Smith read medicine at Edinburgh University in 1819 and took up a post as a military doctor on the Cape’s eastern frontier from 1821 to 1825. During his years as surgeon of the forces, he showed a keen interest

23 South African Commercial Advertiser, 16 November 1825.
24 South African Commercial Advertiser, 28 October 1829. For a more passing satirical reference to phrenology by Fairbairn see South African Commercial Advertiser, 7 January 1829.
25 The Cape of Good Hope Literary Gazette, Vol. 1, No. 14, 29 June 1831. I am grateful to Kirsten McKenzie for following up this reference.
in ethnography, compiling hundreds of manuscript pages on Xhosa manners, customs and physical characteristics. These formative impressions probably informed the series of lectures he later delivered in Cape Town on the subject of comparative anatomy.

In a letter to George Combe on the issue of phrenology, Thomas Pringle reported having lent his friend’s recently published *Essays on Phrenology* ‘to the surgeon of the forces + some of the other principal medical people’. Smith and his colleagues were evidently ‘much pleased with it’. Pringle deposited Combe’s book in the South African Public Library, where it could be consulted along with numerous other works on phrenology and comparative anatomy: Gall and Spurzheim’s *Physiognomical System* (1815), Lawrence’s *Lectures on Physiology and Zoology* (1823), Blumenbach’s *Institutions of Physiology* (1820) and Mackenzie’s *Illustrations of Phrenology* (1820). Subsequent catalogues record that Pieter Camper’s infamous theory of the facial angle and Combe’s later phrenological works were also accessible to local readers, although there is no way of knowing how often they were consulted.

Andrew Smith’s predecessor as surgeon of the forces on the Cape’s eastern frontier occupies a pivotal position in the development of the new theoretical racism in Europe. Like Smith, Robert Knox was trained as a doctor in Scotland at a time when Scottish universities were emphatically dominant in the field of medicine and, especially, anatomy. Between 1817 and 1820 Knox served as a military doctor in the Eastern Cape, a period covering the Fourth Frontier War. During these years he worked under Andries Stockenstrom, who later recalled the Scottish surgeon’s deep ‘ethnological’ interests and his fondness for ‘dissect[-ing] the many subjects which unfortunately presented themselves’. According to Philip Curtin, it was this experience of frontier conflict that prompted Knox’s interest in the anatomy of ‘the various South African races’ and laid the groundwork for his later theorising about the role of race in history. In his well known book *Races of Men*, published in 1850, and in subsequent articles in the journal of the British Anthropological Society, Knox developed the idea that race conflict was the motor force and central theme of human history. In Curtin’s assessment Robert Knox, as a precursor of James Hunt and the more overtly racist strand of mid-nineteenth century anthropology, was ‘the real founder of British racism and one of the key figures in the general western movement toward a dogmatic pseudo-scientific racism’.

Though by no means as ardent and influential a scientific racist as his predecessor, there are echoes of Knox in Andrew Smith’s ethnography. In publishing his ‘Observations Relative to the Origin and History of the Bushmen’ in the local scientific periodical, the *South African Quarterly Journal*, Smith predicted the demise of the Bushmen with barely concealed enthusiasm. His article began by anticipating the possible ‘extinction’ of what he termed ‘the genuine Hottentot’, a broadly designated ‘race’ distinct from the ‘Caffer [race]’. He explicitly defined Bushmen in terms of a biologically based notion of racial ‘purity’, suggesting that ‘The majority of the Bushmen population, according to the restricted sense in which the term is here to be understood, consists of pure Hottentots’, that

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26 For a discussion of these ‘Anthropological Studies in Caffreland’, see P. R. Kirby, *Sir Andrew Smith* (Cape Town, 1965), pp. 29–42.
is, those who were neither ‘the offspring of an intercourse with former and other coloured persons, or else the actual outcasts of other races’.32

In Smith’s analysis, the ‘apparent certainty of the approaching extinction, of at least that savage portion of the race’ was unrelated to the commando killings of the colonists. On the contrary, he expressed some surprise at the unwillingness of Bushmen to believe in the ‘liberality’ of the Cape farmers and government, and attributed their suspicion towards strangers to ‘a consciousness of their offences, and a conviction that their habits and conduct towards all other nations or tribes are of such a character as to warrant anything but kindness or friendship’. The ‘rapid decay of the race’ was explained rather in terms of ‘intermixture with other varieties’ (an early hint at the concept of racial degeneration) and ‘the gradual extension of civilised life’, a process that could scarcely be viewed with regret in light of the accompanying ethnography. Drawing on personal experience, as well as travel and missionary narratives, Smith condemned the dying Bushmen race in unambiguous terms. They were characterised as ‘deeply versed in deceit’, ‘treacherous in the extreme’, masters of ‘cruelty … in its most shocking forms’, repulsive in their eating habits and strongly prone to ‘laziness and … thieving’.33

