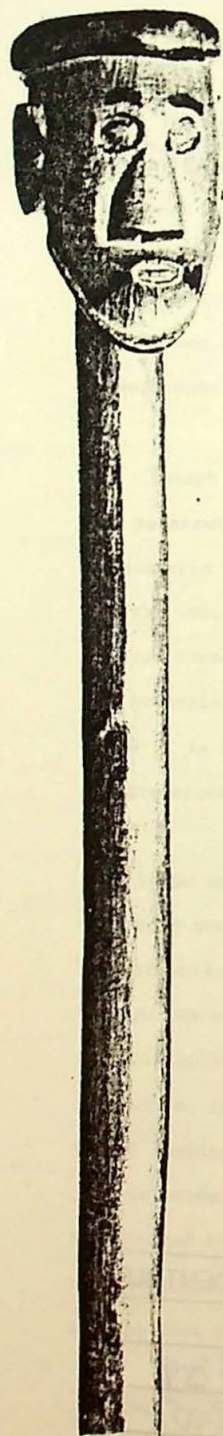


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THE 'MFEKANE' AFTERMATH

towards a new paradigm

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HAS THE MFEKANE A FUTURE?

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Has the Mfecane a Future?

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The term Mfecane has come to be widely accepted as a name for the process of political change and the accompanying wars and migrations which began in the area between the Thukela river and Delagoa Bay during the later part of the eighteenth century and resulted, inter alia, in the emergence of the Swazi and Zulu kingdoms, the founding of the Gaza kingdom in southern Mozambique, the migrations and state building activities of the Ndebele and of the Maseko and Zwengendaba's Ngoni.

Though accounts of these developments go back to contemporary times, it was apparently my interpretation of this chain of events in The Zulu Aftermath (reinforced by the chapter on the same topic in the Oxford History of South Africa) which gave the term common currency and established the topic as a central theme in the historiography of Southern, Central and East Africa.¹ For sensible debate to proceed on the validity of the concept of the Mfecane or as it is sometimes referred to 'Mfecane theory', it may not therefore be inappropriate to look back to what I then saw as its essential characteristics.²

I saw it as a positive process of political change in the direction of increased state power through improved military organisation and increased centralisation and the expansion of the scale of political organisation through the rapid incorporation and assimilation of members of previously separate political communities. It was, I believed, an essentially African revolution, the achievement of African leaders employing and modifying traditional institutions, values, weapons and tactics, rather than borrowing external models or techniques, in building their new kingdoms. It thus illustrated the capacity of African leaders for creative statecraft and the adaptability of traditional African institutions to new purposes. It demonstrated that the nineteenth century history of Africa could not be adequately

discussed simply in terms of external, predominantly European, forces acting on essentially passive African societies, but that it must be seen as a much more complex pattern involving reciprocal interaction between European and African initiatives.

The process of political change in the northern Nguni area, as I saw it, had begun in the latter half of the eighteenth century in response to an intensification of inter-community conflicts which, I thought, probably arose as a result of heightened competition for grazing and garden land consequent upon population growth beyond what could be comfortably sustained within the area by traditional food production practices. The process had advanced through an initial phase, dominated by Dingiswayo's Mthethwa and Zwide's Ndwandwe, in which the conversion of the corporate initiate-mate system to a means of military organisation and a device facilitating the incorporation of young males from other communities was initiated, but the potential of this development was not completely realised, in that the ama-butho only assembled for fairly brief periods of active campaigning. This phase saw the movement of Sobhuza into the area of modern Swaziland and the first inception of what was to become the Swazi kingdom. It thus marked the beginning of the spread of the Mfecane beyond its original nuclear area.

This first phase of the Mfecane gave way, as I saw it, to the emergence of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka which marked the culmination of the process of political change in the sense that the military and political potential of the age-mate system was achieved with the introduction of continuous service, the conversion of royal homesteads into military barracks and the adoption of tactics involving close formation fighting with the use of the short-handled stabbing spear.

The emergence of the Zulu kingdom, I believed, had greatly intensified the impact of the Mfecane. It had resulted in massive conflict and upheaval

in Natal. It had triggered the northward migrations of Soshangane, Nqaba, Zwengendaba, and the Maseko. Later, Mzilikazi and the Ndebele had broken away from Shaka's kingdom to carry both devastating warfare and the process of state formation to the Transvaal highveld and subsequently, after their defeat by the Boer trekkers, to western Zimbabwe. A Zulu attack had also driven Mawane and his Ngwane onto the trans-Orangian highveld where it had greatly intensified the upheavals initiated by the intrusion of Mpangazita and the Hlubi.

The careers of Sobhuza (and of his successors, especially of course Mswati), Soshangane, Zwengendaba, the leaders of the Maseko and their successors, and of Mzilikazi, constituted, as I saw it, a series of experiments in state building involving the rapid assimilation of political, linguistic and cultural aliens and the development within the new rapidly aggregated composite communities of a sense of common identity and loyalty. The creation of such new communities as the Ndebele in Zimbabwe or Mpezeni's Ngoni in Zambia were not only remarkable achievements with important consequences for the subsequent history of those areas but of universal significance in terms of our understanding of the formation of corporate political loyalties.

The series of state-building experiments undertaken by these leaders all involved a common set of institutions including the corporate age mate system of military organisation, the use of royal households as military and administrative centres and the employment of appointed officials (isi-induna) in key roles, but the elements in this common package were developed and employed in very different ways in reaction to the different situations faced by the individual leaders and their followers. The spread of the Mfecane however created both the need and the opportunity for the leaders of other peoples to build enlarged and strengthened political systems. In this task some, like the Hehe in Tanzania, borrowed some elements of the package, while others like Moshoeshe in building the Lesotho kingdom, relied on the traditional institutions of their

own societies, and alternative military tactics.

