This “time of troubles” (2) in southern Africa, c.1790 - c.1830 was one of great disruption and upheavals, leading to mass migrations. This period has been labelled the Mfecane, but during the past 30 years historians have become very critical of this concept, in terms of its causes, course and consequences. A fierce debate has been carried out in books and journals, in an argument, which has almost as much to do with modern South Africa as it has with the past.

The term Mfecane was coined by E Walker in 1928 (3), and is of spurious origin. Supposedly an Nguni word meaning ‘the crushing’, it may actually be a neologism (4) inspired by the Sotho word Difaqane (the scattering) and the Tswana Lifaqane (time of migration).(5) The term Difaqane seems to have been first adopted by a white historian in 1912.(6) Although the two words are sometimes seen as interchangeable,(7) the term Mfecane is generally applied to the whole of southern Africa, or sometimes just to the eastern coastal regions, when the term Difaqane is then applied to the Highveld.(8) Doubts about the origins of the word, however, are a minor issue when compared with the criticisms now being levelled against the whole concept of the Mfecane - yet it was an idea which was almost universally accepted until the 1980s. It is now probably “the most contested of nineteenth century developments to be investigated by South African historians” (9) and that is partly because of the relevance that it has for politics in modern South Africa.

The period of the Mfecane has conventionally been seen as a time of reorganisation within African societies, which led to the rise of more powerful centralised states. Originating in the struggles between the Ndwandwe, Ngwame and Methethwa peoples of the eastern coastal area, 1817 is sometimes taken as the start of the Mfecane proper – when the Ngwame were driven out by the Ndwandwe under Zwide. (10) The shock waves spread in a domino effect throughout southern Africa and as far north as modern Tanzania, as small warrior bands absorbed others and built nations. Either as part of this effect, or in reaction to it, several famous leaders and societies emerged, including Shaka of the Zulus, Sobhuzu of the Swazis, Moshoeshoe of the Sotho, and Mzilikazi of the Ndebele. Above all others, Shaka – who assumed power in his region after the death of his patron, Dingiswayo of the Mthethwa - has been identified as a major cause of the troubles.(11) Shaka is traditionally portrayed as a vicious tyrant, and the Zulu nation that he created has been seen as highly centralised, militaristic and aggressive.(12) It has been claimed that the mass migrations and conflicts that resulted from the struggles depopulated the Highveld, and that “at least a million people, and more likely two, died in a decade.”(13) The root causes of all these upheavals have been identified as decreasing resources, and social changes caused, or intensified by trade. (14)

Contemporaries obviously commented on these events at the time(15) or as much as they knew, but the modern concept of events originated with the “negrophobe”(16) G Theal in the 1890s, who clearly identified Zulu expansion as the main cause of the movements.(17) The leading explanation by whites in the nineteenth century for any progress within black South Africa was that they must have been inspired by some unknown white visitors – for, as with Great Zimbabwe, whites could not credit blacks with creativity and imagination.(18) Although the origins of the concept may have been racist, the Mfecane was adapted by Africanists and popularised by L Thompson and J Omer-Cooper in the 1960s.(19) Thompson brought history and anthropology together, while Omer-Cooper emphasised the positive role of African leaders. He argued that population increase caused an intensification of inter-community conflicts over land. This all led to a process of political change with improved military organisation, centralisation, and larger states being formed by assimilation. He dismissed white influence as a factor, and credited the “creative statecraft” of African leaders, and the adaptability of traditional African institutions with the positive changes. (20)

