THE DEBATE: '*MFECANE*'

Between 1873 and 1922 the historian George McCall Theal published numerous editions of multi-volume histories of South Africa as well as a nine-volume collection of documents (*Records of South-Eastern Africa*) which formed the basis of historical interpretations of South African history until at least the late 1960s. Theal was particularly influential in portraying the early years of the nineteenth century beyond the Cape Colony as being a time of terrible warfare and destruction, caused by the rise of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka. He referred to up to two million people being killed and 'whole tribes' being wiped out, leaving vast stretches of land uninhabited.

Theal did not use the term '*mfecane*', but simply 'the wars of Tchaka' as being primarily responsible for all this 'barbarity'. Theal portrayed Shaka as a cruel dictator, something of a 'black Napoleon', laying waste and conquering all before him. At the time of the formation of the Union of South Africa (1910) George Cory began publication of his five volume *The Rise of South Africa* (Longman Green, London, 1910-30). This was followed in 1928 by Eric Walker's single volume *History of South Africa* (1st edition, Longman Green, London). Both Cory and Walker basically followed Theal's premise in identifying Shaka as the prime mover in two decades of widespread destruction and scattering of peoples in early nineteenth-century southern Africa. Interestingly it was Walker who first introduced the term '*mfecane*' to describe these events. Underlying these interpretations was a colonially-minded assumption that Africans naturally waged 'barbarous tribal wars' until the arrival of white people, who 'pacified' the interior, occupied 'vacant land' and established 'civilized government'. It should be remembered that this was written at a time when liberal white South Africans were seeking to justify their government's segregationist policies, which involved restricting African land rights to the 'reserves' that made up less than a fifth of the land in the country.

The Theal/Cory/Walker thesis, however, did not go unchallenged. Writing at the same time as Walker in the late 1920s W. M. Macmillan suggested in his *Bantu, Boer and Briton: The Making of the South African Native Problem* (Faber, London, 1929) that slave trading from Portuguese Delagoa Bay and

certainly colonial pressure from the Eastern Cape frontier must have had a role in the turmoil in the interior in the 1820s. But Macmillan observed that there was very little direct evidence to back this up and he was in any case drawing on the papers of the LMS missionary David Philip, which were subsequently destroyed in a fire. So Macmillan's suggestion of potential colonial causation, though repeated by his former doctoral student Cornelius de Kiewet in *A History of South Africa: Social and Economic* (OUP, Oxford, 1941), was not followed up in any detail.

During the course of the twentieth century, as the South African government hardened its racist policies, Africans, especially Zulus, were reluctant to abandon the concept of an all-conquering Shaka, especially in the light of the success of his successors' in upsetting British imperial policy by destroying a British regiment at the battle of Isandhlwana in January 1879.

It was not until the 1960s that an attempt was made to re-assess the Theal/Cory/Walker thesis. At that time, across newly-emerging independent Africa, historians were re-casting pre-colonial history in a more positive, 'Africanist' image. The white South African historian, John Omer-Cooper, teaching at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, sought to reflect this approach in looking again at the whole *mfecane* issue. The result was a hugely popular and influential book, *The Zulu Aftermath: A Nineteenth Revolution in Bantu Africa* (Longman, London and Ibadan, 1966). Omer-Cooper did not question the primacy of Zulu initiative in setting off a period of destructive warfare; but he saw reason to note the innovations in warfare that Shaka introduced: use of disciplined regiments, short stabbing-spears, intelligence and surprise, and the concept of total warfare that incorporated or totally destroyed opponents. His main focus, however, as his sub-title suggests, was more on the 'aftermath' of the rise of the Zulu kingdom: its affect on other peoples in the region. And here he saw numerous examples of state formation: the Sotho kingdom of Moshoeshoe, Mzilikazi's Ndebele, first on the highveld north of the Vaal and then on the plateau of western Zimbabwe, Sebetwane's Kololo conquest of the Lozi on the upper Zambezi, and the numerous Ngoni states established in central and eastern Africa in what are today eastern Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania.

Omer-Cooper's book re-focused attention on this brief period of pre-colonial southern African history that occurred on the eve of the intrusion white settlers from the Cape Colony. The primacy of Shaka's Zulu kingdom was not questioned; instead historians cast aside the simplistic concept of Shakan megalomania and sought to understand what exactly it was that set off the events that led to the rise of the Zulu kingdom. See for instance, the important chapter by Alan Smith, 'The trade of Delagoa Bay as a factor in Nguni politics, 1750-1835', in Leonard Thompson's collection, *African Societies in southern*

Africa (Heinemann, London, 1969). Smith suggested that competition over access to the trading opportunities offered by the Portuguese at Delegoa Bay (modern Maputo), especially the ivory trade, may have prompted the rise in Nguni state formation and inter-state conflict that was in due course to lead to the emergence of the Zulu kingdom and the Ndwandwe (Gaza) kingdom in southern Mozambique.