In his capacity as editor of the Quarterly Journal, Smith included contributions that used emergent theories of scientific racism to support such pessimistic portraits of the African character. Another surgeon with experience of the Cape frontier shared Smith’s antipathy towards the Bushmen, describing them as ‘filthy’, ‘indolent in their disposition’ and ‘peculiarly forbidding’. Drawing on Pieter Camper’s comparative anatomy, he wrote that their ‘facial angle’ bears a remarkable similarity ‘to that of the monkey’ and went on to flaunt his knowledge of the latest science of the brain: ‘The figures drawn by them on the rocks are often remarkable for the correctness of the outline; they hit the attitude of the animal, but seldom care about truth in colouring; speaking phrenologically, they have the organ of form but not of colour’.34

The reliance on racial biology was taken up in a more directed and systematic manner in an article ‘On the Influence of Climate on National Character’ in the April–June 1830 edition. The transcript of a recent lecture by one Prof. Schouw delivered in Copenhagen, this article argued that environmental influences, whether climactic or social, were minor by comparison with ‘innate qualities’ in the shaping of different ‘races or families of mankind’. Schouw’s oratory offered a direct critique of the dominant eighteenth century emphasis on climate as an explanation for racial diversity:

In order to eradicate the common error, which induces us to consider nature as the almost exclusive modeller of the character of nations, it is of paramount importance we should carefully keep in view, that … the climate, soil and natural constitution of a country, are by no means capable of explaining all the appearances which will claim the inquirer’s attention … We know it is customary to ascribe the dark complexion of the negro to the extraordinary heat of the solar ray in his native clime; but do not the olive-coloured Hindoo and the fairer complexioned tenant of the South Seas inhabit similar latitudes? … Though surrounded by the same meteorological circumstances, there is a striking dissimilarity in the complexional characteristics of the European, the Asiatic, and the aboriginal Indian of North America.35

Complexional diversity was closely followed up with an account of racial stereotyping within a cultural hierarchy:

The Europeans cultivate the soil, dwell in towns, live under regular forms of government and

in general are devoted to the arts and sciences; whereas most of the Asiatic regions, where the circumstances of climate are similar, are tenanted by nomadic tribes, who derive their livelihood from rearing cattle, are entire strangers to social polity, and have no conception of a more advanced state of civilisation; whilst the aborigines of North America are untutored savages wandering from wood to plain. The feeble, peaceable, thrifty Hindoo lives beneath a climate scarcely differing from that which is breathed by the athletic, fierce and lazy negro.\textsuperscript{36}

Having denied any formative role for climatic conditions in shaping racial character, Schouw went on to express equal reservation regarding socio-political factors. In discussing ‘the effects of what are termed “moral causes” on national character’, he insisted that too great [a] stress has been laid upon isolated appearances. One party will profess to resolve the effects to the influence of legislation and political institutions; another will refer them to education; and a third, to the impulses of religion. All these causes are undoubtedly co-operative; nay, they are far more influential than any physical [i.e. climatic] impulses; yet they are of trivial moment, when placed by the side of those powerful agents which exist in the innate qualities of the human mind: for what are called ‘moral causes’ are usually the immediate result of national character [emphasis added].\textsuperscript{37}

Although the article failed to elaborate on the exact nature of the biological roots of race, the emphasis on ‘the innate qualities of the human mind’ suggests a direct reliance on emergent sciences of the brain like phrenology and comparative anatomy.

The editorial sympathy for phrenological ideas was taken up in a later case reference which contrasts markedly with Fairbairn’s satirical treatment of the theory of organs and bumps. A late 1833 journal edition included a two page case history of an uncannily accurate skull reading by Dr Elliotson, ‘the distinguished’ President of the London Phrenological Society. Through phrenological analysis of the skull of the infamous Dick Turpin, Elliotson correctly diagnosed his disposition as ‘violent, sly, witty and having a love of children’. The London Literary Club resolved that the experiment ‘affords a foundation for the truth of phrenology’.\textsuperscript{38}

