

# Perspective on John Graham and the fourth Cape Eastern frontier war

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## ***Abstract***

John Graham played a key role in the Fourth Cape Eastern Frontier War, 1811 - 1812. His natural intelligence, training and experience as an officer in the British Army prepared him well as civil and military commander in a distant part of the Colony. Escalating tension, violence and instability in the prevailing open frontier situation called for drastic intervention by the authorities. The policy agreed upon was to involve all available Colonial forces in a military operation against Xhosa occupants of areas to the west of the Great Fish River, the official boundary. Within a relatively brief period of military actions the Zuurveld was cleared of perceived hostile enemies. In military terms the campaign under the immediate direction of Graham was a brilliant success. In the long run, however, his frontier arrangements did not bring about lasting peace and stability in relations with the Colony's Xhosa neighbours. Graham's name is perpetuated in the naming of Grahamstown.

**Keywords:** John Graham; Cape Regiment; Eastern frontier; Xhosa leaders; Military operations; Military posts; Defensive measures; Governors Caledon and Cradock.

## **Introduction**

Not much is nowadays remembered of Colonel John Graham in South Africa. His name is perpetuated in the naming of the city of Grahamstown, officially established two centuries ago in the Eastern Cape, and also in the name of a primary school in Plumstead, Cape Peninsula. Buried in the old Wynberg cemetery, Somerset Road, John Graham's grave is today unidentified and lost for ever...

Johan Graham was the second son of Robert Graham of the Fintry Estate in Forfarshire, Scotland. He was born in Dundee on 24 April 1778 and inter alia received his higher education by the learned Professor John Playfair and Josiah Walker, tutor at Athol House. At the age of 16 years Graham was gazetted Ensign in the 85<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, but he never joined this regiment, because in the same year (1794), having assisted his cousin, Thomas Graham of Balgowan (afterwards Lord Lynedoch), to recruit candidates for the 90<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot (Perthshire Volunteers), he was promoted to a Lieutenancy in that regiment.<sup>1</sup>

In July 1795, commanding a company of the 90th Regiment, he was stationed on the Isle de Dun, off the coast of France. However, ill health compelled him in December of the same year to return to England. After recovering, in March 1797, the Duke of York, Commander-in-Chief, granted him permission to join the Austrian Army temporarily. His cousin, by that time Colonel Thomas Graham, also served in the Austrian Army. In 1799 John Graham took part in military actions against the French republican forces in Northern Italy, viz. at Adiyè (26 March), Verona (30 March) and Villa Franca (5 April).<sup>2</sup>

In June 1799 he presumably returned to England on board a vessel under command of Admiral Samuel Hood, whose fleet occupied the French harbour of Toulon and also captured several French ships in the Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> Back in England, Graham became *aide de camp* to Lord Chatham whom he accompanied to Holland in September. He served in that country until the withdrawal of all British forces in February 1800. Subsequently he recruited volunteers for the 93<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Foot (Sutherland Highlanders) in Scotland. He was appointed Major in that regiment and from October 1800 served with his troops on the Channel Island of Guernsey. In October 1802 he returned with his regiment to Scotland. After receiving the Reserve in Ireland, he took command of a battalion of Light Infantry Militia until being appointed Assistant Quarter Master General for the period February 1804 to July 1805.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Scottish Record Office (SRO), Edinburgh, Gift Deposit (GD) 151/3/1, *Graham of Fintry Letters*, undated notes, pp. 4-5.

2 SRO, GD 151/3/1 *Graham of Fintry Letters*, pp. 5-6.

3 *South African Biographical Dictionary*, I ( Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1968), p. 329; DMG Sutherland, *France 1789-1815* (Collins, Glasgow, 1985), p. 189.

4 SRO, GD 151/3/1, *Graham of Fintry Letters*, Undated notes, pp. 5-6.

Image 1: Lieutenant-Colonel John Graham depicted as young officer



Source: Cape Archives.

## **Graham arrives at the Cape**

Following the resumption of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, the strategic importance of the Batavian colony at the Cape of Good Hope was apparent to the British Government.<sup>5</sup> In July 1805 Graham and his regiment embarked on “secret foreign service” under supreme command of Major-General Sir David Baird. It was only after leaving the Brazilian harbour of Saint Salvador that sealed Instructions of the Supreme War Council were opened, indicating the British Government’s immediate objective to take over the opposing Batavian Government’s rule of the Cape Colony.<sup>6</sup>

During the landing of British troops at Losperd’s Bay on 6 January and the subsequent battle on the Blaauwberg flats on 8 January 1806, Major John Graham commanded the combined British Light Infantry with

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5 Cape Archives (CA), Batavian Republic (BR) 73 Bijlagen: Extract Secretee Notulen, 11 June 1805, pp. 547-551.

6 SRO, GD 151/5 Graham of Fintry Letters: John Graham to “a particular friend in Dublin”, 16 March 1806, no. 34.

distinction. The loose sand and heat hampered progress, but Cape Town and its fortifications were occupied without any further resistance by the local citizens. After the final capitulation of the Colony by General Jan Willem Janssens, Baird ordered Graham to immediately “raise and discipline” a regiment of native Khoekhoen and Coloured people, which soon became known as the Cape Regiment. Graham officially became Lieutenant-Colonel and local commanding officer of this regiment on 26 January 1806.<sup>7</sup> Graham’s regiment fulfilled a key role in the defence of the Cape Colony, especially due to the urgent withdrawal of several other British regiments from the Colony and the special characteristics of the indigenous soldiers who were enlisted and trained by mainly British officers at the regimental headquarters in Wynberg, Cape Peninsula.<sup>8</sup>

Graham soon proved to be an energetic and versatile regimental commander. He testified that, in addition to his mother tongue English-Gaelic, he was “tolerably proficient” in Dutch, Italian, German and French. He communicated well with soldiers and local citizens at the Cape, as a practical organiser and inspiring leader.<sup>9</sup>

It seems that Graham’s main challenge as regimental commander was twofold:

- to recruit and enlarge the Cape Regiment with the best available local Khoekhoen and Coloured talent, and
- to overcome any assumed prejudices of local citizens against this new regiment, he had to maintain a clear and pro-active conciliatory approach.