The Mfecane, I believed, had had a major impact on the history of South, Central, and East Africa.³ It had led to the creation of a whole series of new communities, some at a huge distance from their founders' original homes. Two of these, Lesotho and Swaziland, had evolved into internationally recognised independent nations while others remained significant centres of self identification and political loyalty within the wider state structures created by colonialism. The migrations and military activities of the Ngoni, reacting in complex ways with the upheavals arising from the contemporaneous expansion of the East coast ivory and slave trade, had a major impact on East African societies and at least temporarily modified the distribution of population in some areas. In South Africa, the wars and upheavals of the period had resulted, I believed, in a general tendency for population to concentrate in and around areas of rugged country which offered greater defensive opportunities, leaving much of the more open country on the Transvaal and the trans-Orangian highveld temporarily largely depopulated. In Natal, apart from the area around Port Natal, much of the land lay temporarily empty as population fled south under the impact of the migrations of a series of groups set in motion by the rise of the Zulu and subsequently by the Zulu impis themselves. This population accumulated in the extreme south of Natal and northern Transkei, in the neighbourhood of Faku's Mpondo awaiting the return of more secure conditions which would allow them to re-occupy their earlier homes. In the meantime the vicinity of the northern Transkei was a crucible of multiple and complex conflicts. The disruption of the earlier pattern of population distribution, becoming known in the Cape through the reports of English traders in Natal and of travellers, traders and missionaries on the highveld, appeared to offer opportunities for the easy acquisition of desirable grazing land and so taken together with the strength of Xhosa resistance on the East coast helped to explain the diversion of the main stream of white settler expansion away from

its initially preferred route to that of the great trek through trans-Orangia into Natal and the Transvaal. It thus helped to explain the positioning of the new nuclei of white land expansionism created by the great trek and so contributes to an understanding of how the subsequent pattern of white and vestigial African land holding in South Africa came about.

An important measure of the value of any historical study is the extent to which it stimulates new empirical research and interpretative analyses. It is gratifying that the publication of the Zulu Aftermath, has been followed by such a great deal of new research and speculative reinterpretation. In the development of knowledge there are occasions when hypotheses which have long served as the starting points for the search for new data and the formulation of new questions can no longer sustain the weight of new evidence and are replaced by new postulates. With a paper delivered in 1983 entitled 'The Case Against the Mfecane', followed by a number of others down to the present conference, Julian Cobbing has proclaimed the need for such a major change of perspective, a paradigm shift with regard to the Mfecane. He and John Wright who has followed him in this regard have argued that the entire concept of the Mfecane should be scrapped.⁴

At times they seem to be arguing that it is all a myth and that the wars, migrations, etc., never really happened. Thus in an article in the Canadian Journal of African Studies⁵ John Wright acclaims Julian Cobbing for formulating a sweeping critique of the notion that the Mfecane ever happened. Later in the same article in relation to the Mfecane in Natal, he claims, "The Natal Mfecane is, therefore, the prototype of all other regional Mfecanes. Knock down the notion that it actually happened and the whole edifice of Mfecane theory is likely to come tumbling down."

Further reading, however, soon reveals that this is not really what they mean. In spite of the remarks just quoted, John Wright does not intend to deny that a process of political change in the direction of strengthened and expanded political organisation accompanied by heightened military conflict and involving the military use of the i-butho system developed in the area between the Thukela river and Delagoa Bay in the course of the eighteenth century. He accepts that the pace of the process was subsequently intensified with the conflict between the Mthethwa and Ndwandwe and the emergence of the Zulu kingdom.⁶ Neither he nor Cobbing deny the northward migrations of groups originally associated with the Ndwandwe into Mozambique and in the case of Zwengendaba's and the Maseko Ngoni subsequently on through Zimbabwe and Malawi as far as Tanzania. Cobbing does not deny that the Hlubi and Ngwana were driven across the Drakensberg onto the trans-Orangian highveld or that their intrusion into the area contributed to heightened insecurity there. Still less does he dispute the migrations of the Ndebele led by Mzilikazi onto and within the Transvaal and after defeat by the trekkers into Zimbabwe, or his state-building achievements in the Transvaal and Zimbabwe, which formed the subject of his PhD.⁷

Their criticism then is not aimed at disputing that the processes of political change, migrations, and the state-building activities of those involved in them actually occurred, rather it directs itself to three key issues which they believe to be crucial to the concept of the Mfecane.

The first of these issues is the causation of the process of political change in the direction of stronger and more extensive state systems in the area between Delagoa Bay and the Thukela. They reject the idea that it may have started in response to an ecological crisis, heightened competition for grazing land (perhaps specifically sweet veld late summer and winter grazing) to satisfy the needs of growing herds, a problem which might have been intensified by the onset of a cycle of relatively dry years after a number of

exceptionally good ones.⁸ Instead they follow Alan Smith, Hedges and Bonner⁹ in ascribing the original impulse to trade, probably initially mainly in ivory, with the Portuguese at Delagoa Bay. They modify this hypothesis however by arguing on the basis of work by Harries and Liesegang¹⁰ on the slave trade at Delagoa Bay that an initial prolonged phase of relatively slow change was succeeded by a sharp escalation of violence resulting from a massive increase in the slave trade from the Bay. This resulted, they believe, in aggressive raiding especially by Zwide's Ndwandwe which, inter alia, drove the Nguni South into northern Natal and the Hlubi over the Drakensberg. It also resulted in the Ndwandwe Mthethwa conflict and after the destruction of the Mthethwa kingdom, in the emergence of the Zulu kingdom as an essentially defensive reaction against slave trade prompted aggression from the north.¹¹ The acceptance of this hypothesis they believe would destroy the thesis that the Mfecane was an essentially African phenomenon.

There is no doubt that this postulated explanation is both plausible and intellectually very attractive. The trade hypothesis offers the possibility of detecting a common dynamic linking the beginnings of state formation south of Delagoa Bay in the eighteenth century with the very much earlier emergence of substantial state systems at Toutswemogola, Mapungubwe and subsequently Great Zimbabwe.¹² It also offers a possible link between the emergence of enlarged states in northern Zululand and the eighteenth century emergence of the Rolong paramountcy on the highveld, the alleged state-building career of Motlomi in trans-Orangeia and most of all the creation of the Pedi paramountcy, (though it might be noted, Delius has reservations as to the validity of the trade hypothesis in this which might be thought to be the most clear cut example of it.)¹

The suggestion that it was the expansion of the slave trade which brought the process of change to a head offers a very reasonable explanation for the

emergence of militarism and the greatly intensified violence of the period.