There is further evidence of the seepage of phrenological doctrines among Western Cape colonists from newspaper sources of the period. A correspondent to the local anti-liberal mouthpiece, \textit{De Zuid-Afrikaan}, made explicit use of the language of phrenology and notions of innate difference on the subject of ‘Infantile Education’. In an attempt to emphasise the limiting implications of phrenology on social reform, and notably education, the author suggested: ‘Both feelings and intellect are innate – they are only improved and directed by education; and as long as it is believed that education can create faculties, youth will be maleducated; but when the influence of innate disposition is duly appreciated, the necessity will be understood of studying each individual’s natural powers for his proper education’.\textsuperscript{39}

The fact that the editors excluded a translation of the letter in the corresponding Dutch edition of the newspaper hints at the differential ethnic appeal of phrenology among the Cape colonial elite. Notwithstanding the predominantly anti-liberal racial ideology of the established settler community, there is no evidence whatever of any support for theories of scientific racism among the Cape Dutch in this period. The ethnography of the older settlers at the Cape owed much more to the evolution of a settler society based on forms of unfree labour than to metropolitan currents of thought,\textsuperscript{40} whether in the form of egalitarian evangelical ideas or theories of biological determinism. Those intellectual currents that did

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{South African Quarterly Journal}, 3, p. 337.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{South African Quarterly Journal}, (October–December 1833), pp. 75–76.
\textsuperscript{39} M. T., \textit{De Zuid-Afrikaan}, 26 January 1838.
\textsuperscript{40} See Du Toit and Giliomee, \textit{Afrikaner Political Thought}, especially chapter two.
filter through to the Cape from the Netherlands in the first half of the nineteenth century were typically of a fiercely anti-scientific theological stamp.\footnote{For a lucid and detailed exposition of these links, see A. Du Toit, ‘The Afrikaners’ Failed Liberal Moment’, in J. Butler, R. Elphick and D. Welsh (eds), Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: its History and Prospects (Connecticut, 1987).}

**Phrenology and Medicine: The Case of H. E. Macartney**

The only mention of racial science in written Dutch at the Cape takes the form of a highly satirical portrait of the British immigrant and phrenological zealot, Dr H. E. Macartney. In a play written and performed in Cape Town in the early 1830s, Macartney features as an outspoken opponent of temperance (alias Macthirsty) who constantly leaps from his chair to read the heads of his dumbstruck colleagues. After a ponderous analysis of the skull of a member of the Cape temperance lobby, Dr Samuel Bailey (alias Delirium Tremens), Macartney informs his opponent: You were not born to be an advocate of temperance … Not only is your Organ of Moderation missing, but … the Organ of Punch-bibactiveness, or Sense of Brandydrinking is so large! (He shows the length of his forefinger).\footnote{Dutch original: ‘Gy zyt voor geen Temperantist gehoren … Niet alleen ontbreekt het Zintuig der Matigheid geheel, maar … the Organ of Punch-bibactiveness, of het Zintuig van Brandewyndrinktachtigheid is by u zoo groot! (Hy wysst de lengte van zyn voorsten vinger).’ F. C. L. Bosman, De Nieuwe Ridderorde of De Temperantisten deur C. E. Boniface (Johannesburg, 1954), p. 159.}

Macartney’s own ‘Organ of Moderation’ was also seemingly in short supply as he soon came to assume a leading role as the Cape’s most racist phrenological propagandist, spreading his ideas through public lectures, letters to the colonial government and an active practice as the only local professional phrenologist. He emerged as an outspoken advocate of conquest and land appropriation in the Eastern Cape in the aftermath of the 1835 frontier war, a time when British settlers were increasingly receptive to more imperialistic solutions to the frontier problem.\footnote{See Bank, ‘Liberals and Their Enemies’, pp. 189–236.} His overlapping views on phrenology and frontier policy offer compelling evidence of the racial application of the new science of the brain and the powerful political role of medicine in the Cape colonial context.

Constructing the biographical profile of H. E. Macartney presents some difficulties as he features neither in the standard medical histories of the period nor in the Dictionary of South African Biography.\footnote{See E. H. Burrows, A History of Medicine in South Africa (Cape Town, 1968); P. W. Laidler Dictionary of South African Biography.} The earliest reference appears in the medical records of February 1830 when the Supreme Medical Committee supported his application for permission to practice as a ‘surgeon and accoucheur, Mr Macartney [having] produced his Diploma as Surgeon from the Royal College of Surgeons, London’.\footnote{Cape Archives, Medical Committee 1, Minutes of Proceedings 26 February 1830. Unfortunately, in Macartney’s case there is no additional information on education or work experience.} Macartney’s diploma is dated August 1816 and it may have been during this training period in London that he first made his acquaintance with the rising biological sciences. Newspaper sources reveal that he worked as an East India Company doctor before arriving at the Cape in 1829.\footnote{De Zuid-Afrikaan, 14 May 1830.} 

