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## REASSESSING THE GREAT TREK: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TWIN BROTHER OF THE MFECANE

If Julian Cobbing is right in his contention that the root causes of the *mfecane* lie not in Zululand but in disruptive forces emanating from Mozambique and the Cape, then rethinking the *mfecane* means rethinking the Great Trek. This observation of mine, dropped in casual conversation, led to an invitation to contribute to this conference. I enter the fray with more than a little trepidation because I have not made myself an expert on either the *mfecane* or the Trek. What I have to offer is a revisionist proposition delivered from a birdseye view of the historiographical landscape. I have used only the most obvious and accessible sources.

One of the oddest circumstances in historical writing about South Africa is that contemporaneous phenomena — each of which has been called "the central event in South African history" — have been treated as isolated occurrences. According to the dictates of a peculiar historiographical *apartheid* the only recognised linkage is the supposition that the *mfecane* cleared the High Veld of people at the very moment the Voortrekkers decided to go and live there.

Of course, coincidences can happen, but as long ago as 1928 the Imperial Intellect of W.M. Macmillan suspected that the same subterranean force generated both phenomena, much as a single geological fissure can push up volcanic islands hundreds of miles apart. Macmillan is truly the Kilroy of frontier history. Wherever scholars go, they find his name scrawled ahead of them on unsuspected outcrops and mountain peaks. His starting premise in *Bantu, Boer and Briton* was that the large military kingdoms which arose in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were without precedent in Southern African history.<sup>1</sup> He therefore deplored the 'tendency' of twentieth century scholars "to generalise about the military instincts and warrior chiefs of the Bantu". "The Europeans tradition, he pointed out, of the 'unmitigated savagery' of these Bantu tribes is hardly just."<sup>2</sup> He strongly suspected that both the

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<sup>1</sup> William M. Macmillan, *Bantu, Boer, and Briton: the Making of the South African Native Problem* (London 1929), 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

advent of the new African states and the tumults of the interior could be traced to outside causes.

How far this great upheaval among the Bantu [the word *mfecane* was not part of Macmillan's lexicon in 1928] must be attributed, in Bishop Stubbs' words, to the generally unsettled state of all tribes bordering on European conquests can never be fully known . . . a connexion is not wholly to be dismissed. It is significant that the rise of Chaka came at the very moment when things were moving towards a climax on the Cape frontier, and that his wars synchronize with those of Gaika and Ndlambt on the borders of the Colony.... It may very well be that the check to their vanguard on the Fish River, in the severe set-back which began in 1812, was not without direct influence on the Bantu in Natal and Zululand ....

Further, to meet the demands of European planters, slave traders had not only raided on their own account for a hundred years past, but set tribe against tribe in such ruthless fashion that if the consequences were often bloody it is not for Europeans to cast a stone. There is no reason to believe that the slave trade left the southern part of Africa unaffected.<sup>3</sup>

On the contrary, Macmillan continues, there were several pieces of evidence pointing to slaving as a hugely disturbing element.

1. Governor Somerset discussed in 1823 "the desirability of annexing Delagoa Bay, significantly near the scene of Chaka's devastations, as a check on the slave trade".
2. Dr Philip, drawing on the testimony of Moffat in Buchuanaland and French missionaries who had visited Mzilikazi, claimed that the Ndebele migrations northwards had been diverted west because of an encounter with "brown-skinned men with guns" which were probably "slave raiders from Portuguese ports".
3. Philip attributed the military organisation of "the people of Moselekatze" to the necessity of maintaining "an incessant struggle against the Portuguese slave-traders" till at length "war has become their element".
4. Without specifically accusing Farewell of raiding for people, Philip had in a letter of 1830 written: "Farewell and others . . . have stirred up war wherever they have gone. To Farewell's establishment at Port Natal we are to trace the devastations of Chaka."<sup>4</sup>

After rebutting the argument that the rise of the Zulu state created turbulence on the High Veld and in the frontier districts, Macmillan turned his attention to the question of the empty land. His audacious proposition was that African populations on the High Veld *increased*

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

rather than decreased as pressures from the east, south and southwest sent new groups into the interior.<sup>5</sup> Again and again he used quotation marks to indicate his scepticism on the subject of 'empty' land and 'empty' country. He also denied the so-called 'depopulation' of Natal.

The story goes that, [at the time of Retief's arrival] presently, 50,000 to 80,000 natives were found to be 'filtering' from Zululand into Natal, though it is difficult to see how the Zulus . . . with their large herds, could have made room for so many dependents. The legend that Natal had been 'cleared' of its native population probably originated with travellers who, on their way through Natal, naturally saw only the central and northern uplands . . . . In time of stress, and even for choice, natives other than the organized Zulus can never, many of them, have been much farther away than the 'Valley of a Thousand Hills' . . . the dense bush north of Greytown, the rugged upper valleys of the Mool and Tugela Rivers, the Umkomaas Valley, and other similar havens of refuge in the very heart of Natal proper.<sup>6</sup>

If the Africans had never gone away, the subsequent discussions by the Natal Volksraad to deal with the 'influx' by mass removals and 'segregation' were no more than elaborate charades.<sup>7</sup> And if Macmillan's guesses about where the mass of the population sat out the 1830s are correct, Shepstone did not move people into reserves — he declared reserves where large numbers of people lived. (As I argued in the 1970s.)

