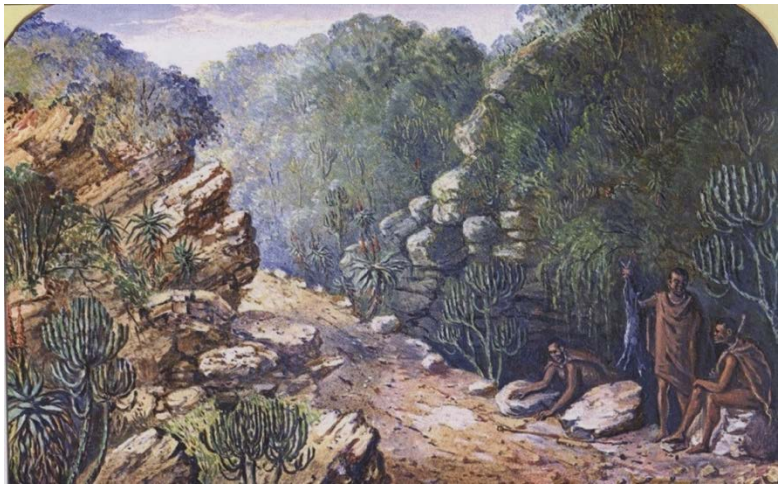
INTO THE THICK OF IT

by Serena Gess

In a letter to Earl Bathurst, Secretary for War and the Colonies, Lord Charles Somerset writes of the Albany district:

> *'[It is] by far the most beautiful and most fertile area of the settlement. I know not how to give an idea of it, except to say it resembles a succession of parks from the Bushman's to the Great Fish River.'*

He's trying to persuade the Earl that the planting of a dense British population along the Cape's Eastern frontier would be the most effective and economical way of defending it. The area had been used for grazing cattle by the Khoi for centuries, and by groups of amaXhosa and Boers since the 1770s. The Xhosa burnt the grazing every winter and probably taught the Boers the same habit. Large herds of herbivores moving through the landscape would also have kept some areas open and park-like. There had been good rain in the summer of 1819, so when the settlers arrived six months later, the country showed great promise.



Of course, the settlers weren't making new homes in parkland, but in a thicket environment.

The **plate opposite** shows a typical valley thicket scene, painted by Frederick I'Ons - a landscape totally unfamiliar to the settlers.

Thicket is aptly named. Walking through this tangle of shrubs, many armed with vicious spikes, you are hindered by vines with names like kat-doring, which makes you ‘wag 'n bietjie’ as you extract the hooked thorns from your clothes or flesh. The amaXhosa were very comfortable in the thicket. Their karosses protected them from thorns, and the dense growth provided refuge in times of war. Thicket species are adapted for the erratic rainfall this area receives; in wet years, they flourish; in dry years they withstand the drought. Thicket survives and remains green in a landscape with sometimes very low rainfall, and extremes of temperature. By 1822 the settlers were probably thinking of their surroundings as a green desert rather than a nobleman's park.

The wagon trains carrying the settlers from Algoa Bay were several miles long (**below).** With twelve to sixteen oxen per wagon, the dust was intense.

Above: Settler family by Angus Mc Bride

The Welsh settler Thomas Philipps recounts: 'We walked on before the wago t time saw s of an elephant in the road...The distant ground on every side appeared to be a park, and the road was so tastefully planted out that it was in vain persuading some of the party that we were not approaching a nobleman's residence.'
The settlers spent several days travelling to their allotments. For the children, it was a grand adventure.

> *'We little ones felt none of the cares that weighed on the hearts of our mothers and fathers. The gipsy-looking camp fires of the first night's outspanning at the Swartkops – the ringing echo of the whips among the hills, the scarlet blossoms and the honey-dew of the aloes – the wildflowers of the wilderness, so new and strange – these were excitements that banished both care and fear, and made the journey a happy and beguiling one.'* (Henry Hare Dugmore)

The immigrants were offloaded from the Boers' wagons onto their wild and unfenced allotments between May and July of 1820. For many, this was an awful moment:

> *'There stood our property on the grass...the dutchman took us by the hand, bade us farewell...I cannot account for my feelings when the good dutchmen left us; 'twas worse than leaving the ship,'* wrote one settler.

After offloading their belongings, Mrs Hoole sat next to her piles and piles of dirty washing and cried. Before her marriage to her wealthy uncle's impecunious secretary she had lived in a grand house in London and had never put on her own stockings.

Wise Settlers asked their Boer wagon drivers for tips on edible and medicinal plants. The Philips family tried spekboom pie, and sour figs. The Wild grape **i**s one of the best of the thicket fruits. It makes a delicious jam and cordial. The Num-num is quite tolerable, and the various species are all edible. Not all thicket berries are safe to eat: the bushman's poison bush is a highly toxic plant that grows in dry dune forest. Did Richard Taylor from Baillie's party in Cuylerville, consume these berries in January 1821? He suddenly went insane and died a few days later.