The influence of medicine in the shaping of theories of race is among the most striking features of the rise of scientific racism in Europe and the United States. Within the wider context of the growth and emergent hegemony of science, medical practitioners became increasingly powerful in the process of knowledge production. The list of influential racial theorists with medical training is extensive: in Britain they include John Hunter, Charles White, William Lawrence and Robert Knox; on the continent J. F. Blumenbach, Franz Gall, ...
J. G. Spurzheim and Georges Cuvier; in the United States John Augustine Smith and S. G. Morton.\(^{47}\) In colonial contexts, it was doctors like H. E. Macartney (and Andrew Smith) who played the leading role in disseminating the ideas of these racial scientists.

Shortly after his arrival at the Cape, Macartney embarked on a programme of public enlightenment. In May 1830 the *Zuid-Afrikaan* notified its readership that: ‘A course of lectures on Phrenology by Dr Macartney is in contemplation: a feasible opportunity is thus offered to such as entertain a proper respect for their public and patriotic propensities, to present themselves in order to have their corresponding bumps properly developed, so that any future doubt or cavil on the matter may be eternally set at rest’. There was evidently some enthusiasm for the doctor’s ideas as a correspondent in the July edition effusively praised his lectures on ‘Physics and Physiology’ for their ‘elegance of language’ and ‘originality of conceptions’, anticipating the ‘dawn of science’ at the Cape.\(^ {48} \)

In one of the lectures in this series Macartney discussed the division of the human race into various families of mankind. In the tenth lecture, ‘the varieties of Mankind; their peculiarities in form and feature, habits, and customs were enumerated; also, the great five families into which the human race have been divided, viz., the Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay, were explained; as likewise, their physical and intellectual qualities’.\(^ {49} \) Macartney’s fivefold classification of racial types was taken from the leading European comparative anatomist, J. F. Blumenbach, who laid the foundations for race classification based on skull measurement. Although a strong defender of Negro abilities and monogenesis, Blumenbach coined the term ‘Caucasian’ and set it up as an ideal type.\(^ {50} \) He owned the most extensive contemporary collection of skulls during the 1790–1820 period and has justifiably been described as the ‘founder of craniology’.\(^ {51} \)

The links between Macartney’s interest in racial classification and phrenology emerge more explicitly from his activities in the Eastern Cape in the mid-1830s where he appears to have attracted a following. Shortly after the 1834–1835 frontier war, Macartney moved his medical practice to Grahamstown and wasted no time in propagating his scientific ideas in the frontier districts. The *Graham’s Town Journal* advertised: ‘Public Lectures. A short course of entertaining Lectures on the now popular science of Phrenology will be delivered by Dr Macartney, the first to take place on Monday 23rd inst, at 7 o’clock in the Evening. They will be familiarly explained and illustrated by various casts of celebrated characters, and models of the skulls of different nations’. The newspaper reported on the 26th that the initial lecture, devoted chiefly to ‘explaining the leading principles of the science’, had attracted a ‘rather numerous auditory’ and advertised for the next in the series to be delivered on Wednesday, 2 December: ‘The subject of the Lecture will be ‘The Perceptive and Reflective Faculties’. It will be shewn how much these powers depend on the size and shape of the forehead by various casts and skulls of native tribes, exhibiting its distinct and peculiar formation’.\(^ {52} \)

These theories were evidently directly applied to racial differences across the colonial frontier. In a lecture on the ‘Feelings and Moral Sentiments’, Macartney indicated that ‘some Kafir skulls, lately received, will be examined in the course of the evening and the


\(^{48}\) *De Zuid-Afrikaan*, 15 July 1831.

\(^{49}\) H. E. Macartney, *A Lecture on the Subject of Life and Death* (Cape Town, 1831). I am grateful to Kirsten McKenzie for verifying this reference. Unfortunately, the full transcript of Macartney’s tenth lecture has not survived.


\(^{52}\) *Graham’s Town Journal*, 26 November 1835.
character described according to the principles [of phrenology]. Thus the new science of
the brain was employed as a means of physically and morally differentiating colonists from
their ‘savage’ neighbours, an idea which doubtless generated enthusiasm in a climate of
growing hostility towards the Xhosa.