Having denied the 'empty land', Macmillan forestalled himself from employing it as an explanation for the Great Trek. An alternative explanation was to hand — the flight of a nation from 'British oppression' — but he hesitated to use it without considerable refinement. Influenced by Philip and related missionary sources Macmillan inclined to apportion blame equally between ongoing land hunger and a desire to escape the consequences of slave emancipation in 1833. Although he acknowledged "a natural reluctance to stigmatize a great national movement as a protest against the emancipation of slaves", he could not help slipping into sarcasm as he contemplated the argument that few Trekkers had slaves. It was, he noticed, coupled to the argument that Trekkers resented the manner in which slave owners were compensated. Thus people trekked because they resented the manner in which they were recompensed "for the slaves they ... did not possess". Macmillan thought it far more likely

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 14-15, 172-73.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 177-78.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 179.

that the Trekkers resented the way in which emancipation brought large numbers of persons under the protection of the 50th Ordinance.

I have devoted this much time to Macmillan's views not because I want to caution against reinventing the wheel, but to counter the idea that "mfecane theory" has enjoyed unchallenged currency since the eighteen twenties. Macmillan did not make his intervention in some obscure article or casual aside. He delivered it *ex cathedra* from the Chair of History at this university in a book that has stood more than sixty years on the shelf of essential reading for historians. Its very prominence raises interesting questions about the ways in which historians have gone about their southern African business. What conscious or unconscious forces moved them to ignore Macmillan without bothering to refute him? Why did they press on with alternative tales of the *mfecane* and Great Trek as if he had never happened?

Part of the reason may well be — as Cobbing, Wright and others contend — that the construction and propagation of standard versions suited (and suits) powerful vested interests. Such answers, whether cast in terms of liberal interest-group theory or structuralist theory, have a lot going for them. However, they seem to me to be less than totally satisfying because they have flourished not just at home but also abroad. Why should foreign scholarship dance to the favorite tunes of South African politicians, miners and farmers? What could move John Omer-Cooper in faraway Otago or Kent Rasmussen in California to serve the cause of 'settler history'?<sup>8</sup>

#### *The surprising persistence of narrative structures*

My own scepticism on this point, and the interesting work of many recent scholars on the shaping of historical narrative, have caused me to ask whether the resistance to change of the standard versions can be explained to some extent by the structure in which the narratives are cast. Without going over to the post-structuralist proposition that text is everything, it is worth thinking about reasons for the surprising

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<sup>8</sup> J. Omer-Cooper, *The Zulu Aftermath* (1966), R. Kent Rasmussen, *Migrant Kingdom: Mzilikazi's Ndebele in South Africa* (London, 1978).

persistence of the narrative templates historians have applied to the Great Trek and the *mfecane*.

In many ways Great Trek and *mfecane* are twins beneath the skin. Each was retrospectively discovered by nationalists and historians. (Decades passed before the 'movement of the emigrant farmers' was inscribed as the Great Trek; the word *mfecane* first appears in print in the twentieth century.) Each has been touted as the "central event" or "centrepiece" of the history of a people.<sup>9</sup> Each, indeed, has been held to express the peculiar genius of a people. Each has been characterized as a movement of people out of touch and out of tune with the surging tides of nineteenth-century capitalist development. With a few exceptions, historians have accepted each as an unique event in human history.<sup>10</sup> Both the Zulu Kingdom and the Trekker republics are conventionally treated as states which desired more than anything else to be left alone.

The similarities do not end there. Each phenomenon has been reified in both academic and non-academic publications. Their historicity is no more doubted than that of the Hebrew Exodus or the French Revolution. Although only a tiny number of historians have tackled either movement as a whole, swarms of industrious researches have beavered away within the paradigms, specifying precisely who was who; who did what, where and how.

Rising above the detailed unfolding of events, it is possible to discern three different templates governing narrative structure in standard accounts of the Trek and *mfecane* :

- 1) The onward march of civilisation
- 2) The growth of a nation
- 3) The advance of the capitalist mode of production

Naturally, the content of these narrative structures differs according to local circumstances. Here are some examples.

#### *The march of civilisation*

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<sup>9</sup> J. B. Peires, ed., *Before and After Shaka, Papers in Nguni History* (Grahamstown, 1981), 1; Eric Walker, *The Great Trek* (London, 1938), ix.

<sup>10</sup> DeKiewiet is the most notable exception.

The Trek as the march of civilisation is pictured, not just in the works of historians such as J. A. Wiid, A.J.H. van der Walt and D. W. Krüger, in but the very bricks and stones of the Voortrekker Monument.<sup>11</sup> The official guide still in use today explains:

[At the gate] assegaais [sic] represent the power of Dingane, who sought to block the path of civilisation. . . .

[The statue of mother and child] 'symbolises the civilisation and Christianity that were maintained and developed by the women during the Great Trek.

Black wildebeest: symbolise Dingane's warriors, but also the barbarism that yielded to civilisation.

Triangular Cornice: Around the top of the Monument is a cornice in a zig-zag pattern. This symbolises fertility. The civilisation brought by the Voortrekkers must grow . . . .

The floor of the Hall of Heroes is lined with ever-widening rings of marble . . . which represents ripples after a stone has been cast into the water, becomes progressively wider until it fills the entire building. It symbolises the diffusion of the spirit of sacrifice that was generated by the Voortrekkers, and that eventually spread throughout the entire country. . .

