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POLITICAL MYTHOLOGY AND THE MAKING OF NATAL'S MFECANE

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Introduction

Over the last twenty years or so the concept of the mfecane has come to be deeply rooted as a notion round which much of the history of southern Africa in the first half of the 19th century is written. As generally used, the term refers to a series of wars and migrations which are supposed to have been sparked off by the emergence of the Zulu kingdom in the late 1810s, and then to have swirled across most of the eastern half of the sub-continent. In the view of many historians, these upheavals were the direct cause of the profound changes in the political map of southern Africa which took place in the 1820s and 1830s, changes which in turn were of the greatest significance in shaping the nature of black-white interaction in southern Africa for the rest of the century. (1)

In a series of so far unpublished papers written since 1983, Julian Cobbing has formulated a radical and sweeping critique of the notion that the mfecane actually happened. (2) While not denying that the history of African societies in the earlier 19th century was marked by numerous violent conflicts, he rejects the particular significance which white writers since at least the mid-19th century have attached to them. He empasizes that they were a continuation of conflicts which had begun long before the 1810s, conflicts whose primary cause was not the expansion of the Zulu kingdom but the onslaught which Dutch and British settlers and imperialists at the Cape and, to a lesser extent, Portuguese slavers at Delagoa bay were making on neighbouring African societies in their unrelenting attempts to seize control of land and labour-power. The upheavals of the times had not one but several epicentres. The

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1. For example J.D. Omer-Cooper, The Zulu Aftermath: a Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Bantu Africa, London, 1966, chs. 1, 12; P. Maylam, A History of the African People of South Africa, Cape Town, 1986, ch. 4; R. Edgecombe, 'The Mfecane or Difaqane', in T. Cameron & S.B. Spies, eds., An Illustrated History of South Africa, Johannesburg, 1986, ch. 9.

2. J. Cobbing, 'The case against the mfecane', unpublished seminar paper, University of Cape Town, 1983; 'The case against the mfecane', unpublished seminar paper, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984 (a slightly modified version of the UCT paper); 'The myth of the mfecane', unpublished seminar paper, University of Durban-Westville, 1987; 'The mfecane as alibi: thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo', unpublished ms., 1987.

role attributed in the literature to the Zulu is not based on historical evidence: rather, it is a product of the search made by imperialist and settler ideologues for a plausible alibi for the colonial-based interests whose aggressions were ultimately responsible for the violence and social disruptions of the period. For their own various ideological reasons, subsequent generations of historians, including that of the present, have either been concerned to maintain the alibi, or at the very least, have done nothing to demonstrate its falsity. From this perspective the notion of the mfecane is nothing but an interest-serving myth. Historians, Cobbing argues, urgently need to abandon not just the term itself, but the whole set of interlinked assumptions, distortions and falsehoods which it embodies, and to address themselves to the business of developing an entirely new analysis of southern African history in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

This paper, which focusses specifically on the Natal region, lends support to Cobbing's notion of the mfecane as myth. (3) It presents, in bald outline, the results of a survey of accounts published since the late 1820s of the upheavals which are supposed to have taken place in Natal south of the Thukela river in the late 1810s and early 1820s. In these literary descriptions, as they have emerged over a period of 160 years, three elements have been found to recur. First, that Natal was 'devastated' (to use one of a group of synonyms which appear in the literature with monotonous regularity) and its population largely exterminated or driven out. Second, that the devastation was the work of the Zulu. Third, that it was carried out as an act of deliberate policy. Over time, the historical context of what is here called the devastation stereotype has varied, but the three elements which make up its content have remained firmly fixed. In its entire history, only one writer has made more than a token attempt to root it in historical evidence. (4) From a historiographical perspective, the mfecane as it is supposed to have happened in Natal turns out to be the latest reworking of a set of ideas whose history dates back directly to the late 1820s and early 1830s. Generation after generation of writers has uncritically reproduced these ideas to form one of the most enduring myths in southern African history-writing. Before the history of Natal in the early 19th century can be rewritten, the poverty of mfecane-theory's intellectual lineage has to be laid bare. This paper aims, by outlining an explanation of how the stereotype came into existence, and why it has survived for so long, to contribute to that process.

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3. The argument that follows is a heavily compressed version of a much longer study written as a chapter of a not yet completed Ph.D. dissertation on the history and historiography of the Thukela-Mzimkhulu region in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. My thanks go to Julian Cobbing and Philip Bonner for their critical comments on the fuller version.

4. This was A.T. Bryant: see pp. 10-11 below.

The stereotype created

The history of the devastation stereotype begins soon after the arrival in 1824 of the first party of British traders to establish themselves at Port Natal. Within a short time of their arrival they were beginning to report that the region round Port Natal was largely empty of population, and to develop and publicize an explanation for this phenomenon. This explanation, to the effect that the previous inhabitants had either been killed or driven out by the Zulu under Shaka a few years before, was beginning to appear in Cape Town newspapers in 1825 and 1826, and in printed books by 1827. (5) At the same time specific literary images of the Zulu and of Shaka were beginning to take shape, with the Zulu being described by writers like King and Thompson as the warlike and bloodthirsty agents of Natal's devastation, and Shaka as the ferocious and savage leader who directed them. (6) Over the next decade these ideas were consolidated by a number of other writers - Owen, Pringle, Kay, Boteler, Steedman and, in particular, Isaacs - into literary forms which in their essence have survived to the present day. (7)

Few of these writers had actually set foot at Port Natal, and none of them had been eyewitnesses of the processes of destruction which they adumbrated. The evidence on which they based their descriptions was derived directly or indirectly from Africans living in Natal, but nowhere in the works of these writers is there any mention of the identity of these informants, or of the circumstances in which their testimony was obtained and recorded. Most of the information which was distilled into the devastation stereotype was probably collected from members of the remnant groups which the traders found living about Port Natal and in the neighbouring coastal regions. It is germane to make the point here that Port Natal

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5. B. Leverton, ed., Records of Natal, vol. 1, Pretoria, 1984, p. 51; G. Thompson, Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa, ed. V.S. Forbes, Cape Town, 1967 (1st ed. London, 1827), vol. 1, p. 172, vol. 2, p. 249.