It must be noted however that the evidence for a great expansion of the Delagoa Bay slave trade discovered so far relates to the period after 1821 and this expansion might, as Harries originally thought, be a consequence of the spread of the Mfecane rather than its cause.¹⁴ It is of course not at all improbable that the expansion noted by 1821 had begun as much as a decade earlier but whether it had or not and whether, if it had, it was the sole cause of the escalation of violence and militarism associated with the period of Ndwandwe/Mthethwa conflict and the rise of the Zulu, remains in the field of speculation.

It is true that Hall's recent work throws doubt on the hypothesis of an ecological crisis in the coastal zone¹⁵ capable of explaining the upheaval but the possibility that competition for grazing may have had some role in the matter is by no means definitely ruled out.

Even, however, if the hypothesis that external trade was the sole cause of the process of political change, and the slave trade in particular, the catalyst of the later phase of heightened militarism and violence, is fully accepted, the Africanist thesis is not significantly affected. It still remains the case that the series of experiments in state-building was undertaken by African leaders, employing existing institutions of their own societies in new ways in the light of the critical situations in which they found themselves, rather than borrowing alien European models. Neither does referring to these new political systems as reactive or in some cases defensive, alter the case. Of course they were reactive in the sense that they developed in reaction to situations of great violence and insecurity whether that situation of heightened conflict was initially caused by struggles over grazing lands or the impact of the slave trade. They were also from one point of view defensive though that does not mean that they were not also from other

perspectives aggressive and predacious. It is not the cause of the insecurity which provoked the process of political change which lay at the heart of the Mfecane but the nature of the process itself which constitutes its Africanness.

The second main argument of the critics of the Mfecane concerns the role of the Zulu, the Zulucentricity, which they see as essential to the whole concept of the Mfecane. First they insist that it was not the emergence of the Zulu which initiated the process of state building and started the series of migrations out of the area between Delagoa Bay and the Thukela. Rather the Zulu kingdom was merely one of the products of a process which had started much earlier during the century.

According to John Wright, it was the emergence of the Ndwandwe and Mthethwa paramountcies which encouraged a number of other chiefdoms including the Qwabe and the Cele to start building similarly enlarged political units. It was during this period that southwards migrations into and through Natal were first set in motion. It was as a result of power rivalry between Zwidwe and Dingiswayo that the Ngwane and Hlubi were driven from their original homes.¹⁶ It was the Ndwandwe who drove Sobhuza into Swaziland. (Cobbing lays more emphasis on the Ndwandwe involved, as he believes them to have become, in the slave trade as the motors of political and demographic change in the area.)¹⁷ When the Ndwandwe had defeated the Mthethwa and the Zulu under Shaka emerged to challenge them, it was not Shaka's victory over Zwidwe's forces or, as John Wright would have it, not that alone, which resulted in the break up of the Ndwandwe paramountcy and the northward migrations that followed, rather it was tensions within that enlarged confederacy and possibly, (Cobbing thinks definitely), the pressures and opportunities resulting from the slave trade which had this result.¹⁸ The migration of Mzilikazi's Khumalo (subsequently known as the Ndebele) onto the Transvaal highveld was not the consequence of rebellion against and defeat by Shaka but of conflict with the slave-trading Ndwandwe.¹⁹ (Cobbing indeed would stretch the impact of groups of slave raiders from Delagoa Bay

very much further than this, believing them to have been responsible for driving Mzilikazi from the north-eastern Transvaal and even to have extended their activities to the Caledon Valley where they, rather than the Zulu or Ndebele, attacked Matiwane and drove him to take refuge across the Drakensberg where he was attacked and his people massacred by the British.)²⁰

Shaka and the Zulu were not therefore responsible for the great chain of migrations into Mozambique and on through Zimbabwe into Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia, onto the Transvaal highveld and thence in Mzilikazi's case into Zimbabwe, neither did the leaders of these migrations borrow their ideas on organisation and tactics from the Zulu. Their state-building experiments were independent of and parallel to that of Shaka in the Zulu kingdom. After his initial repulse of Zwile's forces moreover, Shaka's kingdom remained relatively weak, John Wright believes, and the positioning of a series of his military settlements can best be explained in terms of the need to establish a defensive cordon along his northern border against possible renewed Ndwandwe invasion. It was only after the defeat of Zwile's heir Sikhunyana in 1826 which was made possible by the support of the British traders with their guns that the Zulu were placed in a dominant position with regard to the territory between the heartland of their kingdom and the Bay. With regard to Natal similarly, the Zulu and chiefdoms owing allegiance to them, initially dominated only a very restricted area. The disruption of traditional settlement patterns was primarily due to the activities of other groups. It was only during the 1820s when Shaka moved to the centre of his kingdom southward in reaction to internal political problems, and possibly also because of insecurity on his northern frontier, that the Zulu established themselves as the dominant power between the Thukela and the Mzimkhulu. Though Zulu forces did pass through Natal across the Mzimkhulu and the Mzimvubu to raid the Mpondo in 1824 and subsequently launched sporadic raids into the area between the

Thukela and the Mzimkhulu before Shaka's major campaign into Pondoland in 1828, the Zulu were still the only or main cause of insecurity in the Natal region.²¹ (Here again Cobbing takes a much more radical view. He believes that the disruption of life in the Natal area was not the work of the Zulu but of the English traders and their African followers who he believes were also involved in the slave trade.)²²

These arguments are very convincing. John Wright's work on the Zulu and on the dynamics of the situation in Natal taken together with Carolyn Hamilton's study of ideology and power struggles in the Zulu kingdom, constitute, I believe, a major advance in our understanding of the internal dynamics and external relations and impact of the Zulu state.²³ They certainly do show that the role of the Zulu has been significantly exaggerated. On the other hand, while modifying the earlier accepted picture, they by no means completely destroy it. That the emergence of the Zulu kingdom was not the beginning of the political transformations in the area between Delagoa Bay and the Thukela, but was itself the product of a chain of events which had started earlier and had previously seen the emergence of the Ndwandwe and the Mthethwa, was always clear. That the migration of Sobhuza to Swaziland and the initial dislocation of the Hlubi and Ngwane and thus the beginnings of the spread of the Mfecane also belonged to this period, has likewise been accepted.