### **The Eastern frontier erupts**

By 1811 serious problems in the eastern frontier districts of the Colony required the complete involvement of John Graham and his regiment.

On both sides of the official Fish River boundary successive phases of conflict erupted between the different cattle herding communities, ignoring the frontier arrangements of Governor Joachim van Plettenberg in 1778.

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7 SRO, GD 151/3/2, Graham of Fintry Letters: Statement of Service of Lieutenant-Colonel John Graham, 29 December 1809, p. 556.

8 *The African Court Calendar*: List of the Army at the Cape of Good Hope, 1806-1810, no page numbers.

9 SRO, GD 151/3/2, Graham of Fintry Letters: Statement of service of John Graham, 29 December 1809, p. 556.

Nine eastern frontier wars followed which lasted a century and which may be interpreted as one prolonged conflict, merely fluctuating in intensity.<sup>10</sup>

The eastern frontier zone of the Cape Colony may be defined as a region or territory of inter-penetration between various distinct societies. During most of the nineteenth century different communities competed for hegemony and interacted on this gradually closing frontier.<sup>11</sup>

In cases of large scale cross-border raids and thefts, isolated white and Khoekhoen farmers claimed protection from the distant Colonial authorities, whose main concern seemed to cut back on any additional financial expenses. The white frontier farmers were favoured in military terms by their mobility (horses) and fire-arms, but lacked cohesion and numerical strength. By 1811 the estimated official population figures of the two eastern frontier districts were as follows:<sup>12</sup>

<b>Population</b>	<b>White men &amp; women</b>	<b>Khoekhoen men &amp; women</b>	<b>Slave men &amp; women</b>
Uitenhage	1 111	1 224	580
Graaff-Reinet	2 619	3 544	1 499
Total	3 730	4 768	2 079

By 1811, at least 20 000 Xhosa occupants had already crossed the Fish River boundary into the grassy Zuurveld and beyond. Their numerical strength was buttressed by their intimate knowledge of and adaptability to the physical environment of indigenous vegetation, steep ravines and treacherous river crossings. Xhosa fighters used to conceal themselves in these dense thickets by wrapping their skin cloaks around their bodies to protect themselves against thorny bushes.<sup>13</sup>

The vanguard of white stock farmers moving eastwards and Xhosa cattleherders migrating westwards caused rivalry on the eastern frontier, especially in the contested Zuurveld, between the Sundays and Fish Rivers. Each group resisted the advance of the other, particularly when population increased in a limited area. Within Xhosa ranks further stress was generated by a dynastic feud between Ngqika, paramount Chief of the western Xhosa, and Ndlambe,

10 See for example AJ Smithers, *The Kaffir Wars* (Blackwell, London, 1973).

11 H Lamar and L Thompson (Eds), *The Frontier in History* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1981), pp. 7-9.

12 Public Record Office (PRO), London, War Office (WO) 1/635 Commander-in-Chief: Graham – Hope, 18 November 1806, pp. 51-58.

13 J Campbell, *Travels in South Africa* (Black, Parry and Hamilton, London, 1815), pp. 118-119, 374.

his uncle and former regent.

While John Graham accumulated and trained an efficient Cape Regiment at its headquarters in Wynberg, Major Jacob Glen Cuyler, his immediate deputy officer stationed at Fort Frederick, Algoa Bay, recommended in 1808 that the Colonial authorities set an ultimatum to all Xhosa occupants west of the Fish River to withdraw from their abodes before a given date. Graham supported this suggestion, but the Cape Governor, the Earl of Caledon, maintained that the official policy of only “preserving what we possess” should be applied on the eastern frontier, avoiding any form of offensive action.<sup>14</sup>

Subsequently serious concerns arose when it became known that some of Chief Ndlambe’s followers had settled close to the Sundays River. By the end of 1809 it seemed that a combined Xhosa invasion of the Zuurveld was imminent. Echoing official policy, Graham warned Cuyler to refrain from any aggressive actions against the perceived intruders. This made it virtually impossible for the small number of Colonial troops in the frontier region to henceforth retrieve any stolen cattle from Xhosa homesteads.<sup>15</sup>

### **Graham’s military measures**

In February and again in June 1810 Graham sent two companies of his regiment, in addition to 21<sup>st</sup> Light Dragoons, to reinforce Cuyler’s troops in the frontier district of Uitenhage. In July 1810 three additional companies under major Thomas Lyster of the Cape Regiment were also sent by Graham to the frontier district of Graaff-Reinet. They were deployed on several frontier farms to make the military more visible to the upset local inhabitants.<sup>16</sup>

None of these measures proved effective for the restoration of peace. During the first three months of 1811 some 1 205 cattle and several horses were stolen by Xhosa trespassers in the two eastern frontier districts. Two white farmers and six Khoekhoen labourers were also killed by the marauders. Several desperate frontier farmers evacuated their loan farms and moved either

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14 Cape Archives (CA), Government House (GH) 34/4, Letter Book: Caledon – Collins, 14 November 1808, p. 80.

