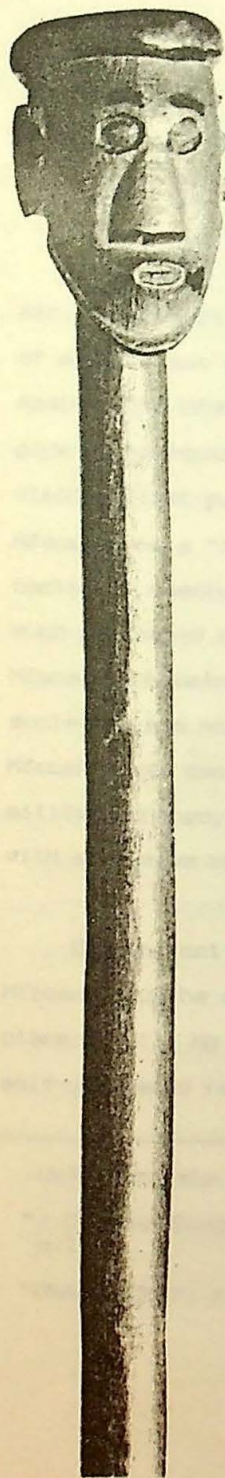


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THE 'MFEKANE' AFTERMATH

towards a new paradigm

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MATTWANE'S ROAD TO MBHOLOMPHO:
A REPRIEVE FOR THE MFEKANE ?

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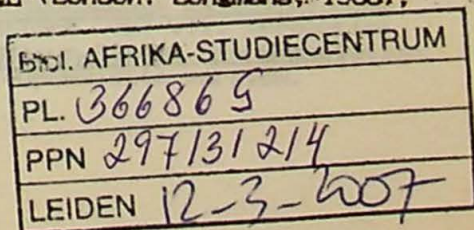
The small and possibly smug world of precolonial Southern African historians was rudely shattered in 1983 by the appearance of a brilliant polemic by Julian Cobbing entitled "The Case Against the Mfecane."¹ In a series of increasingly provocative papers and lectures, Cobbing challenged the existing conventional wisdom, first put forward by Omer-Cooper in 1966, that the Mfecane was a "revolutionary process of change from a single centre,"² namely the rise of the Zulu kingdom. Omer-Cooper was much concerned to stress the Afrocentrism of his perspective. The Mfecane, he maintained, gave the lie to the view "that African societies had no record of autonomous development ... It [the Mfecane] was essentially a process of social, political and military change, internal to African society and taking place with explosive rapidity."³

Cobbing not only rejected Omer-Cooper's definition of the Mfecane, but he seriously questioned whether the event had taken place at all. He argued that the Mfecane was not an internally self-generated revolution occurring within northern Nguni.

¹Unfortunately, it has never been published.

²J.D. Omer-Cooper, The Zulu Aftermath (London: Longmans, 1966), p.7.

³Omer-Cooper, p.168.



society, but a convenient alibi, whereby succeeding generations of white historians rationalised and legitimated white seizure of black lands. The wars and dispossessions of the early nineteenth century were set in motion not by the rise of the Zulu state, but by two chains of violence emanating from Colonial aggression. One chain of violence, in the east, was initiated by Portuguese slave-trading from Delagoa Bay, which impacted directly on the northern Nguni. Another chain of violence, in the west, was prompted by the labour needs of the Cape Colony and augmented by the raiding activities of its armed and mounted surrogates, the Griqua.

Most of Cobbing's arguments have appeared only in an unpublished and incomplete form, and it would be both unacademic and unfair to attack a work-in-progress. However, it is not an exaggeration to say that the entire debate on the nature of southern African precolonial societies has been paralysed by Cobbing's intervention, and will continue to remain so until the crisis created by "the Cobbing hypothesis" has been resolved. Fortunately, one of his articles has been published, "The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolombo,"* thereby making it possible for serious historical debate to commence... I will confine myself to those aspects of "The Mfecane as Alibi" which relate to my own area of specialisation, namely the Eastern Cape/Transkei region. Much of what follows may seem negative and petty. It certainly lacks the broad sweep and wider political resonances which characterise Cobbing's work. But it is

* Journal of African History, 29 (1988), pp.487-519.

essential, I believe, after eight years of "the Cobbing hypothesis," to get the debate down to specifics. And it does provide me with an opportunity to reassess the career of one of the most fascinating and understudied figures in the history of South Africa: Matiwane, the chief of the amaNgwane.

Matiwane is one of the forgotten men of South African history, but his ultimate failure does not permit us to ignore the power that was his in the days of his glory. Matiwane irrupted onto the Highveld about the year 1822. He crushed the Hlubi, defeated the Tlokwa and compelled Moshoeshoe to pay him tribute. For five years or more, he dominated the southern Highveld in much the same way as Shaka dominated Natal.*

Matiwane, the *gwalagwala* bird with the red knees
And the red eyes. He reddened his mouth
By drinking the blood of men.

In 1828, for reasons that are in dispute, Matiwane left the Highveld and crossed the western extremity of the Drakensberg into the Transkei region. On 27 August 1828, he was utterly destroyed at the battle of Mbolompo by the combined forces of the Thembu, Xhosa and Mpondo kings, backed by the British army. Cobbing chose Mbolompo as a good case whereby the "teleological and Afrocentric assumptions of mfecane theory (p.489)" might be tested. It is as a test case that I will be reviewing Matiwane's

*Msebenzi, History of Matiwane and the amaNgwane Tribe as told by Msebenzi to his kinsman Albert Hlongwane. Edited by N.J. van Warmelo. Ethnological Publications, Vol VII. (Pretoria: Department of Native Affairs, 1938), p.63. My own translation, rather than Van Warmelo's rather euphemistic version.

road to Mbolompo; by means of it I hope to produce a concept of the Mfecane which is very different to Cobbing's.

1: *The History of Matiwane*

Since it is unlikely that the average reader will be aware of the rich African sources available for reconstructing the history of Matiwane, and since Cobbing - who is aware of at least some of them - has concealed their existence, it seems necessary to introduce them to readers at some length.

1. Pride of place must undoubtedly go to the extraordinary oral tradition published in 1938 under the name of the "History of Matiwane and the amaNgwane tribe, as told by Msebenzi to his kinsman, Albert Hlongwane."¹ Msebenzi, a grandson of Matiwane, was born about 1850, some twenty years after his illustrious grandfather's death. His poetic talents were recognised while he was still a boy, and he was singled out by his father, the Regent of the amaNgwane, for training as a historian and praise-singer. About 1930, he paid a visit to his literate nephew, Albert Hlongwane, who transcribed the old man's traditions word for word. The text was subsequently translated and footnoted by Government ethnologist, N.J. van Warmelo, and published by the Department of Native Affairs in Pretoria.

¹ Ibid.

This mode of publication, not unusual in the high Colonial period, should not lead one to question the authenticity of the "History of Matiwane." The text is entirely in Zulu, and is more than 100 pages long. Both the structure and the language of the narrative confirm its oral origins. It is full of repetitions, poetic images and archaic expressions, and includes 128 lines of Matiwane's praises. Van Warmelo, a Venda specialist, could not have fabricated any part of it, nor could he have had any conceivable motive for doing so.

2. The next most valuable source is "The Story of the 'Fetcani Horde' by One of Themselves," published in the Cape Quarterly Review.⁷ The narrator is Moloja, a rank and file soldier of Matiwane. Unlike the "History of Matiwane," this is not an oral tradition but an eyewitness account. Moloja fought against Shaka's Zulus at Ladybrand, and he participated in an expedition which reconnoitred the Transkei the year before Matiwane's fatal decision to move south. He does not pretend to know anything about Matiwane himself, or about the councils of the chiefs, but he gives vivid and credible accounts of the events which he personally experienced. The text was taken down verbatim by J.M. Orpen, a Colonial official with a long-standing interest in African history. Although it has been translated into English, it seems to be an accurate rendition, and one cannot think of any reason why the translator might have wished to distort the original.

⁷ Cape Quarterly Review, 1-11 (1881-2), pp.267-275.

3. A third important source is "A Little Light from Basutoland" by Nehemiah Moshoeshoe, the sixth son of the great Sotho king. This text was published in English,⁶ but is based on a series of articles which first appeared in Sotho in Leselinyana kaLesotho. Matiwane is only one of the chiefs dealt with in Nehemiah's kaleidoscopic narrative, but the references are all the more valuable for being incidental and therefore obviously genuine. I have not been able to consult the numerous Sotho references to the history of Matiwane cited by P.B. Sanders,⁷ but, judging from Sanders's text, they seem to be in general agreement with the other African sources detailed here.