Flame: symbolises the flame of civilisation in South Africa.<sup>12</sup>

The theme is continued on the panels of the historical frieze that lines the interior. The Voortrekkers, immaculately groomed and dressed, leave the Cape Colony with herds and fancy bibles. The land they enter is anything but empty. To possess it they must go into battle (the men wearing coats and ties, the women, their best frocks) against countless savage and deceitful enemies.<sup>13</sup>

The classic stories of the Trek written in English propagate a different version of the march of civilisation. According to their accounts the torch of enlightenment carried ashore by Van Riebeeck glowed but dimly in the

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<sup>11</sup> See Ken Smith's discussion in Ken Smith, *The Changing Past, Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Athens, Ohio, 1988), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Riana Heymans, *The Voortrekker Monument*, Pretoria (Pretoria, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps notice how the famous picture on Ransford's book (I could make a slide from the version that appears in my British Empire series) differs from the Monument friezes.

camps of rude frontiersmen. Out on the veld the folk lost touch with progress, took on the colours of their wild environment and passed on from generation to generation the stunted mentality of Calvinist slaveholders. When British rule stoked up the bonfires of civilisation the trekboers shrank back from the unaccustomed light. With their flocks, bibles and bondsmen they flew to the wilderness.

Beatrice Webb had this version of history in mind when, in 1899, she called the South African War a clash between the 19th century and the a "remnant of seventeenth-century puritanism".<sup>14</sup> So did Edgar Brookes sixty years later when he called the Great Trek a reaction "of the eighteenth century against the nineteenth".<sup>15</sup> More than a hint of patronising hauteur creeps into most of the accounts. It resembles in many particulars nineteenth-century stereotypes of the Irish. Macmillan was not immune:

Under these easy-going and yet arduous conditions, Dutch and Huguenots . . . were welded into South Africans — with a predominantly Calvinistic religious tradition, and, for the rest, a love of sun and open spaces, hardy self-reliance, consummate skill in handling a gun, . . . love of independence [which] tended to harden not only into an impatience of Government control, but into an incapacity for co-operation even with his own fellows.<sup>16</sup>

Macmillan's student De Kiewiet, because he painted with a broader brush, conveyed an equally strong picture of a white tribe in Africa, competing with black farmers for the same ecological niche in the environment.<sup>17</sup> The opening pages of Eric Walker's *Great Trek* read more like anthropology than history.

The frontier farmers of the 'thirties were necessarily limited and ignorant of many things. It could not have been otherwise . . . Their knowledge of the older parts of their Colony was apt to be sketchy and, in times of excitement, highly erroneous, while their conception of the outer world was sometimes 100

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<sup>14</sup> Beatrice Webb, writing in *Fabian News*, 10 October 1899, p. 188.

<sup>15</sup> Brookes, *Apartheid*, p. xx; See also C. W. De Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa, Social and Economic* (Oxford, 1941), 58: "In one sense the Great Trek was the eighteenth century fleeing before its more material, more active, and better organized successor".

<sup>16</sup> Macmillan, *Bantu, Boer and Briton*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> De Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa*, 23-25.

years out of date . . . . Perhaps imagination was deadened by the sameness of the Karoo scenery . . . . That attitude pointed to an *hereditary* preoccupation with concrete, matter of fact, personal things and with not much else.<sup>18</sup>

It comes as no surprise to the reader to discover later that the root cause of the Trek was "the steady advance of the forces of regular government" which made life more difficult for "a stubborn folk who found it far more difficult than it had been to escape from unfamiliar influences by edging away a little farther into the wilds."<sup>19</sup>

Oliver Ransford's 1972 version of *The Great Trek* is more extreme. By the end of the eighteenth century, he asserts, "a new breed of men had evolved in South Africa — the trekboers. No people quite like them had ever existed before."<sup>20</sup> The state-imposed task of marking out recognized plots of 6000 acres is transmuted by Ransford into an animalistic marking of a territory.

Their farms usually approximated to the conveniently-managed size (for Africa) of 6000 acres, and they generally marked out this area in a rough and ready manner by trotting a horse from the wagon along all four points of the compass for half an hour.<sup>21</sup>

Ransford explains Afrikaner behaviour partly by genes — "Trekking was in the blood of these land Vikings" — and partly by the environment — "these newcomers had become as much a part of Africa as its indigenous people and as the Bantu."<sup>22</sup> These folk, operating not by reason, but by "instinct", eventually "reached the happy state of living in balance with nature."<sup>23</sup> "Life for them had taken on a special rhythm of its own".<sup>24</sup> Horse, man, and gun fused into a latter-day centaur:

The men depended on a single weapon — the flintlock . . . and a singular style of fighting — charging their perfectly trained horses right up to an enemy group, firing from them without dismounting, retiring to reload, and then

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<sup>18</sup> Walker, 48-49; my italics.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 67; Walker's invocation of "the forces of regular government" is quite close to Jeff Peires' much more recent emphasis on "the revolution in government" which British rule brought to the Cape.

<sup>20</sup> Oliver Ransford, *The Great Trek* (London, 1974), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 16,17; my italics.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 18, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 20.

returning to repeat the attack. These tactical movements came to them almost naturally. . . . 25

The last act in the Anglo version of the march of civilisation is, of course, what Legassick called the frontier theory of South African history. By a series of flukes — the first Anglo-Boer War, the discovery of gold in the wrong place and Lord Milner's "magnanimous" peace — the anachronistic ethos of the trekboer is enshrined in the constitution of the Union, thus delaying for decades the inevitable triumph of modernity.

