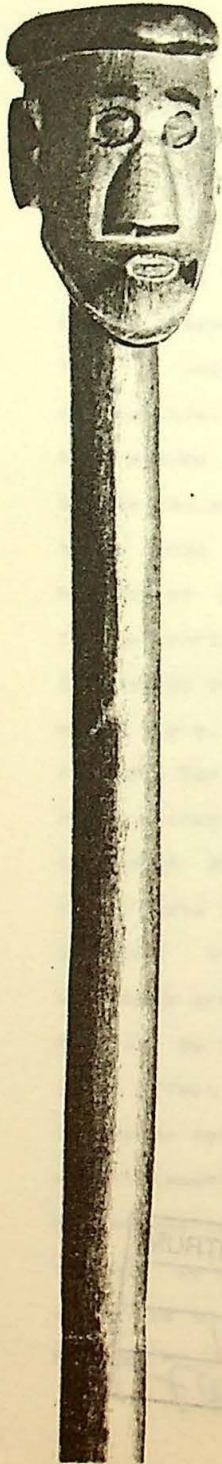


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# THE 'MFECANE' AFTERMATH

towards a new paradigm

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' COBBING AND THE HISTORIANS '

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COBBING, THE MFECANE AND (SOME) HISTORIANS<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Saunders

In mid-1991 some explain the current violence by pinning the entire blame on the Zulu-based Inkatha, while others believe that whites and their agents, acting secretly, are responsible. Yet others suggest that while these forces may have played a major role, it is too simplistic to offer any single explanation and a wider range of factors must be taken into account. Cobbing's reinterpretation of the history of African state formation and colonial penetration in the early nineteenth century has been very directly influenced by contemporary developments, as his choice of words (e.g. black-on-white violence; destabilisation) reveals. For the early nineteenth century violence Cobbing holds whites and their agents, acting covertly, both from the west and from Delagoa Bay, responsible; the Zulu state/Shaka is no longer the cause, but, like other states, is seen as a reactive, defensive creation. Cobbing's arguments are challenging, but in advancing his case he has, in my view, fallen into the trap of again seeking what is in effect a single explanation, albeit with two foci, for a complex set of events, and moreover, his work is marred by overstatements, selective use of evidence and misrepresentations of the work of others. It is as unhelpful for him to call all who have written of the Mfecane racists as it is to label, and dismiss, his interpretation as Marxist.<sup>2</sup>



This paper has a modest purpose: to show, through an examination of what previous historians have said about the Mfecane, that what Cobbing says about previous writing on the subject is flawed. In the first in his series of papers on this topic - 'The Case Against the Mfecane' (1983), never published - Cobbing spent considerable time analysing the development of the historiography of the Mfecane, and in another paper, 'Jettisoning the Mfecane (with perestroika)' also unpublished, he included a lengthy bibliographical note. In his most important paper, 'The Mfecane as Alibi', published in the Journal of African History in 1988, his comments on previous work are briefer and less nuanced, but they sum up the charges he makes against others, and I shall mainly refer to what he says in that published article. As we shall see, views on this topic varied considerably, between historians and over time. I shall draw mostly upon readily accessible sources, and be selective: many aspects of this topic might be investigated by specialists, or non-specialists with more time at their disposal than I have. I shall not, for example, investigate in any depth the writings of Slater, Hedges, Bonner, Wright and others who wrote about aspects of the topic in the 1970s and 80s; the weight of my discussion will fall on earlier historians. But my aim is to say enough to show that what Cobbing says about other historians in 'The Mfecane as Alibi' must be treated very carefully, and that some of it is just plain wrong.

Cobbing is far from being alone, among those who have written about the Mfecane in recent years, in misreading South African historiography. Marianne Cornevin lumped together Cory, Walker and Macmillan,<sup>3</sup> for example, and more recently Dan Wylie has referred to a 'squirearchy of white "liberal" South African historians, from G M Theal to T R H Davenport...'<sup>4</sup> Cobbing is, however, the leading figure in the reinterpretation of the Mfecane, and his work the focus of this colloquium, so I shall confine myself to his errors, though implicitly this paper will criticise other writers as well.

\* \* \*

Cobbing begins 'The Mfecane as Alibi' by asserting that the 'basic propositions' of the Mfecane - 'the self-generated internal revolution' in Zululand and its 'near-genocidal' consequences - 'are integral to a white settler, "Liberal" history', and that 'refined legitimations' by John Omer-Cooper and Leonard Thompson 'were taken up and caricatured by the propaganda and educational apparatuses of the Vorster and Botha regimes'.<sup>5</sup> He suggests, in other words, a direct line from the settler voice through the liberal historians to the apartheid apologists. Settler and liberal historians of various kinds are lumped together as 'Mfecane theorists', 'theory' being used for an interlinked set of assumptions, one of the chief of which is that the Mfecane/Difaqane was begun by, or - if that term excludes the rise of the Zulu state - was caused by, Shaka and the Zulu. That these 'Mfecane theorists' treated the Mfecane as



something separate from the colonial history of South Africa was, Cobbing suggests, no accident. He sees an ideological purpose at work, in particular a concern to justify the racially unequal division of the land.