Right: Acocanthera (bushman's poison bush) and Knysna loerie/turaco

The settlers planted wheat, their cash crop, before tending to their own comforts. The seed was provided by the government, and great efforts were expended in sowing as large a crop as possible: James Henry Greathead writes:

> *'During the first and second years, I cultivated 57 acres, the greater part of which were secured by embankments, and in the third year, 25 acres.'*

Until they were producing their own food, settlers were provided with rations of tea, sugar, soap, candles, rice, flour and sheep. And sometimes rum – apparently good for stomach ailments, though not so good for peaceful co-existence! Bathurst was the central point for collection, the commissariat tent being beside the current Bathurst Primary School.

Above: a settler wheelbarrow

Most settlers had no transport and there were very few roads. The sacks of flour were heavy, and the sheep were on the hoof, resulting in various sorry tales:

John Ayliff describes returning to their location with the rations when they met two of Southey's boys, carrying a dead springbok. The boys' dogs ran at the sheep, scattering them, and under the weight of the flour, the settlers couldn't turn them. Putting down their bundles they went after the sheep, but didn't succeed. Eventually they gave up and returned to collect their sacks but these were nowhere to be found. It got dark; the men got lost, eventually getting home empty handed. The next day they returned with a party; found the flour and spotted five of the sheep in the distance. As these couldn't be caught they had to be shot and carried home dead. Another group of men bringing sheep home discovered they had forgotten things in Bathurst. They left the sheep in the care of a boy, tying their legs together so that they couldn't stray. The sheep's immobility was spotted by vultures, who flocked down, frightened the boy away and devoured the sheep.

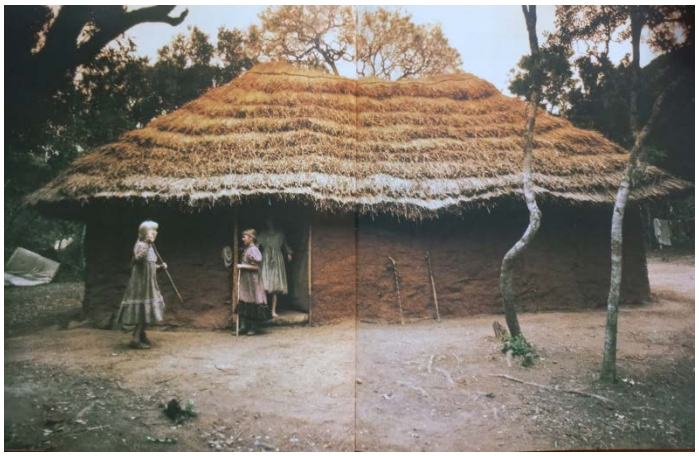
A settler innovation was the ox sled, still seen in the Transkei. (**Previous page: F Ions 1860s)** The making of wheels was a skilled job, but anyone could make a sledge. A y-shaped branch was cut, and boards nailed across to form a platform over the Y, onto which sacks of flour could be loaded.

The settlers must have been delighted to encounter some almost-familiar birds. The wagtail would have been instantly recognisable. The acacia, (**see plate right)** became a crucial part of their lives. Thorn wood makes excellent firewood, and would have been used by the settler women crouching over their outdoor fires, cooking the supper with their long dresses trailing in the dirt. Children chewed acacia gum, and the thorny branches were used for kraals to protect their stock at night. The kraals would have needed constant upkeep to keep out predators, especially in the spring when the calves and lambs were born.

Above: painting of acacia and wagtail by Robert Jacob Gordon

With the coming of spring, snakes emerged, including deadly cobras and puffadders. The Irish settler Captain Butler's little girl of four died from a puffadder bite. In October the immigrants would have heard a terrifying new noise at night, especially when the mist came down. A horrible shrieking, tailing off into the ghostly darkness, perhaps something like a banshee. How long did it take them to find out it was just the mating call of the innocuous tree dassie?
The warmer weather would have meant an increase in ticks, causing tick bite fever and making the care of stock far more difficult.

Some settlers were manifestly more suited to pioneering life than others. Country labourers knew how to build wattle and daub houses, both for themselves and their masters. These might have
looked something like the one below **(SABC series The Volunteers)**.



There was no glass for windows - these were open to the air, with shutters to close them at night. Of course, some settlers had very little idea of how to build a house. One of the Irish settlers in Bailie's party refers to his fellows as 'all Sirs or half-Sirs'. These people had few practical skills. Some were still living in tents two years down the line!

A thicket species that would become invaluable was the Sneezewood. The strong, hard wood doesn't rot, and would have been used for upright posts in their wattle and daub houses, and for the uprights for the cattle kraals. Later, sneezewood posts were used for fencing. There are very few old sneezewood trees left in the area – they are extremely slow growing, and like the yellowwood trees, were decimated for timber.

Another notable plant species in the district is the *Phoenix reclinata* palm. This was most useful – the young fruit could be eaten, and the seeds ground to make a coffee substitute.