### *The growth of a nation*

Afrikaner nationalists have shown a surprising tolerance for this patronising, virtually racist history. The revisionist enterprise of André du Toit and Hermann Giliomee has made only sluggish headway against the prevailing mythologies.<sup>26</sup> The Voortrekker Monument's alternative version enjoys much less visible public support. Why should this be so, when so much ill-concealed ethnic denigration lurks in the Anglo alternative? The answer may lie in the conventions which govern narratives of nationalism. The nation is conceived as the happy, innocent child of the land who is denied his patrimony by sinister forces which must be overcome before the adult can come into his rightful inheritance. An essentialist premise underlying the master narrative is that the nation is a fact of nature on its own soil. This has always been easier to establish in Europe, where the mists of time conveniently obscure historical vision, than in settler colonies whose migratory origins are fulsomely documented.

The myth of the trekboer as child of the South African wilderness overcomes the problem far more elegantly than its counterparts in other settler societies.<sup>27</sup> It substitutes a shroud of distance for the European

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 21; my italics.

<sup>26</sup> A. du Toit, "No Chosen People: the Myth of the Calvinist Origins of Afrikaner Nationalism and Racial Ideology", *American Historical Review* (1983) 88:920-52; A. du Toit, and H. Giliomee, *Afrikaner Political Thought, Analysis and Documents*, 2 vols., Berkeley, 1983. See also Ken Smith, *The Changing Past, Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Athens, Ohio, 1988), 96-98.

<sup>27</sup> Similar problems were faced and solved by equally suspect devices. The Quebecois are mythologized in a fashion similar to the Africans; alternative methods naturalized the *peleds noirs* settlers of Algeria and the Australians. Daniel Boorstin

shroud of time and answers the challenge of black African nationalism with a white nationalism that claims to be equally African. It lays the foundation for subsequent acts in the drama:

- 1) persecution by British invaders leading to loss of patrimony and withdrawal into the wilderness (the Great Trek)
- 2) struggle to reclaim the patrimony marked by incredible suffering (concentration camps in the South Africa War)
- 3) triumph of the mature nation (1948 election and proclamation of the Republic.<sup>28</sup>

The only formidable problem remaining for the nationalist historian was to make these key experiences the common property of all who were defined as part of the nation. Since an overwhelming majority of Afrikaans-speaking people did not go on the Trek and many of them put their "hends op" at the time of Anglo-Boer conflict, this was by no means an easy task.<sup>29</sup> It could only be done, as Grundlingh and Sapire observe, borrowing a phrase from Benedict Anderson, through the construction of an "imagined community".<sup>30</sup> It is not my intention to add to what is already a substantial literature on how the Trek was mythologized, promoted and internalised by twentieth-century Afrikaners. I merely wish to note that the nationalist historiography needed a particular kind of Great Trek and was not interested in exploring alternative versions. The racial slur barely concealed in Anglo Versions of the Trek could be forgiven because the idea of a stubborn folk, rooted in the land and unamenable to reform had an evident political utility.

→ *Advance of the capitalist mode of production*

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and others have shown how the Americans hypothesized a fictive true American, supposedly in existence by the time of the Revolution, who later faced challenges from "unnatural" European migrants.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Novick in an unpublished paper presented to the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University, July 1991, has traced the way in which American Jews assimilated the experience of the holocaust, despite the fact that their nation fought the Nazis.

<sup>29</sup> On the Afrikaner collaborators see A. M. Grundlingh, *Die 'Hendsoppers' en 'Joiners': Die rasonaal en Verskynsel van Verraad* (Cape Town, 1979).

<sup>30</sup> A Grundlingh and H. Sapire, "The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology", *South African Historical Journal* (1929) 21: 24-25

It is worth remarking that the great historiographical revisions of the last two-decades, which have demystified and deracialised large chunks of previously standard historiography, have left the Great Trek and *mfecane* largely untouched. Why? One reason may be that after the paradigms were set, the dense accumulation of empirical scholarship discouraged newcomers from entering the fray; every possible piece of evidence appeared to have been subjected to the intensest possible scrutiny. In addition, some scholars seem to have made a deliberate point of ignoring or downplaying the Trek, implying by their neglect that the really significant forces that shaped modern South Africa are to be found elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> It is ironic that Martin Legassick, whose doctoral dissertation shed so much new light on the far interior of early nineteenth-century South Africa, announced soon after receiving his degree, that it was pointless to look further for the origins of twentieth-century segregation on the frontier. Those who heeded his message pulled up their stakes and retreated to the developed regions of the Cape.<sup>32</sup>

Those who stayed in the field long enough to contribute to the important collections published in the late 1970s (in Britain by Marks and Atmore, in America by Elphick and Giliomee) did not much disturb established versions of the *mfecane* or the Great Trek. While David Hedges' new work on trade into Zululand remained unpublished, Jeff Guy dominated the study of the pre-colonial Zulu kingdom. Working within the paradigm of a Zulu-centric *mfecane*, he maintained that the kingdom showed remarkable resistance to the penetration of capitalism right up to the time of the Anglo-Zulu War.

Revisionist scholarship concerned with the Cape frontier also accepted the Zulu-centric *mfecane* and restated rather than revised liberal and conservative explanations of the Trek. Although not every revisionist

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<sup>31</sup> As an example, Dan O'Meara managed to write *Volkskapitalisme*, a book with the subtitle, *Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner nationalism, 1934-1948*, with only a couple of small references to the Great Trek. (see pp. 71,76). In John Pampallis's *Foundation of the New South Africa* (London, 1991), the Great Trek gets two sentences on page 38.