He associates, then, very different historians - amateurs and professionals - with propagandists, and, to make his reinterpretation seem the greater, presents a stereotypical view of what previous historians said about the Mfecane. Those whom Cobbing and others call 'Mfecane theorists' were in reality far from being theorists by any usual definition of that term. They by no means all treated the Mfecane as something separate from the history of colonisation. The ideological purpose Cobbing imputes to the liberal historians cannot be accepted. Cobbing's own hypotheses are less novel than he would like to make out, though the great contribution he has made to stimulating new interest in, and research on, this important topic must be acknowledged.

\* \* \*

Cobbing recognises the crucial importance of George McCall Theal in advancing an extremely influential view of what happened in Natal/Zululand and the interior in the early nineteenth century. Theal's History, which became a standard work, told of a time of vast destruction, from Natal/Zululand to the far interior, began by Shaka. Theal did not use the word 'Mfecane' - he did not use 'Great Trek'

either, for that matter - but in essence his view of 'the Zulu wars' - or, as he sometimes called them, 'the wars of Tshaka' - was the same as that of Eric Walker and later historians who were to use the term 'Mfecane'. A number of writers before Theal had described great wars in Natal/Zululand in the 1810s and 20s, had ascribed them to the rise of a figure some compared to Napoleon Bonaparte, Shaka's European counterpart, and had written of Mzilikazi carrying death and destruction far into the interior.<sup>7</sup> Theal was not the first to link the Natal region and the interior, as sometimes suggested,<sup>8</sup> but he systematised and carried further earlier views, and presented them in a History that was long considered by many as a basic text and near 'definitive'. In his History, Theal described the rise of Shaka, his reorganisation of the Zulu army - 'The world has probably never seen men trained to more perfect obedience' - and his military innovations. Theal then wrote of Shaka's aggression and cruelty - 'such cruelty as is hardly comprehensible by Europeans' - and of what Omer-Cooper was to call 'the great chain of wars and migrations' and Cobbing a 'chain reaction' or 'railway-shunting' sequence of warfare, from Zululand to the far interior. Behind it all, he implied, was Shaka.

No writer before Theal had presented a picture of quite such destruction and devastation flowing from Shaka's conquests; Theal's narrative, which was on other topics often dull, came alive at this point. Clearly he wished to leave his readers with an image of black barbarism at its most extreme. After writing of 'a torrent of invasion', and a



land 'covered with skeletons', Theal concluded that 'The number of individuals that perished in the whole of the ravaged country from war and its effects can only be roughly estimated, but it must have been nearer two millions than one.' 7 Theal also wished to leave his readers with the idea - Heinrich Vedder had the same aim in mind when, many decades later, he wrote his history of pre-colonial Namibia<sup>10</sup> - that, compared to pre-colonial savagery, colonial rule was extremely beneficial. The 'Zulu wars', said Theal, 'rendered insignificant the total loss of human life occasioned by all the wars in South Africa in which Europeans have engaged since first they set foot in the country'.<sup>11</sup>

Even for Theal the events occurring in the interior were not altogether unconnected with the Colony: had the Griqua not intervened at the battle of Dithakong, he believed, an invasion of the colony from the north would have followed.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Theal's picture of what happened in the interior at this time was not all negative. His reference to nearly two million deaths concludes his chapter entitled 'Terrible Destruction of Bantu Tribes during the Early Years of the Ninetenth Century'. One turns the page to find the next chapter called 'Formation of New Bantu Communities...'. There Theal writes in positive terms of the early history of Moshoeshoe's Sotho state and of the survival of some Tswana polities through the period of upheaval. In his chapter on 'The Wars and Devastations of Shaka' in South Africa (1894), Theal wrote of the 'process of



reconstruction' which had taken place under Moshoeshoe, 'in one corner of the vast waste that had been created'.<sup>13</sup>

The map which Theal published in his 1891 volume showed a large part of South Africa 'nearly depopulated by the Zulu wars before 1834'.<sup>14</sup> In later editions of his History the map was omitted, perhaps because it did not take account of the 'reconstruction' of which he wrote. Only one footnote, and some mention in passing of African traditions, provide clues to his sources on 'the Zulu wars'. He did himself collect oral evidence from Africans in the eastern Cape and Transkei in the 1870s, and by the time he wrote the chapter of his History on the 'Zulu wars', he could draw upon a number of published accounts, such as those by Mhlanga ('An Aged Fingo') and Moloja.<sup>15</sup> He had also read extensively in the archives. Some of what he says is clearly based on Shepstone's 1875 paper,<sup>16</sup> and he took over as fact a statement recorded from an unnamed missionary in a book by J.C.Chase (1843) that 'twenty-eight distinct tribes' had disappeared in this time of upheaval, 'leaving not so much as a trace of their former existence'. Chase had listed these twenty-eight 'tribes', and Theal should have realised that it included the names of many Tswana chiefdoms which had survived the Mfecane.<sup>17</sup> Theal did not alter his chapter in the face of the new evidence he came across when editing the Records of South-East Africa and Records of the Cape Colony. In the latter, for instance, he printed Pringle's report to Somerset in 1825 about the 'Fetcani' having been driven from their own land by 'a people of yellow complexion with black beards and long hair and who were armed with

swords. This long-haired people must certainly be the Portuguese', Pringle added, 'tho' it is odd they are not described as being armed with firearms rather than swords.'<sup>18</sup>