Craft skills among even the educated settler women were impressive. Catherine Philipps writes of the palm:

'The young sprouts when dried and split can be plaited, and it makes very good sun hats. We have made a hat for Papa and Edward and are now making them for ourselves, they are very cool and light.'

Settlers were lucky if they could acquire a dog to alert them to danger from predators or cattle thieves. The Boers didn't like to part with their dogs and while some settlers had attempted to bring their dogs from England, these were often thrown overboard by the sailors. Welsh settler Thomas Philipps advises would-be emigrants that

'anyone wishing to keep dogs from being thrown overboard should offer 2 gallons of rum for each dog delivered to the colony.'

Wild dogs were common in the area, making stock farming very difficult. The damage they could cause was enormous. One settler writes:

'I was startled by the cry of Wild Dogs. I ran to the window and saw about thirty of these ferocious animals; before I could drive them off, they killed twenty of my flock which consisted of twenty seven in all.'

For the natural history enthusiast, the thicket was a wonder. Edward Philipps collected horns, insects, scorpions, locusts and snakes. His principal pet was a young eagle, taken from a nest. His sisters had a pet chameleon. **The illustration below is** a page from Thomas Bowker's entomological journal. These beautifully drawn seasonal journals show the moths and butterflies seen through the year, including their caterpillars.

Fourteen-year-old Bertram Bowker made a fiddle out of different woods from the thicket **(below right).** He writes in his autobiography:

'There came an old blind man, his name was Commons. He had been a bandmaster in the Cape Corps. Mother bought Holden a fiddle from Commons. As soon as Holden began to play I wanted to learn also but had no fiddle. So I set to work to get the green wood out of the bush - three different sorts - hard for the back, soft wood for the belly and tough for the sides. Soon I had a fiddle just as good as the bought one.'

Not everyone revelled in the wilderness around them. Anna Francis from Essex hated it: She writes home:

'Why did I ever leave you, my dear mother? The thought of staying in this miserable solitude is dreadful: debarred from all social intercourse – not a female friend to converse with – no doctor nearer than Grahamstown, which is a wretched place... To be buried like a dog in a place surrounded by wild beasts – me, who have been used to every comfort! Think of my sensation when I hear the wolves

howling round our dismal dwelling; add to this the barking of the jackals and the blowing of the porcupines. The ground swarms with insects and reptiles. I have had a snake a yard long coiled up by my bedside, and a mouse, as large as a small rat, in my bed, when I was lying very ill. We cannot set a single article of provision out of the way, but it is covered by millions of ants, some of them an inch long.'

The wheat crop was attacked by rust in October 1820. This was a calamity for the new immigrants as the surplus wheat was intended to be sold to the government. The failure of the wheat crop didn't just mean no bread; it meant no money for improvements and no money to pay labourers.
Rations continued, taken off the settlers' deposits, but clearly they needed to find other ways to make money. Some settlers became wagon drivers between the Bay and Grahamstown, while those near the Clay Pits in the Coombs took up illicit trade with the Xhosa. Food was supplemented by hunting. In order to claim title deeds for their land, they had to remain there for three years.

1821 was a dry year, and when in 1822 the wheat crop failed for the third time many settlers were destitute. Rations were not issued, but for the first time the settlers were allowed to leave their locations, though this meant they forfeited their claim to the land. People moved to the towns and resumed their trades.
By this stage, many people had no shoes, little food and were wearing clothes made of flour bags or old tents. The Committee for the Relief of Distressed Settlers was formed, with money being raised in Cape Town and in England.
The settlers' woes were compounded by severe floods in October 1823. Few houses were undamaged, and many were washed away altogether. Fields of vegetables were destroyed and livestock died of exposure. The Relief Committee was inundated with cries for help.

Some of the braver settlers turned to a new and dangerous occupation: elephant hunting. Ivory was in high demand. Edward Driver said:

'I have a wife now, and shall have children, and have been driven to this by debt and necessity. I have nearly got over my difficulties, for in twenty months, I and my hottentots have killed eight hundred elephants.'

Thomas Baines. Market Square, Grahamstown

Driver survived elephant hunting and went on to trading. His friend John Thackwray was not so fortunate: he was killed hunting elephant in the Ecca forest.

As Dugmore said: the settlers had to *'Wither and perish or take root and grow.'* Thicket is a capricious environment; verdant after good rains one year, and drought stricken the next.

While many settler descendants left for richer pickings on the diamond fields or at the Gold Rush, some are still here to the 7th or 8th generation, a few on their original farms. When you know it and love it, it's hard to leave

this tough, thorny bush, with its distinctive euphorbias, aloes and cabbage trees - perhaps you might say those who stayed are caught in the tangle of the thicket.

About the Author:
Serena, who lives in Bathurst, majored in History and English Literature at UCT (both her children are currently at UCT), and since 1999 has been founder and director of Greenaway's Herbal Ointments. She enjoys beekeeping, horse riding, birding and playing the accordion. She is currently finishing an historical novel set in our area in the 1820s.

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