<sup>32</sup> In "The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography", *Collected Seminar Papers on the Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1971) 2:1-33.

who touched on the Trek wrote from the theoretical perspective of neo-Marxist scholarship, almost everyone accepted a new working vocabulary focused on relations of production. The result was that the old Anglo version of the Great Trek as a flight from the advancing forces of civilisation was not discarded. It was just dressed up in the latest language. Without thinking too hard about what it might mean to exclude the Voortrekkers from the realm of capitalist production, they were consigned to a vague pre-capitalist limbo.

Thus Jeff Peires could assert in the 1988 revised version of *The Shaping of South African Society*, that "the central causes of this emigration are commonly agreed on by most historians". In Peires' restatement, the advancing forces of "a fully capitalist free market" brought a "revolution in government" to the Cape after the British annexation. "The territories north of the Orange and the Vaal rivers were settled by Cape Afrikaners determined to perpetuate their threatened precapitalist social order". The British, he writes, brought with them the new conception, "foreign to both African and Afrikaner farmers, that land was a commodity that could be acquired and sold without ever necessarily being possessed and worked first".<sup>33</sup> Hermann Gillomee, rejecting Neumark's unique attempt of the 1950s to link trekboer expansion to the expansion of commodity production, sees Afrikaner frontier rebels as "poor, landless and desperate colonists" who could not reach the accommodation with British rule achieved by "wealthier farmers [who] had come to agree that their interests lay in supporting the government".<sup>34</sup> Elphick and Gillomee, summing up what they see to be the dominant view of frontier history among historians at the end of the nineteen eighties, declare that

In the mid-1830s emigrant Afrikaner farmers, the Voortrekkers, left the eastern regions of the Cape Colony to plant new societies in the interior of southern Africa. In large part they wished to restore the traditional social order of the Cape as they knew it . . . . Their successful secession . . . . greatly expanded the area of extensive, low-capitalized agriculture . . . . [Their]

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<sup>33</sup> "The British and the Cape 1814-1834", in R. Elphick and H. Gillomee, eds, *The Shaping of Southern African Society, 1652-1840* (Middletown, 1988), esp. 472, 480, 499, 511.

<sup>34</sup> "The Eastern Frontier, 1770-1812" in *Ibid.*, 450. Neumark's ideas appear in his *Economic Influences on the South African Frontier* (Stanford, 1957).

conviction and social realities formed the fateful legacy of the pre-industrial Cape to the modern people of South Africa.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, what the old version of the march of civilization depicted as a flight of '17th-century' or '18th-century' trekboers from the advancing forces of 19th century progress, becomes a flight of "pre-capitalist" and/or "pre-industrial producers" from the onrush of a more mature capitalist mode of production. While the denigrating anthropological stereotype of the trekboer is dumped, the underlying narrative structure survives intact in the transition from liberal-humanist to Marxist discourse.

#### *Applying Cobbing's revisionist thinking to the Great Trek*

All three of the narrative structures I have identified in standard views of the Great Trek are also evident in the *mfecane*.

- 1) The advance of civilisation, again cast in two versions. One pictures barbarous, virtually self-extminating peoples pushed on by Zulu impls into clearing a place for expanding settlers. The other sees the genius of black invention and statecraft working in isolation to open another dynamic chapter in the constantly changing pageant of African history.
- 2) Growth of nations, cast in a form which is practically identical to the Afrikaner version. A new nation grows in secluded valleys east of the Tsekela, grows to manhood in the wars of Shaka and Dingane, suffers under the oppression of Bartle Frere and Natal colonists, and struggles towards a rebirth of freedom in a time yet to come. Similar narratives are, with appropriate variations, applied to the new states raised up in the turbulence that followed the rise of the Zulu.
- 3) Advance of the capitalist mode of production. The self-sufficient, precapitalist political economies of the Zulu state and its Nguni offshoots, seek to resist incorporation into the capitalist system of production but eventually succumb to (or are 'articulated' into) that system as mining and "fully capitalist" agriculture demand the 'freeing' of their labour.

The revisionist enterprise begun by Cobbing and lately joined by John Wright identifies the same fatal flaw in all three master narratives: the wrong assumption that the Zulu state arose in isolation. Cobbing and Wright hypothesize the previous penetration of both the High Veld and

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<sup>35</sup> Concluding paragraph of *The Shaping of Southern African Society, 1652-1840*, 560-61.

Natal/Zululand by trading and raiding enterprises linked to disturbing economic activity at the Cape and Mozambique, which were in turn linked to the developing world economy. This denies neither the dynamism nor the originality of Zulu or other state builders, but it does reject the idea of primordial nations developing purely in response to their local environments. Neither is there a denial of the importance of relations of production, only a denial that the enterprises of individuals, groups and states were determined in the final instance by the predominant local mode of production. There is also, from at least as early as the second half of the eighteenth century, a dynamic, disturbing, shaping force emanating from nearby colonies.

Cobbing and Wright, who see '*mfecane* theory' functioning in the interests of definable economic and political interests in the modern South African state, are perfectly aware that there their own project reverberates with significance for contemporary political struggles. It challenges longstanding concepts of land rights and the legitimacy of all sorts of claims about the origins and meaning of various ethnic nationalisms.