Alas, many later historians did merely repeat, if not embroider, what Theal had written in his History. George Cory, another influential amateur historian, told his readers that 'twenty-eight tribes' were 'completely wiped out' and that 'the loss of human life... has been roughly estimated at two millions', adding, 'Probably never in the history of the world has there been such an upheaval and such carnage caused by one man as took place during this enormous disturbance'.<sup>19</sup> Eric Walker, probably the first professional historian to write on this topic, drew upon Theal's 1891 map for his Historical Atlas (1922). In the first edition of his History of South Africa (1928), Walker used 'Mfecane' '(= the crushing)', a word of Xhosa origin,<sup>20</sup> for the 'pandemonium' that 'raged' east and west of the Drakensberg in the 1820s and early 1830s.<sup>21</sup> Only a footnote suggested an attempt on Walker's part to go beyond Theal: it pointed out that those defeated at the battle of Dithakong were possibly not the Tlokwa of Mnathathisi, but Fokeng.<sup>22</sup> In his second edition (1940), Walker wrote: 'The Bantu still call those the days of the Mfecane...',<sup>23</sup> while in his third edition (1957) he had no doubt that it was the Fokeng who were defeated at Dithakong, and he used 'Mfecane' more often, as in a new paragraph in which he was now more sceptical of Theal: 'It is...easy to exaggerate the numbers of the slain and to forget that there was much



displacement'. A footnote at that point reads: 'Theal estimated the number of dead at "nearer two millions than one" but gave no authority for the estimate'.<sup>24</sup> It took Walker a very long time to begin to doubt Theal. Decades earlier his more imaginative contemporaries, William Macmillan and C.W. de Kiewiet, had already discarded part of the interpretation put forward by the 'father of South African history'.

Before we examine what Macmillan and de Kiewiet said on this topic, let us note that while, like Theal, Walker was interested enough in the history of Africans to include a brief passage on 'the Mfecane' in a general history of the country - more Eurocentric historians omitted it entirely - Cobbing is wrong to suggest that what Walker and later professional historians said about the Mfecane was in any way integral to their view of the nineteenth century, let alone South African history as a whole. For Walker the frontier was the dominant theme of all South African history. Like other historians of his time, and many of his successors, his interest in pre-colonial history, where the sources were so problematic, was very limited. And while the first chapter of the most detailed recent history of the country, the successor to Walker's History, begins with a chapter which takes us from the dawn of time to 'the time of troubles', what T.R.H. Davenport says about the Mfecane is also hardly integral to his text. Nor is what Thompson says about it in his much briefer History integral to that book. In all these works, the Mfecane gets relatively minor attention. Other prominent historians edited a major

collection of essays on 'the shaping of South African society' which made no significant reference to the Mfecane at all. 20

William Macmillan followed Theal in writing of 'the Chaka wars' and their effect 'even on tribes far away in the interior', but he went on to anticipate, in outline, central features of Cobbing's argument in 'The Mfecane as Alibi'. For Macmillan the 'great upheaval among the Bantu' in Natal/Zululand and the interior was not unrelated to the process of colonisation. In fact, he linked it specifically to the slave trade, though at the same time he made very clear that the lack of source material posed a serious problem to any analysis of what had happened. He wrote as follows:

'How far this great upheaval among the Bantu must be attributed, in Bishop Stubbs' words, to the "generally unsettled state of all tribes bordering" on European conquests can never be fully known. While from the nature of the case the effects of the frontier wars on the remoter tribes are not directly evident, the suggestion that there was a connexion is not wholly to be dismissed...At all events the real source of all this war and tumult has never otherwise been explained. 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.'



Macmillan cited various pieces of evidence in support of the idea that slave raiding was important: that Somerset in 1823 discussed annexing Delagoa Bay as a check on the slave-trade; a statement by John Philip of the London Missionary Society about Tswana-speaking people in the interior fearing the ravages of the slave trade; and a report that Mzilikazi had met slave raiders from Portuguese ports before he headed, significantly, west rather than north. Macmillan went on to quote Philip as saying both that Mzilikazi's people had to 'maintain an incessant struggle against the Portuguese slave-traders', and that 'To Farewell's establishment at Port Natal we are to trace the devastations of Chaka'.<sup>26</sup> And writing in the Cambridge History of the British Empire, Macmillan cited references in Theal's Records of South East Africa to Delagoa Bay being used by slavers, before adding: 'the effects of the slave trade upon the natives in what is now called Zululand have never been considered. Nor is it possible to gauge the repercussions of the check administered on the Fish River to the coast tribes lying to the west of Chaka's sphere of action.'<sup>27</sup>