6. Thompson, Travels and Adventures, vol.1, pp. 172, 174-5, vol. 2, pp. 248, 249.

7. H.W. Robinson, ed., Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia and Madagascar Performed...under the Direction of Captain W.F.W. Owen, R.N., vol. 1, Farnborough, 1968 (reprint of 1st ed., London, 1833), p. 71; T. Pringle, African Sketches, London, 1834, p. 362n; S. Kay, Travels and Researches in Caffraria, New York, 1834, pp. 281, 341, 343, 344; T. Boteler, Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery to Africa and Arabia, vol. 2, London, 1835, p. 303; A. Steedman, Wanderings and Adventures in the Interior of South Africa, vol. 2, London, 1835, pp. 200-201; N. Isaacs, Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa, ed. L. Herman & P.R. Kirby, Cape Town, 1970 (1st ed. London, 1836), esp. ch. 18.

was situated precisely in the one region of Natal which had in fact been overrun by Zulu forces, (8) and it is likely that the generalized depictions of the destruction of Natal which were noised abroad by the traders were a reflection of the particular experiences of informants from this region.

For their own part, the traders had every interest in propagating the idea that Natal was, by the time of their arrival, largely empty of inhabitants, and that Shaka's Zulu had been the agents of their dispersal or destruction. From the very first, the leading traders at Port Natal were concerned not only to open up commerce with the Zulu but also to try to establish rights to large tracts of land round the port. (9) In the face of the express reluctance of the Cape government to sanction the acquisition of further territorial possessions, (10) they attempted to minimize objections to their proceedings by asserting the claim that the land in question was virtually uninhabited.

If the Port Natal traders had a direct material interest in propagating the 'myth of the empty land', so too did the Cape merchants who in large part financed their early trading ventures. (11) In the late 1820s and early 1830s the rising commercial class and its associates in both the eastern and the western Cape were beginning to exert pressure on the British authorities in Cape Town and London to annex Natal and establish it as a colony of British settlement. (12) This class's spokesmen often used the notion of a depopulated Natal to underpin their arguments for the desirability of the territory's annexation. (13)

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8. This emerges from a piecing together of the evidence contained in A.T. Bryant's works (see pp. 10-11 below) and in the four volumes so far published of The James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples, eds. C. de B. Webb & J.B. Wright, Pietermaritzburg, 1976-86.

9. H.F.Fynn, The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn, ed. J. Stuart & D. McK. Malcolm, Pietermaritzburg, 1950, pp. 86-8; Isaacs, Travels and Adventures, pp. 142, 180-1; Leverton, ed., Records of Natal, vol. 1, pp. 37-40, 247-8.

10. Leverton, ed., Records of Natal, vol. 1, p. 36.

11. On the financing of these expeditions see Fynn, Diary, ch. 3; B. Roberts, The Zulu Kings, London, 1974, pp. 8-19, 75-6, 78-81.

12. S. Bannister, Humane Policy; or Justice to the Aborigines of New Settlements, appendices 1, 6 & 7; J. Chase, ed. The Natal Papers, Cape Town, 1968 (1st ed. Grahamstown, 1843), pp. 23-31; P.R. Kirby, ed., Andrew Smith and Natal, Cape Town, 1955, pp. 5-7, 145-6; Roberts, The Zulu Kings, pp. 222-5.

13. Kirby, ed., Andrew Smith and Natal, pp. 148, 155, 170; L. Herman & P.R. Kirby, 'Nathaniel Isaacs: a biographical sketch', in their edition (cited at note 7 above) of Isaacs's

Propagation of the myth thus served a clear material purpose. So too did the fostering of the image of Shaka as the cruel and despotic leader of a warlike Zulu nation. Though in writing of Shaka and the Zulu in lurid detail, writers like King and Isaacs clearly had an eye on their reading public, they and others also wrote to publicize and propagate the pro-annexationist cause. By depicting the Zulu and their king as a potential threat to the security of the Cape's eastern frontier region, or alternatively as the potential allies of rival powers, they hoped to influence the British authorities into annexing Natal and thereby paving the way for the extension of British trade and settlement. (14) Though some scepticism was voiced in the Cape Town press about the reality of the image of Shaka put about by the Natal traders, (15) in the early 1830s the notion of the 'numerous and warlike' Zulu as a 'threat' was becoming widespread in the discourse of Cape merchants and others with an interest in Natal. (16)

By the mid-1830s, then, the devastation stereotype was well established in the literature on southern Africa. It is important for the argument being advanced here to note that of the writers so far cited as having been responsible for fixing the stereotype in print, virtually all were either members of, or had close associations with, the business communities of Cape Town and the eastern Cape. (17) All of them directly or indirectly propounded the virtues of the regions beyond the borders of the Cape colony as fields for the expansion of Cape and British commerce.