Applying to the Great Trek the kind of thinking Cobbing used to attack the *mfecane* also has contemporary implications, though of a different sort. Ken Smith has called attention to the way in which the Afrikaner nationalist interpretation of history began to decline from the very moment of its supreme triumph in 1961.<sup>36</sup> Faced with the growing force of black nationalism at home and anti-apartheid movements abroad, National Party governments sought support from voters of British descent. The anti-British elements in the saga of national achievement were muted. The fiasco of the sesquicentennial celebrations, described by Grundlingh and Sapire, demonstrated that meaning is fast ebbing from the Great Trek. When I visited Blood River monument in mid-February this year, my name became the 62nd on the register for the month. Except for the tea-lady I had the battlefield to myself. Plummeting enrolments in the history departments of the Afrikaans-medium universities suggest that a whole generation is fleeing the past. One of the most interesting passages in E. H. Carr's eternally youthful *What is History* is his analysis of the process by which a "fact about the

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<sup>36</sup> Ken Smith, *The Changing Past, Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Athens, Ohio, 1988), 90-92.

past" becomes a "historical fact." His illustration of the gingerbread vendor kicked to death by an angry mob in 1850 is meant to show that what one historian seizes upon as a 'fact' of great significance becomes a 'historical fact' only when other professionals accept the claim and write it into their own books.<sup>37</sup> Because Carr, for all his relativism, believed in the project of cumulative historical knowledge, he did not contemplate the possibility that a historical fact might slip back into the primeval ooze of facts about the past. Something of the sort had been foreseen by C. F. J. Muller when he predicted in 1963 that if white South Africa disappeared as a political factor "the Great Trek would be seen as merely a brief era of white imperialism that moved up from the Cape as far as the Limpopo or Zambezi Rivers."<sup>38</sup> The remainder of this paper speculates on what the meaning of the Trek might be for historians if we forsook old narratives for the kind of thinking Cobbing has applied to the *mfecane*.

Cobbing abandons the idea that analysis of a particular economy should be keyed to the locally dominant mode of production.<sup>39</sup> By cutting loose from the notion that the starting point for the study of any society is a scrutiny of the predominant internal forces and relations of production, he can see a variety of factors at work. It seems to me unnecessary to ask whether slaving or trade was the external force that provoked the ingenious creation of the Zulu state. Trading and slaving, hunting and labour raiding can all be incorporated into a larger picture of defensive reactions and novel opportunities stirring the African people of the southern African interior at about the turn of the eighteenth century.

There may be gains to be made by applying a similar breadth of vision to the Trek. This requires in the first instance little more than picking up where Legassick left off in 1970, on a frontier where all sorts of economic and activities overlapped, and where no clear delineation of a person's

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<sup>37</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History* (London, 1961), 12.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Smith, *Changing Past*, 71.

<sup>39</sup> He is not alone in this; African historians have been dumping it in increasing numbers since the early 1980s. See the special issue devoted to the question by the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (1985) vol. 19, no. 1. See also my discussion of *Before and After Shaka* in *The Journal of Southern African Studies*, No. 3, 1984.

*The Nguni*.

role in production could be made on the basis of skin colour alone. That settled the frontier issue for many of the historians who were fixated on the effect frontier experiences might have had in shaping the twentieth-century political economy of segregation. The change in perspective required can be illustrated quite simply by reproducing two of the maps that appear in the 1988 edition of *The Shaping of South African Society*.<sup>40</sup> Several threatening black arrows thrust east and north from Zululand. Others, even more menacing, which thrust southwest from the High Veld, are countered by a single grey counter-thrust of Voortrekker movement. Cobbing and Wright ask us to reverse the direction of most of the arrows.

A new map drawn to their specifications would show the Great Trek as only the latest in a series of invasive forces.

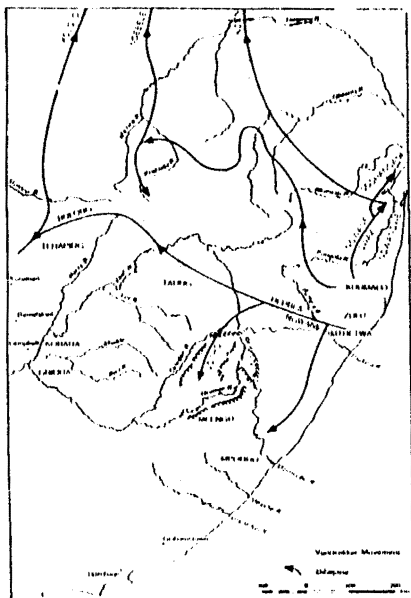


Figure 8.2 The Alliance

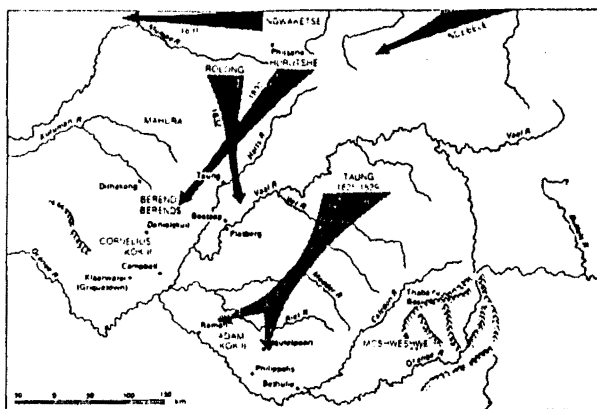


Figure 8.4 Transwangs in 1838

<sup>40</sup> Figures 8.4 and 8.2. in *The Shaping of South African Society*.

