

A powerful critique of recent colonial historiography

Jeff Guy, *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal*

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The majority of Guy's work has been a deeply rooted and fine grained history of African peoples in both Natal and Zululand, focusing specifically on power and production both before and during the colonial occupation of these regions. His close and careful readings of sources have primarily centred on the social and political economy of African peoples within and between these spaces, most notably in *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom* (1979), *The Maphumulo Uprising* (2005), and *Remembering the Rebellion* (2006). Conversely, Guy's work has significantly avoided centring on settler and colonial society in Natal. Indeed, his major exceptions to this, *The Heretic* (1983) and *The View from across the River* (2002), instead centred on members of the Colenso family; men and women whose political and social commitments led to a mutual rejection of settler society and its grasping rapacity. By selecting the towering figure of Theophilus Shepstone, Natal's long serving Secretary of Native Affairs, Guy focuses on the development of colonial Natal while still paying attention to the intricacies of African action and larger imperial ambitions on the continent. In so doing, Guy discusses at length the motivations and prejudices of Natal's settler society, particularly as seen through newspapers and political debates. The result is *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal*, an elegantly constructed and engaging narrative that compiles six decades of south eastern African history within a tome of somewhat formidable length.

Theophilus Shepstone is a towering and certainly contradictory figure in the history of Natal and Zululand. His many successive policies, developed throughout his three decade long tenure as the Secretary of Native Affairs, have been central to understanding the development of indigenous African relations within the colony and through the twentieth century. These policies have been often homogenised under the heading of "the Shepstone System", offering the idea of a coherent set of principles that allowed colonial Natal and later the South African state to implement a form of indirect rule over the African peoples of the region. This iteration was initially championed by Natal's first historians in the early twentieth century and gained further purchase in David Welsh's *The Roots of Segregation* (1971) and Mahmood Mamdani's enormously influential *Citizen and Subject* (1996). Guy takes exception with the common historiographical interpretation of

Shepstone and his system, arguing that the system was not actually Shepstone's at all. Rather, Guy asserts that

Shepstone's policies came to an end before he left office. This is not to say that policies and arguments made in Shepstone's name came to an end indeed, once he was no longer in office, they were appropriated, reinterpreted, and the "Shepstone system" was used to defend what was called Natal's native policy (pp 8-9).

For Guy, the "Shepstone system" is a constantly perpetuated misnomer, first advocated by Natal's settlers after Shepstone had lost formal power in Natal. The actual policies that Shepstone advocated were a contradictory collection of assertions that first and foremost sought to preserve as long as possible African pre-capitalist systems of economic and social production. Chief among these involved the preserving of land for African use, a move that consistently put Shepstone at odds with a belligerent and growing settler population as the nineteenth century progressed. For settlers, Africans were coddled by Shepstone's policies, which allowed them to remain economically independent of settler coercion and therefore kept settlers from obtaining the cheap labour they so vociferously demanded. Yet in a colony in which Africans outnumbered white settlers by at least eight to one, Shepstone rightly saw that Africans could not be completely or thoroughly alienated by settler demands. For as long as possible he hoped to delay capitalist attempts to undermine the economic independence of Africans within the colony, a process that became increasingly difficult as a variety of political and social factors began to push events in favour of Natal's settlers by the late 1860s.

Guy argues that Shepstone was able to achieve this delayed transformation through a canny and cynical manipulation of language and interpretation. Having grown up in southern Africa and having acquired an early fluency in African languages, he frequently mobilised his command of language to assert a sole command of the needs and concerns of Africans. This linguistic power made him frequently indispensable to generations of imperial administrators in the colony and left him considerable room to interpret and manoeuvre in his dealings with Africans, administrators, and colonists alike. Similarly, Shepstone's knowledge and manipulation of the written word allowed him to keep many of his African interlocutors in the dark about developments in the colony or wider empire. It is this state of intentional linguistic ambiguity that makes studying Shepstone and his policy work exceedingly difficult for historians of Natal. Guy himself notes in studying Shepstone's records, "what is invaluable is so adroitly intermixed with the manipulative that to distinguish the one from the other is only possible through close comparative reading and precise contextualisation" (p 2). In order to do so, Guy undertakes an ambitious and largely successful approach. *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal* is not a direct biography so much as the close reading of a life in documents with careful attention to the social, political, and economic changes that resulted in Shepstone's near half century residence in Natal.

In the wake of the disastrous annexation of the Transvaal in 1877 by the British government and the destruction wrought by the Anglo Zulu War of 1879, circumstances shifted decisively against the continued economic and social autonomy of Africans in Natal. Guy traces the large scale collapse of Shepstone's multiple policies to the decade after the war, newly codified in the Natal Native Law Code of 1891. By then, Shepstone's attempts to preserve land and relative

independence for African labourers was eclipsed by the increasing demand of settler capitalism, bolstered by the gold and diamond fields beyond Natal's borders. What arose in its place was not Shepstone's doing, but rather, "the Shepstone system", "a reconstructed system, a settler system, cobbled together from elements of the policies with which he was associated, and to which his name gave historical cohesion and political respectability" (p 504).

This analysis, one that simultaneously privileges policy change and claims of historical continuity, forms the crux of Guy's convincing argument. By closely reading the primary documents that constituted Shepstone's official life in Natal, Guy seeks to not only correct historical interpretations of both the man and the colony, he actively challenges the process of writing the history of Natal. Indeed, Guy's approach offers a significant critique for historians of southern Africa, particularly those of colonial Natal. In *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal* Guy laments scholarship that suffers from the "heavy weight of the established secondary sources, which are too often simply accepted and reworked as historical givens. Then, instead of locating the text firmly within the historical conditions in which it was produced, the text is treated as discourse" (p 11). Although this is something of a simplistic rendering of critical readings of colonial texts and discourse analysis, there is certainly merit in this critique.

Guy's assertions about Shepstone, and more notably about colonial Natal and African responses, are based on decades of painstaking, original archival research. While I believe that discourse certainly has a significant role to play in understanding how power operated in colonial societies and more importantly, how those historical actors viewed these operations of power I do think Guy is right to emphasise the need for a re examination of Natal's primary sources within their historical context. Otherwise, historians run the risk of "stay[ing] intellectually at home, in places and amongst people with whom one is more familiar, the significance of the remote other asserted certainly, but with a gesture rather than engagement", as Guy argues (p 11). Such an interpretive strategy does not do the lengthy and fraught process of historical change justice, and allows for an ahistoric reading of cultural concepts in the present back into the nineteenth century; a process Guy describes as the conflation of "people and things, *abantu* and *izinto*" (p 521). This analysis remains pointedly relevant in contemporary South Africa as politicians and traditional leaders make totalising claims of authority and power that ignore the messy realities of change throughout centuries of colonial (and ostensibly post colonial) history.

Guy's book is a necessary addition to Natal and larger South African historiography not simply for its painstaking research and engaging narrative. It also presents a powerful critique of recent colonial historiography and ahistoric assertions of tradition in the present. *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal* is an important book that demonstrates Guy's keen eye for the intricacies of settler society in Natal as well as his usual astute observation of African agency in the region.

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