Whether the migrations of Soshangane, Zwengendaba, Nqaba and the Maseko were or were not the direct result of the defeat of Zwide's forces by the Zulu, is far less clear. The claim made by Mayinga that the Gaza scattered before any attack by the Zulu²⁴ cannot be taken as any more definitive than the Zulu sources on which Bryant relied in maintaining that they had fled in reaction to Shaka's victory. It is not improbable that there were strong centrifugal tensions within Zwide's extensive paramountcy. It is not

difficult to imagine that involvement in the slave trade may have increased these. Certainly, the Gaza and Zwengendaba's Jere, did subsequently participate in selling captives to the Portuguese.²⁵ On the other hand, the fact that these migrations began, coincidentally with the shift of the Ndwandwe headquarters across the Phongola river into southern Swaziland just as the Zulu kingdom was successfully establishing itself, suggests that the defeat may well have been the precipitating cause which brought internal tensions to a head.²⁶ Wright's view that the failure of Ndwandwe forces against the Zulu is likely to have been a factor but not to have been the only cause, seems very fair.²⁷

With regard to the Ndebele of Mzilikazi, the situation is similar. While the previous association of the Khumalo with the Ndwandwe in the period of Mzilikazi's father, Matshobane, has never been disputed, neither Cobbing's arguments based on the different way that the Ndebele employed the i-butho system,²⁸ nor the oral evidence of members of the Ndebele kingdom, decisively disprove that they were for a time associated as a vassal chiefdom with Shaka's nascent kingdom and that their migration onto the Transvaal highveld was the result of attack and defeat by Zulu forces.²⁹

While John Wright successfully demonstrates that the role of the Zulu in Natal has been seriously exaggerated; moreover, he accepts that life there was greatly disturbed by groups moving south initially to avoid incorporation in the Ndwandwe or Mthethwa paramountcies and subsequently by others seeking to avoid a similar fate at the hands of the Zulu or their satellites. The Zulu themselves, moreover, did ultimately establish their predominance over most of Natal; they did drive the Ngwane onto the highveld and their forces did campaign south as far as Faku's Mpondo.

More important than these details, however, the re-evaluation of the role of the Zulu in the Mfecane in no way implies that the concept itself must be abandoned. Even if the effect of the emergence of the Zulu kingdom in intensifying and accelerating the spread of the process of change which had begun in earlier days has been exaggerated (and if one accepts John Wright's version it is clear that their impact in these regards was nevertheless very considerable), it remains true that a process of change in the direction of strengthened and enlarged political organisation did take place in the course of the eighteenth century between Delagoa Bay and the Thukela and that a whole series of migrations subsequently set out from this area carrying a common package of institutions which they employed in diverse ways in very different situations in which they found themselves, to build substantial states involving the incorporation of large numbers of previous outsiders. It is equally clearly the case that these activities had very significant consequences for the history of a large part of Africa. This is the essence of the Mfecane, not the extent to which it was, or was not, impelled forward by Shaka's Zulu impis.

The third main focus of attack on the concept of the Mfecane relates to the extent of its impact. How extensive was the disruption of community life and the dislocation of population resulting from the upheavals of the period and who was responsible for such disruption as did occur? In relation to Natal, John Wright as has been noted above, argues that the role of the Zulu in disturbing the pattern of life and settlement in Natal has been very significantly exaggerated and that the main cause of this was the southward migration of a series of other chiefdoms. He also insists that Natal was never anything like wholly depopulated and that at least some segments of a large proportion of the communities that had been living in the territory survived within it throughout the period of upheaval. He does accept,

however, that the pattern of life and settlement was very seriously upset by the successive migrations through the area; that substantial parts of the country were very largely depopulated and that there was a temporary concentration of population owing allegiance to a number of different leaders in the area between the Umzimkhulu and the Umzimvubu which became a cockpit for a complex series of conflicts.

Cobbing's arguments are much more far ranging. He concentrates his attention mainly on the areas of the highveld of trans-Orangia and Transvaal (though, as has been mentioned, he does concern himself with Natal also where he holds the English traders and their African followers, engaged, as he believes, in slave trading, to have been responsible for the disturbances). He also directs his attention to the zone beyond the Cape's eastern frontier.

With regard to trans-Orangia he argues that while the activities of the Ngwane or Matiwane were no doubt disruptive, their consequences were short-lived and far less significant than those of the firearm-wielding Griqua raiders. These mounted brigands, he believes, in addition to raiding cattle to supply markets in the Cape, were also engaged in an extensive slave trade to satisfy the Cape farming economy's insatiable appetite for cheap African labour. The concept of the Difaqane (the Mfecane on the highveld) is essentially an alibi, he claims, created by white settlers, officials and missionaries to conceal these slave raiding and trading activities in which they were all implicated.³⁰

As an instance of this he examines the well-known expedition of mounted Grikwas organised by Moffat supposedly to save the Thlaping settlement near Dithakong which was threatened by the advance of a number of wandering and plundering bands. Basing himself on the account of the incident given by the government official Melvill who accompanied the expedition he claims

that it was really a cynically disguised slave raid. Following this general argument he maintains that the accepted accounts of 'Mantatee' refugees entering the Cape to escape the devastations of the Difaqane and providing a much needed temporary source of labour for farmers in the eastern districts, are a deliberate falsification. In fact these 'Mantatees' were the victims of the Griqua slave raiders brought forcibly into the Cape and sold into forced labour, proceedings which were concealed by an extensive conspiracy of silence.³¹ The activities of the Griqua slave raiders, he believes, extended into the Transvaal where their disruptive consequences complemented those of the Delagoa Bay based raiders. Mzilikazi's kingdom was essentially a defensive state which attempted to gather different communities together and offer them protection against these raiders.³² Just as Mzilikazi had initially been driven onto the highveld as a consequence of the slave trade and subsequently out of the north eastern Transvaal by Delagoa Bay based raiders, so he was driven north from the vicinity of the Orange river to the central Transvaal and thence to take refuge in the western Transvaal by the cattle and slave raiding Griquas. Finally, it was the trekkers, with Griqua allies, who broke up his composite kingdom in the Transvaal and forced him on his last great migration to Zimbabwe.

