

A SAN CHILD OF THE DRAKENSBERG AND OTHER CHILD EXILES¹

by Elwyn Jenkins

THE VICISSITUDES experienced by child immigrants from England to South Africa in the nineteenth century have been well documented, for example by Guy Butler in *When Boys were Men*² and Daphne Child in *Yesterday's Children*.³ Some of the children were brought out as indentured servants: apart from individuals who came with immigrants, there were large-scale schemes such as that of the Children's Friend Society, which was closed down by the British government in the 1840s after distributing English boys and girls to farmers around the country.^{4,5,6} To balance their memory, we can give some thought to the fates of three indigenous South African children who travelled in the opposite direction, only to meet untimely deaths in an alien land.

Well into the nineteenth century it was a widespread practice of whites and indigenous peoples to kidnap San children and make them servants. In her book on the last traces of the San in the Drakensberg, Marion How refers to the record of Reverend Thomas Arbousset, a missionary in western Lesotho in the 1830s: 'He saw a village in the Free State in which there were no children between the ages of four and twelve; the kidnappers did not carry off children under the age of four because they died, or over twelve years of age because they escaped. But all the children between these ages had been torn from their parents by the armed forces of the Koranna who sold them to immigrant farmers.'⁷ Another missionary in Lesotho, Reverend Fred Christol, some decades later sketched a



'A domesticated Bushman girl'
(drawing by Fred Christol)

young San woman he encountered who was working as a servant (Fig. 1).⁸ A postscript can be added that provides an unexpected view of one young San survivor from that region.

In *People of the Eland*, Patricia Vinnicombe recounts the capture of 'a young Bushgirl' in the Drakensberg in 1868.⁹ She reports that the child was handed over to the missionary Dr Henry Callaway, and concludes: 'No further mention of her can be found in the records.' What Vinnicombe did not know was that the girl's entire subsequent life story was written up in an obscure little volume published in England in 1874.

Vinnicombe describes the events surrounding the girl's capture: 'Then one night in December, 1868, the Bushmen found an opportunity to sneak down to a kraal between the Mzimkhulu and Mkhomazi rivers belonging to Mfongoswana, a headman under chief Sakhayedwa, son of Dumisa, and to retreat with seventy head of cattle.' Mfongoswana and four men pursued the Bushmen, but were repulsed. She continues:

Sakhayedwa assembled a larger party of about fifteen men, at least some of whom were mounted, who resumed the chase up the pass. After following the trail across the high plateau for six days, they came across a deserted Bushman kraal, and a day's journey beyond this, they saw a new kraal which had been built on a hill overlooking the Orange river. Here they found three of the stolen cows and a young Bushgirl, whom they captured.

The captive Bushgirl was duly delivered to the magistrate at Richmond who in turn put her in the care of Dr Callaway at Springfield mission.¹⁰ Although her age was judged to be about ten or eleven years, she was very small, 'not larger than a white child of three or four years old'. It was requested that the child be kept at the disposal of the Government because she could possibly prove useful in 'opening up communications with her relations', but no further mention of her can be found in the records. According to oral tradition among the descendants of Dumisa's adherents, the name of the girl was Gqawukile.

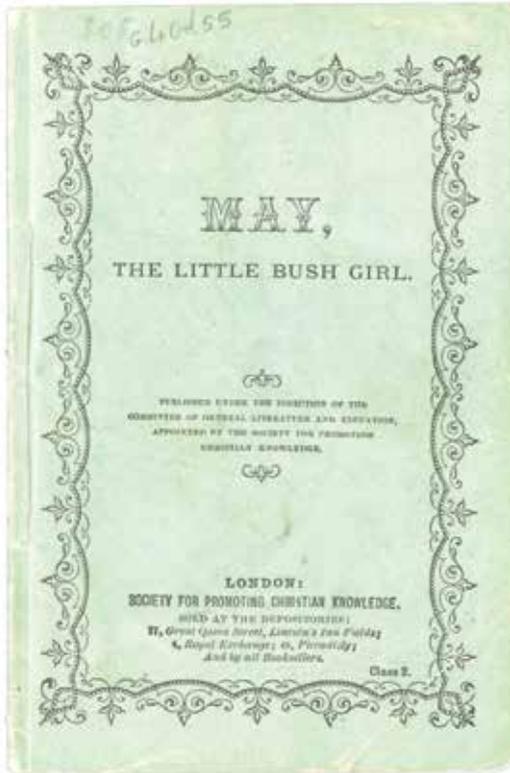
The name Gqawukile is Zulu in form, but derived from an unknown stem, presumably San.¹¹ John Wright, in *Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg 1840–1870*, provides no further information about the girl. While

