

Thomas Stubbs, 1820 Settler: ‘Out the Box and into the Bush’

By Julia Wells

“I frequently went on Xhosa hunting trips when I was 15 years old,” Thomas Stubbs told his two friends as they rode along on horseback. He further elaborated with a story of how one night, sitting around the fire, a bad-tempered old man stood up and boasted about how he had once killed an English boy, like Stubbs. He gave gruesome details of torture. Not long after, Stubbs made this man very angry, provoking his bad



Fig. 2-1. Young Thomas Stubbs, 1847

Source: Adapted from Butler, *The Rackety Colt*, frontispiece

temper. A burly friend named Goba came to his rescue. He offered to fight the old man, but first threw a gun to Stubbs. “If I lose the fight,” he said, “you can shoot him and save yourself.” Goba won the fight and the old man never gave any further trouble.

How did it happen that an English boy was going out on Xhosa hunting trips? Who ever heard of such a thing?! Probably everything that has been written about the early relations between the English settlers and their neighbouring Xhosa people assumes there was nothing but conflict between them. They were implacable enemies! Could this story be true? Is there any other evidence about such a strange friendship?

A few further hints do exist. A Xhosa oral tradition claims that the great warrior, Chief Maqoma, once asked why Thomas Stubbs fought against them, when he had been raised as one of their own? Even Stubbs’ biographer, Robert McGeoch, believed that he spoke the Xhosa language fluently. Yet, on such things, Stubbs remained silent when he wrote up his *Reminiscences*. He only told the story of the hunting trips in private to close friends. In Stubbs’s published memoirs, the most solid evidence of his special relationship to the Xhosa people is a map that he drew in 1847, showing all the Xhosa trails through the thick Fish River bush. Where else could this knowledge have come from, but those who showed him? Stubbs also mentioned that

one time, just as a battle was about to start, his Xhosa adversaries shouted out and called to him by name.

Little clues like this confirm that Stubbs indeed had an unusual relationship with Xhosa people. When his life story is considered as a whole, however, the pieces begin to come together. Despite his silence, evidence of a very rare exposure to African people trickles through his writing. Important clues are scattered throughout his *Reminiscences*. It is an unusual tale of transcending deep social divisions. Thomas Stubbs may have been an underdog on the margins of society in his lifetime, but he shows that there were different ways of settling into Africa.

The hunting trips took place in 1823 when Stubbs was 15 years old. He was part of a massive movement to use English people to fill up land that previously had been occupied by Xhosa people. By the time of his hunting trips, he had lived in the area for nearly three years. The English settlers arrived fully convinced of European racial superiority over African people who were looked down upon as subhuman savages. To the African people, the English were brutal thieves who had stolen their land in a long series of wars. The Stubbs story offers a completely different narrative. It shows not only cooperation, but trust and friendship between the two so-called opposing forces. Sadly, it did not last.

What enabled Stubbs's friendships most of all was the place where he lived. When the English settlers arrived in 1820, the authorities assigned his family to land that was adjacent to the Fish River. At that time, the river was considered the firm eastern boundary between Europeans in the Cape Colony and Africans who had been driven out of it. By English decree, neither side was allowed to cross the boundary without the express permission of the British military authorities.

Even more importantly than that, the land, where the Stubbs family settled was the site of unique soft stones that could be ground into colourful red, yellow and white pigments. These were so highly cherished by the Xhosa people for decorative and ritual purposes, that they simply came to collect the stones regardless of any rules about boundaries. Dubbed "the Clay Pits" by the English, it was the scene of a steady stream of Xhosa visitors.

According to Stubbs, the first time his family saw Xhosa people, they feared they were being attacked and prepared their guns in self-defence. His father was away, so his mother took charge. She wisely advised that the guns should be kept hidden until

they found out the reason for the surprising visit. Indeed, the visitors turned out to be a group of about twelve Xhosa women, carrying digging sticks – which had been mistaken for spears! As they got close, they called out “morrow, morrow” which meant “hello” in Dutch.