Officially sanctioned but concealed slave raiding extended to the Cape frontier zone also, he maintains. The military expedition which attacked the Ngwane of Matiwane allegedly to protect the Thembu and Xhosa from Zulu forces for which the unfortunate Ngwane were mistaken, was really, in his view, a huge official slave raid undertaken in the light of the labour crisis in the Cape's eastern districts.³³

Not only were the disturbances on the highveld primarily the work of slave raiding bands rather than migrations of the Mfecane but the consequences

of these disturbances have also, in Cobbing's opinion, been exaggerated and misrepresented. The area of the modern Free State and Transvaal was never wholly depopulated. Communities living in the area had always occupied widely separated settlements leaving substantial empty land between them. Population was never driven by the disturbances of the period into the precise areas of the subsequent 'homelands' of apartheid legislation. The idea that these were the creation of the Mfecane subsequently merely legitimised by white authority is another Mfecane myth. Lesotho, Cobbing argues further, was not really the creation of Moshoeshoe responding to the challenge and opportunities provided by the Mfecane. It was rather the result of peoples being driven together and concentrated by the pressure from Griqua raiders and land grabbing Boers exerted over a prolonged period. Its survival as a distinct polity was the result of the fortuitous action of the Governor of the Cape. In the same way, the Mfecane cannot be said to have fathered Swaziland which has to be seen as the creation of Anglo-Boer rivalry and diplomacy. Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana) was even more clearly the creation of British policy rather than the Mfecane.³³

With respect to Natal, John Wright's argument that the role of the Zulu has been exaggerated and that the main agents of disruption were the various southward migrating chiefdoms which passed through the area, is almost certainly correct. While it significantly modifies and greatly clarifies the previously accepted picture of what happened in Natal, it by no means totally transforms it. His view that the depopulation of Natal as a result of the upheavals of the Mfecane, was far from total and that severe depopulation was restricted to part of the territory only, is also almost certainly right. These arguments taken together, however, in no way amount to a proof that the Mfecane in Natal never happened as he suggests in his article in the Canadian Journal of African Studies. On the contrary, they show quite clearly that it did.

Cobbing's theory that the white traders in Natal were engaged in the slave trade on a substantial scale must await much further detailed research. The same must be said of the predominant role he ascribes to them in the disruption of life in Natal. On the face of it, the great power which he believes was wielded by these traders and their African followers in relation to that of the forces available to Shaka does not seem wholly convincing when one remembers how Dingane's impi overwhelmed those of the Natal whites at a time when his forces were also involved in the struggle with the Boer trekkers.

With regard to the highveld, Cobbing is right, of course, to draw attention to the plundering activities of the various Khoi and part-Khoi mounted gun carrying raiders that he refers to as Griquas. That their depredations preceded the intrusions of the Hlubi and Ngwane and that they continued and intensified after the departure of Matiwane to the Transkei, has long been established. No doubt he is right in stressing the need to take serious account of their role in the disruption of settled life in trans-Orangia and the Transvaal.

It is when one comes to the extent of the role he ascribes to them that doubts arise. In the case of the Transvaal, the Griqua raiders certainly repeatedly harried Mzilikazi's Ndebele. He found their raids a serious menace and very difficult to deal with. He may well have shifted his headquarters from the vicinity of the Orange to the Central Transvaal in the hope, subsequently disappointed, of gaining immunity from them. His subsequent move to the Marico Basin may also have been, at least in part, a response to this menace. On the other hand, it should be recalled that the Griquas were only able to undertake major attacks on the Ndebele with the aid of African allies. The major onslaughts that they did undertake, moreover, all ended in disaster at the hands of the Ndebele forces.³⁵ To speak of Mzilikazi's kingdom as a defensive state is also, from one point of view, correct. The expansion of

the core of his following and the extension of his authority over other communities was no doubt undertaken largely in search of security and under threat of attack from Griqua raiders Zulu expeditions etc. It is, however, surely absurd to suggest that the rapid incorporation of large numbers of Sotho/Tswana speakers in the Ndebele community, the establishment of their paramountcy over other groups, the repeated campaigns against the Ngwaketsi, the expulsion of Moletsane and his followers across the Orange etc., were undertaken without great violence and disruption of normal life in the area of the Transvaal in which the Ndebele armies operated.

In trans-Orangia likewise, there seems no conclusive evidence to show that the impact of the Griqua was greater than that of the intrusions of the Hlubi and Ngwane and the predations of the Tlokwa and others set in motion thereby, or to disprove the view that Griqua raiding escalated to a level at which it constituted a major cause of disruption in trans-Orangia in response to the chaotic circumstances arising from the intrusions across the Drakensberg. With regard to the large scale slave trading activities in which Cobbing believes the Griqua to have been engaged, there is no reason to doubt Shane Bannister's claim that the Griquas gained control of numbers of Sotho/Tswana and that they sold some of them into the Colony. Their own raiding activities and the general situation of acute instability and insecurity in the area would have made it very easy for them to get control of people in this way and indeed made it difficult not to acquire responsibility for captives, abandoned children, destitute refugees etc. That such people would have been exploited as dependent clients (a form of slavery perhaps) or have been disposed of to other Griquas or to Colonists can hardly be doubted.

Afrikaaner farmers, moreover, needed to be able to acquire small numbers of dependents who could be acculturated to their society and incorporated at least partially and in an inferior dependent capacity, in their families,

to provide domestic services and serve as overseers of labour, retainers who could be trusted with firearms to defend the stock, and even to participate in military expeditions along with their masters.³⁶ It is difficult to doubt that the Griqua would have been a convenient source of such 'apprentices' or that the prospect of obtaining such tradeable captives may have been an incentive to some of their raiding.