A second obvious step is to challenge the enduring view of the Trekkers as pre-capitalist, eighteenth-century white nomads in flight from modernizing British rule. Five decades have passed since the work of P. J. van der Merwe exposed the fallacy of identifying the trekboer with the Voortrekker, but still the stereotype lives on.<sup>41</sup> Neumark may have been wrong to single out wool production as the contribution of the Voortrekker in carrying commodity production into the interior. But why should the opposite be therefore assumed to be true — that the trekkers had no intention other than to establish themselves as self-sufficient pre-capitalist agriculturalists? Legassick and Ross have in complementary studies showed how Kok's Griquas shifted among different kinds of economic activities and how their willingness to consider land as a commodity gradually undermined their position in Griqualand West.<sup>42</sup> In Cobbing's version of the *myfecane* the Griqua are just one of several fearsome advance guards of the world economy. We should perhaps take Hendrik Potgieter precisely at his word when he tells Adam Kok, "We are emigrants together with you . . . who together with you dwell in the same strange land and we desire to be regarded as neither more nor less than your fellow-emigrants, inhabitants of the country, enjoying the same privileges with you".<sup>43</sup> Taken literally, this envisages a life in which hunting for game, cattle and people will be regular events. To what extent slaving as well as slave-holding were on the agenda of individual Voortrekkers is hard to tell. We have the testimony of J. N. Boshof in 1838 that "it was the intention at first to proceed far into the interior, with the view to settle in the vicinity of Delagoa Bay, for the purpose of carrying on a trade with the inhabitants of that settlement".<sup>44</sup> The tragic journey of the Tregardt party revealed the hazards of that enterprise, but why were the alleged pre-capitalist Voortrekkers making for a Portuguese port? The project sometimes attributed to them of

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<sup>41</sup> See the discussion in Smith, *The Changing Past*, 76-77.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Ross, *Adam Kok's Griquas* (Cambridge, 1976), 134.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted by Peires in *Shaping of South African Society*, p. 508. See also Macmillan, *Bantu, Boer and Briton*, 172: "The presence of the Griquas helps in part to explain why it was that from the very beginning the mass of the trekkers moved so far away, instead of planting their secession states on the reputedly 'empty' land immediately adjoining the parent Colony".

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Ransford, 99.

securing access to the sea for Kruger's future republic is ridiculously anachronistic and contradicts the idea that they only wanted to be alone in their wilderness. If participation in the East African slave and slaving economy was on their agenda, they had, of course, to shut up about it. Nothing would be more likely to send furies of Exeter Hall chasing after them. Naturally all such intentions are denied in Retief's celebrated manifesto which has so often been scoured for meaning.

The text has been too often taken at face value. As du Toit and Gillomee point out, it needs to be read against the grain.<sup>45</sup> Retief notoriously led the Trekkers from behind, joining up in 1837. He had the benefit of judging the reaction of public opinion in Britain and at the Cape when he took up his pen to write to the *Grahamstown Journal*. The text was taken with more than a little salt by the *Commercial Advertiser*, who smiled at the idea that the "Farmers have been induced to withdraw from under a settled Christian Government, to seek a 'quiet life' among the gentle kings of central Africa".<sup>46</sup>

In view of Retief's own background, however, activities other than slaving were likely to have been foremost in his mind. Like Louis Tregardt and other Voortrekker leaders, he was anything but a self-sufficient trekboer. He was a businessman, a government contractor of dubious integrity and a land speculator.<sup>47</sup> His experience with the 1820 settlers had showed him all the myriad ways in which money could be made out of pioneering. From the time Graham cleared the Zuurveld, the acquisition and transfer of land in marketable parcels had been a regular feature of frontier life — a fact obscured by the legend of trekboers living on vaguely defined tracts out of sight of their neighbour's chimneys. No account of the Trek has ever ignored land hunger as a cause of the emigration, but the kind of emphasis Hermann Gillomee puts on the "poor, landless and desperate" rebels who followed behind a few well-off leaders has no doubt discouraged historians from considering that Trek had anything to do

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<sup>45</sup> du Toit and Gillomee, 213.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Streak, *The Afrikaner as Viewed by the English 1795-1854* (Cape Town, 1974), 158.

<sup>47</sup> Peires, eager to make his point about the 'revolution in government' brought by the British, de-emphasizes Retief's land speculations in order to point up the way he carried on into the nineteenth century manipulations of government characteristic of the VOC past. See *Shaping of South African Society*, 508-10.

with land speculation. In the settlement of nineteenth century colonies in 'new lands' around the globe the speculative hopes of a few were more often than not grounded on the prospects they could hold out to landless migrants. Before the Homestead Act in the United States — and selection acts in Canada and Australia — regularised the process of land grants to poor farmers, the work of laying out new settlements was generally carried on by private contractors who hoped to profit from resales, particularly of town acres. Could Retief have so left his past behind him as to be blind to such prospects in 1837?

The best evidence about the Trekkers' intentions is to be found in the way they handled land in the republics they founded. The fact that a man found among the trekkers with surveying tools was almost killed as a government spy is not an indication that they were against surveying.<sup>48</sup> It shows not only their objection to British land regulations, but also their intention that nothing should interfere in any way with their reaping the full benefit of whatever annexations they should succeed in making. Retief in a sense died for the cause of land speculation, leaving behind him in his knapsack the deed of cession from Dingane that would protect Voortrekkers in Natal from other claimants, especially the British traders at Port Natal. (Retief had already assured the latter of special consideration in the matter of land grants.<sup>49</sup>)

Much of the work of the Volksraad was taken up with land business. Boshof supplied the expertise in law making that was lost through the death of Retief, and the new state speedily demonstrated its intention of raising most of its revenue through the sale of land. As Walker noticed, Boshof "worked hard to regularise the land laws and to push on with systematic and genuine settlement, the closer the better".<sup>50</sup> There was nothing like a vague marking out of vast tracts by riding horses to the four points of the compass. Town acres in Pietermaritzburg were dispensed on the same system that applied in Adelaide (contemporary capital of the thoroughly modern "systematic colony" of South Australia) through the drawing of lots.<sup>51</sup> At Port Natal, town plots were sold outright.