In a well publicised pamphlet addressed to Governor George Napier in 1840, Macartney
expressed his vehement opposition to a frontier policy based on conciliatory treaties.
Writing from the frontier town of Bathurst, he declared ‘the present Treaties defective in
principle’ as ‘they have only worked favourably on the Kafir side’. Macartney viewed the
Treaty System as a supreme example of the false philanthropy of Cape liberals and their
metropolitan allies:

Your Excellency must be aware that these Treaties were framed under an erroneous impression
– at a time when it was supposed, and indeed industriously circulated, that the Kafir tribes had
been hardly dealt by and were the injured party. Such was the feeling and consent of public
opinion in England when those Treaties were made … ‘Give them all – give everything’ was
the word. And when it was determined that their own country be restored – the principle of
justice was overstepped by surrendering at the same time a large tract of the colony to which
they had no just right or title whatever.

Macartney proceeded to address the issue of Xhosa cattle theft in a way that fused his
anti-liberal political rhetoric with racial science and stereotype:

Through making the restitution of stolen cattle depend on the slight trace they leave, you adopt
a mode, which of all others, is the most favourable to call forth the dexterity and cunning of
the Kafir to counteract or elude this clue to detection. With some exceptions, the Kafirs cannot
be called robbers – those daring characters that come openly, and regardless of consequences
pillage and plunder: no, they are thieves, dexterous thieves, and all their energies are directed
to the most stealthy and dexterous modes of indulging this strong propensity of their nature.

The term ‘propensity’ was likely drawn from phrenology as J. G. Spurzheim’s Physiognomical System divided human ‘moral sentiments’ into ‘faculties’ and ‘propensities’ with the
Organ of ‘covetousness’ or ‘theft’ being attributed a localised seat in the human brain.
Macartney’s public lectures on phrenology no doubt emphasised the differential racial
development of organs such as covetousness, secretiveness and destructiveness with a
model Xhosa skull as an on-hand illustration.

The phrenologist’s own ‘Plain and Easy Way to Settle the Frontier Question’ represented a return to Governor Benjamin D’Urban’s policy of land seizure and the creation of
a police state in Xhosaland. Macartney recommended that the territory between the Fish and
the Keiskamma be annexed and transformed into a ‘New District of Victoria’ subject to
British law: ‘An active native police might be organised within the district, together with
all the other accessories for the punishment and repression of crime’. Such ideas found
resonance within a British frontier settler community anxious to assert control over an
African labour force within the colony, while maintaining security from those beyond its
borders.

Macartney’s political campaign was sustained by his continued zeal for phrenology:
during the early 1840s he actively plied a trade as a colonial phrenologist and continued

53 Graham’s Town Journal, 10 December 1835.
54 Macartney’s Plain and Easy Way to Settle the Frontier Question was published both in Cape Town and
Grahamstown. Further evidence of his anti-liberal policy recommendations may be gleaned from a letter to the
Graham’s Town Journal, 16 November 1843.
55 H. E. Macartney, M.R.C.S., A Plain and Easy Way to Settle the Frontier Question, (Graham’s Town and Cape
Town 1840).
56 H. E. Macartney, A Plain and Easy Way to Settle the Frontier Question, p. 8.
spreading his ideas through public lectures. A prospective Grahamstown clientele were notified in July 1843: ‘Medical. Dr Macartney will be happy to receive any person, that may wish to consult him ‘medically’ between 3 and 5 o’clock in the Afternoon at his Cottage, Settler’s Hill’.58 While on tour in the Western Cape, he announced his willingness ‘to receive, during his stay, any persons who may wish to consult him, or to have their own or their children’s Heads examined’.59

In yet another series of public lectures in Cape Town, the indefatigable doctor aired his conservative views on ‘the system of Treaties’ and ‘contrasted the manner of the inhabitants and the native tribes’.60 A report in the Cape Town Mail suggests that his racist theories were not taken too seriously in the local liberal press:

In his last lecture the Doctor gave various humorous details of his peregrinations on the Frontier, and stated his views – hardly less amusing – relative to the Caffers and the Caffer Treaties … [T]he Doctor’s plans and projects – representing as he does the ultra-illiberal side of the question – are so embellished by the flowers of his oratory, and his admirable sketches – that although scarcely agreeing with a single word he uttered, it was impossible on the whole not to be delighted with his lecture, as putting in such a light that it could be laughed at, the ‘original prescription’ for dealing with Aborigines of new countries as the offspring of Ham, accursed, of course [and set apart from] the noble ‘Caucasian’ race.61

Like his anti-liberal ally on the Eastern Cape frontier, John Mitford Bowker, H. E. Macartney yoked the older biblical notion of the curse of Ham to his nineteenth century racism and fierce hostility to philanthropy. Ironically, like Bowker, Macartney appears to have met his death in the heated conflict of ‘races’ on the colonial frontier.62