Jeff Guy, whose primary focus was on the destruction of the Zulu kingdom in the late-nineteenth century, looked at the importance of environmental factors in the original rise in competition for resources in the Nguni region east of the Drakensberg. His Shaka at least started off as a highly rational man who built on the work of his predecessors to establish a new, centrally organised state that used male and female regiments to better-utilize the limited resources of the region [J. Guy, 'Production and exchange in the Zulu kingdom', *Mohlomi*, 2 (1978), pp.96-106; the introductory chapter of J. Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: the Civil War in Zululand, 1879-1884* (Longman, London, 1979); J. Guy, 'Cattle-Keeping in Zululand', in S. Marks and A. Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa* (Longman, London, 1980); and J. Guy, 'Production and Exchange in the Zulu Kingdom' in J. B. Peires, *Before and After Shaka* (Grahamstown, 1981).

Meanwhile, in the more realistic realm of liberal historiography, Leonard Thompson followed Omer-Cooper's lead in focusing on the state-building side of things: see his contribution to *The Oxford History of South Africa*, *Volume 1* (OUP, Oxford, 1969) and his *Survival in Two Worlds: Moshoeshoe of Lesotho, 1786-1870* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975). For other works in a similar vein see R. K. Rasmussen, M*igrant Kingdom: Mzilikazi's Ndebele in South Africa* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1978); and W. Lye and C. Murray, *Transformations on the Highveld* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1980).

These more nuanced approaches to the origins of the Zulu kingdom and the wider *mfecane/difaqane* were reflected in a number of textbooks intended for senior secondary school use. The way was led by Neil Parsons, *A New History of Southern Africa* (Macmillan, London, 1982) and followed by Kevin Shillington, *History of Southern Africa* (Longman, Harlow, 1987) and John Omer-Cooper, *History of Southern Africa* (James Currey, London, 1987). These texts were widely used in the southern African region beyond South Africa, but significantly *not* in South Africa itself.

In South Africa, by contrast, prescribed school textbooks were based upon the work of Afrikaner historian Floors van Jaarsveld, whose *From Van Riebeeck to Vorster, 1652-1974: An Introduction to the History of the Republic of South Africa* (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1975) distorted the evidence of Omer-Cooper to claim that the pre-colonial wars of the *mfecane,* entirely initiated by Africans, pushed Africans into the limited land areas that were later 'reserved' for them

in the Land Act of 1913, leaving the rest of South Africa open for white settlement.

For most of the 1980s, as the *apartheid* state began to face its final challenges, professional historians in South Africa focussed, understandably, on the 20th century – on racism and on capitalism and the relationships between the two. Little attention was paid to the pre-colonial world. Thus when Julian Cobbing, an historian at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, first proposed at academic seminars in the mid-1980s that the very idea of the *mfecane* itself was a complete myth, what should have been a bombshell failed to explode. It was not until a revised version of this thesis was published in the *Journal of African History* in 1988 ('The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo') and was backed up by specialist on Zulu history, J. B. Wright, in 1989 ('Political mythology and the making of Natal's Mfecane', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 23, pp. 272-91) that the bombshell finally exploded.

Cobbing's argument basically was that the whole Zulu-orchestrated *mfecane* was in fact a colonial-settler propaganda myth, dreamt up by contemporaries in the 1830s and 40s to justify land seizures north of the Cape Colony and perpetuated by historians ever since to excuse the continued unjust land policies of the *apartheid* state. In fact, claimed Cobbing, such violence as did take place was mostly perpetrated by white and mixed-race slave-raiders emanating from the Cape and from Delegoa Bay. According to Cobbing the battle of Dithakong of 1823 was little more than a slave raid by the missionary Robert Moffat and the Cape Government's Griquatown agent, John Melville. And the rise of inter-state violence on the south-eastern lowveld was provoked by the slave trade at Delagoa Bay.

Cobbing's *mfecane* as 'myth' thesis provoked considerable reaction among historians. Over the next few years some sought to hammer more nails into the *mfecane* coffin; others sought to defend, or only slightly modify, long-held positions. It should be remembered that this historiographical controversy took place against the historic background of the political collapse of contemporary *apartheid*. As South Africans of all 'races' prepared to face seismic changes in the future of their shared country, there was a preparedness among many to accept the need for a re-evaluation of the standard versions of the country's past.