C.W. de Kiewiet also implicitly criticised Theal in his account of the Mfecane. Under Macmillan's guidance, de Kiewiet had written a thesis at Wits - no copy survives - on the Cape northern frontier in the period just after the Mfecane. When he came to write about the upheaval itself in the 1930s, first in his chapter in the Cambridge History of the British Empire and then in his History of South Africa

Social and Economic, de Kiewiet, though well aware that 'The causes of these events can never be adequately investigated', did not follow Theal, but instead advanced an ecological interpretation. Conflict had occurred because of 'an intense competition amongst the tribes for sowing and grazing land'. There was 'much reason', he said, to think that what had been written about 'the devastation of the Zulu, Matabele and Mantati "hordes" was very greatly exaggerated'. What had happened in the 'confusion of the eighteen-twenties' was 'much displacement', after which people 'poured back into their lands'. And in his History, he added: 'Amongst the causes of this singular crisis that smashed tribes, scattered others, and dashed the fragments into new combinations, the halting of the Bantu vanguard on the Eastern Frontier probably had much influence.'<sup>26</sup>

For John Philip in the 1830s, then, as for Macmillan and de Kiewiet a century later, the upheavals in Natal and the interior were by no means divorced from the process of colonisation. Only in a paragraph concerning the Ndebele does Cobbing, in passing, acknowledge that Macmillan, 'slightly deviant here as in some other respects', linked the ejection of Mzilikazi to the slave trade and that 'this hypothesis is better than anything we have'.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere in his article, as we have seen, Cobbing suggests a line of interpretation running from Theal through Macmillan to Omer-Cooper and beyond. What he might have done, but does not, is analyse why the very suggestive insights which Macmillan and de Kiewiet made in the 1920s and 1930s were not followed up. The loss of the Philip papers in the fire at Wits in



1931 may be part of the explanation, but there are many more important reasons why historians of the 1940s and 1950s turned their attention elsewhere. The unfortunate result was that when historians did in the 1960s turn to the history of African societies as a 'forgotten factor', there was a tendency on the part of some to ignore the extent of colonial penetration before conquest.<sup>30</sup>

Cobbing maintains that the liberal historians put forward a view of 'cataclysmic black-on-black destruction' as an 'alibi' for what actually happened because they supported the racially unequal division of land. They attributed 'the land distribution of 1913...to a black-on-black holocaust in the period 1815-35'. 'Since the Second World war', Cobbing continues, 'the stress of the alibi has been on the natural "pluralism" of black societies and how they self-sequestered themselves into proto-Bantustans in the era of Shaka, leaving the whites merely the task of surveying and recognition'. The Mfecane was 'a characteristic product of liberal history used by the apartheid state to legitimate South Africa's racially unequal land division'.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, Macmillan was a leading critic of the unequal distribution of land, and of racial segregation in general. His first public statement on African affairs, made to a Dutch Reformed Church conference in 1923, started with a critique of the 1913 Land Act and its effects.<sup>32</sup> Macmillan was also firm in his rejection of any idea of a separate African history. De Kiewiet did not return to South Africa in large part because of his opposition to racial

segregation, and Walker actively campaigned against Hertzog's franchise and land policies before he left the country in 1936. In their writings, Macmillan and de Kiewiet wrote much about the hardships brought by colonial penetration. Indeed, few since have written more eloquently than de Kiewiet about the consequences of conquest and dispossession.<sup>33</sup> And the liberal Africanists of the 1960s were fundamentally opposed to the apartheid state and what it stood for.

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In 'The Mfecane as Alibi', where he does not trace the development of views on the Mfecane over time, Cobbing fails to take account of the great change in attitude among historians that flowed from the revolution in African historiography that occurred as the countries of tropical Africa moved to independence.<sup>34</sup> For those who saw themselves as part of that 'Africanist revolution', the Mfecane became, above all, constructive and creative. These writers wanted to show that Africans had acted with initiative, and positively. Both the destructive aspects of the Mfecane and European influences were downplayed, though not altogether ignored. Omer-Cooper's eastern Cape roots - which Cobbing sees as significant<sup>35</sup> - were a much less important influence on him than the fact that he taught at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria while he was working on The Zulu Aftermath. A Nineteenth Century Revolution in Bantu Africa (1966). At Ibadan he was exposed to the new thinking on African history, which in the West African case argued



convincingly that the European role had been grossly exaggerated in previous histories.

The Zulu Aftermath was a pioneering work of synthesis and interpretation which told the history of a 'socio-political revolution' beginning in South Africa and reaching to 'the southern shores of Lake Victoria'. Omer-Cooper saw this revolution as 'independent of European influence in origin', but though he wished to stress that the Mfecane was the result of internal rather than external forces, he did add that as it developed, it 'interlocked with expanding European activity affecting and being affected by it'.<sup>36</sup> His main theme in the book was state-building, with the movement of people over vast distances as a secondary positive development. Not the Zulu, but the other states whose history he summarises were seen as reactive states, created in response to the raiding to which they were subject.