From the later 1830s the stereotype began to be taken up and disseminated by members of another influential body of opinion-moulders and image-builders, the missionaries who were active in southern Africa. Though there were wide differences of opinion between them as to the benefits or otherwise of the extension of European settlement, they were united in wanting to promote 'civilized' European government. Many aligned themselves with the merchants' call for the 'opening up' of the interior, and at the same time used much the same kind of his-

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Travels and Adventures, p. xi; R. Godlonton, Introductory Remarks to a Narrative of the Irruption of the Kafir Hordes, parts I & II, Cape Town, 1965 (1st publ. Grahamstown, 1836), pp. 165-6.

14. Thompson, Travels and Adventures, vol. 1, p. 174, vol. 2, p. 249; Isaacs, Travels and Adventures, p. 339.

15. Roberts, The Zulu Kings, pp. 154, 177.

16. Chase, ed., Natal Papers, p. 27; Godlonton, Introductory Remarks, pp. 162-8, 172; Kirby, ed., Andrew Smith in Natal, pp. 149-51, 153-4, 166-8, 171-2.

17. The evidence is presented in detail on p. 14 of the wider study mentioned in note 3 above.

torical rationale to justify it. (18)

The stereotype appropriated

In the 1840s the hopes of merchants and missionaries for the 'opening up' of Natal at last began to be realized. In 1843 Britain annexed the region between the Thukela and the Mzimkhulu, and in 1849-51, several thousand British settlers were established in the new colony to help speed up the process of 'civilizing' it. But with the achievement of some of the main goals of its progenitors, the devastation stereotype did not wither away. On the contrary, over the next few decades it was vigorously taken up, embellished and propagated by numerous writers in the service of a new cause - that of the Natal colonists.

Though there were often strong differences of opinion between officials, settlers and missionaries over what policies were appropriate for dealing with the colony's now rapidly increasing African population, they were by and large united in the notions that the safeguarding and expansion of their various newly acquired estates required the subordination of Africans to the political tutelage of Europeans. Like colonizing groups everywhere, the Natal colonists sought to justify to themselves and to others both their occupation of lands formerly inhabited by other people, and their status as overlords or would-be overlords of the indigenous peoples. The devastation stereotype was admirably suited to the version of Natal's history which they developed to suit their ideological needs. It justified the presence of European colonists in Natal on the grounds that they had established themselves in a largely empty land. It justified their attempts - ultimately successful - to establish domination of the African population on the grounds that the coming of white rule had put an end to the ravages of the Zulu and inaugurated an era of peace and stability. It justified their continual demands for an increase in the size of the British garrison to defend them against the threat posed by the savage Zulu kingdom across the Thukela.

Perhaps the clearest example of the early appropriation of the devastation stereotype by settler ideologues is to be found in the report, which appeared in 1853, of a major official com-

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18. Kay, Travels and Researches, pp. 281, 341, 343, 344; D. Kotze, ed., Letters of the American Missionaries 1835-1838, Cape Town, 1950, p. 97; G. Champion, Journal of the Reverend George Champion 1835-1839, ed. A. Booth, Cape Town, pp. 15, 62; W. Boyce, Notes on South African Affairs, Cape Town, 1971 (reprint of 1st ed., Grahamstown, 1838), pp. x, 171, 173-4; B. Shaw, Memorials of South Africa, Cape Town, 1970 (1st ed. London, 1840), pp. 44-5; T. Arbousset & F. Daumas, Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the North-East of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, Cape Town, 1968 (repr. of 1st English ed., Cape Town, 1846), ch. 17, esp. p. 148.

mission appointed to enquire into the state of the colony's African inhabitants. The commission was dominated by representatives of the settlers: its declarations on the precolonial history of Natal were of the kind that became common in the literature over the next seventy years. After Shaka had become king, the commissioners reported, the Zulu became 'a desolating scourge to all the surrounding tribes and nations within a circle of 500 miles'. He 'completely conquered the Natal tribes with immense slaughter, devastated the whole country and added it to his dominions, from the Itongati down to St. John's River'. The survivors were carried off and incorporated in small groups into the Zulu people. 'The Natal tribes then ceased to have any separate national existence ...'. (19)

Stated in these sentences is an important part of the historical creed of an emerging settler society. The last sentence is perhaps the most significant. For intruding settlers, thrown together from disparate backgrounds and attempting to establish, first, a social existence and identity in territory previously inhabited solely by African communities, and second, political domination over their Africa fellow-colonists, it was important to minimize in their own eyes the rights to land of the people among whom they settled. The notion that the African societies which had formerly occupied Natal no longer had any coherent existence was clearly convenient to their purpose.

The accounts of Natal's history which emerged from the pens of colonial-based writers in the 1850s and 1860s served to codify views such as those expressed by the commission. (20) But these writers did not simply reproduce the existing stereotype: they also placed it in a more elaborate historical context. The Cape and British-based originators of the devastation thesis had been concerned primarily to expand the geographical orbit of the Cape's commerce, and had had little interest in investigating Natal's history beyond what was necessary for constructing the thesis in bare outline. The settlers, on the other hand, needed a more elaborate - and denigratory - history of African societies in pre-European Natal: one which spelt out in unmistakeable terms that the history of independent African societies was mostly one of wars and destruction. Civilization in Natal had begun with the com-

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19. Proceedings and Report of the Commission Appointed to inquire into the Past and Present State of the Kafirs in the District of Natal..., Pietermaritzburg, 1853, p. 6.