4. "A Story of Native Wars" by "an aged Fingo" named Platje Mhlanga⁸ is another eyewitness account, related by a Hlubi who served for a time in Matiwane's army. This text is relatively brief, but is still of historical interest as an independent confirmation of other sources.

5. More problematic is the account of "The Amahlubi and the Amangwane" which W.C. Scully, the well-known magistrate and writer composed for a series of ethnic histories which appeared

⁶ Cape Monthly Magazine (1880), pp. 221-233, 280-292.

⁷ P.B. Sanders, Moshoeshoe, Chief of the Sotho (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.30.

⁸ Cape Monthly Magazine, April 1877, pp.248-252.

in The State.¹¹ Scully's main informant was Dick Simanga, a half-brother of Matiwane, whom he interviewed in 1895. Alone of these five sources, this does not pretend to be a verbatim text and is liberally interspersed with Scully's own embellishments and assertions, some of them borrowed from G.M. Theal's questionable histories.

Whatever the defects of the above five texts, they share certain qualities which tend to lend them credibility. In each case, the name of the original informant is known. There is no reason to believe that any of them has been biased or distorted either internally by the informant, or externally by the white editor and translator. Finally, the texts are completely independent of each other and none of them, except Scully's, has been interfered with or influenced by any other text.

Cobbing, however, makes no direct reference to any of these valuable sources. This is especially curious inasmuch as he is certainly aware of at least three of them. He refers to the archival documents which Van Warmelo appended to the History of Matiwane, but he does not use the History itself. He disparages D.F. Ellenberger's History of the Basuto¹² but he fails to mention that Ellenberger's version of Matiwane's story is explicitly drawn from Moloja and Nehemiah Moshoeshe. The closest that Cobbing ever comes to acknowledging the existence of any of

¹¹W.C. Scully, "Fragments of Native History," Parts IV and V, The State (1909), pp.284-292, 435-441.

¹²London: 1912.

these African sources is footnote 110, which states:

I do not regard the allegations either of Ellenberger or those in Van Warmelo as reliable. There is no evidence [of battles between the amaNgwane and the Zulu or the Ndebele] from the Zulu or Ndebele sides. 'Zulu' meant any Nguni.

It is indeed an extraordinary turn of phrase to dismiss a 110-page Zulu text, probably the finest oral tradition ever recorded in the Zulu language, as an "allegation." There might not be any evidence of battles with the amaNgwane from the Zulu or the Ndebele sides, though R.K. Rasmussen would disagree.¹³ However, there is plenty of evidence from the Ngwane and the Sotho sides, and it would be absurd to argue that Moloja, who was personally engaged in these battles,¹⁴ did not know whom he was fighting against.

Even if Cobbing does regard the five texts as unreliable,¹⁵ he has no right to conceal their existence. He has an obligation to discuss these texts and give reasons for his assessment. Unwary readers may well be predisposed to reject the "allegations" of Van Warmelo (seemingly an Afrikaner) and Ellenberger (a missionary) as unreliable. They should not, however, casually dismiss the evidence of five authentic and unchallenged African

¹³ R.K. Rasmussen, Migrant Kingdom (London: Rex Collings, 1978), p.55, states that "Ndebele-derived evidence makes it clear that he [Matiwane] fought - and was defeated by - subjects of Mzilikazi." Unfortunately, I have not been able to check Rasmussen's references.

¹⁴ Moloja, "Fetcani Horde," pp.269-70. Every one of the five sources mentions the Zulu attack on Matiwane. See also footnote 20 below.

witnesses.

11 *Matiwane's Road to Mbolombo*

Cobbing alleges towards the end of his article (p.509), that "the Ngwane were first expelled from the Mzinyathi by the direct or indirect attention of the Delagoa Bay slavers." He offers no evidence - indeed none exists - that the Delagoa Bay slavers even came anywhere near Matiwane, so we must excuse the "direct" part of "direct or indirect attention" as a rhetorical flourish. In fact, Cobbing has nothing new to say about Matiwane's origins in Natal except that he lived on the Mzinyathi, which is a mistake.

Matiwane's home was on the White Mfolozi from which he was driven, possibly by Zwide, before the emergence of Shaka.¹⁰ He fled southwest to Ntenjwa in the foothills of the Drakensberg, the original home of the Hlubi and the Zizi. This first invasion initiated his career as a conqueror and an overlord. Matiwane compelled defeated chiefs to give up their eldest sons and their fattest cattle in return for being left alone. The men were organised into age-regiments, but an ethnic hierarchy persisted, the Ngwane regarded the Hlubi as their "servants."¹¹

¹⁰ The sources are contradictory. The History of Matiwane refers to a conspiracy between four chiefs, including Shaka, Dingiswayo and Zwide, to fall upon "that little fly" (p.20). Moloja refers to an attack by Ndwandwe, the father of Zwide, p.268.

¹¹ On the relationship between Matiwane and his subject chiefs, see the crucial texts in History of Matiwane, pp. 22,46. On the Ngwane view of the Hlubi as their servants, see Moloja, p.268, and Mhlanga, p. 250.

When Shaka defeated Zwide and laid claim to sole authority in the northern Nguni region, Matiwane realised that he could no longer hold his ground and he decided to preserve his power by relocating it. He explained his motivation to one of his subject chiefs, as follows:¹⁷

I am retiring in order to be further removed from Shaka, that he may not get at me while still well fed, it were better that he reach me when hungry. I shall climb over the mountains and get to the top and settle there.

Strangely enough, he said nothing about the direct or indirect attentions of the Portuguese slavers at Delagoa Bay.

Cobbing maintains that the interests of Matiwane and the other "black groups" on the Highveld were essentially complementary. "The Ngwane," he argues, "expanded more as a defensive organisation than an offensive one" (p.508). This view of Matiwane's activities would certainly have surprised Chief Mpangazita of the Hlubi, whom Matiwane killed; Chief Sikonyela of the Tlokwa, whom he defeated; and Chief Moshoeshoe, who was forced to pay him *nyehelo* protection money.¹⁸ It would also almost certainly have offended Matiwane himself, who enjoyed being praised as the *gwalagwala* bird whose lips were reddened by the blood of men. The recorded sayings of Matiwane, such as "the nation I make war on goes hairless" (shaved heads being a sign of

¹⁷ History of Matiwane, p. 22.

¹⁸ Sanders, Moshoeshoe, pp.29-30, 37-8.

mourning],^{1*} do not evoke a chief of defensive and pacific disposition. We would do well to remember that it is not only white sources, which depict the Mfecane as a time of unbridled and indeed praiseworthy ferocity.

The crux of Cobbing's argument, however, lies not with Matiwane's sojourn on the Highveld but with his decision to leave it. Cobbing can find no direct evidence bearing on this question, and resorts to speculation (pp.508-9):

What at this stage drove the Ngwane south? ... Before I undertook research for this article, the hypothesis that Griqua-Bergenaar attacks from the west were responsible had occurred to me ... the Ngwane were far more exposed where they were, west of the Caledon ... The contemporary evidence fully backs this hypothesis. The conclusion is inescapable. The Ngwane .. had the misfortune to run into the Griqua in the Caledon who attacked them from the west for Mantatees and cattle.

We will look at the Griqua in due course. But one is constrained to remark that had Cobbing conceived his hypothesis after doing his research rather than before it, his results might well have been very different. In particular, if he had consulted the five African traditions discussed in Part I above, he would have found that they are all agreed on the reasons for Matiwane's move south.

Matiwane's power on the Highveld remained unchallenged until approximately February 1827, when it began to unravel with frightening rapidity. The first blow fell with the Zulu invasion of the Highveld, which is confirmed by all five traditions and

^{1*} Scully, p.290.

by the French missionary, Arbousset.²⁰ The best explanation for this attack is that given by Nehemiah Moshoeshe, whose evidence is all the more trustworthy inasmuch as it comes from a disinterested outsider. Nehemiah writes that Shaka was summoned by the Hlubi chiefs Mhlophakulu and Sidinane, after Matiwane had killed their father, Chief Mpangazita. Moloja gives a vivid picture of the fighting:

The Zulus had crossed the Caledon. It was many days since our cattle were taken [by the Zulus]. We were as numerous as they; they and the cattle were scattered. We had reached Viervoet (Kolonyana). The great regiment (of the amaNgwane) proposed that we should go in a body. The regiment of the white shields (the married men) refused. They went on [alone]. They wanted to capture many [cattle]. Ho! When the first Zulu rushed at them shouting the hullabaloo, they fled. We the Ushee [regiment], we fought at Lady Brand. We fought well. We killed all the Zulus there. We were tired out ... We met the Zulu army returning from chasing the regiment of the white shields. There we fought with them. There Dingaan himself was stabbed in the chest by that small party of ours. He was serving in that army of his brother Chaka.

