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Norman Etherington. *The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815-1854.* London and New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2001. 360 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-31567-9.

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In *The Great Treks*, Norman Etherington's intention is to center history in South Africa literally on a "southern Bantu heartland," falling roughly to the northeast of Ladysmith, right near one place (among several) of the legendary origin for human beings (usually a "footprint" in a rock or a bed of reeds). This center, Ntsuanatsatsi, Etherington tells us, is an ancient crossroads; in the late-eighteenth century, Sia and Tlokwa people lived there, bearing old connections to other Tswana-speakers ("Sotho-Tswana") and peoples of the eastern grasslands who speak a related cluster of languages (Nguni) tended to move through this region as invaders ('Matabele' or 'Zaze') or individual settlers.

Etherington wants to reconstruct a political history of this heartland, an overlapping panorama of interrelated peoples. Around this center, placed on map 3 as a clock-face, are positioned polities and peoples. These include the kingdom or people called "Mbo," surmounted by the linguistic term "Nguni," the eastern grassland linguistic cluster, underlining its uncertain status. There are other proto-identities assigned to chiefs (Tau), ancestors (Hurutshe [not Hurutsche], Ngwato) and combinations therein (Thulare's Pedi), all to denote polities of some sort. Some of these are ignored in subsequent discussions in favor of South African-bounded people. He mangles a few linguistic and ethnic terms, but his focus is not on the category of tribe, so this is unimportant. Instead, he suggests that historians look more closely at chiefs. I am convinced that this focus is correct. Chief-ship, rather than tribe or ethnicity, bears the most promise in re-organizing our view of the past according to a non-colonialist paradigm. Now Etherington recognizes the potential pitfall, that this could represent a return to the "great man" school of history. But chiefs appear brightly in the historical record, and chief-ship is interesting to anthropologists. Moreover, by focusing on a "crossroads" as his center, he re-amalgamates Nguni and Tswana ("Sotho-Tswana") as a single congeries of chief-ships among closely related people, whose descendants are the black people of South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Botswana today.

To appreciate the innovation of such an approach, an attempt to write an Afro-centric (if I may use this word) history of South Africa, it is necessary to remember that a typical history of South Africa more or less adopts the point of view of the colonizer(s). One approaches the Cape with the V.O.C. (Dutch East-India Company), penetrates the hinterland, engages the Xhosa, however sympathetically, recoils from the mfecane (the disturbances caused by the Zulu), treks inland to the Republics, and then looks on as minerals and cities are initiated. The stages of colonial expansion are recapitulated in history

because expansion generates the sources that historians rely on. The resulting story situates the reader as foreign. Of course, scholars have added other narrative structures, including the rise of African kingdoms, the ethnographic outline-history of Khoikhoi (and ethnographic description of African "pre-history," and archaeology), but the assumed status of the reader is still usually projected into a series of encounters with South Africa, each of which unfolds and leaves records in its wake.

Here, in contrast, Etherington positions those encounters relative to the actions of the people in and around the "heartland." This approach means entertaining an unusual historical perspective: Africans "confronting" Griqua and Kora raiders, Xhosa meeting "new enemies" on their western frontier, people "getting guns and missionaries," and so forth. Unfortunately the heartland was not a bucolic place, but rather, as early as 1790 or even 1690, a field of violence and dislocation. Etherington sees several loci for the instabilities of the early-nineteenth century. One was the difaqane on the central highlands abutting the Kalahari, another the mfecane north of the Tugela River in Natal, a third the Gcaleka-Tshawe ("Xhosa") frontier with the eastern Cape. Etherington tries to de-emphasize the accepted paradigms by extending them to new areas. Thus the "Great Trek" is relativized as one trek among many, alongside, for instance, the incursions of mixed-descent settlers from the Cape, and the migration of Moroka's "Seleka-Rolong"-led polity, in particular. And, by re-prioritizing elements in the standard narrative of South Africa, Etherington is able to underline the creativity of chiefs such as Moletsane and Zwide, who tried to combine elements of foreign and regional ideas in amassing power.

In this context he appears to accept Julian Cobbing's suggestion that the Portuguese slave trade out of Delagoa Bay provoked the Ndwandwe (or forces allied to them) to enter "the slaving business," which Cobbing has connected to the rise of the Zulu kingdom.[1] As Elizabeth Eldredge has pointed out, Cobbing drew on an article by Patrick Harries who argues that in the late 1820s and early 1830s, "it seems likely that well over 1000 slaves were exported every year from each port," the figures for Inhambane and Louren=o Marques having been largely consolidated.[2] Moreover, prior to the 1820s there is scant evidence, and so the slave trade cannot plausibly be seen as a cause of mfecane-linked violence. Did even the "1000 per year" trade "ravage" the hinterland of Delagoa Bay in the late 1820s? How were the slaves brought to the market? Were they composed of defeated peasant militias? The work of West Africanists like Rodney, Lovejoy, Elkins, Inikori, B. Barry, J. Miller, and others suggests that conclusions here are very premature.