20. W.C Holden, History of the Colony of Natal, Cape Town, 1963 (reprint of 1st ed., London, 1855), pp. 55-7; and The Past and Future of the Kaffir Races, Cape Town, 1963 (reprint of 1st ed., London, 1866), pp. 9-16, 20-28; J. Shooter, The Kafirs of Natal and the Zulu Country, London, 1857, ch. 8; L. Grout, Zulu-land; or, Life among the Zulu-Kafirs, London, n.d. (1863), chs. 7, 8.

ing of Europeans: for its impact to be the more fully apparent, the barbarism and savagery of 'Zulu' society had to be revealed in some detail. Hence in the works of settler ideologues the devastation thesis came to be situated in the context of a 'Zulu' history that extended back into the 18th century and forwards to the Boer victories in the late 1830s and the British annexation in the 1840s. (21)

The stereotype reinforced

The devastation stereotype as it had become entrenched in settler historiography in the 1850s and 1860s survived quite unchanged into the early 20th century. In the late 19th century, as an alliance of British imperial interests and white settler interests in southern Africa set out to bring the sub-continent's African societies once and for all under white domination, the stereotype began to penetrate more widely. It moved beyond the accounts of colonial historians and local travellers to become established in reference works ranging from Natal schools text books to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, (22) and to become almost universally accepted in literary discourse on southern Africa. (23)

Until this time the stereotype had remained based on the most meagre and tenuous empirical evidence, and set mainly in the context of the history of the Natal region. It existed very much as a formula reproduced by rote rather than as scientifically argued history. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries it was for the first time given powerful intellectual underpinning. The voluminous writings of George McCall Theal rooted it firmly in the wider context of southern African history, and the works of Father Alfred Bryant on 'Zulu' history served to give it an apparently firm empirical foundation.

Except for his very earliest work, Theal's histories were strongly pro-settler in their slant. (24) Like other settler

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21. The first author to have developed a detailed account of this history seems to have been Shooter: see his Kafirs of Natal, pp. 249-60.

22. H. Bryan, Our Country: an Elementary History of Natal, London, n.d. (1909), pp. 28-31; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 9th ed., vol. 24, Edinburgh, 1888, p. 828; and 11th ed., vol. 28, Cambridge, 1911, pp. 1051-52.

23. Only two authors in the period under review have been found in this study to have written in some respects directly counter to the stereotype: A. Wilmot, The Story of the Expansion of Southern Africa, Cape Town, 1895, p. 126; J. Voigt, Fifty Years of the History of the Republic in South Africa (1795-1845), vol. 1 Cape Town 1969 (reprint of 1st ed., London, 1899), pp. 185-92.

24. Recent critical studies of Theal are D. Schreuder, 'The imperial historian as "colonial nationalist": George McCall

historians before and after him, he made no changes to the essentials of the stereotype, but an immensely important innovation on his part was to detach it from the history of the Natal region and set it in a new context. Most previous writers had treated the pre-European history of Natal as part of the overall history of that region: in Theal's works, by contrast, the upheavals in Natal before and after 1820 were treated as part of the history of the African societies of southern Africa in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In his main work, this history was covered in a block of chapters which broke into a sequence of chapters on the history of European settlerdom and officialdom at the Cape. (25)

With hindsight it can be seen that this structuring established the preconditions for the emergence of mfecane-theory. By sharply segregating the histories of African and European societies in southern Africa, it allowed the impact of pre-1820s European settler and imperial influences on African societies largely to be side-stepped, and the violence of the 1820s to be attributed to purely 'African' causes. By linking the history of the Zulu kingdom in this period ethnically with that of other African societies across southern Africa rather than regionally with that of neighbouring societies, both African and European, in eastern southern Africa, it allowed the rise of Shaka and the Zulu kingdom to be portrayed as the spark which touched off a holocaust of intra-African violence which swept across the whole sub-continent. Where, in the earlier literature, the devastations supposedly caused by Shaka had usually been projected as having been confined to the eastern coastal regions, from Theal's time onward they were universally seen as having affected much of the interior as well. The devastation in Natal now came to be seen as simply one aspect of a wider series of wars and migrations.

Schreuder has suggested that Theal's fairly novel sub-continent-wide perspective was rooted in the movement towards the creation of a common anti-imperial 'colonial' identity which was beginning to emerge among the English-speaking commercial classes and Afrikaner rural interests in the Cape in the last two decades of the 19th century. In Theal's view, the central theme of southern African history was the march of European civilization, carried by Boer and British colonists together, across the sub-continent in the face of resistance from barbaric African tribes and of 'meddling' on the part of the British imperial government. As Schreuder puts it, 'It

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Theal and the making of South African history', in G. Martel, ed., Studies in British Imperial History: Essays in Honour of A.P. Thornton, London, 1986, pp. 95-158; C. Saunders, The Making of the South African Past: Major Historians on Race and Class, Cape Town, 1988, chs. 1-4.

25. G.M. Theal, History of South Africa since 1795, vol. 1, London, 1908, chs. 14, 15.

was Theal, in fact, who historically invented white "South Africa"', and his histories provided an important element in the emergence of an ideology of colonial nationalism and white supremacy. (26)

Theal's treatment of the history of African societies, it is suggested here, was a necessary counterpart of his concern with the white colonial civilizing mission. If white colonists were to be seen as the bearers of civilization, then, in a pioneering colonial nationalist historiography that was emerging when the process of bringing African people under the control of white settlers was by no means over, it was important to demonstrate in some detail that the culture of African peoples was barbaric, and their history largely one of war and destruction. The 'Zulu devastations' posited by Theal thus formed an important backdrop to what he saw as the essentially civilizing mission of the Great Trek.