The amaNgwane held their ground, but they were unable to prevent the Zulu taking most of their cattle. Shortly after this incident, Matiwane began to think of moving south. He sent two regiments, the UShiyi and the Intsimbi, to spy out the land of the Thembu.

²⁰ Moloja, pp.269-70; Scully, p.435; N. Moshesh, pp.224-5; Mhlanga, p.251; History of Matiwane, pp.26-8; T. Arbousset and F. Daumas, Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the Northeast of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope (1846; reprinted Cape Town: Struik, 1968), p.307.

Before they could return, however, the amaNgwane had suffered another, even more decisive setback at the hands of the Sotho king, Moshoeshoe. Matiwane had made his alliance with Moshoeshoe the cornerstone of his policy, but there were many of his councillors who distrusted the Sotho leader. Rumours spread that Moshoeshoe had doctored the presents he sent to Matiwane with a medicine that caused the Ngwane chief to love him. At the same time, the councillors argued, Moshoeshoe was conspiring with Shaka. The History of Matiwane relates the story of a delegation of amaNgwane who visited Moshoeshoe, only to discover a delegation from Shaka already there:²¹

When we filled our hemp-pipes to praise you [Matiwane], we heard Shaka's praises being recited on the other side of the fence. That mSuthu of yours about whom we spoke to you all these days, where are our lies now? [referring to Matiwane's refusal to believe that Moshoeshoe was plotting against him]. We asked you: What does that mSuthu mean by continually standing over you?

When Matiwane still refused to take action against Moshoeshoe, the Ngwane commanders called out the army on their own authority:

Arm yourselves! For Matiwane has abandoned his responsibilities! His father is now that Moshoeshoe.

The Ngwane armies advanced up the single road leading to Thaba Bosiu, but the Sotho rolled boulders down on them, and they were defeated with great slaughter. More surprising is the assertion in the History of Matiwane, confirmed by Moloja, that Matiwane warned Moshoeshoe of the impending attack thus ensuring

²¹ History of Matiwane, pp.40-41.

the defeat of his own army.²² This astonishing story becomes less incredible once one understands that Matiwane was concerned not so much with helping Moshoeshoe as with destroying his own rebellious generals.

After this unnecessary defeat, Matiwane gathered together the survivors and demanded to know who had called out the army without his permission. But the princes of the blood were equally furious, and replied:²³

They [those of royal blood] replied, "It [the army] was called out by us, but as to those that you enquire about [killed in battle] they were killed by you, by you yourself..."

And the indunas spoke in the same strain. They said, "As for you [Matiwane], what hinders us from killing you? Do you think that amongst the sons of Masumpa [Matiwane's father] you are the only one, that we cannot make another son of Masumpa chief? you despise us and listen more to Moshoeshoe than to us."

The relationship between Matiwane and the rebel regiments was still deadlocked when further troubles descended on him from outside. Chief Mehlomakhulu had resuscitated Hlubi power, and defeated three Ngwane regiments at Moolmans Hoek. At the same time, a formidable new enemy, Mzilikazi, raided deep into the southern Highveld.²⁴

Meanwhile, the scouting expedition had returned from the Transkei. They reported that the country was rich in cattle, but

²² History of Matiwane, p.40; Moloja, p.272.

²³ History of Matiwane, pp.43-5.

²⁴ Moloja, p.272; Rasmussen, p. 55.

that they had not been able to capture any. Moreover the rigours of the journey had reduced them to such a state of illness and starvation that Matiwane did not dare to allow them to return home until they had fully recuperated. For it is clear from the records that the decision to move south was Matiwane's alone, and that he forced the other amaNgwane to accept it.²⁵

The great men, our fathers, said .. "We have been fortunate, we have conquered others, and settled in a country, let us stay and eat corn. Chaka has come and turned back. Mosilikatze has come and turned back. If they come another day we shall devise some scheme and fight them well." But the chief refused to listen.

Matiwane's brother, Hawana, was even more emphatic:²⁶

There? Where? We have come a long way, we are not going anywhere else. We have already built here. Has this fellow eaten a sheep's lung? It is he who has been sent to destroy our nation.

Such an insult could not be tolerated by Matiwane, especially in the light of his generals' threat to "make another son of Masumpa chief." He sent an army against Hawana, his own brother. After two days of fierce fighting, the loyalists prevailed and Hawana was killed. Another brother, Madilika, had already been killed for similar reasons.²⁷

Resistance to Matiwane's tyranny collapsed after the death of Hawana and Madilika. "We had better go," said Matiwane's

²⁵Moloja, p.272.

²⁶History of Matiwane, p.30. According to Van Warmelo, eating a sheep's lung was supposed to turn a warrior into a coward.

²⁷History of Matiwane, pp.30-44.

mother, "or he [Matiwane] is certain to kill us all."²⁰ And so the amaNgwane moved south to their eventual destruction at Mholompo.

The answer to Cobbing's question, "What at this stage drove the Ngwane south?" is abundantly clear. It was none other than Chief Matiwane himself, against the evidence of his own spies and the wishes of his own people. It was Matiwane himself who drove his people south, even though he had to kill his own brothers first. Buffeted by external defeats and shaken by internal rebellion, the *gwalagwala* bird with the red knees clearly felt that the only means of rejuvenating his waning authority was a brand-new start in a brand-new country.

It would not have been difficult to make this point in a much briefer space, but I have chosen to tell the history of Matiwane at length because it demonstrates the unusually rich and rewarding extent of the African sources which Cobbing has chosen to ignore. These sources demonstrate that an Afrocentric approach is neither ideological nor teleological; on the contrary, it is the only approach which is permitted by the historical evidence. Matiwane's movements cannot be explained merely in terms of external enemies, black or white. They can only be explained by an understanding of the internal dynamics of the Ngwane kingdom.

But what of the "contemporary evidence" which Cobbing maintains "fully backs" his hypothesis (p.508)?

²⁰ Moloja, p.272.

The first point to make is that none of the intrusive "Mfecane" groups which invaded the Transkei region before 1827, referred to by Cobbing on p.500, had anything to do with Matiwane. The descent of the Cape Drakensberg was an arduous task which precluded the possibility of a lightning raid on the Transkei by any of the Highveld chiefdoms. The Mfecane of the early 1820's had nothing to do with Matiwane, but was the work of wholly unrelated invaders who had entered Transkei directly from Natal. Reverend John Brownlee refers, for example, to an attack by the "Ficani" on the Mpondo about the middle of 1824 at a place far distant from either the amaNgwane or the British imperialists.²⁰

The most famous of these invaders were the Bhaca, under their redoubtable chief, Madzikane.²¹ The March 1825 attack on the Thembu, to which Cobbing refers (p.500), was most probably carried out by the Bhaca. The raiders are described as people "who never rear cattle, nor sow corn, but slaughter and devour." This description fits the Bhaca, but not the amaNgwane. The location of the raiders, on the Tsomo river, and the date of the attacks likewise fit in better with what we know of Bhaca movements

²⁰George Thompson, Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa, (1827; reprinted Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1967-8), Vol.1, p.180. Curiously enough, Cobbing fails to mention this reference.

²¹See A.M. Makaula, "A Political History of the Bhaca from earliest times to 1910," M.A. Rhodes University, 1988. Also D.Z. Makaula, UMadzikane (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1967).

at the time.²¹ It is also barely possible that the mysterious invaders were the Sotho-speaking Hoja, some of whom were driven out of the Tarka by a Boer commando in 1824.²² Moorosi's Phuti also raided Boer cattle.²³ There is no evidence anywhere in Cobbing's sources that the "Mfecane" of 1825 were the soldiers of Matiwane.

What of the Griqua-Bergenaar attacks from the west which, Cobbing suggests, drove Matiwane south into the Transkei? I do not pretend to any special expertise on the Griqua, and it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the battle of Dithakong. Available evidence on the Grikwas of 1827-8 indicates, however, that they posed very little threat to Matiwane if - as is extremely unlikely - they had any contact with him at all. The Dithakong alliance between Andries Waterboer, Barend Barends and Adam Kok was a one-off marriage of convenience, never again to be

²¹ Madzikane was killed fighting the Thembu and the Qwathi at Gqutyini in Engcobo district. This occurred about the time of a solar eclipse that can be dated to 20 December 1824. M. Rainier, "Madikane's Last Stand," (unpublished MS, 1982). The key text is a letter, W.H. Rogers-Major Forbes, 27 May 1825, Records of the Cape Colony, ed. G.M. Theal (London: 1897-1905), XXII, pp.429-30. In addition to the passage quoted above, Rogers refers to the invaders as people who burned their enemies alive in their huts at night. Bhaca rebels murdered Chief Sonyangwe by this means.