The fact that anti-liberal extremists, like Macartney and Bowker, worked within a biblical – and therefore monogenist framework – highlights the continuing centrality of theology in Cape intellectual life. There is no contemporary evidence of support for the polygenist belief in the early mid-nineteenth century Cape Colony in the separate creation of different ‘races’ and therefore little to support claims that the British settlers of 1820 ‘straddled an earlier environmental monogenism and a later polygenetic racism’.63 Even in Britain the hegemony of the biblical paradigm was only effectively challenged in the latter part of the century, as the monogenist ethnographic model of James Cowles Prichard dominated Victorian anthropology from 1830 through to the late 1850s.64

Phrenology, Art and War

The authority of the new racial sciences was also invoked by those outside the medical profession. Phrenology attracted the keen interest of one of the Cape’s pioneering professional artists, Thomas Baines, whose memoirs and works offer unusual insight into the overlap between art and science in the Cape colonial context.

Baines was born in 1820 and arrived at the Cape in the early 1840s, spending the years between 1848 and 1853 on the colony’s turbulent eastern frontier. Baines’s art and racial

58 Graham’s Town Journal, 6 and 13 July 1843.
59 South African Commercial Advertiser, 8 November 1845.
60 These lectures were reported in Sam Sly’s African Journal, the Cape Town Mail and the South African Commercial Advertiser in October–November 1845. I am grateful to Anthony Whyte for alerting me to Macartney’s renewed activities as a popular lecturer in the Western Cape.
61 Cape Town Mail, 25 November 1845.
63 Crais, White Supremacy, p. 126.
ideology is characterised by a tension between romanticism and imperialism. If the romantic face of Baines was often expressed in his picturesque paintings, his self-confident imperial chauvinism was more pronounced in his private writings. But this ambivalence between the romantic and the racist Baines may also be seen in his contrasting aesthetic of the African body and the African mind.

The artist’s impressions of the African body were highly favourable, drawing on classical convention. In a diary entry in 1848, he records that the African population of Fort Beaufort ‘forcibly reminded me … of the statues of antiquity’ given their ‘fine figures, unconstrained and easy motions, and graceful drapery’. His picturesque watercolour of ‘A Fingo Village’ in this district is foregrounded with well-draped figures attentive to the oratory of an African woman rendered in dramatic and statuesque pose.

Baines was equally active in converting the minds of Africans into art objects, though here they were invested with negative content. In order to illustrate the deficient constitution of the African brain, Baines used his sketchpad and the authority of the latest science of the skull:

The back of the [Xhosa] head seemed disproportionately large, and, though little skilled in phrenology, I confess that its configuration was vividly recalled to my mind by the words of a friend, murdered a short time previously … by Hottentot deserters, who, using the skull of a favourite monkey in illustration of his favourite science, made me observe the great preponderance of the animal over the intellectual development. But, that the reader may have an opportunity of forming his own opinion upon this point and not depend entirely upon mine, it may be as well to offer to his notice the outline in various positions, of a skull which I picked up some months previously on the banks of the Keiskamma, and copied as accurately as my ability permitted on the spot.

As this diary entry indicates, this sketch was designed to emphasise the dominance of the animal over the intellectual faculties in the configuration of the Xhosa head. The skull is outlined in pencil from six different angles and appears to have a noticeably elongated aspect. It is also suggestively titled: ‘A Query to Phrenologists: Was this Man a Cattle Thief?’ At a time when the Xhosa were almost uniformly stereotyped as ‘inveterate thieves’ by British frontier settlers, the question was evidently rhetorical.

The artist’s interest in phrenology intensified in subsequent months. On an expedition from his Grahamstown base towards Sandile’s kraal on the south-east bank of the Keiskamma in August 1849, Baines made contact with a frontier racial scientist given to hands-on applications of phrenology:

[I]n passing the store of Mr McLashlan, contractor’s agent, [I] was invited by him to see a work he had formerly published on phrenology and which he wished to republish on a larger scale with illustrations of the Kafir developments. As the most likely place for our purpose he proposed adjourning to a canteen kept by Mr Francis, where in a short time we were favoured by a visit from the late Paramount Chief of Kafirland, Sandile … [I was made to feel] sundry bumps or organs under his wooly hair, which I did not understand – but I suppose might be guessed nearly enough as acquisitiveness, secretiveness, and destructiveness.