Many historians repeated the story uncritically during the 1970s (21) but there were a few attempts to re-examine certain aspects of the period in the 1970s and early 1980s (22) The idea that the conflicts were caused by the pressure of an expanding population on limited grazing and arable land had been suggested
by Omer-Cooper, but M Gluckman helped to substantiate this argument. J Guy attempted to show that the northern Nguni were competing for specific mixes of grazing that were needed at different seasons. He also explained how other ecological factors played an important part in increasing distress – there was a disastrous famine in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and the decline in rainfall reached its lowest point. Starvation and cannibalism resulted on the one hand, while in some areas villages grouped together to protect their grain stores. The control of decreasing resources was, therefore, one reason for the growth of larger chiefdoms. Guy does not agree with Gluckman, that Shaka’s military structure was due to him being “a near psychotic “with “a very disturbed psychosexuality” – but he does see Shaka’s recruitment of unmarried men into celibate regiments, to use as a workforce, as an effective way of controlling both production and reproduction. Taking the example of Pondoland, W Beinart argued that social changes could take place independently of the pressures of the Mfecane, even in areas that had been devastated. H Slater suggested that one by-product of the Mfecane was a supply of labourers for white farmers, as Africans became alienated from their means of subsistence.

It was not until J Cobbing’s attacks on the whole theory in a series of publications and papers between 1983 and 1991 that the Mfecane became more widely re-assessed. Cobbing believes that the main causes of increased conflict came, not from within African society, but from European-inspired slave trading. The Mfecane, he maintains, was a myth devised to cover for illegal slave raiding, and to legitimise the seizure of land by the Voortrekkers.

Cobbing’s first point is that European and Griqua slave-raid were the main cause of the problems, not the Zulus. From 1810 onwards, he argues, South African blacks were caught between two important demands: the supply of labour for the Cape, and the supply of slaves through Delagoa Bay. Although most historians are critical of his theory, some accept parts of it. N Etherington and J Wright for example, agree that the Mfecane was not Zulu-centred, but think that there is a lack of evidence for Cobbing’s alternative explanation. Omer-Cooper defends most of his own original theory, but accepts that the role of the Zulus has been exaggerated. He also says that slavery should be taken into account, whilst being unhappy about the lack of substantiation to Cobbing’s claims.

Others are more aggressively critical. M Kinsman and G Hartley both dispute the idea that missionaries co-operated with the Griquas over slavery. J Peires denies the claim that the Ngwane were first driven onto the Highveld by slavers from Delagoa Bay, only to be driven from it by Griqua slavers, and finally attacked by the British on a raid for labour at the battle of Mbolompo in 1828. The British, Peires claims, were acting defensively, and captives were only a by-product of the action. Cobbing receives some support for his claim that the British were involved in slavery from A Webster, but Peires and A Lester – whilst accepting that some captives were taken opportunistically – say that it would have been impossible for the British to maintain a large force of captive labour on such a wild frontier. The fact that contemporary humanitarians never referred to such a trade also makes it less likely to be true. E Eldredge attacks Cobbing’s assertion about Portuguese slave trading from Delagoa Bay. She says that slavery here was a response to the Mfecane, not a cause of it, and that slavery in general only added to existing problems of some stronger groups preying on others. For most of this period, both the people of Delagoa Bay and the northern Nguni were actually averse to the slave trade.

Cobbing’s second main point is that the idea of Shaka being evil and a prime cause of the Mfecane was used by British traders as an ‘alibi’ for their slaving activities, and then by historians to excuse land-grabbing. D Golan tries to show that Shaka has been much maligned, but there is too much contrary evidence for this to change the overall picture of him. D Wylie finds that stories about Shaka originated from many different sources, not just traders, while C Hamilton says that the bad views of Shaka start with his own people, and are only elaborated by traders later. Omer-Cooper continues to stress the creative role of Shaka, whatever his character was like. It is now generally accepted, in any case, that many of the military and social reforms that Shaka introduced were not his original ideas, but developments of earlier practices. C Saunders has found no evidence of a conspiracy among South African historians to make excuses for earlier generations.