²² Thompson, I, pp.179-80. W.H. Rogers-Major Forbes, 27 May 1825, Records of the Cape Colony, XXII, p. 430, states "they have a great dread of fire arms and relate that some few of their tribe attempted to plunder some people to the westward who had them (fire arms) and were repulsed." This fits the Hoja better than the Bhaca, but in any case it should be noted that this text hardly indicates a mass expulsion.

²³ Moloja, p.271.

repeated. Waterboer and Barends remained in the deepest Northwest Cape, hundreds of kilometres removed from Matiwane, and Adam Kok, who settled at the abandoned mission station of Philipton in 1826, was by far the weakest of the three. Kok's humble request for a renewal of the missionary influence against which he had initially rebelled indicates his desire "to regain the advantages of respectability and a settled existence."¹⁴ And, even though the old spirit of hunting and raiding was not altogether quenched, neither Ross nor Legassick mention any contact between the Griquas and a Nguni-speaking people during this period. By 1827, Adam Kok's Griquas numbered no more than 60 families, with 200 Kora and Sotho families subordinate to them.¹⁵ Finally, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that Adam Kok could have driven Matiwane from the Highveld, even with horses and guns. Mzilikazi, who crushed Barend Barends in 1831, was unafraid of guns and had nothing but contempt for the Griquas and their ilk:¹⁶

They [the Griquas] were only a pack of thieves, and destitute of courage, for in no instance had they ever stood, or could stand, the brunt of battle. He had always destroyed and driven them with a handful of men and the mere striplings of his army.

¹⁴ R. Ross, Adam Kok's Griqua (Cambridge: University Press, 1976), p.21.

¹⁵ M. Legassick, "The northern frontier to c.1840: the rise and decline of the Griqua people," in The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840, eds. R.Elphick and H.Gillomee. 2nd ed. (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1989), p.394.

¹⁶ Rasmussen, pp.81-4. It is also worth noting that Moshoeshoe defeated the Kora and the Newlanders on an open field in 1850, even though these were accompanied by 800 Rolong and a British artillery unit. Sanders, pp.72-4.

The only army that he feared, Mzilikazi added, was that of the Zulu chief, Dingane. There is no reason to believe that Matiwane felt any different.

Cobbing cites three specific pieces of evidence in support of his contention that the amaNgwane were driven south by the Griqua (p.508). We will examine each in turn.

- (1) In 1829 Shaw was told by two of the prisoners taken at Mbolombo: 'They had seen when far to the north some white people with horses, which we suppose to have been some of the Griquas.'

One should note to begin with that it was Shaw rather than the prisoners who identified the "white people with horses" as Griquas. Mpini, a grandson of Matiwane's brother who got the story from one of Moloja's contemporaries, told Van Warmelo that the amaNgwane "were unfamiliar with guns but had already seen horses a few times on the Vaal. They had belonged to Boers."¹⁷ It is therefore quite possible that the "white people" referred to were indeed white people. But even if the "white people" were Griquas, Shaw's informants said nothing about firearms or fighting, which one might suppose were more memorable than horses.¹⁸ They did add that "their nation are fond of War, and for many years they had been moving over an immense extent of country and had conquered and plundered many tribes both of Caffres and Bootshuanas." This is hardly in keeping with Cobbing's image of a

¹⁷ History of Matiwane, p. 263.

¹⁸ W. Shaw, The Journal of William Shaw. Ed. W.D. Hammond-Tooke. (Cape Town: Balkema, 1972), p.160.

passive group of Africans trapped in the trans-continental cross-fire of interrelated European plunder systems. Finally, one should note that the "prisoners taken at Mbolombo" were prisoners no longer. They had indeed been captured by the British troops, but, less than one year after their capture, they were free inhabitants of the Transkei.

- (2) Bannister heard from other prisoners that the Ngwane had been repelled by the Griquas about two years since, and twice they sought for a place to rest.

Saxe Bannister (not Shane Bannister, as Cobbing calls him) was a British publicist who never went anywhere near Mbolombo. His information came not directly from "other prisoners," as Cobbing states, but third-hand, from a British officer, who had heard it from some Khoikhoi, who had spoken to some prisoners. In considering this text, it is pertinent to quote some other extracts which Cobbing preferred to ignore.²⁰

In discussing their origins, the prisoners reportedly said:

They were first driven from their houses by Chaca several years ago; then repelled by the Griquas about two years since; and twice they had sought for a place of rest. The Tambookies, they assert, first attacked them without provocation.

They gave the following description of the aftermath of the battle:

[The Xhosa and the Thembu] fell upon the women and children in the most inhuman manner imaginable ... A few men and numbers of women and children fell into our hands. Many have requested our protection, being afraid to remain as the Caffres would kill them. I

²⁰S. Bannister, Humane Policy, (1830; reprinted London: 1968), pp. 156-159.

hear the boers have taken several to the Colony, and the remainder were escorted by a party of cavalry into the track of the dispersed Maceesas [ie. amaNgwane].

At another point in his book, Bannister describes Lieutenant-Governor Richard Bourke in the following terms:

It is impossible to describe a person better disposed towards the native people than Major-General Bourke .. His benevolent intentions are proved substantially by his public acts.

This is the same Major-General Bourke whom Cobbing maintains sent an army across the Kei and deliberately instigated a massacre, purely to extract labour for the Colonial farmers.

Cobbing cannot have it both ways. If he accepts Bannister's authority concerning a Griqua attack on the amaNgwane, then he must also accept, on the same authority, that Tshaka attacked the amaNgwane, that it was the Thembu not the British who initiated the battle of Mbolombo, that the Ngwane women and children voluntarily accepted British protection, that the British soldiers escorted the majority of captives back to their people, and that Lieutenant-Governor Bourke was a sincerely humane individual. Any one of these admissions would destroy his entire case.

- (3) Finally, Stockenstrom referred to 'great atrocities' committed by Adam Kok's Griqua on 'black fugitives' - and he meant the amaNgwane - in the upper Caledon.

Stockenstrom did not identify the 'black fugitives' in question, and Cobbing has no right to state with such assurance that "he meant the amaNgwane." The passage is taken from some unrevised autobiographical notes that Stockenstrom wrote in 1856, nearly thirty years after Mbolombo. It occurs at a point in his

narrative where he is trying to rationalise his harsh treatment of the Griquas and the Khoikhoi.** On the very page that Cobbing alludes to, Stockenstrom confuses Adam Kok's mission station of Philipolis with the Kat River mission of Philipton. Elsewhere, he refers to the "Fetcani" of Mbolompo as a branch of the "Mantatee [i.e. Sotho] hordes." In short, the extract is the casual remark of a confused and elderly politician trying to justify himself. Since it is far from certain that he was even referring to the amaNgwane, I think we may discard this text.

In addition to these three unsatisfactory texts cited by Cobbing, there are two other references to contacts between the amaNgwane and the Griqua. The first comes from W.C. Scully's version of his conversation with Dick Simanga:†

To westward lay the waterless desert on whose hither fringe dwelt the cunning yellow men who rode swift horses and spat death from iron tubes. Matiwane had met and been vorated by the Griquas on one occasion when he led his haggard horde across the wide plains, in the hope of being able to find a haven on the banks of the Vaal.

Expressions such as "cunning yellow men" and "haggard hordes" demonstrate quite conclusively that there is more Scully than Simanga in the above passage, but even if we take it at face value, it means only that the Griquas blocked Matiwane's path

**A. Stockenstrom, The Autobiography of the late Sir Andries Stockenstrom, Bart., Ed. C.W. Hutton. (Cape Town: Juta, 1887), 2 Vols, I, pp. 213, 278-9. It is also possible that Stockenstrom was thinking of an incident in which he supported a group of San against the Griqua leadership. See Ross, p.24.

†Scully, p.437.

westward; even Scully does not suggest that the Griquas chased Matiwane south. The best clue to the occasional Griqua references in the history of Matiwane is provided by the missionary Stephen Kay.⁴²

This young man [a former follower of Matiwane] informed me that he was with the Mantatees, when the Matlhapees and Griquas attacked and shot so many of them near Lattakoo [Dithakong]. This fact, therefore, indubitably shows that Matuwane's forces .. formed a branch of that powerful host.

Kay's inference is understandable, but obviously incorrect. Matiwane never fought at Dithakong. The value of the quotation is to demonstrate that the young man in question did not accompany Matiwane all the way from Natal but joined his army on the Highveld. Matiwane's army was, after all, a composite entity of diverse origins which contained remnants of all the nations which he had conquered - Zizi, Hlubi, and Sotho. I would suggest that the scattered and insubstantial references to the Griqua originate not with Matiwane or the amaNgwane proper, but with some of his followers who had fought against the Griquas before attaching themselves to the Ngwane chief. The tenuousness of the evidence - no names, no places, no anecdotes - clearly indicates that the Griquas did not play a significant role in Ngwane history.