If Theal provided the devastation stereotype with a new context, he added nothing to it by way of fresh evidence. The first author to go much beyond the handful of primary accounts on which the stereotype was based was Father A.T. Bryant, whose career as a writer of history overlapped with the latter part of Theal's. Where Theal had been the first historian in South Africa to produce full-length studies based on intensive, if superficial and selective, archival research, Bryant was among the first writers to produce histories based largely on oral testimony collected from African informants. Between 1905 and 1929 he published a number of works on the history of the Natal-Zululand region which are still widely used - usually quite uncritically - as primary sources. (27) These works were the first to set out detailed, though discontinuous and confusing, accounts of the upheavals of the late 1810s and early 1820s, but, far from challenging the stereotype, Bryant presented his information in such a way as *to reinforce* it.

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26. Schreuder, 'The imperial historian as "colonial nationalist"', in Martel, ed., Studies in British Imperial History, pp. 96-8, 114-15, 129-33, 138-47. The quotation is from p. 97.

27. Bryant's first major historical work was the essay entitled 'A sketch of the origin and early history of the Zulu people', which was published as a preface to his Zulu-English Dictionary, Mariannhill, 1905, pp. 12*-66*. This was followed by a series of articles published in the newspaper Izindaba Zabantu in 1910-13; these were reprinted after the author's death in A.T. Bryant, A History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Tribes, Cape Town, 1964. His widely influential Olden Times in Zululand and Natal, was published in London in 1929. His major ethnographic study, The Zulu People as They Were before the White Man Came, Pietermaritzburg, 1929, begins with two historical chapters.

Bryant's own work indicated that several 'waves' of non-Zulu invaders had swept through much of Natal some time before the advent of Shaka's Zulu armies, and that Zulu incursions had in fact been confined to a comparatively small area. But, in keeping with the established stereotype, he all but submerged the role played by these precursors in favour of an emphasis on the doings of the Zulu. His dramatized and often hyperbolical description of Shaka's wars and conquests, one inherited directly from the settler stereotype, underscored the idea that Shaka and his 'Zulu murderers' were the main destroyers of Natal. (28) In addition, Bryant's method of presenting the region's history through a recital of the individual histories of the numerous chiefdoms of Natal had the effect of repeatedly bringing Shaka and the Zulu into the narrative in the role of conquerors, exterminators, and tribute-takers. For the reader trying to pick his or her way through the mass of often contradictory historical detail which Bryant presented, the Zulu could hardly have emerged as anything other than the main villains of the piece. In spite of the empirical richness of his account, he was unable to break with the established stereotype.

The stereotype sanctified

In the works of the liberal academic historians who dominated the writing of South African history in English from the 1920s onward, interest both in regional history and in the history of autonomous African societies began to dry up. By this time the affairs of the recently established Union of South Africa were coming to overshadow those of its constituent parts in political significance, and the social and political impact of the country's ongoing industrial revolution was preoccupying its intellectuals as well as its politicians. The consequence was another new turn in the history of the devastation stereotype.

The emergence of liberal historiography in the post-World War I era needs to be seen against the background of the erosion of the bases of the old agrarian-commercial order, the spread of poverty in the African reserves, the large-scale migration of Africans to the urban areas and the resultant problems of social control, and the formation of potentially formidable, if unstable, political alliances between sections of the exploited African proletariat and frustrated and militant elements of the emerging African petty bourgeoisie. For liberal intellectuals these developments posed a profound dilemma.(29)

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28. The phrase 'Zulu murderers' occurs in his Dictionary, p. 49*.

29. On the nature of South African liberalism between the wars see P.Rich, White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism, Johannesburg, 1984, chs. 1-3; S. Dubow,'"Understanding the native mind": the impact of anthropological thought on segregationist discourse in South Africa, 1919-1933', unpublished conference paper, Uni-

On the one hand they were concerned about the possible political consequences of increased legal entrenchment of discrimination against Africans, and of the increasing suppression of the material and political aspirations of the African 'elite'. On the other, they were fearful about the threat which, to their minds, the processes of African urbanization and proletarianization presented to 'civilized values' (read 'capitalist order') in South Africa. The response of liberal historians was two-fold. (30) In reaction against the racism of settler historiography they turned their attention to the history of 'race relations' in South Africa, and, to enable liberals the better to grapple with the complex ramifications of the 'native problem', they began to focus on the nature of the historical forces which, as they saw it, had drawn Africans and whites into a common society. Those fields of history which offered little or nothing by way of an explanation of these issues were neglected.

As a result, the writing of precolonial history, whether locally focussed as in Natal colonial historiography, or broadly focussed as in Theal's works, virtually died out. In turn this meant that the devastation stereotype escaped the critical scrutiny of the first generation of academic historians to emerge in South Africa. With their main fields of interest lying elsewhere, these historians were content to absorb Theal's generalized view of the 'Zulu devastations' into their own work, even if in the process they were concerned to strip it of its more racist forms of expression. Thus in the works of writers like Walker, Agar-Hamilton, Macmillan, Hattersley, De Kock, De Kiewiet and others, the notion remained quite unchallenged that Natal had been swept almost clear of inhabitants during wars of extermination waged by Shaka and the

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versity of the Witwatersrand, 1984', pp. 1-22; S. Dubow, 'Race, civilisation and culture: the elaboration of segregationist discourse in the inter-war years', in S. Marks & S. Trapido, eds., The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century South Africa, London, 1987, ch. 2. Less critical studies are R. Elphick, 'Mission Christianity and interwar liberalism', in Butler et al., eds., Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect, Middletown, Conn., & Cape Town, 1987, ch. 3; and J. Butler, 'Interwar liberalism and local activism', in Butler et al., eds., Democratic Liberalism, ch. 4.