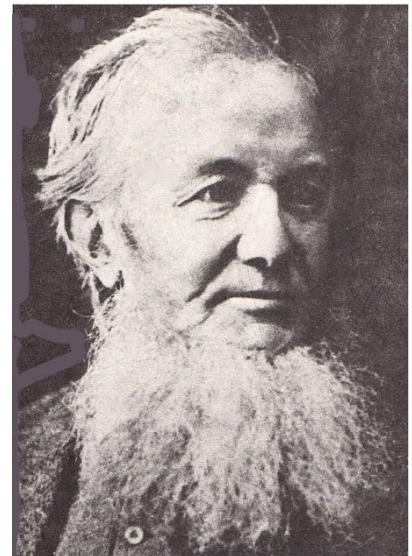
Mrs Stubbs invited the women into the family’s tent and offered them some hard biscuit. But this friendly gesture was soon interrupted when neighbouring men, who had heard there were Xhosa people there, came and arrested all the women. The prisoners were taken to nearby Grahamstown and sent out to work for white farmers. Stubbs recorded his deep regret at such hostile and unprovoked actions, just as they were beginning to make friends.

Despite this, some Xhosa people set up a camp not far from the Stubbs home. While the women dug out the stone pigments, often referred to as “clay”, the men hunted. The surrounding thick bush was full of elephants and other game. Both the digging and the hunting were things they had done from time immemorial before the English came. As later events revealed, this was the time when Thomas Stubbs got to know all the secrets of life in the Fish River bush.

The whole Stubbs family got drawn in. John Stubbs, Thomas’s father, soon entered into trading relations. He exchanged beads and buttons, in return for ivory and cattle. Thomas’s older brother and his cousin both joined their father on his trading missions. At one point in his *Reminiscences*, Thomas described how a Xhosa chief and ten warriors, laden with ivory tusks came to an English home to trade. They were warmly welcomed, and a cow was slaughtered for their breakfast!

But all such friendly and profitable interactions were deemed to be illegal. Ever since the arrival of the first Europeans in South Africa in 1652, the colonial authorities tried to enforce a trade monopoly for themselves. This banned all civilians from doing any form of trade with indigenous people. For a brief time, in 1822, the British gave permission for Africans to come into the Colony to trade legally, only with government officials, at the Clay Pits. But the people who lived near-by, like the Stubbs family, were not supposed to take part. They had to resort to secret trading, at risk of arrest. It was safer to travel across the Fish River into African territory to collect ivory and cattle, than to work close to home.

Thomas Stubbs alleged that the Magistrate of Grahamstown, Harry Rivers, engaged in his own secret illegal trade in collaboration with a prominent coloured hunter. Rivers constantly demanded military action against civilian illegal trading – which he blamed for every problem the colony faced. His zeal is consistent with someone wishing to eliminate his own competition in the lucrative ivory trade. John Stubbs's success as a trader was no doubt showing, to the envy of all the other 1820 settlers around him. He was getting rich while the rest of them were suffering from drought, crop failure, locust plagues and floods. At one point, Magistrate Rivers called in John Stubbs to question him as a suspected illegal trader. But when that turned up nothing, he sent out military patrols to intercept the traders as they crossed the Fish River.



This was exactly what happened to John Stubbs. As he emerged from the Trompetter's Drift Crossing of the river in June 1823, he was intercepted by a patrol of coloured soldiers. When he refused to submit to their commands, he rode back to try to warn others and protect his trade goods. He had 80 head of cattle and two wagon-loads of ivory. As he galloped off, he discovered, to his great surprise, his own cattle hidden away in a little valley. Xhosa thieves had stolen them from his home the night before, while he was away. When he got down off his horse to confront the rustlers, a fight ensued, and he was speared to *death*.

Fig. 2-3. Portrait of Thomas Stubbs
Source: Cory Library, PIC/S 4957

John Stubbs' death changed everything. It left Thomas bitter and resentful, not of the people who had actually killed his father, but of the people who triggered the events. For the rest of his life, Thomas Stubbs had an unwavering hatred and contempt for the two kinds of people he held responsible for his father's death. One was selfish and greedy British officials who paid little attention to the needs of the people they ruled. The second was people of mixed-race descent, often called "coloured" or "Khoisan," who had been incorporated into the British army. Stubbs considered them to have only superficially acquired colonial ways. He apparently considered the people who actually speared his father, to be renegade thieves, not typical of all Xhosa people. This suggests that he also knew others who were trustworthy and reliable.

With the death of his father, Thomas Stubbs's carefree and outdoor days in the Fish River bush with his Xhosa friends came to an abrupt end. One year later when his mother died, as he claimed, "of a broken heart," Thomas and his two eldest brothers were sent into seven-year apprenticeships in Grahamstown. The authorities auctioned off all the family possessions and put his younger siblings up for adoption. Nothing remained of his happy childhood and family life. He admitted that the trauma of losing everything was so great that he often cried himself to sleep.