15 CA, Colonial Office (CO), 22 Letters Received: Graham – Alexander, 28 January 1810, no. 15; Grey – Alexander, 22 March 1810, no. 26.

16 CA, CO 2572 Letters Received: State of Detachments, 20 January 1810, no. 7; as well as Defence Department (DD) 12/1 Colonial Paymaster: Extract Account, 2 July 1810, no page numbers.

westwards or northwards with their remaining stock.<sup>17</sup> By the end of July it was reported to Graham that Bruintjes Hoogte was completely occupied by Xhosa and that they had never previously penetrated so far and on such a scale into the Colony.<sup>18</sup>

Image 2: The Cape Eastern frontier, 1812



It seems that the Xhosa at this stage controlled most of the eastern frontier region, extending their positions as far west as possible from the official colonial boundary. The two most important Xhosa leaders in the occupied area were Ndhlambe (of the Rharhabe) and Chungwa (of the Gqunukhwebe). They claimed that their followers needed more grazing lands for their cattle. The petty chiefs Galata, Habana and Xasa had their own agendas to gain increased independence for themselves. They migrated to the grasslands around the Zuurberg and their followers raided the frontier farms. Ironically, at this stage, when it seemed that the Xhosa had won their struggle to control

17 CA, CO 2572 Letters Received: List of Cattle stolen in Uitenhage, April – June 1810, 27; GE Cory, *The Rise of South Africa*, I (Longmans Green, London, 1910), pp. 30-231; HB Giliomee, *Administratiedyperk van Lord Caledon* (Archives Year Book for SA History, 1966, II), p. 340.

18 CA, CO 2576 Letters Received: Hawkes – Cuyler, 24 June 1811, 3.

the Zuurveld, John Graham was authorised to take recovering steps on the Colonial frontier. Graham could and would only use military force to clear the Zuurveld of all illegal Xhosa occupants and marauders. Ndhlambe rallied all the Zuurveld Xhosa to resist Graham's measures.<sup>19</sup>

When Governor Caledon left the Colony in July 1811, to be replaced in September of that year by an experienced military officer, Sir John Francis Cradock (who became Lord Howden in 1819), a definite scheme was launched by Lieutenant-General Henry G Grey, with regards to the formation of a Commando of citizens to act against the perceived marauding Xhosa. John Graham realised that the available regular British military forces on the frontier had to serve officially only as a reserve at various rallying points in the region. However, at that stage, due to the escalation of terror, theft and violent incidents, this plan could not be fully implemented.<sup>20</sup>

The new Governor instructed Graham to move the remaining soldiers and headquarters of the Cape Regiment to the eastern frontier. But more important, he officially appointed Graham as Special Commissioner with supreme local military and civil powers in the eastern frontier districts. Graham practically received a *carte blanche* to change any standing regulations or practices on the frontier.<sup>21</sup> In a private letter to his father in Scotland, Graham admitted that his appointment in command of all the military forces on the Cape eastern frontier came as a surprise to him. It was evident that the new Governor had agreed to Graham's previously suggested stronger coercive measures to clear the eastern districts of Xhosa occupants when all other peaceful measures had failed.<sup>22</sup>

Various factors favoured the appointment of Graham as local civil and military Commander to direct the Colonial resistance against the Xhosa occupation of the Zuurveld and adjacent frontier areas, e.g.:

- He had gained extensive practical experience of operational planning and the conduct of war in Europe and at Blaauwberg.
- He became acquainted with the local languages and customs of the inhabitants of the Colony, especially during his previous visit to the district of Uitenhage.

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19 JB Peires, *The House of Phalo* (Ravan, Johannesburg, 1981), pp. 59-60.

20 CA, CO 4830 Letter Book: Grey – Cuyler, 27 June 1811, pp. 22-23.

21 SRO, GD 151/2/1 Graham of Fintry Letters: Lynedoch – Robert Graham, Proclamation, 30 September 1811, Enclosure no.5, pp. 305-305.

22 SRO, GD 151/2/1, John Graham – Robert Graham, 4 October 1811, pp. 307-309.



- Both his superiors and inferiors held him in high esteem, especially as a result of his good relations with various military, as well as civil and missionary personalities.<sup>23</sup>
- He was only 33 years old in 1811, energetic in action, humane and undaunted, sharp in observation and practical in decision making.<sup>24</sup>

Governor Cradock maintained that the farmers and other civilians on the eastern frontier were in principle responsible for their own defence, based on the prevailing Commando system and operational actions under supervision of the local Landdrosts. Cradock, however, simultaneously sanctioned an increase of British infantry and cavalry on the frontier, but required that Graham should use the regular soldiers primarily as a reserve force, to be called upon only as a defensive armed reaction in cases of an emergency.<sup>25</sup>

Image 3: Governor Sir John Cradock who held Graham in high esteem



Source: Cape Archives.

By the end of 1811, Graham's available regular British forces on the eastern frontier of the Colony, including reinforcements, comprised of:<sup>26</sup>

Units	Officers	Subalterns	Rank & file	Total
Royal Artillery	1	0	97	98
21 <sup>st</sup> Light Dragoons	7	11	147	165

23 PRO, WO 1/343, Despatches: Cradock – Liverpool, 18 October 1811, p. 119.

24 CA, CO 4831 Letter Book: Cradock – John Graham, 6 October 1811, p. 56.

25 *SA Biographical Dictionary*, II, pp. 150-152.