30. On liberal historiography from the 1920s to the 1950s see M. Legassick, 'The frontier tradition in South African historiography', in S. Marks & A. Atmore, eds., Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa, London, 1980, ch. 2; C. Saunders, 'Liberal historiography before 1945', in J. Butler et al., eds., Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect, Middletown, Conn., & Cape Town, 1987, ch. 7; J. Butler & D. Schreuder, 'Liberal historiography since 1945', in Butler at al., eds., Democratic Liberalism, pp. 148-56; Saunders, Making of the South African Past, chs. 5-9.

Zulu. (31)

But the stereotype did not survive in early liberal historiography simply by default. Part of the neglect of African history by liberal historians from the 1920s onward must also be put down to their often elitist attitude to the culture of the African underclasses, and to their ambivalence on the issue of what political rights to accord to Africans. (32) Even if liberals rejected the notions put forward by racial theorists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the effect that the African 'race' was incapable of 'catching up' with the civilization of the European race, until at least the 1950s many of them still thought of cultural differences in strongly evolutionist and hierarchical terms. Africans were expected to 'adapt' their own cultures in the direction of European culture, and, in effect, to reject their own past, which had little, if anything, to do with 'progress'. From the 1920s, African history was largely discounted by liberal intellectuals, and the study of African societies was increasingly seen as belonging to the emerging discipline of anthropology rather than to history. Now that autonomous African societies had been thoroughly subjugated, their versions of history did not have to be contested, as had been necessary in the era of white settlement: their overlords could simply disregard their history altogether.

In the years between the two world wars one of the central concerns of South African liberal intellectuals had been to try to identify the 'problems' in white-black 'race relations' which were seen as preventing orderly social evolution towards the 'civilized' society which they ardently hoped for. Liberal historians had been concerned to look for the historical roots of those problems as one means of working towards their solution. After the National Party's electoral victory of 1948, and the further entrenchment of racial discrimination and repression, the problem for liberal historians came to be

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31. E. Walker, A Modern History for South Africans, Cape Town, 1926, p. 225; E. Walker, A History of South Africa, London, 1928, pp. 182-3; J. Agar-Hamilton, The Native Policy of the Voortrekkers, Cape Town, n.d. (1928), pp. 2-3; W.M. Macmillan, Bantu, Boer and Briton: the Making of the South African Native Problem, London, 1929, pp. 13-14; A.F. Hattersley, South Africa 1652-1933, London, 1933, p. 75; M.H. de Kock, The Economic Developmentof South Africa, London, 1941, p. 50; C.W. de Kiewiet, A History of South Africa Social and Economic, Oxford, 1941, pp. 49-50.

32. On this ambivalence see Rich, White Power, passim; Saunders, 'Liberal historiography before 1945', in Butler et al. eds., Democratic Liberalism, pp. 139, 145; Butler & Schreuder, 'Liberal historiography since 1945', in Butler et al, eds., Democratic Liberalism, pp. 154-6; D. Irvine, 'The Liberal Party, 1953-1968', in Butler et al., eds., Democratic Liberalism, pp. 117-19, 125-30.

why whites had taken the 'wrong road' and refused to share power with blacks. The focus of their work swung further towards political and constitutional history, with a concomitant further decline in the attention paid to African history. (33)

If early liberal historiography showed little interest either in the history of African societies, or in the history of Natal before the advent of Europeans, these subjects received even less attention in the Afrikaner nationalist historiography that was emerging from the early years of the 20th century onwards. Whether it was in popular histories or in the works of the professional historians who were becoming established in the Afrikaans-language universities after World War I, the focus of this historiography was overwhelmingly on the history of Dutch-Afrikaner societies from the Great Trek to the South African war of 1899-1902. So far as it touched on the history of pre-Trek Natal, it simply reproduced the stereotypes entrenched by Natal settler historiography and by Theal and other contemporary writers, though now placing them in the context of Voortrekker history rather than in the context of Natal's history or the history of African societies. In this context, the devastation stereotype served conveniently to portray Natal as having been emptied of population before the coming of the Voortrekkers. (34) Together with contemporary liberal historians, then, Afrikaner nationalist historians carried the devastation stereotype, set in the context of settler history, from the early 20th century through into the 1960s.

The stereotype africanized

It was not until the 1960s that historians turned back to writing the history of the African societies of southern Africa. As is well known, its revival was an aspect of the growth of interest in African history in general which accompanied the political decolonization of most of the continent north of the Zambezi. The ending of colonial rule stimulated an eager demand among African political activists and intellectuals, and among sympathizers in Europe and North America, for a 'decolonized' African history, one which would rescue Africans from the virtual oblivion to which they had

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33. Saunders, 'Liberal historiography before 1945', in Butler et al., eds., Democratic Liberalism, p. 147; Butler & Schreuder, 'Liberal historiography since 1945', in Butler et al., eds., Democratic Liberalism, pp. 151-4, 160-1.

34. S. Gie, Geskiedenis vir Suid-Afrika, vol. 2, Stellenbosch, 1928, p. 306; E. Jansen, Die Voortrekkers in Natal: Opstelle, Cape Town, 1938, p. 1; A. du Plessis, 'Die republiek Natalia', Archives Year Book for South African History, 1942, part I, Cape Town, 1943, ch. 1; A. van der Walt, 'Die Groot trek tot 1838', in A. van der Walt et al., eds., Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika, vol. 1, Cape Town, 1951, p. 264.

been consigned by colonial historiography, and which would emphasize African 'achievements'. An alliance of African nationalist and metropolitan liberal historians moved to meet this demand by producing history which took as its main themes the emergence of great states in precolonial Africa, the mounting of resistance to European conquest and colonial rule, the growth of African nationalism, and the role of African elites.