It is not as if we lack an explanation for Matiwane's decision to depart from the southern Highveld. Shaka's army had defeated him, and his alliance with Moshoeshoe was broken. A new enemy, Mzilikazi, had appeared, just as an old one, Mehlomakhulu,

⁴²S. Kay, Travels and Researches in Caffraria (London: John Mason, 1833), pp.299-300.

was reviving. Matiwane had killed two of his brothers out of jealousy, he had betrayed his own soldiers to the Sotho king, and he held the remainder of his followers in subjection by fear alone. Matiwane did not need the Griquas to push him out of the Highveld: he had no reason to stay.

III *The British Attack*

Even if Matiwane's amaNgwane were not driven south by the Griqua, the possibility remains that Cobbing's second major hypothesis is correct, namely that the British attacked Matiwane at Mbolompo in 1828 for the express purpose of acquiring labourers. "Driven into the Transkei, the Ngwane were at once set upon by the British who were raiding for "free" labour in the aftermath of Ordinance 49" (p.509). It is therefore to the behaviour of the British authorities that we now turn.

Cobbing argues, on the basis of Susan Newton-King's article on "The labour market of the Cape Colony, 1807-1828,"⁴³ that an acute labour shortage "threatened the whole British settler scheme, and with it economic development and 'defence' on the eastern frontier" (pp.493-4). With the failure of attempts to import white indentured labour, and with the prospect of slave abolition in the near future, the Cape Government proposed to meet the need by importing black labour from beyond the Colonial

⁴³ See Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa, eds S. Marks and A. Atmore. (London: Longman, 1980).

boundary. This was illegal in terms of existing legislation until the Governor passed Ordinance 49 "for the Admission into the Colony .. of Persons belonging to the Tribes beyond the Frontier, and for regulating the manner of their Employment as free labourers in the service of the Colonists." Cobbing continues (pp.501-2):

Bourke urged London to agree to the Colony 'inviting' in not merely emaciated individuals .. but 'whole tribes.' But would they come?

This was a grim moment for Africa. It was the first time in British colonial experience anywhere that the dilemma of how to 'attract' free labourers, to work at very low wages and in perhaps appalling conditions, had to be faced. The passing of an Ordinance permitting 'invitations' was unlikely to have much effect. Later, more thorough strategies were devised and perfected in the Cape to force out free labour. ... But in 1828 the only way to obtain 'free' labour was to send in an army and fetch it out. As soon as Ordinance 49 permitting the issue of invitations was safely drafted, Bourke seized on the news of the Zulu invasion as a pretext to send his armies across the Kei to bring out some more labour.

It is my contention that Cobbing's interpretation of British policy is just as erroneous as his argument that Griqua attacks drove Matiwane south. I will begin by analysing the labour policies of the Cape Colony during the administration of Acting Governor Richard Bourke. I will then question the contention that "the only way to get free labour was to send an army and fetch it out." Finally, I will compare Cobbing's version with the events leading up to the battle of Mpholompo with the historical record.

British capitalism had long outgrown the smash-and-grab phase of primitive accumulation by the time that Matiwane headed south. Those were the days when the ardent free trader, William

Huskisson was President of the Board of Trade, and the laissez-faire principles of Adam Smith was the conventional wisdom of Britain's commercial ruling classes. As far as labour policy was concerned, the anti-slavery movement was approaching its zenith, and Britain was moving rapidly towards a code of social relations in which voluntary submission took the place of coercion, where masters were urged "to employ a system of encouragement in vigorous exertion, instead of the dark code of penalties against crime."⁴⁴

In South Africa, the new thinking was embodied in the so-called Commission of Eastern Enquiry, appointed in 1822, to root out the mercantilist detritus of the former Dutch colonies.⁴⁵ They produced a series of wide-ranging recommendations designed to break the feudalistic hold of the Cape Dutch oligarchy; to liberalise production, trade and land tenure; and to create a rational and impartial bureaucracy capable of administering a free market economy. They vigorously condemned all forced labour practices, believing that these rendered the Afrikaner masters indolent and unenterprising and discouraged the Khoikhoi working

⁴⁴ J.P. Kay Shuttleworth, quoted in M. Rayner, "Slaves, Slave Owners and the British State: the Cape Colony 1806-1834," ICS Collected Seminar Papers, Vol. 12 (1981), p.16. The points that I am making above are commonplaces of all recent writing on the abolition of the slave trade. See, for example, J.C. Armstrong and N. Worden, in Elphick and Giliomee, Shaping, p.164.

⁴⁵ I have discussed the Commission of Eastern Enquiry and the Revolution in Government in detail in J.B. Peires, "The British and the Cape, 1814-1834," in Elphick and Giliomee, Shaping, pp.490-499.

classes. They lauded the achievements of properly salaried Khoikhoi artisans, and confidently anticipated that free Khoikhoi would boost the economic prosperity of the Cape as soon as their disabilities were removed.

Acting Governor Bourke, appointed precisely on account of his known Whig (ie. liberal) sympathies, was fully committed to this "Revolution in Government."⁴ His closest associates were the Cape's leading liberals, Reverend John Philip, Landdrost Andries Stockenström and Judge Henry Burton. Ordinance 49, which opened the Cape's borders to foreign labourers, and Ordinance 50, which abolished forced labour for Colonial Khoikhoi, were the products of this partnership. Since Cobbing has sneered at the notion of "invitations" it is perhaps important to stress that these Ordinances were not intended as positive injunctions but were conceived as permissive legislation, situated within the classical liberal framework of removing all the artificial and unnatural impediments which hindered the free operation of market forces. The two Ordinances were promulgated within three days of each other, and were certainly intended to operate in tandem, to free the Cape labour market from its dependence on forced labour. Cobbing's interpretation of Ordinance 49 - that it was introduced to facilitate the forced importation of servile black labour - is

⁴Despite his title of "Acting Governor," Bourke's appointment was not meant to be temporary. He was only so named because the appeal of his predecessor, Lord Charles Somerset, was still pending. See H. King, Richard Bourke (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1971).

incompatible with the provisions of Ordinance 50, which freed the Khoikhoi within the Colony from involuntary servitude. It is not reasonable to suppose that any colonial administration would undertake the risky and complicated task of forcibly recruiting untrained, untamed and linguistically incomprehensible foreigners in order to voluntarily release the docile and thoroughly domesticated labour force which it already had at its disposal.⁴⁷

Cape Government officials stationed on the frontier wholeheartedly endorsed the viewpoint that African labour should enter the Colony voluntarily and without coercion. It is significant that they gave practical rather than moral reasons for their opinions.⁴⁸ Landdrost Andries Stockenström of Graaff-Reinet was adamant that Africans should not be "decoyed" or "enticed" into the Colony, as forced labour was bound to desert and it would endanger the security of the frontier districts. Landdrost W. Mackay of Somerset East thought that "compulsion is totally out of the question" and that employers who attempted coercion risked their lives. He issued orders that foreign labourers who wanted to leave their employers should not be forcibly prevented from doing so.

⁴⁷ Bourke was under no pressure at home or abroad to pass Ordinance 50. Newton-King's argument on p.197 of Economy and Society cannot be sustained. The reasons for the passage of Ordinance 50 are those which she gives on p.198.

⁴⁸ Newton-King in Shaping, p.194; W. Mackay-R.Plasket, 20 Feb. 1827, RCC XXXIV, pp.371-3; W.Dundas-R.Plasket, 10 April 1827, RCC XXXIV, pp.395-8. The only frontier Landdrost who approved of forced labour was the veteran J.C. Ouyler of Uitenhage, who was dismissed shortly afterwards on the recommendation of the Commissioners of Enquiry.

But the most interesting opinion is that of W.B. Dundas, the Landdrost of Albany. Dundas administered the district where the 1820 settlers resided and the labour shortage was most acute. Drawing on his experiences with the Mantatee (ie. Sotho-speaking) refugees, Dundas declared that any form of indenture would cause potential labourers "to resist and leave us." The relationship between settlers and Mantatees was mutually beneficial. On the one hand, the Mantatees were were anxious to get cattle which they could no longer obtain in their own country. On the other hand, the settlers appreciated Mantatee labour, and their fear of losing it led them to treat the Mantatees relatively well. He himself employed Mantatee labour at a rate of four cattle per family per year, and he was fully satisfied with the results. Like his brother Landdrosts, Dundas was convinced that it was absolutely impossible to police coerced labour in a frontier situation:

When satisfied with their treatment, they are cheerful, obliging and obedient, and though hard labour .. is irksome to them, they have no objection to make themselves generally useful; but on the contrary, if the naturally hasty temper of the savage is excited by ill usage of any kind, they become sullen and resolutely indifferent ... they invariably leave their employers, and frequently the Colony altogether.

