Fred Morton, *When Rustling became an Art: Pilane's Kgatla and the Transvaal Frontier 1820–1902.* Claremont, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, 2009. Pp. xxx, 314. ISBN 978-0-86486-724-7.

Reviewed by Bruce Bennett

In this history of the Bakgatla we read of war, slave-trading, and marauders hacking off limbs: not in some remote country, but here, in what is now one of the world's most peaceful countries. As Prof. Morton once observed, in the nineteenth century this region was a very rough neighbourhood. This book, which is the culmination of many years' research and analysis throughout the author's career, is less about cattle-rustling than the title might suggest, although that is a major thread. It is a significant historical work, but is very readable, and will be of interest to general readers.

The author notes that much historical attention has been given to the "large, resilient kingdoms" such as the Bangwato, the Bakwena, the Basotho, or the Amaswati. This, however, is the story of how a relatively weak group, living on the open range, succeeded in acquiring a more secure territory, a large herd, and a degree of prosperity: in short, the story of the creation of "Kgatleng".

A large part is the story of their life as subjects or allies of the Boers in the South African Republic or ZAR (the official name of the Transvaal republic). Modern readers may be surprised by this, perhaps because of the later experience of apartheid South Africa as the greatest enemy of Black Africa. But as Prof. Morton shows, it was often the most rational option. Compared to the harsh impositions of the Ndebele, the status of a "kapitein" under the Boers was a more acceptable option to a sensible chief, and the Kgatla kgosi Pilane Pheto made a successful career as an ally of the Boer leader Potgieter in violent campaigns.

His successor Kgamanyane had a more difficult relationship with Paul Kruger. As is well known, Kruger had Kgamanyane flogged over the provision of labour, and the Bakgatla left the territory. But Prof. Morton suggests that the traditional understanding of this is inaccurate. The Bakgatla, he points out, did not flee but moved at leisure, took nearly a year to depart the ZAR, and seem initially to have hoped to return to Saulspoort. Nor did the move mean a break with the ZAR. Kgamanyane continued the relationship, and for a long period the Bakgatla regarded the ZAR as their natural ally.

In his new location, Kgamanyane had to deal with Sechele of the Bakwena, who considered the Bakgatla to have become his subjects. Soon after Kgamanyane died and was succeeded by Linchwe, war broke out between the two. Linchwe claimed the ZAR as an ally, while the ZAR saw the Bakgatla as a useful forward defence buffer against Sechele. The Bakgatla might not love the Boers, but the interests of the two ran parallel.

During the war, both sides sought to undermine the other's subsistence by terror attacks on their agriculture: marauders killed stock, burned families in their houses, and hacked

off limbs. The war went through various stages, involving the British annexation and loss of Transvaal, and in the end the Bakgatla had a de facto independence by default.

Prof. Morton's account of the early years of the Bechuanaland Protectorate again brings forward new ideas. The Bakgatla, he shows, still maintained their link with the ZAR, and sought its backing at the time of the Kopong conference of 1889 (called to discuss proposed increased British intervention). Most strikingly, Prof. Morton suggests that the impact of the 1891 Proclamations—usually treated as a key event in the establishment of British control—has been exaggerated. Although they were significant in the long term, the nature of British rule did not change much at the time: "The proclamations were promulgated in order to change the rules of the game... but scoring... remained more or less the same."

There is a cogent analysis of Linchwe's conversion to Christianity. It was not a question of a personal transformation of inner belief of the sort that missionaries hoped for, but neither was it a "nominal" change of public status. Rather, Christianity was understood in the context of the existing belief systems: Christian practice was something added to the ways in which the kgosi approached and dealt with the supernatural on behalf of his people. (One is reminded of the first generation of converts among the kings of Anglo-Saxon England.)

The South African War (1899–1902) was fought partly in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, a fact seldom realized outside the region, and the Bakgatla were particularly involved. In the battle of Derdepoort, notoriously, British forces abandoned the Bakgatla. Prof. Morton's interpretation of this is both more Machiavellian and more convincing than previous accounts: "The Bakgatla had been set up." Without the British commander risking serious losses to his force, the strategically-placed Bakgatla were now committed by their actions as enemies of the ZAR—something the British had been unsure of in view of the two parties' previous ties.

A positive result of the war was that the Bakgatla were able, through stock rustling, to restore their cattle herd, which had been depleted by rinderpest. Significant numbers of men, however, had been killed or maimed.

There is a brief epilogue on Isang Pilane and his conflict with Molefi. Prof. Morton is surely right when he remarks that Isang, who was both a brilliant leader with positive achievements and a vicious tyrant, was born in the wrong century. However the account seems surprisingly favourable to Isang.

This is an important book, full of fresh perspectives, sometimes startling. The author has woven together a large variety of sources with great skill, using archives here, in Britain, and in South Africa (including nineteenth-century Dutch sources, an under-used resource), his own interviews, and old oral material recorded by Schapera. He has not allowed the borders of modern Botswana to limit his view, but shows the value of a broader, regional approach. Research of this quality is not something that can be produced at short intervals.

Although the focus is on the Kgatla narrative, there is much interesting general material included. Notably, there is valuable material on the dynamics of dynastic politics, on bogwera, on the “inboekelinge” slaves, and on gender relations.

One of the the author’s strengths is his ability to explain in detail. For example, both in the case of the early Bakgatla and in the case of Sechele’s Bakwena, Prof. Morton is not content just to call them a “morafe” and assume that is enough. Instead he explains, briefly but clearly, what sort of society and authority is meant. Also, the book begins with a useful discussion of terminology. In order to help readers get a feel for the sound of the time, the author interchanges Dutch and Setswana, thus referring to both “Boers” and “maBuru”.

The book’s one main problem is technical. Perhaps because of the apparent belief, or superstition, among publishers that footnotes deter general readers, what should be footnotes are placed as endnotes after each chapter. This is inconvenient, but it is made worse by the fact that the notes use (for books and articles) the unsuitable author-date system. The result is that, to check a reference, the reader first has to locate the endnote, and then has to turn to yet a third page at the back, and look in two possible lists for the actual source.

I recommend this book to all those interested in Botswana history.