In his relatively brief chapter on the Zulu kingdom, Omer-Cooper accepted the importance of Shaka, but also recognised that the process of change began before, and therefore independently of, Shaka. The argument - recently advanced for the Phongolo-Mzimkhulu region by John Wright and Carolyn Hamilton in their chapter in Natal and Zululand. A New History<sup>37</sup> - for a much longer process of change, an argument which therefore at least implicitly plays down the importance of the 1820s. in the state-building process east of the Drakensberg, has a long pedigree. <sup>38</sup>

Omer-Cooper's general synthesis was soon followed by more detailed research, especially on the area west of the Drakensberg. This was because Leonard Thompson, who began teaching African history at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the early 1960s, began to direct doctoral students to it. He had decided to write a major biography of Moshoeshoe, and wished the highveld background explored. He himself first wrote about the Mfecane in his chapters for the first volume of The Oxford History of South Africa (1969). Interest in the topic at UCLA continued, to a much lesser extent, after Terence Ranger took over from Thompson. His Zimbabwean background led him to direct R. Kent Rasmussen to the history of the Ndebele state before it was relocated in Zimbabwe.

It was in the 1960s, then, that historians first began to do detailed research on the Mfecane. William Lye, a Mormon, was attracted to the topic in part because the many migrations of the 1820s and 30s could be compared to the Mormon trek, as Eric Walker had pointed out in his history of the Great Trek.<sup>37</sup> Lye could build on a body of recent revisionist work done by non-historians on one part of his topic: in his commentary on his edition of the journals and letters of the London Missionary Society missionary Robert Moffat (1951),<sup>40</sup> Isaac Schapera showed that MmaNthatisi's Tlokwa had never been anywhere near Dithakong, and a fuller discussion followed from Marion How, who anticipated Cobbing's search for an 'alibi'; hers was for MmaNthatisi.<sup>41</sup>



In a paper presented at the conference on 'African Societies in Southern Africa' which Thompson organised at the University of Zambia in 1968, Lye offered 'a corrective' to the view of massive social destruction on the highveld: in place of devastation and depopulation, he showed - this time with evidence - that there had only been displacement.<sup>42</sup> Then in his meticulous study of Mzilikazi's Ndebele state south of the Limpopo River, Rasmussen (1978) showed that the Ndebele had not been forced out of the Transvaal by the Zulu, but by Griqua and later Boer attacks, and he uncovered many errors in previous work, such as Lye's uncritical use of Bryant on Ndebele raids.<sup>43</sup> Martin Legassick, another of Thompson's doctoral students at UCLA, had earlier pointed to the importance of Griqua raiding in the history of this period.<sup>44</sup> This was a theme which Cobbing was to take up almost two decades later, with the new hypothesis that the raiding had been for slaves.

No work of comparable depth to Lye's was completed in the 1960s or early 1970s on the Zulu in the Shakan period. Alan Smith, a black American student of Thompson's, did investigate trade at Delagoa Bay, and concluded that the slaves exported from there did not come from the south and were not significant in number before the 1820s.<sup>45</sup> Shula Marks worked on the early as well as the more recent history of the Zulu, but after presenting a paper critical of Bryant's work to the Lusaka conference, she left the field and tried to interest her doctoral students at the University of London in it.<sup>46</sup> David Hedges, the only one to focus directly on it, completed his thesis in 1978.<sup>47</sup>

Floors van Jaarsveld, the eminent Afrikaner historian and other apartheid-apologists in the early 1970s took up the new liberal Africanist work and used it to suggest that the Mfecane had created a new pattern of settlement which formed the basis for the bantustans of grand apartheid policy. Such writers also used the Mfecane to justify the white seizure of land, which liberal historians had never done.<sup>46</sup> When Omer-Cooper and Thompson realised what use van Jaarsveld and others were making of their arguments they were appalled, for they had not anticipated that their work could be so misread. The very purpose of The Zulu Aftermath, as of the Oxford History (first volume, 1969), was exactly the opposite of van Jaarsveld's: both were designed to begin the task of offering Africans their own history, in which they would be active agents and not just victims, and Omer-Cooper and Thompson hoped that their work would help undermine apartheid. When they found their work being used by apartheid apologists, they rejected with contempt these misinterpretations of what they had tried to do. Unfortunately, being resident outside the country, it took some time for their responses to appear, and Omer-Cooper's was never published.<sup>47</sup>

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I now skip past the important new body of work that emerged from the mid 1970s: the theses by Guy, Bonner, Slater and Hedges;<sup>48</sup> the papers, some published, delivered at workshops held at the National University of Lesotho in July