It was this same W.B. Dundas, a considered advocate of free labour, who was to lead the first commando against Matiwane some eighteen months later.

We come now to the question of whether it was indeed urgently necessary for Bourke to send an army into Xhosaland to bring the labour out. Cobbing has no doubt that it was urgent in the extreme (p. 502):

As soon as Ordinance 49 permitting the issuing of invitations was safely drafted, Bourke seized on the news of the Zulu invasion as a pretext to send his armies across the Kei to bring out some labour.

"As soon as Ordinance 49 .. was safely drafted" is a curious formulation. It implies that Cobbing is aware of a hole in his argument, namely that Bourke's instructions to his "armies" (21 June 1828) were issued *before* the promulgation of Ordinance 49 (14 July 1828). Leaving this aside, however, Cobbing is clearly indicating that Bourke seized the first possible opportunity "to bring out some labour." But did he?

In fact, he did not. Bourke had received permission from the British government to recruit Xhosa labour as early as 26 October 1826. Ordinance 49 had been "safely drafted" ever since 30 June 1827 - more than a year before the battle of Mbolombo.** Clearly the labour shortage, though chronic, was not so urgent as all that.

And that is not all. Ordinance 49 was already "safely drafted" by 24 August 1827, when Bourke himself arrived on the frontier in response to a war scare unintentionally generated by Matiwane's

**R.Bourke- Lord Bathurst, 30 June 1827, BQC XXXII, pp.53-4.

initial scouting party.** On his arrival, he found that 3,000 of Chief Bawana's Thembu had entered the Colony as refugees. Not only did the allegedly labour-hungry Bourke fail to enslave this first installment of Ngwane invaders, but he actively compelled the 3,000 Thembu already in the Colony to depart from it immediately. If the labour crisis was as serious as Cobbing suggests, why did Bourke pass up this fine opportunity to acquire Thembu labourers? The Thembu were regarded as "a quiet and inoffensive race, and for a long period of time upon friendly terms with the Colony." To accept Cobbing's thesis is to believe that the Colonial administration preferred the "fierce and less civilised" amaNgwane beyond the Colony to the "quiet and inoffensive" Thembu already inside it. This is absurd. The fact is that Bourke, like the Governors who followed him, was more concerned about the military security of the frontier than about the labour problems of the settlers.

"Would they come?" asks Cobbing, referring to black peoples 'invited' in by Ordinance 49. Indications are that they certainly would. Even if one accepts that the Mfecane was set in motion by the Portuguese and the Griquas, it would still be true that there were tens of thousands of starving, homeless and desperate people roaming about southern Africa seeking work and refuge. Peace, security and four head of cattle per family per year does not sound like a bad deal, especially since one could always run away from

** R.Bourke - Viscount Goderich, 15 Oct.1827. British Parliamentary Paper 252 of 1835, pp.21-22. Bourke further went out of his way to "convince them [the Xhosa chiefs] of the necessity of defending their country against all invaders, and of the utter impossibility of receiving them into the Colony."

ill-treatment. Cattle-clientage was a common practice among many southern African peoples; indeed it was the foundation of the Mfecane kingdoms of Moshoeshoe and Sekwati. In the early years of inter-racial contact before the 1811-2 Frontier War, even though the Xhosa still possessed land in abundance, many of them willingly served white farmers in exchange for cattle. As Chiefs Chungwa and Ndlambe, both noted opponents of white domination, put it in 1803, "the colonists were such rich people, that they [the Xhosa] should be glad to come among them and gain a day's wage now and then." After the 1811-2 War, however, all Xhosa residing to the west of the Fish River were expelled; and a strict policy of "non-intercourse" was adopted which effectively prevented white farmers from employing Xhosa labour until the passage of Ordinance 49.⁹¹ The labour shortage, to which Newton-King and Cobbing allude, was to a very considerable extent artificial, and due to the Cape Government's refusal, for security reasons, to permit the Xhosa enemy within the Colonial gates.

By 1828, the stick of increased landlessness and the carrot of imported commodities had combined to make the Xhosa ever more willing to enter Colonial service. Farmers had very little difficulty in recruiting labour, as this passage from a missionary's diary attests:⁹²

⁹¹ H. Lichtenstein, Travels in Southern Africa. Trans. A Plumptre. (1812-5; repr. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society), Vol. 1, p.386. See also J.B. Peires, The House of Phalo (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1981), p.104; B. MacLennan, A Proper Degree of Terror (Johannesburg, 1986), pp.59-61.

⁹² Shaw, p.141.

We have frequent visits from Dutch Boors, who come in order to engage Caffres in their service, the Govt having lately issued an Ordinance allowing the Natives beyond the Colonial boundaries to enter into the service of the Colonists. Here are three Boors here today for this purpose, and I have had to write passes for several Caffres who have agreed to go with them. I am sorry to say that Mama has been induced by their flattering promises to enter into the service of one of them, and will thus be removed from the means of grace.

Three days later, the missionary again remarked that he was "busy writing passes for Caffres to go to the Colony." So many Xhosa voluntarily availed themselves of the opportunity offered by Ordinance 49 that the chiefs themselves objected to it, and the Commandant of the Frontier called for an end to "the great influx of Caffres into the Colony at the present moment." Far from struggling to attract free labour, the Colony attracted more than it could safely manage, and Ordinance 49 was suspended in August 1829, little more than a year after its proclamation.³³

Having established, first, that Bourke's administration genuinely preferred free labour to coerced labour, and, second, that a sufficient, uncoerced labour supply was readily available, we pass on to the events leading up to the battle of Mbolompo. My argument here is a simple one, namely that the traditional explanation of Mbolompo is essentially correct, and that the capture of refugees by Colonel Somerset was a by-product of the battle rather than its cause. To establish this important point,

³³ Stockenström, I, p.304; H.Somerset-W.Dundas, 12 Aug. 1829, British Parliamentary Paper 252 of 1835; C.F.J. Muller, Die Oorsprong van die Groot Trek (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1974), pp.105-112.

It is necessary, albeit tedious, to go through the events item by item, contrasting Cobbing's interpretation with the evidence provided by the historical sources.

Cobbing begins by asserting that "Bourke seized on the news of the Zulu invasion as a pretext to send his armies across the Kei to bring out some labour" (p.502). He produces no evidence to support this interpretation, and he makes no effort to locate or quote the instructions given by Bourke to his representatives on the spot, Major Dundas and Colonel Henry Somerset. Detailed evidence on this point is, in fact, available in the Cape Archives, but Cobbing has never consulted it.

The story begins with the arrival at Algoa Bay in May 1828 of a deputation from Shaka to inform the Colonial authorities of his intention to attack the Mpondo and other Transkeian peoples, and to assure them of his friendly disposition towards Britain. Almost simultaneously, the Colonial authorities received information from the missionaries in the Transkei that the Zulu forces had crossed the Mzimvubu river and were heading for the Great Place of Hintsa, virtually adjacent to the Colonial boundary.** Fearing another massive influx of Xhosa refugees, Bourke instructed Major Dundas to visit Hintsa and the other Xhosa chiefs, to

**GH 19/3 Statement of James King, 10 May 1828; GH 19/3 W. Shrewsbury- H.Somerset, 12 June 1828. The Zulu deputation to the Cape, as well as their invasion of Mpondoland, are amply attested in Zulu and Mpondo sources. See, for example, C. de B. Webb and J. Wright (eds), The James Stuart Archive, Vol II (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1979), pp.61, 167; V.P. Ndamase, Amampondo: Iballi ne-Ntialo (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, n.d.), p.9.

encourage them to "unite their forces and oppose a resolute resistance to the invasion of their country." Bourke was most anxious to avoid any fighting, however, and the chief purpose of Dundas's mission was not to "bring out some labour," but to secure a personal interview with Shaka and to persuade him to withdraw from the Transkei. When, eventually, Dundas did get involved in some fighting with Matiwane (see below), Bourke officially reprimanded him for it."

Cobbing ignores all of this and proceeds (p.502):

In July 1828 a commando under the military commandant of Albany, Major Dundas, hurried to Vusani's Tembu to prepare them for an attack on the Ngwane or Fetcani. While the Tembu were mobilising, Dundas rode on to the Mpondo and discovered that the 'Zulu' army was in fact that of H.F. Fynn and his fellow Natal adventurers.