26 PRO, WO 1/343, Despatches: State of the Troops employed in the Interior, 18 October 1811, p. 139.

Cape Regiment	30	42	522	594
83 <sup>rd</sup> Regiment	8	13	200	221
93 <sup>rd</sup> Regiment	1	1	1	3
Total	47	67	967	1 081

From the above statistics it is clear that Graham could only rely on the Light Dragoons for swift operational tasks; the last three regiments being infantry which could merely be used to defend strategic posts. Numerically, Graham's Cape Regiment was by far the largest in number (30 officers and 522 men) and also the best adapted troops to perform fatigue duties in the unique frontier environment.

Graham personally attended to the transportation of the military reinforcements, equipment and ammunition on board the *Upton Castle* to Algoa Bay. On arriving at the Drostdy of Uitenhage, 27 October 1811, he spent some weeks personally observing the extent of Xhosa occupation of the frontier districts.<sup>27</sup>

On 21 November he ordered the troops to move their military posts in an eastward direction, closer to the Fish River boundary. This would enhance the protection of more farms, extend the military communication lines and provide strategic support to any contemplated Commando operation.<sup>28</sup> In the district of Graaff-Reinet, Graham concentrated the bulk of Lyster's regular troops at Bruintjes Hoogte. The left flank of Lyster's posts stretched from Bruintjes Hoogte to the Baviaans River, a northern tributary of the Great Fish River. The right flank of Lyster's posts stretched from Bruintjes Hoogte to the Riet (or Vogel) River, where the cavalry (21<sup>st</sup> Light Dragoons) were stationed.<sup>29</sup>

Graham's grand strategy to clear the eastern frontier of Xhosa occupants was carefully planned. He warned Major Lyster that in case of forceful operations against the Xhosa, some may succeed to move unobserved in a westward direction, rather than crossing the Fish River. The reserve troops at the various outstretched posts had to be on the *qui vive* for any such Xhosa who may attack them from the back, especially during night time. Any roaming Xhosa found during day time, had to be disarmed and forced over the eastern

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27 CA, GH 23/4, Despatch Book: Cradock – Liverpool, 18 October 1811, 3; SRO, Ex GD 151/2/1, Graham of Fintny Muniments: Graham – Reynell, 29 October 1811, pp. 1-2.

28 CA, CO 33, Letters Received: Graham – Reynell, 21 November 1811, no. 29.

29 SRO, Ex GD 151/2/2, Graham of Fintny Muniments: Graham - Reynell, 21 November 1811, pp. 13-15.

boundary.<sup>30</sup>

Graham instructed Lyster to:

- keep the exact number of reserve troops at the various posts secret;
- use only a part of the reserve troops at a post for patrol work;
- avoid entering dense forests where the enemy could wait in ambush;
- notify Graham immediately when any Xhosa chief is found and held at a post;
- strategically withdraw the reserve troops from their posts in case of being completely outnumbered and over-powered by a major onslaught of enemy forces, and
- defend at all costs the drostdy as vital administrative centre of Graaff-Reinet.

Graham evidently took into account the particular needs and circumstances at the different defensive posts, by allowing discretionary powers to commanding officers of the reserve troops.<sup>31</sup>

### **The war escalates**

In addition to the defensive function of the advanced frontier posts, Graham's strategy was meticulously presented in his General Instructions of November 1811, whereby a well-planned and boldly executed offensive had to be launched against the Xhosa occupants of the frontier districts. For this purpose he called upon all available armed citizens of Graaff-Reinet and Uitenhage, under their respective Landdrosts, as well as a proportion of regular troops, including the Cape Regiment. The three divisions of the contemplated force comprised of:

- a *right division*, close to the coast, commanded by Major Cuyler, Landdrost of Uitenhage;
- a *central division*, commanded by Captain George Sackville Fraser of the Cape Regiment, and
- a *left division*, from the district of Graaff-Reinet, commanded by Landdrost Anders Stockenström.<sup>32</sup>

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30 SRO, Ex GD 151/2/1, Graham of Fintry Muniments: Graham – Lyster, 15 November 1811, pp. 6-7.

31 SRO, Ex GD 151/2/1, Graham - Lyster, 15 November 1811, pp. 8-9.

32 CT Atkinson (Ed), *Supplementary report on the manuscripts of Robert Graham of Fintry* (Historical Manuscripts Commission publication, no. 81, London, 1942), p. 88.

Graham allowed ample time for the farmers to finish the wheat harvest, before they were to join the Commando under their civilian leaders, e.g. Field-Commandant Gabriël Stoltz and Fieldcornets Willem Grobler and Willem Nel.<sup>33</sup>

In the mean time Graham had to resolve proverbially a storm in a teacup, when Landdrost Stockenström complained to him that Lyster had ignored his civil authority by instructing armed civilians of the reserve force to serve under officers of the Army. Graham responded that Lyster was a most experienced officer and appointed in command of all the reserve forces. It was practically impossible for Stockenström simultaneously to command the left wing of the Colonial task force, as well as the reserve forces in his district.<sup>34</sup>