Vinnicombe went back to the original records, Wright quotes a vague report published nearly four years later in the *Natal Mercury* of 17 August 1872: 'I believe Dr Callaway very kindly took charge of one or more Bush-children.'¹² The information provided by Vinnicombe and Wright does not explain how it was that the girl was handed over to the magistrate instead of being taken into bondage.

The story was taken up by Callaway's adopted daughter, Jane Eliza Button (1838–1914). She was the daughter of James Button, who immigrated with his family in the party of Bishop Colenso, apparently as a tenant farmer.¹³ The family broke up on the death of the father in 1855, when Jane was 17, and Henry and Ann Callaway adopted her. They had no children of their own. Callaway travelled to England to be consecrated Bishop of St. John's, Kaffraria, in 1873, and Jane accompanied his party. They returned to South Africa in 1874, and the following year she married Reverend John Oxley Oxland.

In 1874 the Christian publishing house Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) published *May, the Little Bush Girl* by 'Miss Button'.¹⁴ The introduction announces: 'We will tell it exactly as she herself told the greater part of it to a Sunday-school.' The rest is written in the first person by Jane Button. Jane's obituary, published in the *Natal Witness* on 18 November 1914,¹⁵ does not mention this book.¹⁶

The little book of 32 pages tells how the 'wretched little Bush girl' was handed over to Callaway, who named her May. At first she would not bath and would not wear a frock, but after playing with other children asked for one. After eight months she asked to be



Cover of May, the Little Bush Girl

baptised. When the family were leaving for England she begged to go with them, and so they took her.

‘She thought England was a nice country, far nicer than Africa,’ Button says. ‘She learnt to talk English very quickly,’¹⁷ and she went to school and learned to read and write English. Callaway had a studio portrait of her taken in Croydon for a carte-de-visite that he later donated to Sir George Grey. It is housed in the Grey Collection in the National Library in Cape Town.¹⁸ An intriguing detail in the photograph is that May is wearing a necklace which is reminiscent of an ostrich eggshell bead necklace such as San people used to wear. Could May or her carers have chosen it for this reason?

At the first snow, May caught a ‘feverish attack’ and was never well again, suffering from ‘coughing and short breathing’. Now Button’s account changes: ‘She was always longing for her dear African home.’¹⁹ May’s illness was fatal. Button concludes:

On returning, I went immediately to her, when I found her, to my distress, much worse, evidently dying. We gave her a little brandy, but she was too far gone; she just swallowed it, then, recognising me, said, ‘Turn me.’ I did so. She immediately said it again three times. The last time, I said ‘This way dear?’ She looked at me sweetly, and said ‘Yes dear.’ She put her little cold hand in mine and gently fell asleep, like a tired child, without the least apparent suffering. I felt that the loving Jesus was very near, and committed the soul of the little one to His tender care ...



Studio portrait of May

On the day of the funeral, I made a large cross of pure white roses to place upon the coffin. We all followed her to the grave, where all her little school-fellows, with their schoolmistress, had assembled, dressed in their best frocks, each holding a bouquet of flowers, which they threw upon the coffin, all weeping most bitterly for the loss of their little African sister. She had found a way into their hearts in a most wonderful way.²⁰

Gqawukile, or May, would have been about 15 or 16 years old.