One might begin by noting that Major Dundas was not a military commandant, that Vusani's real name was Ngubengcuka, and that the correct spelling of "Tembu" is "Thembu," but these are small matters. What is more important is that Dundas's commando did not hurry to Ngubengcuka's Thembu to prepare them for an attack on the amaNgwane, nor did he leave them mobilising. Dundas, in fact, went nowhere near the Thembu at all, but touched at Hintsa's and then headed straight for the Mpondo because he had been informed that there was a Zulu delegation at King Faku's place. Faku informed Dundas that the Zulu had plundered his country for a month and a half, and that he had accepted cattle from Shaka's ambassadors as a token of Mpondo submission to the Zulu king.

³³ CO 4888 J. Bell-W.Dundas, 21 June, 27 June, 18 July 1828.

Faku did refer to "Henry Fynn and his small party with Chaka's army,"⁵⁶ but to state, as Cobbing does, that the army which attacked the Mpondo belonged to Fynn and not to the Zulu, is to state that Faku did not know whom he was fighting with, or whom he had negotiated with, or whom he had submitted to.⁵⁷ It is quite clear from Faku's statement that he was attacked by a Zulu army, and that Fynn's party was only a small adjunct to it.

Cobbing continues (p.502):

Dundas's commando then doubled back and reached Vusani again on 24 July. The white and Hottentot gunmen and the by now fully mobilized Tembu moved east of the Mbashe and surrounded the Ngwane villages before dawn on 26 July. The Tembu climbed the ridges behind the imizi and drove the awakening victims onto the British guns. ... There was now no realistic Fetcani problem to the east of the Tembu.

One is puzzled by Cobbing's gratuitous reference to "Hottentot" gunmen, but again that is a minor point. More important is the fact that an examination of the evidence to which the above passage refers, makes it quite clear that it was the Thembu king Ngubengcuka, and not Major Dundas, who was

⁵⁶ History of Mafiwane, p.243. Cobbing omits to mention both this phrase, and Faku's later reference to "Chaka's people, who had been accompanied by a party of armed Englishmen." Both phrases clearly indicate that Fynn's group was an appendage to the main Zulu army, and nothing more than that.

⁵⁷ Both Cobbing and myself rely on Dundas's report of 15 Aug.1828, reprinted in History of Mafiwane, pp.241-9. I invite the reader to consult the original and decide which summary is the more accurate. Ndamase, p.9, confirms that the Zulu invaded Mpondoland and that Shaka gave cattle to Faku, though he insists that this did not imply Mpondo subordination to the Zulu.

quite literally calling the shots. The Ngwane's own version of their arrival in Thembuland confirms this:²²

Through these mountains we came to the country of the Abatembu. Tshaka had already been there. We found that the people of many villages had fled, and their cattle had been taken. We attacked the villages that remained and took many cattle.

[Mhlanga]

After this, the amaNgwane and their chief Matiwane simply went on and on, making no halt until they reached Mbolombo. When he reached the territory of other chiefs, and found that they had crops standing, he attacked and conquered them, taking their grain, thus becoming "the lazy one who consumes the grain of those who work hard" [one of Matiwane's praises]

[History of Matiwane]

We descended these mountains again. We came towards the people of Kubencuka. We saw there peaceful people ... We captured cattle in all directions, even to the Umzimvubu... The Tembus called from a distance. Wait, in a month we shall be among you." We did not know they had gone to call whites. We settled down nicely. The first time the Tembus came alone to attack us, and they were not so many, and it was open country, and we killed them nearly all.

[Moloja]

The Ngwane themselves thus confirm that they invaded the Thembu country, attacked the Thembu and seized their cattle. One of Dundas's volunteers described the scene as "all desolation, all dead men, women and children, cattle and dogs. Everything was laid waste, and the whole country burnt black."²³ There can be no

²² Mhlanga, p.251; History of Matiwane, p.46; Moloja, p.273.

²³ "Extracts from the journal of Bertram Egerton Bowker," in Comdt. Holden Bowker, ed. I. Mitford-Barberton (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1970), p.58.

doubt that the Thembu were faced with a serious military crisis that was quite unrelated to the Cape Colony's labour problems. They had no need to be mobilised by Dundas or anyone else; they had already mobilised themselves.**

There were five or six, the oldest and most important among the [Thembu] people, who spoke. The invasion of their country by the Fickanies, the loss of their cattle, the destruction of their corn, the murder of their women, and their children carried away from them, were the great subjects of their harangues, and all in their turn urged a determination to resist, and that their insulted country called for vengeance on the intruders.

Both Mpondo and Colonial sources show that it was the Thembu king, Ngubengcuka, and not Major Dundas, who was the architect of the anti-Matiwane coalition. Chief Victor Poto states clearly that his forefather King Faku "was requested by Ngubengcuka to come and help him in the battle with Matiwane at Mbolombo."¹ The settler Thomas Philipps, who had a personal grudge against Dundas, placed full responsibility on the Thembu king:²

Major D. was deceived by the Tambookie Chief Vasanie and suffered himself and a little retinue to be led by that scoundrel to slaughter innocent individuals.

Even Reverend Kay, a severe critic of Dundas, lays part of the blame on Ngubengcuka.³

**Report of W.B. Dundas, 15 Aug. 1828, quoted in History of Matiwane, p.248.

¹V. Poto Ndamase, p.10.

²T. Philipps, Phillipps, 1820 Settler. Ed. A. Keppel-Jones. (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1960), p.350.

³Kay, p.328.

Statements, therefore, the most exaggerated were got up by the different Chieftains with a view of inducing Government to send out an armed force to their help.

Cobbing maintains that "it is inconceivable that the Anglo-Tembu intelligence system did not know that their victims were the Ngwane" (p.502n). In fact, it is not so inconceivable as all that. The evidence of Mhlanga quoted above confirms that the amaNgwane had settled in country recently traversed by the Zulu. Faku had informed Dundas that the Zulu had headed towards Thembuland. Dundas was self-admittedly confused by "the various and contradictory reports respecting Chaka which are daily received."⁴⁴ Even more important is Mhlanga's revelation that Matiwane deliberately concealed his true identity.⁴⁵

Matiwana did not wish his name to be known by those people. We were commanded therefore to call ourselves Magagadlana.

Let us return to the role of the British in the battle of Mbolompo. It will be recalled that Acting Governor Bourke had sent Major Dundas on a mission to negotiate directly with Shaka or his ambassadors. He was still on that mission when he was contacted by Ngubengcuka's messengers who gave him "certain information respecting the advance of the Zoolas." En route to Ngubengcuka's Great Place (which, *pace* Cobbing, he had not yet visited), Dundas was disturbed by Thembu war-cries announcing

⁴⁴For example, Dundas was informed by two young Thembu girls, prisoners of Matiwane, that "they were undoubtedly Chaka's people. History of Matiwane, pp.239,244,246.

⁴⁵Mhlanga, p.251.

Matiwane's advance. On his arrival at the Great Place, Dundas found approximately 5,000 Thembu warriors already armed and assembled without any suggestion, let alone assistance, from himself. It was only at this point, that he assumed a leading role. Even so, Cobbing's description of the skirmish (p.502) is suspect:

The Tembu climbed the ridge behind the *imizi* and drove the awakening victims onto the British guns. About seventy Ngwane were shot dead and 25,000 cattle plundered. There was now no realistic Fetcani problem to the east of the Tembu.

It is not clear why Cobbing refers to the "awakening victims," when the battle took place well after dawn. The number of 70 killed is also probably an exaggeration.** But, again, these are small matters. More important is Cobbing's statement that there was no longer a "realistic Fetcani problem east of the Tembu," which implies that the second, and more significant, allied attack was launched against a beaten and defenceless enemy.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Moloja relates that only seven "bands" of the amaNgwane fought against Dundas, and that the mighty UShiyi regiment remained entirely intact. The amaNgwane followed up the retreating Thembu, attacked them, and recaptured all the cattle which had been lost. Moloja's statements are confirmed by Reverend Kay, who added:**

** Dundas, in History of Matiwane, p.239, refers to 10 am; B.Bowker, "Journal," has "daylight"; Moloja, p.273, has "early morning." Mhlanga, p.251, refers to the battle taking place in the afternoon. Bowker refers to 16 killed on each of the Thembu and Ngwane sides. Kay, p.329, refers only to "several" shot.

** Moloja, p.273; Kay, p.330.

[Matiwane] vowed vengeance against his opponents, declaring that he would pay them a visit when they least expected him .. Fear and revenge, therefore, gave rise to a hue and cry, which put the whole of Kafferland in commotion.