At the Drostdy of Uitenhage some Khoekhoen scouts reported to Graham on 22 November that they had visited the main settlement (“kraal”) of Habana in the Rietberg. They found this petty Chief, a cousin of Ndlambe, in a desperate condition. He was old and sickly. He seemed unprepared for war and afraid of the British. Graham expected that Habana would peacefully remove his followers and cattle over the eastern boundary.<sup>35</sup> At the beginning of December 1811 he sent Landdrost Stockenström as emissary to the headquarters of Chief Ngqika outside the Colony, in the Tyumie Valley, east of the Kat River. This paramount Chief agreed to Stockenström that he would allow his traditional rival Ndlambe with all of his followers to cross and settle east of the Fish River. Graham welcomed the *status quo* with Ngqika, but did not really trust him.<sup>36</sup>

Subsequently a tragic incident took place near the town of Uitenhage, on 2 December 1811, which triggered the outbreak of the Fourth Frontier War. Graham was informed that some Xhosa fighters had attacked a small mounted military patrol, killing one member (Swartz) and taking eight horses. An immediate follow-up operation proved fruitless and Graham concluded in desperation:<sup>37</sup>

I gave them orders, if they could get the murderers, to shoot them immediately, for sorry I am to say, that reasoning with these savages is of no avail...

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33 PL Zietsman, *Die verdediging van en verdedigingsbeleid op die Oosgrens...* (M.A. dissertation, UNISA, 1941), p. 69.

34 SRO, Ex GD 151/2/1, Graham of Fintry Muniments: Graham – Stockenström, 7 December 1811, pp. 28-30.

35 CA, CO 33, Letters Received: Particulars of a conversation between Habana and three Hottentots, undated, Enclosure, no. 29.

36 B MacLennan, *A Proper Degree of Terror* (Ravan, Johannesburg, 1986), pp. 94-98.

37 CA, CO 33 Graham – Reynell, 12 December 1811, no. 32.

The movement of the three already organised military divisions to clear the frontier districts of Xhosa intruders commenced on 20 December, utilising the visibility of full moon in night time. On 26 December the right wing of Ndlambe's forces, well hidden in the bush, confronted the division of Cuyler. The Chief stepped forward and loudly challenged Cuyler, stating that he had conquered the Zuurveld in a previous war and that he would not voluntarily yield. He then raised his assegai as a signal to his followers to attack. His warriors, however, kept a safe distance from the troops to avoid the effectiveness of any volleys from Colonial firearms.<sup>38</sup> It was evident that Ndlambe had rallied all the Zuurveld Xhosa in a war of resistance against Graham's contemplated clearing up operation. Graham decided to concentrate all his available forces (three divisions) at Zokamma (also known as Coerney), about 16 kilometres northeast of the mouth of the Sundays River, in order to prepare a combined military attack on Ndlambe's stronghold in the Addo Bush.

Graham instructed Landdrost Anders Stockenström to move the left division over the passes of the Zuurberg and Rietberg to join Fraser's central division in the vicinity of Korhaan Drift on the Sundays River.<sup>39</sup> On the evening of 29 December Graham received alarming news that Stockenström, who wished firstly to consult with him personally, had fallen with eight of his mounted party, including Fieldcornets Potgieter and Greyling, as well as a Coloured interpreter, in a surprise attack that morning at Doorn Nek in the Zuurberg. This tragic incident was executed by the imiDange warriors of petty Chief Xasa, who refused to negotiate on the removal of his people across the Fish River boundary.<sup>40</sup>

Graham insisted that the left division should link up with Fraser's central column for the contemplated combined operations. This took place at Zokamma on New Year's day 1812,<sup>41</sup> where Graham assembled a combined force of some

- Royal Artillery                      30 men
- 21<sup>st</sup> Light Dragoons                20 men

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38 SRO, Ex GD 151/2/1, Graham of Finty Muniments: Cuyler – Graham, 26 December 1811, pp. 38-39.

39 CA, CO 2582 Letters Received: Extract of a private communication of Lieutenant-Colonel Graham, 2 January 1812, Enclosure, no. 50.

40 CW Hutton (Ed), *The Autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström* (Reprint by Struik, Cape Town, 1964), pp. 57-61.

41 CA, CO 2582, Letters Received: Extract of a private communication of Lieutenant-Colonel Graham, 2 January 1812, Enclosure, no. 50.

- Cape Regiment                   400 men
- Armed citizens                 350 men
- Total                               800 men

On 2 January he organised these troops in six companies, each comprising of 60 armed citizens and 20 Cape Regiment soldiers, to sweep the Addo forest on foot from the north, shooting all male Xhosa and seizing all cattle. This was the first time that Colonial troops were used to scour thickets systematically on foot in this frontier war. It proved to be less successful, because agile Xhosa warriors could easily evade the heavily armed soldiers under cover of the natural vegetation and physical terrain. After five days of fatiguing service, the parties returned. They reported that they could only eliminate 12 or 14 Xhosa resisters, including the old Chief Chungwa, who was hiding in the bush. Field cornet Nortjé was killed by an assegai during skirmishes with the enemy. Various Colonial units confiscated 2 500 cattle in possession of the Xhosa during this operation.<sup>42</sup>

To expedite the expulsion of all Xhosa occupants from the frontier districts, Graham requested Governor Cradock on 8 January to transfer at least 200 additional regular soldiers of the Cape Town Garrison to reinforce the frontier troops and to enable him to fully deploy the Cape Regiment for operational duties in the guerrilla warfare against the Xhosa.<sup>43</sup> To this request the Governor responded swiftly by ordering the embarkation of 200 rank and file and officers of the 60<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot to Algoa Bay.<sup>44</sup>

By the end of January Graham ascertained that Ndlambe and his immediate subjects, with all their cattle, had evacuated the coastal war zone between the Sundays and Fish Rivers. They retreated eastwards across the Colonial boundary on 14 or 15 January, followed also by remnants of the community of the fallen Chief Chungwa.<sup>45</sup>

This enabled Graham to attend to deteriorating conditions in the Bamboesberg, where the wife of a farmer (Van der Merwe) and several Khoekhoen cattle herders had been killed by Xhosa marauders, seizing several droves of cattle. Graham gave instructions that armed citizens and soldiers of the Cape Regiment be henceforth mounted for quick retaliatory expeditions.