1976 and August 1977, and at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, in October 1977;<sup>91</sup> the lively debate that ensued at the Nguni Workshop held at Rhodes University in mid 1979... Some of this new work was highly speculative, and heavily rooted in materialist theory, some was more empirically grounded; none of it tackled the very concept of Mfecane itself. In introducing the published collection of papers presented at the Nguni workshop, Jeff Peires began by saying that Omer-Cooper's Zulu Aftermath 'firmly established the Mfecane as a central event in the history of Africa, a revolutionary process of change spreading from a single centre'. He went on to say that the Mfecane now had to be seen 'as a social and economic revolution rather than as a military upheaval', but he did not question the idea of Mfecane.<sup>92</sup> Nor did Cobbing, who in his contribution to that volume accepted that Mzilikazi 'was one of the greatest figures thrown up by the mfecane'.<sup>93</sup>

In a footnote in 'The Mfecane as Alibi' - which is all he allows for earlier critical work - Cobbing cites Marianne Cornvein's discussion of the sources on the Difaqane in her book on apartheid historical myths, which appeared in 1980.<sup>94</sup> Her discussion of this topic, however, was brief and not entirely accurate;<sup>95</sup> many South African historians probably shared Peires's view that she had said nothing new.<sup>96</sup> In the same year, James O. Gump completed a doctoral thesis at the University of Nebraska on 'Revitalisation through Expansion in South Africa', which offered in its first chapter a reappraisal of the Mfecane critical of the materialism of, for example, John Wright's 'Pre-Shakan Age-

Group Formation'.<sup>87</sup> Gump proposed instead a cultural explanation, and suggested parallels between Shaka and Hiawatha.<sup>88</sup> It was left to a member of the Cape Town-based Unity Movement, writing under the pseudonym V.E. Satir, to publish the first general critique of the concept of Mfecane, which appeared in the pages of the Educational Journal in September 1983.<sup>89</sup> Some months earlier Cobbing had presented his first paper on this topic - 'The Case Against the Mfecane' - at the University of Cape Town.

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This sketch of some aspects of the historiography of the Mfecane, selective though it has been, has provided examples to show that what Cobbing says in 'The Mfecane as Alibi' about previous writing on the topic is far from exact. He fails to bring out how views changed over time, or to discuss previous work in its historical context, and he attributes certain motives to historians without justification. Historians from Theal to the liberal Africanists of the 1960s by no means all presented a similar picture of the Mfecane, and Cobbing errs when he associates liberal historians with segregation and apartheid.<sup>90</sup>

What is of course true is that many historians failed to do any new research and merely copied from one another. Like Cobbing, they lumped together what they should not have and were too ready to find a single explanation for the process they described: in their case, a Zulu, or more specifically Shakan explanation. When Rasmussen asserted that 'There are



simply not sufficient data to support intelligent discussion of most issues' <sup>1</sup> he went too far, but Macmillan, more sensibly, said, with reference to this topic: 'History, for want of serious and sufficient documentary evidence, must walk warily.'<sup>2</sup> His caution remains relevant, and will have to be borne in mind by anyone bold enough to attempt a 'new and integrated conceptual framework for analysis of the period' <sup>3</sup> Such a new framework will have to rest on detailed, careful checking of the evidence against Cobbing's argument, using the kind of analysis which Cobbing himself employed when he subjected the arguments in Terence Ranger's Revolt in Southern Rhodesia to criticism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Some' because this paper has had to be written in more of a hurry than anticipated. Thanks to Carolyn for encouragement.

<sup>2</sup> S.F.Malan, et al, History Study Guide for HIST 202-S (Pretoria, 1989), pp. 30, 59.

<sup>3</sup> M.Cornevin, Apartheid: Power and Historical Falsification (Paris, 1980), p. 103.

<sup>4</sup> D.Wylie, 'Who's Afraid of Shaka Zulu', Southern African Review of Books, May/June 1991, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> J. Cobbing, 'The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo', Journal of African History, 29 (1988), p. 487.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. G.M.Theal, The Republic of Natal... (Cape Town, 1886), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. W.C.Holden, The Past and Future of the Kaffir Races (London, n.d.), ch. 2. This book by a Wesleyan missionary was written in the early 1850s and published c. 1867. The comparison between Shaka and Napoleon Bonaparte continues down to the present day; for one recent example, see B.Magubane, The Politics of History in South Africa (New York, 1982), p.17.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. J.B.Wright, 'Political Mythology and the Making of Natal's Mfecane', Canadian Journal of African Studies, 23 (1989), pp.278-79.

<sup>10</sup> G.M.Theal, History of South Africa from 1795 to 1828 (London, 1903), p. 389.

<sup>11</sup> B.Lau, "Thank God the Germans Came", in K.Gottschalk and C.Saunders, eds., Africa Seminar. Collected Papers, 2 (Cape Town, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> G.M.Theal, History of South Africa 1891 ed. quoted J. Cobbing, 'The Case Against the Mfecane', p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> G.M.Theal, Compendium of South African History and Geography (Lovedale, 3rd ed. 1877), p. 198.

<sup>14</sup> G.M.Theal, South Africa (London, 1894), pp. 170-71.