Although Cobbing does not deny that great upheavals and migrations did take place, it is implicit in his other arguments that the impact of the Mfecane, certainly resulting from African peoples, must have been less than previously claimed. Here, there is support for his point of view. D Beach, for example, notes that the effect of the Mfecane on the Shona people was “far less cataclysmic than has been suggested in the past” and that in many areas the effects of raids were not long lasting, and the basic pattern of settlement and politics continued unaltered. J Laband claims, “the white settler myth of a landscape swept entirely clear by the Mfecane of its original inhabitants should be discounted.” As mentioned above,
however, nobody else accepts that slavery would have accounted for large-scale losses. Trading influence
was obviously important, but on the frontiers, the Boers were often seen by the Africans as just another
raiding society. (53) Contrary to much conventional historiography, the settler societies on the Highveld
during this period are most notable for their weakness. (54)

The debate is further complicated by the fact that some critics of Cobbing, also disagree amongst
themselves about certain issues. Eldredge continues to pursue the ecological causes of the *Mfecane*,
together with local patterns of economic and political organisations, but is critical of Guy and Peires (who
claims that Cobbing is attacking historical stereotypes that have already been discarded). (55) She argues
that maize fostered a growth in population, which was fine when there was good rainfall, but disastrous
when there was not. The area of the northern Nguni had good rainfall in the late eighteenth century, but in
the early nineteenth century they were hit by droughts and famine – and that was when the militarised
kingdoms began to emerge. (56)

A Kuper argues against Wright and Hamilton, saying that there was no political, social or economic
transformation in late eighteenth century southeast Africa leading to new models of ‘state-formation’. He
claims instead that there were strong continuities with established forms of chieftaincy in the region, based
on the pan-Nguni homestead form of organisation. (57) Then there are other historians who have not
directed much criticism with Cobbing, but who try to establish a wider context for the *Mfecane*. N Parsons
maintains that the Mfecane was not a unique phenomenon in South Africa, but that there was continual
violence based around trade (58). S Hall (59) and A Manson (60) link the *Mfecane* in the Highveld to a
more widespread time of strife among the Tswana, where Europeans may have made things worse, but did
not cause the problems.

Though concerning an historical period, Cobbing’s criticisms are overtly political. (61) He is attacking
those who use ‘popular’ history to simplify and distort the past for their own ends. In this way he sees the
*Mfecane* as having been used to justify white supremacy, while the legend of Shaka was used by extremist
Zulu nationalists to compensate for later defeat. (62) By encouraging these beliefs, the South African
whites in modern times were able to exploit the rift between the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party, and the
African National Congress. That other ‘great event’ of South African history, the Great Trek, is also now
under attack as being another myth devised to bolster white supremacy(63) – and since the two are inter-
related (64) the call is now for a general re-assessment of South African history in the nineteenth century.
The idea that the Voortrekkers were idealistic not materialistic is as much in question as the old idea that
the *Mfecane* created a vacuum for them to conveniently move in to. (65)

Cobbing is not the only one to call for the abandonment of the *Mfecane* as an historical term (66) and
although he has attracted much criticism, he is credited with having raised important new questions, and
causing historians to seriously re-examine that period.(67) It was the force of his critique, which led
Hamilton to call a major conference on the *Mfecane* in Johannesburg, in 1991.(68) The absence of any
contribution from Cobbing in the resulting book, however, plus the lack of any input from black historians,
does not bode well for the future.(69)

The debate has now quietened down, perhaps because history - and its modern implications - has less
emphasis placed on it in the new post-Apartheid South Africa, or perhaps because attention has moved on
to the Great Trek and the wider context. Most historians today acknowledge that there is a controversy
about the causes of the *Mfecane*, even if they still use it as a convenient term, (70) but in some places the
old stories are still to be seen, as if the debate of the last twenty years had never taken place!(71) A review
of the way South African history has been presented – with blacks and whites as two irreconcilably hostile
blocks – has long been overdue.(72) Omer-Cooper still maintains that the study of a period of history
should not be abandoned just because it has been misused in the past. He says that the study of the
*Mfecane* should be continued because it helps to show a number of important things, including: the
positive role of Africans in the history of their own continent, that Zulu society was not inherently military,
and that the claims of Apartheid were false.

Time will tell if he is right.
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25. Ibid, p111.
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44. E Isichei, African Societies to 1870, p414.
47. E Isichei, African Societies to 1870, pp413-414.
53. S Marks & A Atmore, Economy and Society, p29.
62. Ibid.
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