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42 CA, GH 28/4, Enclosures to Despatches: Graham - Reynell, 8 January 1812, no. 12.

43 CA, CO 2582, Letters Received, Graham – Reynell, 8 January 1812, no. 50.

44 CA, GH 23/4, Despatch Book: Cradock – Liverpool, 23 January 1812, p. 28.

45 CA, CO 2582, Letters Received: Graham – Alexander, 30 January 1812, no. 5.

They were to track stolen cattle to the hiding places of the Xhosa and to kill all male occupants indiscriminately.<sup>46</sup>

The Xhosa Chief Habana, who seemed unprepared for war in November 1811, subsequently provided sanctuary to numerous hostile Xhosa leaders and fugitives at his stronghold in the Rietberg. Graham decided to launch a simultaneous twofold attack on Habana's abode. On 24 January 1812 some 150 men from Graaff-Reinet were to attack Habana's place from the north, while Fraser with an equal number of soldiers had to assail it from the south. Habana's warriors skillfully avoided any direct confrontation with the troops, withdrawing time and again into the vast overgrown ravines of the Rietberg. Graham, however, responded by sending an additional 200 fresh soldiers of the Cape Regiment to continue the military offensive with orders to kill or drive all Xhosa persons over the eastern boundary.<sup>47</sup> At daybreak, on 13 February, a twelve day sweeping operation of the northern and southern slopes of the Rietberg started. The troops covered a distance of about 65 kilometres of deep valleys and nearly inaccessible ravines. They applied a scorched earth policy by destroying all Xhosa gardens and crops and seizing some 600 cattle. About 30 male Xhosa were killed in action, but more than 100 Xhosa women and children were also taken captive by the troops and sent over the Colonial boundary via Brintjes Hoogte. Graham was convinced that this military operation had unequivocally demonstrated to any Xhosa occupants west of the Fish River that no hiding place in the frontier districts would be inaccessible to the Colonial forces.<sup>48</sup>

### **Termination of military operations under Graham**

By the end of February, Graham reported to Governor Cradock that all resistance of Xhosa occupants in the frontier districts had been broken and that "hardly a trace" of them had remained.<sup>49</sup> For all practical purposes the Fourth Frontier War had ended. On 7 March the Governor announced in a general *Communiqué* that Graham's troops had successfully swept some 20 000 Xhosa occupants out of the Zuurveld in merely two brief months.

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46 CA, CO 2582, Letters Received: Graham - Reynell, 31 January 1812, enclosure 4, no. 50.

47 PRO, GD 151/3/2, Graham of Fintry Letters: Graham - Reynell, 26 February 1812, no. 174.

48 Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, London, War Office (WO) 1/343, Despatches: Graham - Cradock, 26 February 1812, pp. 155 - 156.

49 R Elphick and H Giliomee (Eds), *The Shaping of South African Society* (Longman Penguin, Cape Town, 1979), pp. 315 and 326.

A minimum of blood had been shed, but the Xhosa leaders practically experienced the effectiveness, extent and hegemony of Colonial military power.<sup>50</sup>

The Governor reported favourably to the Commander-in-Chief at the Horse Guards in London that:

Lieutenant-Colonel Graham of the Cape Regiment, in whose hands all the civil and military power was lodged, has conducted the whole course of the proceedings with the greatest ability and good management, and has expressed himself in the most favourable terms of every part of the military force under his command.

The success that has attended the measures pursued, has gone beyond expectation and the expulsion of the (Xhosa occupants) from His Majesty's territory into their own country, effected in the manner it has been done, with so little violence, seems to receive universal satisfaction and will give a peace and security to the frontiers of this settlement hitherto unknown...<sup>51</sup>

But the termination of the war did not end Graham's commitment to arrange necessary measures for a lasting peace and stability in the frontier districts. He firstly improved lines of communication by opening strategically important roads in the Zuurveld. Soldiers and civilians were utilised to repair the old route from Korhaan Drift (on the Sundays River) to Rautenbach's Drift (on the Bushman's River) and a new road over the Addo Pass.<sup>52</sup>

To seal off the Fish River boundary, Graham established 22 military posts between the Great Winterberg and the sea. These posts roughly formed two parallel lines of defence. The front line stretched from Esterhuyzen's Post (east of Slachter's Nek) to Old Kaffir Drift (near the mouth of the Fish River). The second line of military posts linked Bruintjes Hoogte and Groenfontein. The bulk of patrol work was allocated to the Cape Regiment, whose soldiers were mounted partly on pack oxen due to horse-distemper that prevailed in the frontier regions. The rest of the patrols consisted of farmers called up from different districts for particular brief periods of service.<sup>53</sup>

In collaboration with Governor Cradock, Graham envisaged a relatively dense farming population close to the eastern borders of the Colony, in order

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50 SRO, GD 151/7/1, Graham of Fintry Letters: *Communiqué*, 7 March 1812, p. 13.

