

Book Reviews

On the Mfecane Aftermath

The Mfecane Aftermath:

Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History

by Carolyn Hamilton

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Historians love to fight. The reasons for this bad temper are not all that clear. Henry Kissinger would have us believe that it is the insignificance of academic fights that makes them so bitter, and frequent. With more justice I might agree with Mark Andrews (a formidable Natal and Springbok rugby lock forward) who recently explained that aggression motivates when all the other incentives (money, power, love) have dissipated. Whatever the case, arguments make for the best kind of scholarship. And few debates in southern African historiography have been as bad tempered, or proved as productive, and interesting, as the controversy that erupted around Julian Cobbing's claim that the narrative of the expansion of the Shakan kingdom in the 1820s was an invented 'alibi' for colonial dispossession¹. Much of the richness of this debate has been captured by the anthology edited by Carolyn Hamilton entitled *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History*.

In broad terms, Cobbing was arguing for a complete reappraisal of nineteenth century Southern African history. He rejected the widely accepted idea that the Shakan state had sent shock waves of violence across the subcontinent in the 1820s, and pointed an accusing finger at the earliest forms of colonial power. In the place of northern

¹ Julian Cobbing, 'The Mfecane as an Alibi: Thoughts Upon Dithakong and Mbolompo'. *Journal of African History* 29 (1988) 487-519.

Nguni territory as the eye of the Mfecane hurricane, Cobbing offered three external sources of violence: the Portuguese slave trade from Delagoa Bay, Griqua and Bastaard raiders in the northern Cape, and the invasions of British settlers and troops on the eastern Cape. In every case he stressed that it was a search for forced labourers by the representatives of the emerging colonial order that prompted the systemic violence of the 1820s.

In *The Mfecane Aftermath* most of the details of Cobbing's sweeping critique have been undone by the careful historical research of almost a dozen scholars. Yet the substance of his claim—that it was a colonial search for labour that encouraged regional violence—remains intact. Only raiding across the northern Cape frontier—of Cobbing's three 'external sources' of conflict—has survived historical scrutiny with any measure of integrity, but that has been enough to prompt the revision of the early nineteenth century history of southern Africa². Several scholars have re-opened research into nineteenth century enslavement, and begun to re-examine the Great Trek as a search for forced labour³.

The significance of this volume does not rest entirely upon the future of the Cobbing debate. It has also brought to light new forms of historical investigation, and a set of interdisciplinary studies which may open research into the eighteenth and nineteenth century of southern Africa (a field that was looking decidedly comatose if not completely dead). Thus we have tentative but interesting studies of the unusual scenes of conflict depicted in rock art from the Caledon Valley, and a provocative but historically unsatisfying account of the archaeology of subterranean villages from the north-western Transvaal that also date from the 1820s. In both these cases the evidence remains tantalisingly beyond the reach of a straightforward historical analysis.

The Mfecane Aftermath also presents a good selection of new historiographical approaches. Dan Wylie examines a rich collection of colonial historical texts on the subject of the Shakan state, and identifies a powerful common desire to debase and 'assassinate the character' of the king. Carolyn Hamilton's innovative study of the layers of ideas that (mostly colonial) individuals and institutions have produced about Shaka since the 1820s goes a long way towards resolving the conundrum of the clearly

² See Elizabeth Eldredge's 'Sources of Conflict in Southern Africa c. 1800-1830: The "Mfecane" Remembered' (p. 126-139), for a convincing refutation of extensive slave raiding from Delagoa Bay before 1823; Jeff Peires, 'Matiwane's Road to Mbolombo: A Reprieve for the Mfecane?' (p. 222-236) for a defence of the migration of the Ngwane and the insignificance of slave-raiding during the battle of Mbolombo; and Eldredge's 'Sources of Conflict' (p. 139-150) and Guy Hartley, 'The Battle of Dithakong and "Mfecane" Theory' (p. 395-416) for well researched rejections of Cobbing's interpretation of the Battle of Dithakong.

³ Elizabeth Eldredge and Fred Morton (eds.), *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labor on the Dutch Frontier*, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press (1994).

unreliable evidence offered to us by these sources. In a similarly textual vein, Norman Etherington seeks to identify a set of common narrative structures in the workings of the history of the Mfecane and the Great Trek. The tensions between these different papers also suggest that there are important limits on the capacity of careful textual analysis to resolve the most pressing political questions of historical debate⁴.

Whatever the individual shortcomings of the papers in this anthology—many of which bear the unmistakable signs of being preliminary conference papers—the Cobbing fracas, the gathering that Hamilton organised at Wits in September 1991 to discuss it, and *The Mfecane Aftermath* have managed to return scholarly attention to the history of the early nineteenth century. This can be clearly seen in the numbers of young scholars pursuing dissertations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Ultimately, however, it remains true that there is a powerful circularity at work here, and until we extend the range of African sources on this period we are unlikely to escape the ‘blind alley, grubbing for colonialists behind every dirt bin’⁵.

⁴ Dan Wylie, ‘Language and Assassination: Cultural Negations in White Writers’ Portrayal of Shaka and the Zulu’; Carolyn Hamilton, ‘“The Character and Objects of Shaka”: A Reconsideration of the Making of Shaka as Mfecane Motor’; Norman Etherington, ‘Old Wine in New Bottles: The Persistence of Narrative Structures in the Historiography of the Mfecane and the Great Trek’.

⁵ See Peires, ‘Matiwane’s Road’ (p. 239).