It is another thing, however, to maintain that the very large numbers of so-called 'Mantatees' who entered service with farmers in the Cape at this time, a matter certainly of some thousands, were all captured by the Griquas and brought into the Colony as slaves. To accept that such a large scale operation with caravans of slaves moving under armed guard etc., could have gone on without comment or criticism assumes a unanimity of interest, opinion, and cynical indifference to considerations of humanity among missionaries, officials, farmers and traders that is frankly incredible. It is all the more difficult to believe in face of the criticisms which were raised over aspects of the Mbolombo campaign.³⁷

Certainly the evidence which Cobbing reveals in relation to the Dithakong campaign does little to establish his case. He finds it suspicious that Moffat should have broken off his journey to the Ngwaketse and hurried back to organise the expedition "on the basis of unsubstantiated rumours of a Mantatee presence"³⁸ but the rumours were in fact essentially correct. Groups of wandering displaced people were approaching Dithakong. Would Moffat have acted more responsibly if he had ignored these rumours? If he and Melvill had really planned the whole expedition as a large scale stock and slave raid, why did Moffat go off to the Ngwaketse and have to come dashing back? Was this perhaps all a devious subterfuge to conceal his criminal intentions?

After the battle about 150 women and children were brought to Kuruman.

them from starvation. If, as Cobbing maintains, they were simply seized as slaves and their capture was one of the main purposes of the whole campaign, why were their numbers so small when the Griquas, with their firearms, were apparently in a completely dominant position, killed two to three hundred of the Mantatees and burnt their villages and had horses to help them round up any who might attempt to flee? The direct evidence of slave trading alleged against Moffat consists, firstly, in the fact that he kept one of the boys as a personal servant "affectionately domesticated in the family of his benefactor" and that he took some others, including five women and a fine boy and placed them in the service of white families in the Cape. In the case of Melvill, the gravamen of the charge is that he took fifteen of the survivors of the battle who had come under his control, to Graaff Reinet and placed them with white families there, receiving some ammunition in return.³⁹ However critical one may be of these transactions they scarcely provide justification for describing the whole campaign as a deliberately organised slave raid or indeed for doubting the general outlines of Moffat's account of it.

The argument that the Mbolombo campaign was simply a huge slave raiding expedition is also difficult to credit. According to Cobbing's account the expedition involved about 16,000 men, including 531 gun-armed whites constituting one of the largest armies yet seen in Africa. It had overwhelming fire power and surrounded the Ngwane encampment before opening fire and massacring several hundred Ngwane. Yet only between one and two hundred prisoners and about forty-seven women and seventy children were to be brought back to the Cape as workers.⁴⁰

While it is highly probable then that whites in the Cape did acquire some servants, probably mainly women and children, by trade or barter from the Griquas, a large part of the large numbers of 'Mantatees' who came into the Cape at this time probably did come as refugees from the situation of war and general insecurity on the trans-Orangian highveld, seeking safety, shelter,

food and the means to acquire the cattle essential to establish or re-establish autonomous homesteads. This presumption is strengthened by the fact that so many of these Mantatees subsequently left the Colony with the cattle they had acquired to settle under Moshoeshoe's protection in Lesotho.⁴¹

Looking at Cobbing's criticisms of the alleged impact of the disturbances it is easy to agree that the extent of depopulation should not be exaggerated. Probably no substantial area was ever even temporarily wholly depopulated. Some of the former inhabitants probably always remained, hiding in hilly or bushy areas and showing the good sense to keep out of sight of parties of mounted and armed men. Much of the more open highveld country may never have held a very dense population anyway. The idea that the entire area subsequently legislatively defined as exclusively belonging to whites had been vacated and that Africans had confined themselves to those very areas subsequently constituted 'homelands' is quite absurd. It is also obviously true that Moshoeshoe's kingdom might well have broken up if it had not been for the external pressure of land hungry whites and that in the last resort its survival and status as a separate British colonial territory could not have come about without the actions of Governor Wodehouse. In the same way Cobbing is of course right to maintain that Swaziland as a High Commission Territory owed its existence to British policy as did the Bechuanaland Protectorate.

On the other hand neither Swaziland nor Lesotho would have become High Commission Territories or become the kind of states that they are now if they had not been part of the territories of two African kingdoms which owed their origins to the period of the Mfecane. In the same way, the Native Reserves were clearly residual areas of African landholding which happened to survive the process of white land expropriation long enough for

be appreciated, rather than the direct creations of the Mfecane. Nevertheless, in some cases at least, (Thaba Nchu would be one such) the explanation as to why the area concerned had a relatively concentrated African population and ended up as such a vestigial Reserve as well as of the composition of its population necessitates looking back to the Mfecane. Finally, although the highvelds of trans-Orangia and the Transvaal were never depopulated, Cobbing does not deny that life there was gravely disrupted and settlement dislocated; he merely suggests that responsibility for this should be placed mainly on the Griqua and Delagoa Bay slave raiders rather than on Mzilikazi and Matiwane. It still seems probable, therefore, that the upheavals of the time did encourage the movement of the Trekkers into those areas and facilitate their initial settlement and the beginnings of the process of further expansion and land expropriation from their first nuclear settlements. If so, then they do form part of the explanation of the eventual pattern of land holding that was to emerge.

From the foregoing, it is clear that John Wright's carefully researched critique which is confined to the area of Zululand and Natal does not require the abandonment of the idea of the Mfecane or even drastically transform our understanding of it. Cobbing's much more broad ranging arguments are another matter. Taking the implications of his arguments to their logical conclusion, the heightened demand for cheap forced labour in the Cape, South America, Indian Ocean Islands, the Middle East etc., arising from the expansion of European capitalism must be seen as the ultimate effective cause of all the violence, upheavals and political changes in African societies in pre-colonial Southern, Central and East Africa in the nineteenth century. This grand scenario brings the activities of Delagoa Bay based slavers and of the Mozambican super-prazeiros of Arab, Swahili and Nyamwezi leaders of slave caravans in East and Central Africa, of Griqua bandits on the highveld, English traders in Natal and of British troops beyond the Cape colonial

frontier as well as the creation of the Zulu, Swazi and Ndebele kingdoms and the migrations of the Gaza, Ngoni etc., within a single explanatory framework. Within this scenario, the kingdom building of Shaka, Mzilikazi, Soshangane, Zwengendaba et al, must be seen as a minimally disruptive series of reactions to the expanding slave trade. Even if this attractive grand hypothesis is fully accepted, however, and in the (to me, somewhat improbable) event that Cobbing's assertions about the slave raiding activities of Griquas, Natal traders and British troops all prove fully substantiable, it will still be the case that the state building achievements and migrations of the Zulu, Swazi, Gaza, Ngoni etc., the essence of the Mfecane, constitute an important theme in nineteenth century African history. Far, then, from destroying the idea of the Mfecane, the work of Julian Cobbing, John Wright and others who have followed in this general approach has served to raise important new questions concerning its causation, nature and impact, to stimulate a great deal of new thought and research in the area and ensure its continuing to occupy a prominent place in the developing historiography of nineteenth century Africa.