51 PRO, WO 1/343, Despatches: Cradock – Torrens, 8 March 1812, pp. 143-158.

52 SRO, GD 151/3/2, Graham of Fintry Letters: Graham – Reynell, 26 February 1812, no. 174.

53 SRO, GD 151/2/1, Graham of Fintry Muniments: Graham – Reynell, 20 March 1812, pp. 39-40.



to form a cordon of small semi-military settlements.<sup>54</sup> The abandoned loan farm of Lucas Meyer, “De Twee Fontijnen”, which the farmer had officially obtained in January 1785, was selected by Graham for the new headquarters of the Cape Regiment. It was strategically situated in the Zuurveld, about 30 kilometres from the Fish River boundary. In June 1812 the first temporary barracks of wattle and daub were constructed on high level ground for this new local military centre on the Kowie River.<sup>55</sup>

To honour the exceptional services rendered by Graham and his associates during the Fourth Frontier War, Governor Cradock in August 1812 proclaimed the new military headquarters on the banks of the Kowie river officially as Graham’s Town (soon to be spelt Grahamstown). It soon also developed into a major administrative and commercial centre.<sup>56</sup>

Image 4: An artists view of early Grahamstown as military and administrative headquarters on the frontier



Source: Cape Archives.

<sup>54</sup> CA, CO 4831, Letter Book: Alexander – Graham, 2 April 1811, pp. 395-396.

<sup>55</sup> SRO, GD 151/Box 11, Graham of Fintry Letters: Graham – Reynell, 15 May 1812, no. 10/87/7; JC Visagie, *Die Trek uit Oos-Rietrivier* (Private publication, Stellenbosch, 1989), pp. 7-8. The mimosa tree under which Graham had originally pitched his tent when deciding on the most suitable site for the headquarters blew down during a thunder storm in High Street about three decades later (*Graham’s Town Journal*, 31 August 1843, p. 2).

<sup>56</sup> *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*: Proclamation, 14 May 1812; Advertisement, 14 August 1812, p. 1.

## **Conclusion**

What made the Fourth Frontier War and John Graham's role remarkable?

Firstly, a relatively small number of heterogeneous colonial forces, comprised of regular soldiers and armed civilians, in total an offensive force of about 1 000 men, effectively cleared the frontier districts of about 20 000 Xhosa occupants within a brief period of about two months. Graham's motivational skills, organisational talents and military experience blended them into a concerted military machine against a common foe, notwithstanding previous years of escalating tension, loss of lives, devastation of property and ultimately the large scale evacuation of loan farms in the frontier districts.

Secondly, one should note that the Frontier War was also traumatic to the Xhosa, because they experienced the full military power of the Colonial forces. At the very moment of their perceived control of vast extents of the Zuurveld and Rietberg, they were confronted by colonial opponents whose fire-power and mobility they could not match. According to the Xhosa prophet Nxele (alias Makana or Links), the Xhosa easily credited the Colonial forces with the mystical power of the "spirits who lived below the sea".<sup>57</sup>

Although Xhosa leaders such as Ndlambe, Chungwa and Habana claimed a right to occupy the frontier districts on account of conquests during previous wars, they failed to maintain their supremacy. Individual property rights did not exist among the Xhosa, but they adhered to communal occupation of the best arable and grazing lands, as well as specific spheres of influence. They were not unaccustomed to a nomadic life style based on seasonal changes, but not to the same extent as the Khoekhoen or Bushmen in the interior of the sub-continent.<sup>58</sup>

The evasive tactics of the Xhosa in guerilla warfare enabled them to avoid heavy casualties and to equalise the assegai and firearm in hand to hand fighting in the thickets. But the Xhosa were hampered in coherence from the very beginning of the war. Ndlambe fled with his followers and cattle across the Fish River, leaving Chungwa to resist the Colonial forces. Habana collected many renegades and Xhosa thieves in the Rietberg, but isolated himself from his superiors east of the Fish River boundary.

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<sup>57</sup> J Hodgson, *Plugging in to Sources of Power* (Paper presented at the Sixth Congress of the Association for the Study of Religion, U.Z., 27-28 June 1984), p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> J Milton, *The Edges of War* (Juta, Cape Town, 1983), pp. 25, 61.

The real reason for the frontier conflict was clearly identified by Graham and his associates as a clash about similar means of subsistence between the eastward moving extensive cattle farmers of the Colony and the westward moving Xhosa cattle herders in the disputed frontier zone. The pressures of population growth, internal strife and successional problems complicated the closing frontier situation for Xhosa occupants.<sup>59</sup>

To reinforce his limited number of regular troops, Graham called upon the armed citizens of the frontier districts to defend their families and property during a crisis situation. Graham utilised the traditional Commando system for practical reasons. The farmers were familiar with their own local leaders and physical environment. They had to victualise themselves and used their own horses for brief periods of military service. It implied a financial saving to the authorities and the promotion of self-interest of civilians.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, commissariat services were arranged by Graham for the regular troops and armed citizens who were utilised for lengthy periods in the reserve force and at the newly established frontier posts. This created a market for local entrepreneurs and contractors such as Piet Retief.<sup>61</sup> Supplies were also sent from Cape Town by ox wagon or shipping through the agent Robert Hill.<sup>62</sup>

Another remarkable fact of the Fourth Frontier War was the limited loss of lives, as documented in official reports. It is very unlikely that Graham or Governor Cradock would have underplayed the real number of Xhosa casualties during the frontier operations. War is always horrible, traumatic and destructive, but Graham succeeded to restrain the anger and ruthlessness of his troops in relation to the grand objectives of his frontier arrangements. The lives of Xhosa women and children were saved during the campaign against Habana, but immediate revenge motivated the forces against the imiDange after the tragic death of Landdrost Anders Stockenström and his party at Doorn Nek.<sup>63</sup>

How permanent was the outcome of the Fourth Frontier War? With the wisdom of hindsight it is possible to conclude that Graham's successful military operations and subsequent frontier arrangements did not last long. After he and Cradock had left the Colony, new administrators lacked the zeal and

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59 See also B MacLennan, *A Proper Degree of Terror* (Ravan, Johannesburg, 1986).