Within this context there was published in 1966 the first work since Theal's to attempt a broad synthesis of the history of the upheavals which had taken place in south-east Africa in the 1820s and 1830s. This was J.D. Omer-Cooper's full-length study, The Zulu Aftermath: a Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Bantu Africa. (35) In important respects Omer-Cooper's account was similar to Theal's. It saw the violence of the period as having emanated from a single epicentre, the Zulu kingdom, and as having radiated outward across much of southern and central Africa. Omer-Cooper attributed the ultimate causes of the upheavals to a build-up of population pressure in south-east Africa in the later 18th century, rather than to the personality of Shaka, as Theal had done, and he went beyond Theal in seeing the effects of the violence as having extended over wide areas of Central Africa, and as having persisted into the latter half the 19th century. But, as the title of his book indicates, like Theal he was looking for a compendium explanation to cover what he saw as a single historical phenomenon. (36)

In two respects, though, Omer-Cooper introduced major conceptual innovations into the treatment of the subject. In the first place, in sharp contrast to Theal, who had emphasized the violence and bloodshed that had accompanied the upheavals in order to portray them as an indication of African barbarism and savagery, Omer-Cooper depicted them in positive terms as 'one of the great formative events of African history', as an episode of 'nation-building' on the part of 'a galaxy of great leaders'. (37) In the second place, he gave the upheavals a single label, one which has stuck both in academic and in popular usage ever since. This was the term 'mfecane', which he gave as meaning 'the wars and disturbances which accompanied the rise of the Zulu'. (38) The word had been used sporadically in the literature since the 1920s, though without a clearly defined meaning. (39) Omer-Cooper both standardized its meaning and projected it into general usage.

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35. London, 1966.

36. Omer-Cooper, Zulu Aftermath, introduction & pp. 19-27.

37. Ibid., pp. 4-7.

38. Ibid., p. 5n.

39. Cobbing, 'The case against the mfecane', unpublished paper, University of the Witwatersrand, p. 5.

In his treatment of the region south of the Thukela, to which he devoted a chapter, Omer-Cooper drew heavily on Bryant's Olden Times in Zululand and Natal. (40) There was nothing in his account that explicitly contradicted the devastation stereotype; if anything, The Zulu Aftermath served to give it further academic respectability, and, by presenting it as an integral part of the long-established and now revamped notion freshly packaged as the 'mfecane', to publicize it more widely than ever. From this time on, the history of the stereotype was closely intertwined with that of mfecane-theory.

Few works on southern African history have had so immediate and widespread an effect as The Zulu Aftermath. As Cobbing has pointed out, within a few years of the book's publication both the term mfecane (or difaqane) and the notion that the mfecane was one of the central events of southern African history had become embedded in Africanist discourse outside South Africa. (41) It was widely established in general histories of Africa, in academic articles and monographs, in university and schools text books, and once again, though now in a quite different context, in the Encyclopaedia Britannica. (42)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s South African academics began to catch on to the notion of the mfecane. The first to do so were Afrikaner nationalist historians, who were quick to spot the support which mfecane-theory lent to the ideologically important notion that the first white settlers in the interior of southern Africa had moved into a land largely depopulated by intra-African warfare. (43) A little later, under the influence of overseas Africanists, liberal writers began to incorporate the mfecane into their work as the fons et origo of the processes of African 'state-formation' (another term for 'nation-building') round which they wrote the history of African societies in south-eastern Africa in the first half of

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40. Omer-Cooper, Zulu Aftermath, ch. 10.

41. Cobbing, 'The case against the mfecane', unpublished paper, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 5-7; and 'The myth of the mfecane', unpublished paper, pp. 8-9.

42. S.M. (Shula Marks), article on the history of southern Africa in Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 17, Chicago, 1974, p. 281.

43. C. Muller, 'The period of the Great Trek, 1834-1854', in C. Muller, ed., Five Hundred Years: a History of South Africa, Pretoria & Cape Town, 1969, p. 125; D. Ziervogel, 'The natives of South Africa', in Muller, ed., Five Hundred Years, pp. 445-8; F. van Jaarsveld, Van Van Riebeeck tot Verwoerd 1652-1966, Johannesburg, 1971, ch. 7; J. Bruwer, article on Shaka in Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa, vol. 9, Cape Town, 1973, p. 598; C. Muller, Die Oorsprong van die Groot Trek, Cape Town, 1974, esp. pp. 74-83.

the 19th century. (44) They were followed by some African nationalist writers, particularly those sympathetic to Zulu ethnic nationalism, for whom the 'nation-building' aspects of the mfecane were an obvious attraction. (45)

By the later 1970s the mfecane was an established 'fact' of southern African history. Though by then a reaction against the more uncritical assumptions and assertions of Africanist history was manifesting itself among liberal and radical-revisionist historians alike, the mfecane lived on in South Africa and abroad virtually unchallenged. In 1983 mfecane-theory found standardized form in the first academic dictionary of south African history to be published. (46) In 1986 it achieved coffee-table status, (47) and in 1987, some twenty years on from The Zulu Aftermath, it was re-invigorated by Omer-Cooper himself in a new text book on South African history. (48) In the late 1980s liberals, radicals, African nationalists, and Afrikaner nationalists continued in an unlikely, if unwitting, alliance, some propounding, some merely accepting, but virtually none challenging the validity of the notion of the mfecane.