<sup>15</sup> This map is reproduced in Davenport, South Africa, (3rd ed., London, 1987), p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> 'An Aged Fingo', 'A Story of Native Wars', Cape Monthly Magazine Jan-June 1877; Moloja, 'The Story of the "Fetcani Horde" by one of themselves', Cape Quarterly Review, I (1882).

<sup>17</sup> As suggested by J.Raum in 'Historical Concepts and the Evolutionary Interpretation of the Emergence of States: The Case of the Zulu Reconsidered Yet Again', Zeitschrift für Ethnologie, 114 (1989), p. 127 and n.2. Theal states, for example, that Dingiswayo had gone to the Cape: cf. T.Shepstone, 'The Early History of the Zulu-Kafir Race' in J.Bird, ed. Annals of Natal, I (1885).

<sup>18</sup> J.C.Chase, The Cape of Good Hope and the Eastern Province of Algoa Bay (London, 1843), p. 12. Cf. W.Lye, 'The Distribution of the Sotho peoples after the Difaqane' in L.M.Thompson, ed., African Societies in Southern Africa (London, 1969), p. 192 and n.1

<sup>19</sup> G.Theal, ed., Records of the Cape Colony, 22 (London, 1904), p. 433.

<sup>20</sup> G.Cory, The Rise of South Africa, vol.2 (London, 1913), p. 231

<sup>21</sup> 'Fetcani' was much used at the time, and since, for people who entered the Transkeian region in the 1820s and 30s: see e.g. Cory, Rise, vol. 2, p. 236. 'Mfecane' is not Zulu, as claimed in, e.g. D.Denoon and B.Nyeko, Southern Africa since 1800 (London, 1984), p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> E.Walker, A History of South Africa (London, 1928), p. 182-83. Though he does not use 'Mfecane' on these pages, it is clear that he viewed 'Mfecane' as a general term for this upheaval: cf. p. 164 and p. 210 n. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Walker, History, p. 182, n.1.



- <sup>23</sup> Walker, History of South Africa (London, 1940), p. 182. Cobbing is wrong, I think, to suggest that Walker is here using Mfecane in a broader sense than he had in 1928, and therefore wrong to link a broader sense to the rise of Nazism in Europe: 'Case', pp. 8-9.
- <sup>24</sup> Walker, History of Southern Africa (3rd ed., London, 1957), pp.175-76.
- <sup>25</sup> R.Elphick and H.Giliomee, eds., The Shaping of South African Society (Cape Town, 1979). In reviews of both editions I was critical of the title of the book for this reason. In the second edition (Cape Town, 1989), J.B. Peires refers to the Mfecane as 'a series of wars set in motion by the Zulu king Shaka': p. 486.
- <sup>26</sup> W.M.Macmillan, Bantu, Boer and Briton (London, 1929), pp. 18-20.
- <sup>27</sup> W.Macmillan in A.P.Newton and E.Beniens, eds., The Cambridge History of the British Empire, vol. 8 (Cambridge, 1936), p. 301.
- <sup>28</sup> C.W. de Kiewiet, 'Social and Economic Developments in Native Tribal Life' in Cambridge History, 8, pp. 808-809; A History of South Africa Social and Economic (Oxford, 1941), p. 50.
- <sup>29</sup> Cobbing, 'Mfecane as Alibi', p. 489.
- <sup>30</sup> C.Saunders, The Making of the South African Past (Cape Town, 1988).
- <sup>31</sup> Cobbing, 'Mfecane as Alibi', pp. 518-9.
- <sup>32</sup> Cf. W.M.Macmillan, My South African Years An Autobiography (Cape Town, 1975), p.181.
- <sup>33</sup> Esp. in his chapter in The Cambridge History of the British Empire, vol.8.Cf. C.Saunders, C.W.de Kiewiet. Historian of South Africa (Cape Town, 1986).
- <sup>34</sup> He had brought out that change in his earlier papers.
- <sup>35</sup> Cobbing, 'Mfecane as Alibi', p. 487 n.3.
- <sup>36</sup> J. Omer-Cooper, The Zulu Aftermath (London, 1966), pp.2, 7.
- <sup>37</sup> A.Duminy and B.Guest, eds., Natal and Zululand from earliest times to 1910 A New History (Pietermaritzburg, 1989), ch. 3.
- <sup>38</sup> Cobbing refers, in 'Jettisoning the Mfecane' (p.16), to 'the tea room at UCT' as important in the development of the overpopulation hypothesis. In the African Studies tea room, in fact, Monica Wilson stressed the Delagoa Bay trade hypothesis.
- <sup>39</sup> E.Walker, The Great Trek (London, 1934), pp. 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> I.Schapera, ed., Apprenticeship at Kuruman: Being the Journals and Letters of Robert and Mary Moffat 1820-1828 (London, 1951).

<sup>41</sup> M.How, 'An Alibi for Mantatsi', African Studies, 13 (1954) and see the discussion in W.F.Lye, 'The Difaqane: the Mfecane in the Southern Sotho Area, 1822-24', Journal of African History, 8 (1967), p. 109 and n.5.