It is worth noting here that Cobbing's thesis appears to have been provoked by the continued dominance of the van Jaarsveld version of history, as still taught in South African schools, rather than a balanced critique of the historiography of the previous two decades, such as was being taught in some of the universities and schools of the wider southern African region. In taking his extreme line Cobbing had overlooked the contributions that historians had been making during the 1970s and 80s.

Critics pounced on the evidential detail of Cobbing's article. He claimed that it was slave raiding for the Delegoa Bay market that prompted the upheavals which led to the rise of the Zulu kingdom. But in order to be a causative factor, this would have had to have happened in at least the 1810s, if not earlier, whereas slave exports from Delegoa Bay were insignificant before the early 1820s. Whatever their contribution to conflict in the regions from then on, they could not have been the reason for the rise of the Zulu kingdom in the first place. Similarly, it was pointed out that Cobbing's portrayal of the missionary Robert Moffat as a deliberate slave-raider for the Cape slave market was based upon an extremely selective use of the implied evidence of contemporary witnesses. It ignored a plethora of evidence, from the same contemporary sources, which gave a contrary view. On Cobbing's other main target, however – the concept of land left vacant by destructive warfare – even critics had to admit that in the past historians had allowed the concept of the depopulation of whole territories to pass with too little question.

To bring together all of these ideas and to try and reach a general understanding of this important period of South Africa's past, a colloquium was held at the University of Witwatersrand in September 1991. It was followed by the publication of a number of articles in academic journals: notably, E. Eldridge, 'Sources of conflict in southern Africa, ca.1800-30: the "Mfecane" reconsidered', *Journal of African History,* 33 (1992); C. A. Hamilton, 'The character and objects of Chaka: a reconsideration of the making of Shaka as "Mfecane Motor", *Journal of African History*, 33 (1992); and Omer-Cooper's own response, 'Has the Mfecane a Future? A Response to the Cobbing Critique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19 (1993), pp.273-94. Substantive versions of these articles appeared in the revised selection of the papers presented at the Wits colloquium, finally published in 1995: Carolyn Hamilton (ed.), *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History* (Wits UP, Johannesburg and University of Natal Press Pietermaritzburg).

The consensus seems to have been that there was indeed a period of turmoil, and that the terms *mfecane* and *difaqane* are still valid and convenient labels for what was happening. But conflict should not be seen as primarily Zulu-centric. Slave trading at Delegoa Bay may well have been an element in the continued conflict from the 1820s, even if not responsible for initiating the rise of the Zulu kingdom. On the highveld, slave raids by Griqua and other horsemen armed with guns were responsible for a large part of the conflict on the southern and western highveld, even though Robert Moffat appears absolved of active participation. Regarding state formation, it appears that this was part of a process with a much longer history than previously widely recognised. See the chapters by Neil Parsons, 'Prelude to *Difaqane* in the Interior of Southern Africa, c.1600-c.1822', and Andrew Manson, 'Conflict in the Western

Highveld/Southern Kalahari, c.1750-1820', in Hamilton (ed.), *Mfecane Aftermath*, pp.323-61. Manson was building on the concept of the pre-*difaqane* 'Tswana wars' of the eighteenth century already related by Neil Parsons in his *New History of Southern Africa*, published in 1982, but overlooked by Cobbing.

On the issue of 'depopulated land', especially south of the Tugela (the region of colonial Natal), John Wright pointed out in his contribution to the Wits colloquium [*The Mfecane Aftermath*, pp.163-81] that the region south of the Tugela was far from depopulated. Rather, Shaka consolidated his domination there, partly by making his own appointments to head the chieftaincies that still existed in the region. People may have moved out of the way of armies or specific battles, but they never abandoned the land – as incoming colonists were to find in the late 1830s and early 1840s.

At the beginning of the new millennium Norman Etherington wrote an important book whose primary object was to re-orientate the history of southern Africa in the early 19th century away from the dominance of the Cape Colony as the prime initiator and mover of events in the region. Asked by the publishers, Longman, to write a book on 'The Great Trek', Etherington pointed out that the 'Boer Trek' of the late 1830s was only one major population movement that was transforming southern Africa in that period, hence the plural of his book's title: *The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815-1854* (Longman, Harlow, 2001). Etherington's book placed his viewpoint firmly in the interior, from which position the Cape Colony was only one player among many. From this viewpoint, and bearing in mind the revisions in the historiography of the *mfecane/difaqane*, the rise of states and conflict between them is viewed as part of a long-term continuum. See also C. Hamilton, B. K. Mbenga and R. Ross (eds), *The Cambridge history of South Africa* , Volume I, *From Early Times to 1885* (CUP, 2010).