Thomas complained bitterly about his working conditions: the rough company he had to keep and the atrocious food were the fate of apprentices in those days. In fact, at one time, he ran away and remained at large for several months and at another time he actually sued his employer for the terrible food. Although Thomas was reduced to the status of a poor orphan, he maintained a kind of smug self-consciousness. His family had been relatively well off when they emigrated to South Africa. They brought fine linens, a mahogany tabletop, a collection of books and two violins. He noted that his ability to read and write gave him comfort and set him apart from others in his lowly position. As an apprentice, he learned the art of saddle-making, which remained his vocation for the rest of his life.

Not long after his apprenticeship ended, war broke out in 1834 between the two nations. When the first news of massive raids came through, Stubbs, by that time, a married man with one young child, raced out to his former home along the Fish River. There he found almost everybody he had known from the days of his youth either fleeing or murdered, and their houses all burnt down. Obviously, the era that he grew up in, had come to a bitter end. Over the seven years of his apprenticeship in town, he is likely to have lost touch with the original Xhosa friends he had made.

Eventually Stubbs reconnected with his beloved Fish River bush. In 1843 he started a sporting club which took indolent young men out of Grahamstown and introduced them to hunting and camping in the thick bush. Stubbs claimed that he had never experienced happier days in his life. It was what he had always longed for. But events soon overtook them in a way that put their bush survival skills into the service of the British Army.

As an adult, Stubbs had to take part in three successive wars. These were in 1834-35,

1846 and the last one starting in 1850. The role that he played in fact confirms his intensive immersion in Xhosa society in his younger days. His sporting club became a home guard of local men to defend their property and loved ones against invaders. They specialised in tracking down Xhosa enemies in the old haunts of the Fish River bush. What gives away Stubbs's knowledge from earlier days, was his ability to draw the detailed map of the Xhosa trails through the bush. He knew them all and used this knowledge for English self-defence. He also became an expert in the tactic of "waylaying." This meant that a select group of men hid themselves along a forest pathway at night and waited for their enemies to come along, surprising them with a deadly ambush.

As traumatising as it might have been to fight against people who were once friends, Stubbs had little choice but to join with the rest of settler society in struggling for their own survival. With the wars in 1846 and 1850, Stubbs and his men in the sporting club took on an active role under the command of the British military. At this stage of his life Stubbs stood out as someone with much-needed specialist skills. His incredible knowledge of the bush and of the people who had become the sworn enemies, was in high demand. Stubbs eventually convinced the British army officers that his tactic of *waylaying* was their best form of effective defence. He also went out on several official military expeditions with his men, where he offered assistance and advice to British officers who had no familiarity with African conditions.

Although he was so at home in the bush, Stubbs never lost his suspicions of those in authority. He openly disobeyed orders from his superiors, he got into arguments with generals and governors and simply walked out on meetings when he felt he was not being heard. When the settlers wanted to celebrate the 25th anniversary of their arrival, Stubbs turned the gala dinner into a brawl by shouting out his views on government failures over the years. He was enthusiastically supported by many others and lifted to a tabletop as a speaker. Although he was willing to fight for settler society, he was never a comfortable part of it.

As one war followed another, Stubbs became very critical of the amount of corruption he witnessed all around him. The local settler community learned how to get rich from military contracts, grossly overcharging for what they sold, reselling livestock - like horses - twice, and drawing rations they were not entitled to. Similarly, the military cheated people, by simply confiscating their horses and cattle. Stubbs once got a contract as a leather-worker to produce an order of pouches. When he

delivered the goods, he was told that they were of inferior quality and therefore he was not paid for them. Then the same contract was given to another person, with the instructions to make pouches exactly like Stubbs's. Such things did not sit well with him.

Throughout it all, Thomas Stubbs maintained an unusual degree of sensitivity for those people who were now considered to be enemies. At one point he spoke of the trauma of confronting someone coming up a trail during a waylaying expedition, especially if they were humming a tune. He also described how hard it was to take an African life, even in times of war. During his last war, he urged the British to only kill cattle since that was what people were fighting over. This would save human lives and let each side retire to their own homes.

From the stories that Thomas Stubbs told about his early years in the colony, living along the Fish River, it becomes clear that at least a few people, from both sides, found ways to become friends and find common interests. His family involvement in the world of trade with the Xhosa people ended up becoming a positive example that soon brought about major changes and a relaxation of the restrictions. Everybody benefited. The friendly encounters with the Xhosa people around the Clay Pits show that the British efforts to declare an uncrossable boundary meant very little in those early days.

REFERENCES

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