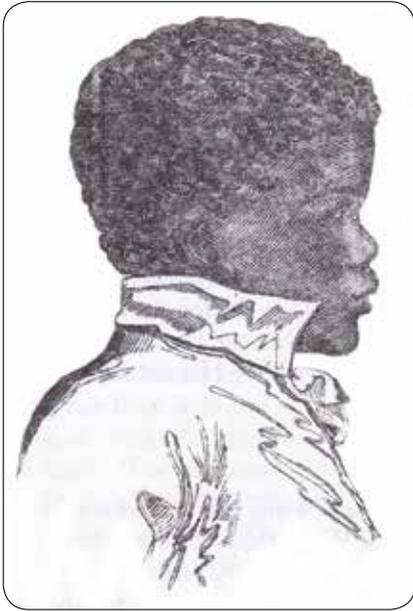
Miss Button's book was typical of its time. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mawkish scenes of the deathbeds of children were a common theme in children's literature. It is also typical in that in the nineteenth century English publishing houses published a number of edifying tales for children set in South Africa, some of which featured true stories of little Christian converts. In *Far Off; or Africa and America Described* (1856), Favell Lee Mortimer²¹ relates the conversion of Jejana, a little Khoi girl, and the story ('taken from a very little book entitled *Mr. Moffatt's Visit to the Children of Manchester*') of a little San boy who came to Robert Moffatt's mission station at Kuruman to see the baby Jesus. The illustration in *May, the Little Bush Girl*, purporting to show May kneeling in prayer at her bedside while Miss Button looks on approvingly, is fairly typical in its gross rendition of a child from Africa.

May was not the only indigenous child who died after moving to England.



May at prayer (illustration from May, the Little Bush Girl)

Another was Paul Dikkop, son of the widow of a Khoi chief who persuaded Reverend John Campbell to take him to England to give him a better life. His portrait forms the frontispiece of Campbell's account for children, *Hottentot Children, With a Particular Account of Paul Dikkop, the Son of a Hottentot Chief, Who Died in England, Sept. 14, 1824* (1840), which was published by the Religious Tract Society.²² Campbell had already resolved to take a black child to England 'to try what effect might be produced by an European education',²³ and Paul provided the opportunity. Paul was sent to school and progressed well, but after developing a pain in his side he died at the age of 13. In his account, Campbell regrets that the experiment could not be



Paul Dikkop

concluded, while praising Paul, saying he never told a lie.

Paul's burial is recorded in an entry in the Register of Burials of the Kingsland Independent Chapel in Hackney, London, signed by Campbell himself: 'Sept. 1824. Paul Dikkop, son of Dikkop, Hottentot Chief of Hooge Kraal, South Africa, was interred in north end of burying ground, behind Kingsland Chapel ___ And March 30th 1825 Mrs Janet Bower of Shacklewell, late of Edinburgh, was interred in the same grave. John Campbell.'²⁴

Also well documented is the story of Hinza Marossi, a five-year-old

Bechuana refugee orphan, who was taken as an indentured servant by Thomas and Margaret Pringle in 1825. He is the subject of Pringle's poem 'The Bechuana Boy'.²⁵ It opens:

I sat at noontide in my tent,
And looked across the Desert dun,
Beneath the cloudless firmament
Far gleaming in the sun,
When from the bosom of the waste
A swarthy Stripling came in haste,
With foot unshod and naked limb;
And a tame springbok followed him.

With open aspect, frank yet bland,
And with a modest mien he stood,
Caressing with a gentle hand
That beast of gentle brood;
Then, meekly gazing in my face,
Said in the language of his race,
With smiling look yet pensive tone,
'Stranger – I'm in the world alone!'