Revengeful or not, the amaNgwane now firmly established themselves in the heart of Thembuland, near the sources of the Umtata river, where they began to erect dwellings and plant gardens. It is in this context that the battle of Mbolombo was fought on 27 August, 1828. Mbolombo was no gratuitous assault on a beaten enemy but a calculated attack initiated by the Thembu king Ngubengcuka in concert with his allies, namely the Gcaleka, the Mpondo and the British.

Having established this context, there is no need to quarrel with Cobbing's description of the battle itself. The allies attacked the amaNgwane before dawn, attempting no negotiation and giving them no opportunity to withdraw peacefully. The British cavalry swooped on the sleeping amaNgwane in their huts, and continued to attack them as they struggled to escape. When some of the amaNgwane rallied and tried to make a stand, the British opened up with cannons. Many fled to the neighbouring forests, some of which apparently caught fire, though there is no evidence to suggest that the British deliberately "raked the Ngwane escape routes" (p.502). The Thembu and Gcaleka armies participated unrestrainedly in the carnage:**

**Kay, p.332. Bannister, p.156-9. Another relevant extract is quoted on p.21 above.

While the military were routing Matuwane and his warriors, they [the Xhosa] busily employed themselves in driving off all the cattle they could find, and in murdering the women and children ... the field presented a scene indescribably shocking: old decrepid men with their bodies pierced, and heads almost cut off; pregnant females ripped open; legs broken, and hands likewise severed from the arm, as if for the purpose of getting the armbands or some other trifling ornament.

All of the sources used by Cobbing justify Somerset's decision to take possession of more than 70 Nguni children in terms of the above atrocities. This may or may not be true, but it is a little besides the point. I have had previous experience with Colonel Henry Somerset's lying and self-serving dispatches.** It was Boer practice, and Somerset's practice also, to entice Boer volunteers to military service with easy pickings in cattle and child servants. I have little doubt that Somerset allowed the Boers to take as many children as they could get.

My dispute with Cobbing concerns not what Somerset actually did, but with the historical significance that should be attached to it. Cobbing sees this raiding of children as "the primary objective of Somerset's commando" (p.503), as part of the "trans-continental crossfire of interrelated European plunder systems." I reject this, and I reject the idea that the British were "raiding for 'free labour' in the aftermath of Ordinance 49." Somerset's Boers were not raiding for new-style "free labour" but for old-style "forced labour," as they and their fathers had been doing

**Peires, House of Phalo, p.227 fn 95.

for decades. It was precisely this kind of labour relationship that Ordinance 49 was intended to replace. Even if Ordinance 49 failed to prevent the battle of Mbolompho, it nevertheless cannot be labelled as the ultimate cause of the battle. Mbolompho was a contradiction of current British policy, and not its manifestation.

IV *A Reprieve for the Mfecane?*

Cobbing rejects not only the concept of the Mfecane, but even the very word itself. "Walker coined the word 'mfecane' in 1928. Walker's neologism, meaning 'the crushing', has no root in any African language" (p.487). This is an astonishing claim. Any Xhosa dictionary will inform one that "imfecane" is derived from the root "-feca," meaning "to crack, bruise, break down the maize or sweetcorn stalks."⁷⁰ Contemporary English sources habitually refer to the invaders as "Fetcani" or "Fetcanie," and the word "imfecane" appears in a Xhosa-language newspaper as early as 1863.⁷¹ The word originally seems to have meant a military unit, as indicated for example in the statement of one Ngwane, "we sent out Fetcanie, beat the Tambookies often, and took their cattle."⁷² "Imfecane" refers to people who are crushing others, rather than to people who are themselves crushed. It appears to be part of an extended metaphor, in which the marauding bands see themselves as

⁷⁰A. Kropf, A Kaffir-English Dictionary (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1899), p.100.

⁷¹Thompson, I, p.180; History of Matiwane, p. 235. J. Mazamisa, "Izizwe za-Mamfengu," Indaba I (1863), p.171.

⁷²History of Matiwane, pp. 235-6.

crushing their wealthy and ineffectual opponents; in the words of Platje Mhlanga, "ladla impakata nodiza" (they consumed the corn-cobs and the stubble as well).⁷³

It must, however, be conceded that the Xhosa use of the word "imfecane" applies not to the historical event itself but to some of the people who participated in it. Thus a Hlubi descendant of Mehlokhulu refers to this period as "imfazwe yemfecane" (the wars of the Mfecane), rather than "the imfecane." To that extent, the use of "Mfecane" as a portmanteau word denoting the whole of the historical event is indeed a coinage, a neologism. But that does not necessarily imply that we should reject it.

The term "feudalism" was unknown during the feudal era. The term "Renaissance" was invented by Jacob Burckhardt in 1840. History, like any social science, should aim at generalisation, and if we can think of a suitable term and if we can agree on its interpretation, we are certainly entitled to use it. The term "Mfecane" undoubtedly has its attractions. First of all, it is already well established in the historical literature. More important, it appears not only in Xhosa and Zulu, but in Sotho as well. Finally, the term was used in its own time not as a synonym for a specific ethnic group, but as a generic term for any group of aggressive "crushers," regardless of their ethnic origin.

⁷³Mhlanga, p. 249.

As far as the interpretation of the term "Mfecane" is concerned, the "old paradigm" is quite adequately summed up in Omer-Cooper's phrase "a revolutionary change proceeding from a single centre."⁷⁴ This formulation is broad enough to encompass both Omer-Cooper, who sees the change as essentially political and military in nature, and those influenced by mode of production theory, such as Guy, Bonner and Hedges, who emphasise the social and economic transformation embodied in the regimental system. The single centre is not, of course, the Zulu kingdom alone but the whole of northern Nguniland. The concept of a single centre does not in any way exclude the influence of trade from Delagoa Bay or elsewhere. Primary sources as different as H.F. Fynn and Thomas Mofolo have stressed the importance of Dingiswayo's links with the Portuguese, as have such diverse historians as Alan Smith, Henry Slater and David Hedges. All of these concur in viewing trade as an external factor which impacted on the internal structure of the Zulu state, transforming it into something new and essentially different.

Cobbing sees neither revolutionary change nor a single centre. All rhetoric aside, he is indeed proposing a new paradigm. He sees no dynamic initiative, no creative tension, no social transformation occurring within the African societies themselves. African societies are reduced to the status of hapless and passive victims, mere billiard balls crashing into each other, propelled around the table by infinitely more

⁷⁴ Omer-Cooper, p.7.

cunning and sinister forces. And in place of an internally generated trajectory, he proposes two chains of externally sourced violence: one proceeding from the Portuguese at Delagoa Bay, and the other from the British and their Griqua surrogates at the Cape. Let us not reduce the debate on the Mfecane to a mere quibble about words. Let us choose between these paradigms.

Given such a choice, I stand unequivocally behind the old paradigm of the Mfecane. I cannot accept an analysis that reduces the history of Africans in this country to the "meaningless gyrations of barbarous tribes" by means of systematically ignoring all the evidence which comes from African sources. Mawane was a great leader who stood up to Shaka, dominated the Highveld, slaughtered his own brothers to maintain his power, forced his people into the Transkei by the strength of his will, and finally succumbed to the overwhelming number of the forces which his own dynamism had raised against him. The materialist in me also notes that any political structure held together by purely military means is necessarily brittle. Mawane's brief and conflict-ridden tenure of office did not see the kind of transformation of productive relations that melded other, more successful post-Mfecane societies into an organic whole.

To make these points is not to fall prey either to the naive idealism of Omer-Cooper or to the gross racialism of The Irruption of the Kaffir Hordes. It is simply to state the obvious inferences from a substantial body of historical evi-

dence, which Cobbing has manipulated at will. For it must be clearly stated that it has only been possible for Cobbing to arrive at his conclusions by acts of blatant omission (the History of Matiwane and all the other oral traditions) and distortion (see, for example, p.37 above on his contention that the Zulu army in Mpondoland was led by Fynn). There is hardly a single statement anywhere in his history of Matiwane that can stand up to detailed examination.

Historiographically, "the Mfecane as Alibi" can be situated somewhere between the Pirenne thesis and the Hitler diaries. At worst it is a fabrication, and at best it is a fantasy. Inasmuch as it has led us all to question our basic assumptions and to review the evidence which we had somehow taken for granted, it has done us good. Inasmuch as it has trapped us in a blind alley, looking for colonialists behind every rubbish bin, it has distracted our attention from the history of Africans in South Africa and from our unfinished attempts to establish the material content and context of that history. Let the faddists, the lemmings and the kamikazes take flight in their new-look, new-paradigm hot-air balloon, if they so desire. The rest of us must lose no time in getting the old paradigm off the scrap-heap and back onto the road. It should be an interesting race.