A few days later, Baines reported that he was taken by McLashan to Sandile’s home. The rest of the week was apparently spent ‘in sketching characters for the Phrenologist’ including profiles of Xhosa chiefs. McLashan praised Baines for drawing more than just ‘a likeness of countenance’, but ‘phrenologically correct’ sketches. Unfortunately, there is no

further trace of the phrenological activities of McLashan in Xhosaland nor on his proposed book on phrenology.69

As in the case of Macartney, Thomas Baines’s interest in phrenology dovetailed neatly with his expressly hostile view of Africans beyond the frontier. At various points in his Journal Baines describes the Bushmen as having a debased language and resembling a ‘tame monkey’, while the etymology of the word ‘Kafir’ is seen to be ‘derived from one or other of two Arabic words, ‘Cafara’ – to lie, and ‘Kafir’, a waste, either of them sufficiently applicable’. Personal descriptions of Xhosa chiefs were prone to relapse into crude racist remarks as when he refers to the semi-conscious intoxication of Sandile in a frontier canteen as ‘the happiest moment in a Kafir’s life’.70

Such attitudes towards the Xhosa motivated a growing antipathy towards the meddling of arm-chair humanitarians. Following his involvement as the official colonial artist of the 1850–1853 frontier war, Baines shuddered at the thought that ‘the black man should ever regain possession of any part of South Africa which has been occupied by the white’, attributing such heated visions to ‘mistaken philanthropists, whose ideas of savage life would be considerably modified by a few months’ actual experience’.71

As Jeff Peires so vividly demonstrates, the actual experience of the ‘Riverman’s War’ (1850–1853) did involve ‘the progressive dehumanization of both sides in the course of obloody and bitter conflict’.72 The means employed by the British army in procuring native skulls were often grisly in the extreme. Stephen Lakeman remembered strange rituals in the Cape’s battle zone:

Doctor A – of the 60th had asked my men to procure for him a few native skulls of both sexes. This task was easily accomplished. One morning they brought back to camp about two dozen heads of various ages. As these were not supposed to be in a presentable state for the doctor’s acceptance, the next night they turned my vat into a cauldron for the removal of superfluous flesh. And there these men sat, gravely smoking their pipes during the live-long night, and stirring round and round the heads in that seething boiler, as though they were cooking black-apple dumplings.73

It is not entirely clear how Lakeman’s men procured these skulls, but the heads of women were presumably not taken from battlefields. According to Peires, enemy bodies were frequently mutilated by the British military and Lakeman’s account is not an isolated instance of their boiling off of black skins and facial flesh.

The active role of the military as patrons of medical men and metropolitan phrenologists is evident in other war memoirs. W. R. King proudly described his acquisition at the body-strewn battlefield of Waterkloof: ‘I took the liberty of putting [a fine specimen of a Xhosa head] into my saddle-bag, and afterwards brought it home with me to Scotland, where it has been much admired by phrenologists for its fine development’.74

The catalogue of specimens contained in the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in London and compiled by a leading physical anthropologist of the Victorian era, W. H. Flower, offers some glimpses into the mechanisms of the transmission of colonial empirical materials to the metropole and of the role of colonial doctors and military men in that process. The samples classified in the subsection on South Africa include:

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69 According to Kennedy, the death of one Patrick Maclachlan was reported in the Graham’s Town Journal in November 1871 and a William McGlashan commanded a Fingo Company in 1847, but neither published books on phrenology. Kennedy, Thomas Baines’ African Journal, p. 145.
70 Kennedy, Thomas Baines’ African Journal, p. 146.
71 Ibid., p. 306.
72 Cited in Peires, The Dead Will Arise, p. 22.
73 Cited in ibid., p. 24.
74 Cited in ibid., p. 24.
The Catalogues of violence. The skull of a Kaffir (M); from a ‘head man’ or chief shot by a party of the Rifle Brigade at Mount Coke, British Caffraria, during the war in May 1847, presented by W. T. Black, Staff-Surgeon H.M. Army 1866.

1296. The skull of a Hottentot, M, ‘obtained and prepared by the donor when stationed at Whittlesea, North Victoria, Cape of Good Hope’. It belonged to a rebel killed in the siege and capture of Shiloh from the Hottentots, February 1851, by the British forces under Major Tylden, R.E., presented by W. T. Black, Staff-Surgeon H.M. Army, 1866.75

The surgeon to Somerset Hospital, Henry Bickersteth was evidently another keen patron of the racial scientists as he presented at least four skulls to the Royal College collection around 1850.76

The case histories of such skulls, whether presented by travellers, settlers, medics or the military highlight the degree to which racial science preyed upon frontier violence. Catalogues of ‘sources’ respectably filtered through medical hands rendered the events of frontier wars as curiosities and collectors’ items, rather like the horns of an animal. The transformation of the heads and skulls of indigenous peoples into objects of science or art, in the case of Thomas Baines, abstracted African bodies from their conflict-ridden contexts, divested them of their humanity, and thereby neutralised their emotional and political associations.