For the specialist *The Great Treks* is both fascinating and infuriating, as it was meant to be. On the other hand, for the uninitiated, the proliferation of chief- and ancestor-derived polity-names can be confusing. Without meaning to, *The Great Treks* sometimes normalizes highly partisan and gendered claims to the past. For his adumbration of Sia and Tlokwa in the center of the "heartland," for instance, Etherington footnotes the *Oxford History of South Africa*, Leonard Thompson's *Survival in Two Worlds*, and D. F. Ellenberger's *History of the Basuto*.[3] Ellenberger, the only primary source among these, was a knowledgeable missionary and minister to Lesotho, Moshoeshoe's kingdom, from 1861. His grandson described his avenue of inquiry as exclusively patrilineal, asking Africans for information:

"on your father, your grandfather, your forefathers as far back as you can go. It could be as far back as the 15th, 20th, 25th generation (even the 32nd) … [so that] it was possible to reconstruct the whole history, with very numerous precise details."[4]

This type of primogeniture-establishing genealogy is extremely prejudicial and open to manipulation. Names such as Sia and Tlokwa were invoked as part of certain kinds of patriarchal claims in the region's polities, at least in many Lesotho citizens' accounts of themselves to Ellenberger. Carolyn Hamilton has perhaps set an impossibly high bar in interpreting such material in her study of Natal, *Terrific Majesty*,[5] but it cannot be both that MmaNthathisi's extremely aggressive polity, which became feared as the "Mantatees," "were" Tlokwa, a "totemic" affiliation, and that "the Tlokwa were their neighbors" (p. 75). Moreover some of MmaNthathisi's people preserved the memory of "common descent" from a previous legendary mother, MmaThulare.[6]

Is it coincidental that an unrelated chief named Thulare ruled in the Transvaal and sent raiding parties across the countryside in the 1810s? His kingdom was the Pedi kingdom, because there were already "Pedi" people living there. Etherington references Peter Delius for Thulare, which, in turn, sources various nineteenth-century collections of chiefs' lineage traditions.[7] A "Kgatla" named Thobele founded the nucleus of the later kingdom among pre-existing "Pedi" (another ancestor-name) people in the late-seventeenth century, in which Thulare is usually said to have established "Maroteng hegemony" (Delius), i.e. that of his lineage, in the nineteenth. (One hears the echo again of ethnic heritage in such terms as

"Maroteng"; and Etherington himself lapses and writes of "the Thlaping people of the Langeberg" or "the Tsonga and Tembe chiefs" to the south of Soshangane, as if these were ethnicities.) Other traditions held that "the Tlokwa" themselves "came from" a (sixteenth-century?) offshoot of the Kgatla chiefdom. Neil Parsons writes of these ties in his *A New History of Southern Africa.*[8]

In these criss-crossing references to Kgatla, Thulare, Pedi, and Tlokwa, one inevitably gazes through the old prism of race–or more politely, ethnicity: of mobile "peoples" with distinct characteristics and customs, whose composition and borders somehow vary from one generation to the next, but whose numbers are legion. This can be daunting. Yet beyond the names, one sees the repeated accretion and fission of people collected together in flexible idioms–patrilineal heritage, direction of origin, heroes of the past (sometimes duplicated in name), rumor, and terror. It is here that *The Great Treks* illuminates South Africa's history, by showing how creative state-makers confronted the challenges of South African colonialism. Other work will continue to show the way political and economic ideas informed the activities of chiefs like Faku, Hintsa, Sechele, Shaka, and the woman MmaNthathisi, but Etherington has opened a door. This is a bold and timely synthesis, and worth looking into.

Notes

[1]. Julian Cobbing has written a good deal about the mfecane, but is perhaps best known for "The Mfecane as Alibi," *Journal of African History* 29:3 (1988), pp. 487-519.

[2]. Elizabeth Eldredge, "Sources of Contact," in *The Mfecane Aftermath*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), pp. 123-162; Patrick Harries, "Slavery, Social Incorporation, and Surplus Extraction: The Nature of Free and Unfree Labour in Southeast Africa," *Journal of African History* 22:2 (1981), pp. 309-330.

[3]. Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, *The Oxford History of South Africa*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 135-139; Leonard Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); D. F. Ellenberger, *History of the Basuto, Ancient and Modern* (Morija: Archives, 1992 [facsimile reprint of 1912 ed.]).

[4]. Paul Ellenberger, "Inventory List," related to *Histoire des Basotho Anciens et Modernes*, trans. Albert Brutsch for Stephen Gill, in the 1992 Morija reprint of that work, which was itself composed by D. F. Ellenberger from his notes and conversations with chiefs and commoners in Lesotho, revised and rewritten in English by J. C. MacGregor (c. 1912).

[5]. Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[6]. As in Mangwato, Malete, or Maroteng, "Ma" could mean "people" and "mother of" (which I have given in contemporary orthography as Mma), or even both at once in the currency of everyday usage. What of this recourse to a matriarch in memory and in fact? Is there an overlaid, obscured promontory in the Transvaal of the matrilineal traditions among the Venda and to the north, in central Africa?

[7]. Peter Delius, *The Land Belongs To Us* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983).

[8]. Neil Parsons, *A New History of South Africa* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1982).

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