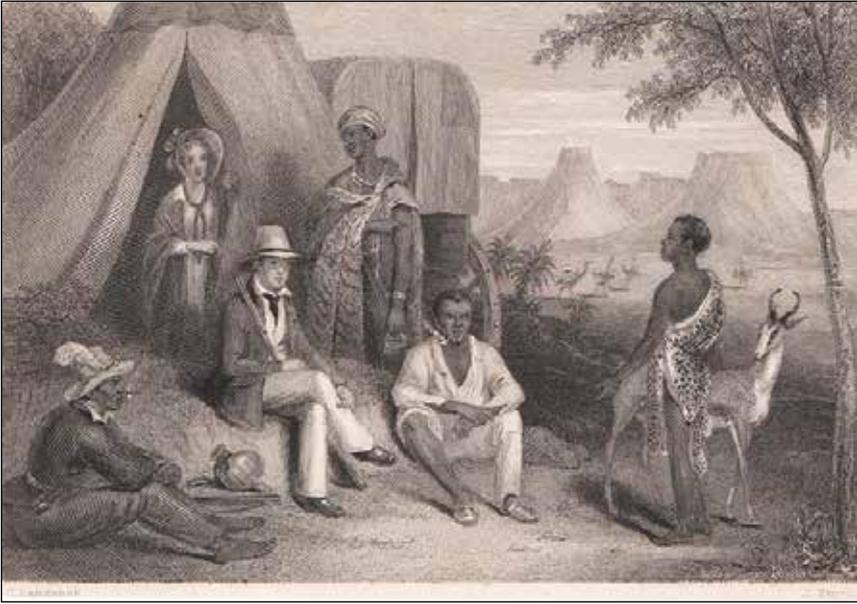
The frontispiece of Pringle's *African Sketches* (1834) is a romantic portrayal of their meeting.²⁶ In the poem Pringle describes how Hinza had been orphaned and captured in a raid by 'Bergenaars', who sold him to a white man. He fled from his master when he heard Pringle was in the vicinity:

Because they say, O English Chief,
Thou scornest not the Captive's grief.
Then let me serve thee, as thine own –
For I am in the world alone.

The childless couple loved him, and a bond developed between the boy and Margaret similar to that which apparently existed between Jane Button and May:

Sept. 1824. Paul Dikkop, son of Dikkop, Hottentot Chief of Hooge Kraal, South Africa, was interred in north end of burying ground, behind Kingsland Chapel ___ and March 30th 1825 Mrs Janet Bower of Shacklewell, late of Edinburgh, was interred in the same grave
John Campbell

Burial record of Paul Dikkop signed by Reverend John Campbell



Hinza Marossi presents himself to Thomas Pringle

And One, with woman's gentle art,
Unlocked the fountains of his heart;
And love gushed forth – till he became
Her child in every thing but name.

The Pringles obtained permission to take him to England with the intention of educating him before returning him to South Africa. Pringle described him: 'He was indeed a remarkable child. With great flow of animal spirits and natural hilarity, he was at the same time docile, observant, reflective and always unselfishly considerate of others. He was of a singularly ingenuous and affectionate disposition.'⁷

Hinza died in England at the age of nine from pneumonia or tuberculosis.

NOTES

- 1 This article is based on a note by the author, 'What happened to Gqawukile', *The Digging Stick*, 34(2), August 2017, pp. 15–16.
- 2 Butler, Guy (ed.), *When Boys were Men* (Cape Town, Balkema, 1970).
- 3 Child, Daphne, *Yesterday's Children* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1969).
- 4 Bradlow, Edna, 'The Children's Friend Society at the Cape of Good Hope', *Victorian Studies*, 27, 1984, pp. 155–77.
- 5 Brown, M.M., 'Die Children's Friend Society in Engeland en die Kaap die Goeie Hoop, 1830–1841', *Argief Jaarboek vir die S.A. Geskiedenis* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1989).
- 6 Blackburn, Geoff, *The Children's Friend Society: Juvenile Emigrants to Western Australia, South Africa and Canada 1834–1842* (Northbridge, Western Australia, Access Press, 1993).
- 7 How, Marion, *The Mountain Bushmen of Basutoland* (Pretoria, Van Schaik, 1970), p. 57.
- 8 Sketch by Fred Christol, reproduced in How, *Mountain Bushmen*, p. 53.
- 9 Vinnicombe, Patricia, *People of the Eland: Rock Paintings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a Reflection of their Life and Thought* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1976) p. 85.
- 10 The correct name of the mission station is Springvale, also written as Spring Vale.
- 11 Adrian Koopman, personal communication, 17 October 2017.
- 12 Wright, John, *Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg 1840–1870: A Study of their Conflict with Stock-keeping Peoples in Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1971), p. 178.