Conclusion: Cape Phrenology in Comparative Context

Phrenology attracted little interest among the Dutch settler community in the Western Cape whose world-view was shaped by institutions of slavery and servitude rather than frontier violence. Cape liberal ideologues like John Fairbairn were outspokenly critical of new-fangled theories of cerebral determinism that might contradict their cherished belief in the transformative powers of education and the gospel. But phrenology held greater appeal for those with experience of frontier conflict and an associated antipathy towards a ‘savage’ enemy.

This article has attempted to uncover the activities of the select, but influential phrenological faction at the Cape during the 1830s and 1840s. The surgeon of the forces-cum-museum curator, Andrew Smith, made an early acquaintance with George Combe’s newly published essays on phrenology and the intersection of ethnography and racial science was a marked feature of the scientific journal which Smith edited. Smith’s medical colleague, Dr H. E. Macartney, was the most zealous propagandist of the new racial science at the Cape, disseminating his ideas from his own medical rooms to lecture halls fully furnished with models of Xhosa skulls. The artist Thomas Baines was greatly intrigued by phrenology and its potential racial application on the eastern frontier, industriously reading the heads of Xhosa chiefs and making sketches of skull shapes for the frontier phrenologist McLashan.

Ideologues like Smith, Macartney and Baines had counterparts in other British colonies. Emergent scientific theories of racial difference attracted an even more substantial following among white settlers, and especially doctors and frontiersmen, in early colonial Australia.

In his seminal article on racial thinking before the Australian gold rush, Reynolds locates phrenology at the forefront of applied colonial racial science: ‘Phrenology was popular among educated groups in the Australian colonies during the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s being

76 W. H. Flower, *Catalogue*, Numbers 1300, 1301, 1302, 1304.
discussed at cultural societies and in literary journals. Both Melbourne and Sydney had professional phrenologists while visiting exponents toured country areas till at least the 1860s.77

Following George Combe’s precedent, colonial disciples eagerly seized upon phrenology as proof of Aboriginal inferiority. In 1844 a certain ‘Aeneas’ argued that the great ‘pre-ponderance of brain in the New Hollander, as in all savage Nations’ lay at the back of the head, the ‘seat of passions, and inferior sentiments’, whereas the ‘moral and intellectual portions, with few exceptions’ were ‘very deficient’. In 1851 Mr A. Knowles told a Brisbane audience that he had examined skulls in many different parts of the Colony and concluded that ‘the smallness of the aboriginal brain’ was the ‘cause of all his miserable manifestations of mind’. The Sydney-based practitioner Mr W. Hamilton likewise spoke of ‘the pusillanimous and miserable state’ of the Tasmanian skull, contrasting it with ‘the greatness and dignity’ of the Maori.78

But local settlers in New Zealand were far less inclined to praise the Maori mind. By Nicolson’s account, colonial medicine in nineteenth century New Zealand was thoroughly infused with racial politics and the anti-liberal settler faction used the authority of medical science to buttress their pessimistic view of the Maori: ‘The doctors who spoke for the settler interest in the period from 1850 onwards, frequently argued … that the Maori were inherently and biologically inferior. They seized on the evidence from craniology and phrenology that the Maori’s brains were smaller overall and significantly underdeveloped in vital areas’.79 In New Zealand, as at the Cape, theories of scientific racism proved increasingly attractive in the context of the frontier wars. The Maori wars of the 1850s and 1860s, like the Xhosa wars of earlier decades, were fertile breeding grounds of white settler contempt towards indigenes.80

By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, phrenology was in decline both in Britain and her far-flung colonies. As a racial science steeped in morality, Combe’s ‘great system’ formed a temporary bridge between an older theological paradigm and the emergent biological racism of the age of imperialism. The specifically secular influence in the study of human origins and racial difference would increase in Europe in the 1860s with the rise of physical anthropology and widespread acceptance of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Although the initial impact of evolutionary ideas at the Cape still awaits systematic investigation, phrenology anticipated the scientific racism of the early twentieth century in its doctrines of biological determinism, its interest in skulls and comparative anatomy, its reliance on systems of classification based on broadly defined racial ‘types’ and, above all, in its obsessive preoccupation with the nature of the ‘native mind’.

78 H. Reynolds, ‘Racial Thought’, p. 50.