Mfecane-theory emerged at a time when liberal and African nationalist historians outside southern Africa were seeking to break away from racist and patronizing colonial cliches about African culture and African history. It is easy to understand why the notion of the mfecane as a period of African 'nation-building' caught on so rapidly among them, and why it survives today in the uncritically Africanist histories that continue to be produced. It is easy, too, to understand the continuing attraction of mfecane-theory's 'depopulation' thesis for the ideologues of apartheid.

More problematic is the failure of contemporary critical lib-

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44. For example the present author's Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg 1840-1870, Pietermaritzburg, 1971, pp. 15-17; several of the articles in C. Saunders & R. Derricourt, eds., Beyond the Cape Frontier, London, 1974; C. Webb, 'Of orthodoxy, heresy and the difaqane', unpublished paper, University of the Witwatersrand, 1974; and 'The Mfecane', in Perspectives on the Southern African Past, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1979, ch. 9; T. Davenport, South Africa: a Modern History, Johannesburg, 1977, pp. 10-17.

45. J. Ngubane, 'Shaka's social, political and military ideas', in D. Burness, ed., Shaka King of the Zulus in African Literature, Washington, D.C., 1976, pp. 140, 147.

46. C. Saunders, Historical Dictionary of South Africa, Metuchen, N.J., & London, 1983, pp. 107-8.

47. Edgecombe, 'The Mfecane or Difaqane', in Cameron & Spies, eds., Illustrated History, ch. 9.

48. J.D. Omer-Cooper, History of Southern Africa, London, 1987, ch. 4.

eral and radical-revisionist scholarship to challenge mfecane-theory. At a superficial level this failure can be explained in terms of the general decline of interest among scholars abroad in African history since about the mid-1970s. (49) Researchers are thinner on the ground than they used to be in the days of the Africanist boom, and they have little incentive to tamper with what appears to be a coherent and well-grounded set of notions which puts the precolonial African states of southern Africa firmly on the historical map. In South Africa itself, after a brief flowering in the 1970s, interest in the region's precolonial history has waned as liberal and radical historians have increasingly focussed their research and debates on the effects of capitalist penetration in southern Africa from the late 19th century onward. Partly, then, mfecane-theory survives today by default.

But, at a deeper level of explanation, it survives among liberal historians, as Cobbing has argued, because it functions to obscure the processes by which a white property-owning class came to be politically dominant and in possession of most of the land south of the Limpopo river. (50) By omitting the role of white agency in the upheavals of the 1820s and 1830s, and by attributing them ultimately to the rise of the Zulu kingdom, mfecane-theory is able to portray them as a consequence of internecine African conflict. African agency thus becomes responsible for opening the way for the penetration of white settlers into a largely 'empty' interior, and the land-grabbing of whites later in the century can be down-played. Cobbing's argument perhaps overstresses the cohesion and strength of white settler societies in the 19th century, but its central point seems essentially correct. For liberal defenders of South Africa's capitalist order, as well as for the ideologues of South Africa's bantustan policies, mfecane-theory provides an ideologically incontrovertible explanation of the historical basis of South Africa's present-day patterns of land distribution.

Among radical historians too mfecane-theory survives today partly for ideological reasons. The 'structuralist' approach which was dominant among radical writers in South Africa in the 1970s did not encourage detailed scrutiny of historical evidence. While the reaction on the part of many contemporary radical historians against the often reductionist analyses that were generated by their predecessors has made for the production of a far more textured and nuanced kind of history,

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49. T. Ranger, 'Towards a usable African past', in C. Fyfe, ed., African Studies since 1945, London, 1976, p. 17; P. Curtin, 'African history', in M. Kammen, ed., The Past before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States, Ithaca & London, 1980, p. 115.

50. Cobbing, 'The case against the mfecane', unpublished paper, University of the Witwatersrand, pp. 1, 7-8, 16, and 'The myth of the mfecane', unpublished paper, pp. 1, 9-10, 30.

it has also meant a loss of much of the political punch which radical history carried a decade ago. With their focus often on microstudies, and with their tendency to be suspicious of schematizing and generalization, present-day radical historians are often less overtly concerned than the previous generation was to identify and hammer away at the ideological props, such as mfecane-theory, which help sustain the current racial and social order in South Africa.

Conclusion

A hundred and sixty years after it first surfaced, the devastation stereotype lives on, embedded now in mfecane-theory. Cape merchant interests created it in the 1820s and 1830s on the basis of hearsay evidence. Natal settlers from the 1840s onward, the first South Africanists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and Afrikaner nationalist historians from the early 20th century onward all had a common vested interest in keeping it alive. Early liberal historians in South Africa, with their attentions elsewhere, incorporated it as an element in what they saw as the not very important history of the country's African underclasses. Later liberal historians, first outside and then inside South Africa, helped resuscitate and reconstruct it in a way that would be aceptable to emerging African nationalist elites. After a brief period of concern with developing new approaches both to pre-industrial history and to the macrohistory of southern Africa, the majority of radical historians turned away towards the more recent past and towards a partially depoliticized social history, leaving the stereotype intact. Present-day writers of all shades of opinion continue to pick it up from the previous literature and to incorporate it into their own work without attempting to seek empirical verification for it. Natal's mfecane exists today by virtue not of historical argumentation but of uncritical repetition of a racist and elitist myth.