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<sup>48</sup> *Shaping of South African Society*, 504.

<sup>49</sup> Walker, 154.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

Land claimants showed far more sophistication than legend ascribes to them. Far from being satisfied with one 6000 acre farm per family,

men went on staking claims right down to the Umzimvubu and far beyond the Tugela, in the lands claimed by Panda and Faku. Soon 1800 farms had been staked out, two or three for each family and the rest by unattached men . . . .<sup>52</sup>

Similar scenes were enacted on the High Veld. Potchefstroom had for a time not one registrar of land titles, but two, competing against one another.<sup>53</sup> The record keeping may have been haphazard, the resources of administration inadequate, and the officials inept, but in all the new republics dealing in land as a commodity was fundamental to the enterprise of settlement. It would, of course, be decades before speculative profits were reaped in most parts of the interior. It would also be some time before the staples of production were identified through experiment and market-place demands. But to deny that commodity production was prominent on the agenda of the trekkers misunderstands of the way new lands were brought into production by Europeans and North Americans in the nineteenth century. Prohibitions against black ownership of land in the new republics were certainly grounded in concepts of inequality, but, like restrictions on the rights of white newcomers to acquire land on the same basis as the founding burghers, they were also a device to maximise speculative gains for the pioneers. Through all the crises of the Transvaal up to the annexation of 1877, control of land dealing was fundamental to the shaky operations of the state.<sup>54</sup>

The colonizing of new territory by the Great Trek shared many features in common with contemporaneous outward movements in other parts of the world. Following the Napoleonic wars, population growth, booming demand for agricultural commodities, improvements in transportation and storage, led to the seizure of land from old indigenous owners. In every case these movements marked out land for sale or lease. This was so in the Louisiana territory, Texas, Oregon, Algeria, New Zealand and Australia. The trek began in the same year that Wakefield's South Australia Company surveyed its capital and the Texas Republic seized its

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>54</sup> The work of Peter Delius on the relationship of the Pedi polity to the Transvaal government is especially revealing. See *The Land Belongs to Us* ( London, 1983 .

independence from Mexico. It is not conceivable that the Voortrekkers knew nothing of parallel ventures elsewhere. Historians have ignored the conjuncture and clung to concepts of South African exceptionalism embodied in the master narratives analysed earlier in this paper.<sup>55</sup> From Macmillan and Walker to du Toit, Peires and Giliomee historians have tenaciously insisted that the Trek was a reactive and conservative movement. This deserves to be questioned.

From the eighteen twenties the annexation of Natal had been contemplated by speculative commercial minds at the Cape.<sup>56</sup> The Trekkers made a pre-emptive strike, based on information they had picked up while engaging in precisely the sort of disruptive activities Cobbing emphasizes. No doubt the business would have been more neatly managed by the British Empire, but after their own fashion the Trekkers did the job. They had some peculiar reasons for wanting to escape from British rule, but so had the Mormon founders of Utah some peculiar reasons to escape from Yankee rule. Those peculiarities should not blind us to the fact that Utah and the Orange Free State shared ideas about the owning, farming and selling of land.

Andries Stockenström, the archetypal progressive Afrikaner, is remembered by liberals (and excoriated by nationalists) as the opponent of the Trek, but it should be remembered that his preferred policy was not a closed frontier. It was systematic "colonization of all depopulated territories".<sup>57</sup> That is to say, he would have preferred a thorough job done by British rule to the half-botched job done by the trekkers. Daniel Lindley, the American missionary eye-witness to the Trek, regretted the ignorance of the pioneers, but did not doubt but that they represented the same outward movement of invasive migration that had

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<sup>55</sup> This is true even of De Kiewiet, who noticed in *A history of South Africa* p 57, that "between the exodus of the Boers and other colonizing movements in the nineteenth century similarities are easily discerned". Nonetheless, he too insisted that the "Boers moved inland not to found a new society and to win new wealth . . . theirs was not the aggressive movement of a people braving the wilderness for the profit that it would bring their purses, or the education that it would give their children". (pp. 58-59)

<sup>56</sup> John Wright, "Political Mythology and the Making of Natal's Mfecane", *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (1989) 23:272-91.

<sup>57</sup> Macmillan, 235n.

taken place in Indian territories in the land of his birth.<sup>58</sup> Neither did the Voortrekkers. Piet Uys affirmed in 1838 that he and his fellows proposed "to establish our settlement on the same principles of liberty as those adopted by the United States of America". The Lydenburg Republic's Executive in 1860 cited in defense of their record of colonization, not only the ancient Israelites, but also the European colonisers of Asia, America and Australia.<sup>59</sup>

Julian Cobbing argues that we should change our conception of the *mfecane* from an aggressive movement sparked off by the Zulu to a period of turbulence resulting from a stepping of intrusive forces stemming from the advance agents of the world economy. A corollary shift is required in thinking about the Great Trek. The Trekkers were part of the intrusive process, not weird anachronisms in flight from it. They hoped to profit from turning free land into commodities and means of producing commodities for sale. They did not walk backwards into an empty land.

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<sup>58</sup> D. Lindley to Rufus Anderson, 27 March 1838, folio 15.4, vol. 2, Archives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>59</sup> du Toit and Gillomec, 228, 284.