60 Note the conclusions of PE Roux, *Geskiedenis van die Burgerkommando's in die Kaapkolonie* (D.Phil. thesis, U.S., 1946).

61 JLM Franken, *Piet Retief se Lewe in die Kolonie* (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1949), p. 71.

62 CA, GH 34/2, Indian Letter Book: Cradock – Farquhar, 13 July 1813, no numbers.

63 SRO, GD 151/7/1, Graham of Fintry Letters: *Communiqué*, 7 March 1812, p. 13.

resources to maintain a strict border control and defensive system. Financial interests surpassed the “luxury” of military and security needs, regulated from Cape Town and London.

An assessment of John Graham as prototype of early nineteenth century British military leadership needs some perspective. Leadership is usually determined by response to an immediate crisis. During the Fourth Frontier War, Graham became the leader of the moment. His relatively brief period as civil and military commissioner on the frontier was preceded by a long record of excellent military service abroad, as well as in the Cape Colony, where he soon became acquainted with all sectors of the local population and circumstances. He had many friends, but few enemies, in his personal life. In his dealings with Landdrost van der Riet (Stellenbosch) and Landdrost Stockenström (Graaff-Reinet) he promoted equal treatment for all people before the law.<sup>64</sup> Graham was regarded by his superiors, such as Governor Cradock, as most reliable and loyal, performing duties to the best of his ability and according to the convictions of his time.<sup>65</sup>

Was Graham the inventor of segregation on the Cape eastern frontier? Certainly not, but he applied it diligently as a practical and viable solution to the immanent clash of different interests in a closing frontier situation. According to the Colonial authorities the Fish River boundary was an artificial, but official, ruling since 1778. The cattle farming communities of both trekboers and Xhosa herders regarded the disputed Zuurveld as ideal grazing lands for their increasing stock. Graham did what he was required to execute as effective functionary of the Colonial government. After the expulsion of the perceived illegal Xhosa occupants of the Zuurveld, he made arrangements for continued “safety and tranquility” on the frontier, in accordance with the recommendations of his predecessors and contemporaries, e.g. Colonel Richard Collins and Governor Cradock.<sup>66</sup>

In the light of political controversies about the possible changing of place names and institutions in South Africa associated with racial segregation,<sup>67</sup> the

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<sup>64</sup> Graham's handling of the case of the soldier Viool is a typical example. Refer to CA, CO 10, Sundry Civil and Military Officers: Graham – Cockell, 20 November 1808, no. 112; Grey – Alexander, 24 December 1808, no. 116.

<sup>65</sup> See Cradock's praise in the Proclamation of 14 May 1812 in the *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser*, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> GM Theal (Ed), *Records of the Cape Colony*, VII (Report of Collins, 6 August 1809), pp. 98-139.

<sup>67</sup> A typical example appeared in *The Mercury*, 20 June 2001, p. 2 (“Asmal firm on re-naming schools”). For an opposite appreciation see for example J Bond, *They were South Africans* (University Press, Oxford, 1971), pp. 24-34.

name of John Graham may be included with that of Theophilus Shepstone, John Cradock and Benjamin D'Urban. Graham, as much as other prominent leaders in our history, figured substantially in the kaleidoscope of early nineteenth century local personalities. He must be judged within the limitations of the time and context of his services.<sup>68</sup> His record remained unblemished – using his most productive years in the Cape Colony, promoting peaceful negotiations and mutual reconciliation, but also firm in conviction and execution.<sup>69</sup> Graham's intention on the eastern frontier was never to slaughter the Xhosa occupants, but to use the strongest military measures to compel them to accept the *fait accompli* of the integrity of the Fish River as official dividing line between the Colony and adjacent Xhosa territory to the east.

Graham's subsequent role in the Napoleonic wars in Europe and his return to the Cape Colony as Commandant of Simon's Town represent another chapter in his remarkable life story. His marriage to Johanna, daughter of Rudolph Cloete of Westervoort, Rondebosch, immediately after the Fourth Frontier War, also confirms his affection to the Colony and its people. But in the last instance Graham never lost sight of his ancestral roots, viz. his distant relatives and the family estate of Fintry in Scotland...<sup>70</sup>

Nonetheless, the exceptional military leadership qualities of John Graham reached a pinnacle in his effective, but short lived measures taken during the Fourth Frontier War and should be accredited in the annals of South African history.

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68 J Rüsen, *Studies in Metahistory* (Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1993), pp. 180-183.

69 On one of the interior pillars of the Anglican Cathedral in Grahamstown is simply inscribed: "In memory of Colonel John Graham, Commandant of Simon's Town, Cape of Good Hope, who died 17 March 1821, aged 42 years".

70 SRO, GD 151/3/1, Graham of Fintry Letters: Biographical notes, undated, pp. 4-6.