<sup>42</sup> W.Lye, 'The Distribution of the Sotho peoples after the Difaqane' in L.M.Thompson, ed., African Societies in Southern Africa (London, 1969), and Thompson's summary of Lye's chapter on p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> K.Rasmussen, Migrant Kingdom. Mzilikazi's Ndebele in South Africa (Cape Town, 1978), esp. p. 202 and n.96.

<sup>44</sup> M.Legassick, 'The Missionaries, the Griqua and the Sotho-Tswana: the Politics of a Frontier Zone', UCLA, Ph.D., 1969.

<sup>45</sup> A.Smith, 'The Trade of Delagoa Bay...' in Thompson, ed., African Societies. Smith's thesis, completed in 1970, was, like Lye's never published.

<sup>46</sup> S.Marks, 'The Rise of the Zulu Kingdom' in R.Oliver, ed., The Middle Age of African History (London, 1967); 'The Traditions of the Natal "Nguni"' in Thompson, ed., African Societies. Marks was working on what became Reluctant Rebellion (Oxford, 1971), a history of the Bambatha rebellion.

<sup>47</sup> D.Hedges, 'Trade and Politics in Southern Mozambique and Zululand in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century' Ph.D., University of London, 1978. J.Guy and P.Bonner had done related work some years earlier: see n.58 below.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. F. van Jaarsveld, Van Van Riebeeck tot Vorster (Johannesburg, 1975). I am not here concerned with the equally outrageous assertions in such publications as the official South Africa 1977, which Cornevin criticised in Apartheid, and in school textbooks.

<sup>49</sup> E.g.Omer-Cooper's paper presented to the Australian African Studies Association in 1981. Notice L.M.Thompson's response in The Political Mythology of Apartheid (New Haven, 1985).

<sup>50</sup> H. Slater, 'Transitions in the Political Economy of South-East Africa before 1840', D.Phil., University of Sussex, 1976; Hedges's thesis is cited in n.47 above. Only introductory sections of the Guy and Bonner theses related to the Mfecane: cf. J.Guy, The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom (London, 1979), ch.1; P.Bonner, Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires (Cambridge, 1983), ch.2.



<sup>81</sup> E.g. J.Guy, 'Production and Exchange in the Zulu Kingdom', Mohlomi, 2 (and in J.B.Peires, ed., Before and After Shaka (Grahamstown, 1979), 'Ecological factors in the rise of Shaka and the Zulu kingdom', in S.Marks and A. Atmore, eds., Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa (London, 1980); J.B.Wright, 'Pre-Shakan Age-Group Formation among the Northern Nguni', Natalia 8 (1978).

<sup>82</sup> J.B. Peires, ed., Before and After Shaka (Grahamstown, 1979), p.1 and back cover.

<sup>83</sup> Peires, Before and After, p. 160.

<sup>84</sup> Cornevin, Apartheid. She was particular concerned to criticise the official publication South Africa 1977.

<sup>85</sup> E.g. p. 2 above; or her statement that all Theal's works are characterized by a profound contempt for blacks (Apartheid, p. 103).

<sup>86</sup> See his review in Social Dynamics, 6 (1980), pp.89-90.

<sup>87</sup> .Wright, 'Pre-Shakan Age-Group Formation'.

<sup>88</sup> J.O.Gump, 'Revitalisation Through Expansion in South Africa', University of Nebraska Ph.D thesis, 1980, p. 24. Gump draws in particular on the work of A. Wallace on the Amerindians: pp. 20ff.

<sup>89</sup> I have been unable to find out who wrote this article. This was not the first Unity Movement intervention on this topic: Hosea Jaffe's Three Hundred Years. A History of South Africa (Cape Town, 1952) stressed colonial dispossession above black self-destruction, but N.Majeke (Dora Taylor) wrote of the 'chaos of tribal warfare': The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest (Johannesburg, n.d.).

<sup>90</sup> E.g.Cobbing, 'Mfecane as Alibi', p. 319. Similarly, he is too quick to assume James Stuart adopted the racist views of his fellow magistrates: cf. J.Cobbing, 'A Tainted Well. The Objectives, Historical Fantasies and Working Methods of James Stuart, with Counter Argument', Journal of Natal and Zulu History, 9 (1988) and C.Hamilton, 'The Cobbing Thesis Reconsidered', seminar paper, University of Cape Town, 1991, p.29.

<sup>91</sup> Rasmussen, Migrant Kingdom, p. 3. W.F.Lye, 'The Difaqane'; 'The Sotho Wars in the Interior of South Africa, 1822-1837', unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of California, 1969; 'The Ndebele Kingdom south of the Limpopo River', Journal of African History, 10 (1969).

<sup>92</sup> W.M.Macmillan, 'The Frontier and the Kaffir Wars', in Cambridge History of the British Empire, vol.8 (Cambridge, 1936), p. 301.

<sup>93</sup> Wright and Hamilton, 'The Phongolo-Mzimkhulu Region', in Duminy and Guest, Natal and Zululand., p. 69.

<sup>94</sup> I thank Nigel Penn for this point.