Post-script: The Mfecane and Political PropagandaPolitical Propaganda

For serious historians the value of the idea of the Mfecane is as a term facilitating the description and explanation of a complex series of events and processes in the nineteenth century history of Southern, Central and East Africa. It must stand or fall by its utility in assisting our cognitive grasp of what happened, why it happened and what consequences followed. It is clear from the tone and in some cases, titles, of the works of the critics of the concept that this is not their only or perhaps prime concern. Their attacks on the Mfecane gain emotional force from the abuse of the concept to give empirical support to pro-apartheid propaganda. The Mfecane which they are attacking is thus not primarily that which has been portrayed and discussed by serious historians in recent years but caricature versions deliberately designed to provide a rationale for that monstrous system of race oppression and territorial segregation, and fed to young minds through school textbooks.

It is in these versions, which often look back to much earlier accounts such as those of the negrophobe Theal, that the Zulu have the extreme centrality in the Mfecane which comes to be depicted as the wars of Shaka, the mad monster. It is in these accounts that the violence in nineteenth century history is attributed to the insensate ferocity of blacks massacring one another while the trekkers appear as the benign bringers of peace and security. It is in these accounts that it is claimed that Africans coralled themselves in the exact areas later proclaimed as 'homelands' leaving the whole of the areas subsequently legislatively defined as for white ownership only, entirely vacant.

With attacks on such pernicious rubbish one must of course have the greatest sympathy. The gross factual errors about the location of African communities in the period of the Mfecane and of the way that white expansion took place should be and can easily be, decisively refuted.

That white expansion was accompanied by great violence, cruelty and deceit should no doubt be made clear to dispel the fatuous myths of universal white benignancy if they still have any credence. The overwhelming institutional violence involved in the whole dreadful system of race domination and oppression should also be pointed out if there are still any who do not recognise this.

It is when hostility to such propaganda-users of the Mfecane extends to seeking to deny the phenomenon itself that I have serious doubts. Any significant historical development can be used as the basis of propaganda for causes which we may rightly regard as evil. The devil is well-known to have the facility to quote Scripture to his need. In many cases, of course, the same sequence of events can be used to support a variety of different and opposing causes. The career of the Jacobin Committee of Public Safety is an obvious case in point. So too is the Mfecane as Cobbing partly acknowledges when he writes of there being two Mfecanes, one of Africanist scholars and another of apartheid propagandists. The state building activities of the great Mfecane leaders indeed decisively give the lie to the concept of the immutability of ethnic identity and the impracticability of developing a common society from multi-cultural components which is the basic principle of apartheid.

They also refute the view of Africans' incapacity for originality and creative statesmanship, a foundation myth of white supremacist ideology. In comparison with the potential value of the Mfecane to destroy the ideological basis of the whole apartheid system, its potential employment to buttress, it is confined to the legitimisation of communal territorial claims which only have any validity at all on the basis of these more fundamental principles (and even this involves easily exposed factual distortions).

To seek to discard or turn away from historical developments or accounts thereof, primarily because we object to the actual or possible propaganda use to which they might be put, is to risk embarking on a road which leads away from the assessment of historical statements on cognitive grounds and towards

their evaluation for their political utility to the causes we favour. That road must soon leave all honest scholarship behind. Some of the more rhetorical phrases in Julian Cobbing's and John Wright's papers do seem to suggest a teetering rather near the brink of this fateful slope.

Not only is the whole basis of the attack on the Mfecane for its supposed value to apartheid ideology intellectually worrying but the actual lines of attack are also in some cases seriously concerning. For example, to invest so much in attacking the notion that whites found empty land to occupy in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal risks implicitly accepting the basic racist assumption that if they had been the creation of a system of segregation, excluding blacks from owning land in these areas would have been justified.

Of course the factual errors in the apartheid theorists mythologised versions of the Mfecane and who occupied what and at the time of the Trek should be corrected, but whether they are false or not, is not of fundamental significance to exposing the moral invalidity of apartheid.

In the same way aspects of Julian Cobbing's arguments about responsibility for violence seem to me to come dangerously close to accepting the idea that attempting to balance responsibility for violence on a racial basis is a significant exercise. Unless we accept the racist assumptions of apartheid, of course this is not so. No racial or ethnic group can be said to be inherently more violent than any other and if members of one group appear to have acted more violently than those of another, we must assume that the others would have done just the same if their total historical situations had been reversed. Perhaps, however, we can all agree that the main responsibility for violence in South Africa, as everywhere else in the world, must be borne by men.

Much of the argument in this debate seems to me to illustrate the extreme difficulty, (even for those of the ~~purest~~ intentions) of extricating themselves from the webs of racial categories and assumptions of the system in which they

have been living. It is to be fervently hoped that the development of the new South Africa will soon make many of these controversies irrelevant.

Footnotes to Has the Mfecane a Future?

