

BOOK REVIEW

Graham Dominy is a former Archivist of South Africa who retired in March 2014 after winning a protracted labour dispute with Minister and Department of Arts and Culture. He has worked in and managed a variety of, archival, cultural and heritage institutions since the 1970s. He has studied extensively in South Africa and internationally: obtaining his graduate and professional qualifications in South Africa (University of Natal and Pretoria), his MA in Ireland (University College Cork) and his PhD in the United Kingdom (at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London).

The Assassination Of King Shaka by John Laband

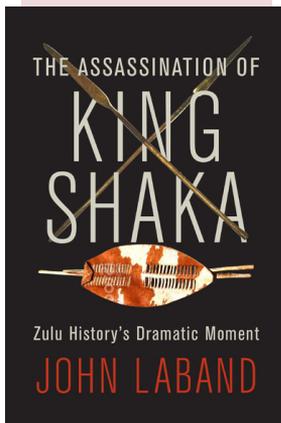
In February, 1979, an academic conference commemorating the centenary of the Anglo-Zulu War was held at the then University of Natal in Durban. Voices were heard before the conference wondering if it was superfluous as, surely, there was nothing left to say about the Anglo-Zulu War? The Chairperson of the Natal Provincial Museums Advisory Board (an old New Republic Party – ex United Party – political veteran with little apparent historical expertise), wrote,

‘There is little likelihood of an organisation based in South Africa adding anything really new to the material which has been published on military operations undertaken during the war.’

However, events in both South Africa and abroad had been developing an avid audience, both academic and popular. In 1964 the blockbuster movie *Zulu*, that launched Michael Caine on his career, came out and the following year, Donald Morris (an American ex-CIA agent based in Berlin), published a popular history, *The Washing of the Spears*, that became an enormous best seller. So, what was left to say? One new approach was suggested during the opening address at the conference: Chief Mangosuthu G. Buthelezi, then Chief Minister of KwaZulu, called for a Zulu approach to Zulu history.

The naysayers were proved wrong, the centenary and the conference launched one of the biggest historical growth industries in South Africa. For example, far more has been written about the Anglo-Zulu War than the Anglo-Boer War. The conference papers were edited by Andrew Duminy and Charles Ballard and published as *The Anglo-Zulu War: New Perspectives* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1981), and works on the Anglo-Zulu War kept rolling off the presses and selling.

One of the leading academic figures in this industry is Professor John Laband. In 1979, he was a young history lecturer at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg and I recall him declaring at the conference that his doctoral thesis would tackle the Anglo-Zulu War from the Zulu perspective. In the introduction to *Kingdom in Crisis: The Zulu response to the British invasion of 1879*, the published version of his PhD dissertation, Laband credits his colleague, the late Paul Thompson (rather than the words of Buthelezi), with ‘inspanning’ him into Anglo-Zulu War research. Their partnership began with the appearance of the first edition of *A Field Guide to the War in Zululand 1879*, a publication that went through several editions and expansions. They also produced several area-specific monographs together. Laband has had an illustrious academic career, in both South Africa and Canada, that broadened from the narrow battleground of the Anglo-Zulu War, to war studies in southern Africa



THE ASSASSINATION
OF KING SHAKA
BY JOHN LABAND
Publisher: Jonathan
Ball, Cape Town,
Johannesburg 2017
ISBN: 9781868428076

and across the continent more broadly. With *The Assassination of King Shaka* he returns to South Africa and to what the publisher's blurb on the front cover calls, 'Zulu History's Dramatic Moment'.

The assassination of King Shaka kaSenzangakhona, the founder of the powerful Zulu kingdom, was a key moment in South African history and is worthy of focused historical treatment, despite the difficulties with the source material. Written material on Shaka is limited and much of what there is comes from the British hunter-traders at Port Natal, who wrote up their reminiscences many years later and who had their own individual axes to grind. While Zulu accounts have been

published in the magisterial multi-volume, *James Stuart Archive of recorded oral evidence relating to the Zulu and neighbouring peoples* (edited by Colin Webb and John Wright), even these are second hand and were recorded many decades later.

Laband acknowledges the problems, but points out that classical historians write about the Ancient World with 'unabated enthusiasm', despite even greater difficulties. Given the paucity of reliable contemporary sources, scholars such as Carolyn Hamilton, author of *Terrific*

The Assassination of King Shaka is a gripping read as well as a professional history of the highest quality. However, it poses some of the challenges that reviewing a novel poses: how much to tell without giving too much away to a reader?

Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1998), have focused on the representations of Shaka Zulu in history, rather than on the development of a narrative history of Shaka himself. Is it, therefore, brave, or foolhardy, for John Laband to attempt such a history?

The Assassination of King Shaka is a gripping read as well as a professional history of the highest quality. However, it poses some of the challenges that reviewing a novel poses: how much to tell without giving too much away to a reader? The story opens with an incident at the court of King Mpande kaSenzangakhona, many years after the deaths of both Shaka and Dingane, when two large snakes were seen battling in a life and death struggle in the fencing around the buildings at KwaNodwengu, the king's principal military homestead. In terms of the traditional Zulu belief system, these snakes represented the spirits of Shaka and Dingane continuing their earthly battles in the spirit world. Mpande consulted the *izangoma* (the diviners with powers to communicate with the shades), who advised the king to propitiate the larger snake, the spirit of Shaka, the founder of the nation, rather than the Dingane snake, as Dingane had killed Shaka and divided the nation.

Laband initially focuses on an unsuccessful attempt on Shaka's life in 1824 and questions who the would-be assassins were: Members of the royal family? Ndwandwe loyalist supporters of Shaka's old rival Zwide? Or resentful men of the defeated Qwabe chiefdom? Laband explores each of the possible avenues and, through the explorations, tells the history of the Zulu people and the rise of the kingdom. The chapters are short, their titles are pithy and Laband quotes Zulu sources evocatively and effectively. The text is supported by a timeline, a list of characters, a glossary of Zulu words, maps, well selected illustrations and a list of kingdoms, chiefdoms and paramountcies, all very useful to the general reader.

The main focus is on King Shaka, on the man, his appearance, his background and his personality. What is refreshing is that this account sheds light rather than heat. Laband discusses Shaka's relationship with women and dismisses the suggestions that he was sexually inadequate or impotent. The death of his mother, Queen Nandi,

is discussed at length and the suggestion that Shaka himself killed her is debated. Laband identifies this event and the extravagant and gory mourning that followed, as a moment when Shaka's grip on his kingdom began to weaken.

Shaka built up and ruled one of the most powerful and well known African kingdoms in the first half of the 19th Century and his fame became legend with much being made of his tyranny and ferocity. Many of the early stories that reached white ears were spread by the small group of British traders, hunters and adventurers at Port Natal. They intrigued the king and he learned from them and exploited them astutely. Part of the reason that Shaka moved his capital south of the Thukela to KwaDukuza (a centre that became the colonial town of Stanger), was to be nearer to the opportunities offered by this strange group and to be able to counter any possible threats from them more quickly. The traders became Shaka's conduit to the wider world and he insisted that they accompany his emissaries to the Cape. The first mission was a failure and Shaka was killed before the second set of emissaries returned.

Laband does not believe that Shaka would have withstood the arrival of the Voortrekkers any more effectively than Dingane did, given the fact that the socio-economic, military and technical structures of the Zulu kingdom were almost identical during the reigns of both kings. However, there is an intriguing "what if" that Laband fails to explore. Had Shaka lived on, with his formidable reputation as a warrior-king intact, and cemented an alliance with the British, what would the Trekkers have done? Would they have thought it worthwhile to try and settle on the margins of his powerful kingdom when it was allied with the detested British authorities at the Cape from whom they were trying to escape? It would have been an act of double jeopardy for them.

This scenario would have changed the political geography of 19th Century South Africa dramatically and the Trekker states would have been pushed further west and perhaps further north. It is unlikely that they would have been able to develop as much as the Orange Free State and the Transvaal actually did. Instead of the "Great Trek" being seen as a watershed in South African history it may have turned out to be a relatively minor migration and the history of South Africa would have been very different – had Shaka continued to reign until the 1840s.

At the end of the 19th Century, Major Matthew Nathan, a British War Office official, who later became Governor of Natal, wrote in a Whitehall memorandum: 'The Zulus from Natal and Zululand form perhaps the finest material in the Empire for military service, but it has recently been decided that political considerations do not permit of a force for Imperial service being raised from them.'

It is fanciful to imagine the Zulu kings as playing the same role in the British empire in Africa as Indian maharajahs played in the imperial Great Game in central Asia. But it is a history that never happened because of the assassination of Shaka. John Laband's account of this critical and contested event is a fresh and worthy contribution to our understanding of an over-mythologised part of our common history. It is a real page turner from a brave rather than a foolhardy author.