1. See e.g. Julian Cobbing "The Case against the Mfecane." Unpublished Seminar Paper, University of Cape Town, 1983.
2. See J.D. Omer-Cooper "The Zulu Aftermath", Longmans, London (first published 1966) especially the Introduction and concluding Chapter 12. My views on a number of these points have, of course, been considerably modified in the light of subsequent research.
3. See The Zulu Aftermath, Chapter 12.
4. Julian Cobbing "The Case Against the Mfecane." University of Cape Town, 1983.
"The Case Against the Mfecane". Unpublished Seminar Paper, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984.
"The Myth of the Mfecane." Unpublished Seminar Paper, University of Durban Westville, 1987.
'The Mfecane as Alibi: thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo'. Journal of African History, 29, 1988, pp. 487-519.
'A Tainted Well: the Objectives, Historical Fantasies and Working Methods of James Stuart with Counter-Argument'. (Review article on C. de B. Webb and John Wright edited The James Stuart Archives, 4 vols. to date, University of Natal Press 1976 -). Journal of Natal and Zulu History, XI, 1988, pp. 115-153.
"Grasping the Nettle: the Slave Trade and the Early Zulu". Unpublished Seminar Paper, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, Sept. 1990.
"Rethinking the Roots of Violence in Southern Africa c.1790 - 1840". Unpublished Seminar Paper, June 1991.
5. J.B. Wright 'Political mythology and the making of Natal's Mfecane'. The Canadian Journal of African Studies, vol. 23, no. 2, 1989, pp. 272-291
6. See John Wright 'Political transformations in the Thukela - Mzimkhulu Region of Natal in the late 18th and early 19th centuries'. Unpublished Seminar Paper, University of Antananarivo, July 1991, pp. 8-12.
7. Julian Cobbing 'The Ndebele under the Khumalos 1820-96'. Unpublished PhD thesis, London University, 1976.

8. A possibility examined by J. Guy in "Ecological Factors and the Rise of the Zulu Kingdom". Unpublished Seminar Paper, University of Lesotho, August 1977.
9. Alan K. Smith 'The Trade of Delagoa Bay as a factor in Nguni politics 1750-1835' in Leonard Thompson edited African Societies in Southern Africa, London 1969.
'The Struggle for the control of Southern Mozambique 1720-1835'. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1970.
D.W. Hedges 'Trade and Politics in Southern Mozambique and Zululand in the 18th and early 19th centuries'. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1978.
P. Bonner 'The Dynamics of Late 18th Century Northern Nguni Society: some hypotheses' in J. Peires, ed. Before and After Shaka. Grahamstown, 1981, pp. 74-81.
P. Bonner Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires. Cambridge, 1982
10. P. Harries 'Slavery, Social incorporation and Surplus Extraction: the Nature of Free and Unfree Labour in South-East Africa', Journal of African History, 22, 1981, pp.
G. Liesegang 'A First look at the Import and Export Trade of Mozambique, 1800-1914', ch. v. in G. Liesegang, H. Pasch, A. Jones edited Figuring African Trade, Berlin, 1986.
11. See Julian Cobbing "Grasping the Nettle".
John Wright "Political Transformations".
12. This point is raised by Martin Hall The Changing Past: Farmers, Kings and Traders in Southern Africa, 200 - 1860, Cape Town, 1987.
13. Peter Delius The Land Belongs to Us: Pedi Polity, the Boers and the British in the Nineteenth Century Transvaal. London 1983, pp.11-19.
14. P. Harries "Slavery, Social Incorporation and Surplus Extraction".
15. Martin Hall The Changing Past, p. 126.
16. John Wright "Political Transformations".
17. Julian Cobbing "Grasping the Nettle".

18. Compare Julian Cobbing's trenchantly expressed conviction on this point in "Grasping the Nettle" and Re-thinking the Roots of Violence" with John Wright's much more cautious argumentation in 'Political Transformations'.
19. Julian Cobbing "Grasping the Nettle", p. 7.
20. Julian Cobbing "Grasping the Nettle", p.10, where he argues that there is evidence for 'Portuguese' slavers penetrating to the vicinity of the Maluti Mountains. It is not entirely clear whether he thinks that they or, the also slave raiding Griquas (said to have been responsible in 'The Mfecane as Alibi') played the decisive role in driving Mtiwane across the Caledon Valley.
21. J. Wright 'Political Transformations', also "A.T. Bryant and 'The wars of Shaka'". History in Africa, 1991.
22. The theme of the destructive role of the white traders in Natal was expounded in Julian Cobbing "The Mfecane as Alibi" where he suggested, inter alia, that they may have been involved in the murder of Shaka. The idea that they were involved in the slave trade is set out in "Grasping the Nettle and further developed in "Rethinking the roots of Violence".
23. John Wright "The dynamics of power and conflict in the Thukela-Mzimkhulu region in the late 18th and early 19th centuries: a critical reconstruction." Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1990.
Carolyn Hamilton "Ideology, Oral Tradition and the Struggle for Power in the early Zulu Kingdom". Unpublished MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1986.
24. C. de B. Webb and J.B. Wright edited The James Stuart Archive, vol.II, p. 251. Quoted by Julian Cobbing "Grasping the Nettle", p.11.
25. P. Harries "Slavery, Social incorporation and surplus extraction."
26. Peter Delius has suggested that Zwide moved his headquarters much further than has previously been thought in response to the defeat. He believes that he retreated as far as the Pedi country where he, rather than MZilikazi, was responsible for the defeat of the Pedi. If this is confirmed by further research, the view that defeat by the Zulu was the catalyst for the secessions of the Gaza, Jere etc., and their northward migrations, will be significantly strengthened. Peter Delius The Land Belongs to us, pp. 22-23.

27. John Wright 'Political Transformations', p.13.
28. See Julian Cobbing 'The Ndebele under the Xhumalos'.
29. In 'The Case Against the Mfecane' Julian Cobbing still held that Mzilikazi's migration had been precipitated by conflict with the Zulu. See footnote 113.
30. Julian Cobbing "The Mfecane as Alibi".
31. Julian Cobbing "The Mfecane as Alibi".
32. Julian Cobbing "Grasping the Nettle", p.13, "Re-thinking the roots of Violence", pp.25-26.
33. Julian Cobbing "The Mfecane as Alibi".
34. See Julian Cobbing "The Case against the Mfecane".
35. See R. Kent Rasmussen Migrant Kingdom: Mzilikazi's Ndebele in South Africa. Cape Town, 1978, pp. 27-132.
36. An excellent account of the Afrikaner farmers' need for such 'inboekselings' and of the roles they performed, is given by Peter Delius The Land Belongs to Us, pp. 34-37, 136-147.
37. Noted in Julian Cobbing "The Mfecane as Alibi", p. 513.
38. Julian Cobbing "The Mfecane as Alibi", p.492.
39. Julian Cobbing "The Mfecane as Alibi", pp. 492-493
40. "The Mfecane as Alibi", pp.502-503.
41. See e.g. Peter Sanders Moshoeshoe: Chief of the Sotho, London 1975, pp.60-74.