

## Review Debate

### A response to Norman Etherington's 'Jeff Guy's *Theophilus Shepstone: a study in character*'

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Fifty years ago it was unusual for researchers in the humanities to use typewriters. The British Museum Reading Room allowed them in but they were directed to a small, windowless, claustrophobic annex in the library's bowels. It was here I met Norman Etherington, both of us to our astonishment searching for the same unusual sources on South African history. We later met in South Africa to continue our research – spoke with people who bridged a great span of South African history – Selby Msimang, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Anthony Barker – and explored what was then still Zululand in an old, yellow Ford Anglia on roads so vulnerable to the weather that on one occasion Norman, delayed by the mud, missed not only an appointment with Edgar Brookes but playing the bassoon in the Pietermaritzburg Philharmonic's performance of Beethoven's Seventh. Except for the past few years, we kept in contact and I have been the recipient of his exceptional generosity, personal and academic. I must admit therefore to be taken aback not by a critical review of my book on Theophilus Shepstone and colonial Natal but by a hostile one. I also believe that it is a misreading of my book and I must respond to it, for the same reason that he gives for his review: 'Here is a challenge that cannot be left unanswered, lest it be thought silence signifies assent' (p51).<sup>1</sup> I have tried not to give the impression, not only uninteresting but unedifying, of two grumpy old men slugging it out. I'm not sure if I have succeeded.

Etherington's review of my book *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal: African autonomy and settler colonialism in the making of traditional authority* is long, ranges back and forth, selecting different

targets for a range of the historical weapons he has collected in a lifetime of research, some of them to mount major attacks with the intent of inflicting major damage, others minor, made in passing. I have ignored the latter and concentrated my defence on the former and built it around the title of the book: a rather clumsy title I admit but passable as a succinct summary of the book's dominant themes and quite able I feel to fend off the assaults made on it.

The review begins at the very beginning with *Theophilus Shepstone*, the opening two words of the title as they appear on the cover. These are larger than the rest of the title and this will lead, the reviewer maintains, to 'prospective readers' expecting a biography. And not only prospective readers but the reviewer himself for he follows this up with the assertion that 'almost everything that might be expected in a full-blown biography is missing'.

This absent biography is targeted throughout the review. The problem is that while Shepstone is certainly central to the book, it is not and was not intended to be a 'full blown biography'. This should be apparent from the wording of the title as a whole for which I take full responsibility, and not from its visual appearance for which I do not. It should also be apparent from the words that head the first sub-section of the 'Introduction', 'Historical biography/biographical history', in which I explain why I felt it necessary to shift 'away from historical biography towards biographical history' (page 2). No matter: Etherington wanted a full blown biography and didn't get it, and criticises the book not for what it is but what he wants it to be: a comprehensive biography, structured around an evenly paced narrative, dealing with those topics that Etherington holds to be significant for a life of Shepstone.

But even if I could, if anyone could, write the comprehensive biography that he insists upon, I chose not to do so. Of course I read the sources as widely as possible, but I knowingly selected certain themes and then developed them as broader issues, within a context which Etherington ignores or dismisses in this review. I regret leaving out certain important aspects of Shepstone's life – his relations with African rulers beyond Natal's borders for example – or dealing insufficiently with others – like events in southern Natal – but this is not to say that I didn't take them into consideration. But selection is intrinsic to research and writing and I was aware of what I was doing. I concentrated on Shepstone as the Natal official responsible for native administration. I favoured themes I thought were novel, or at least would benefit from a new interpretation. I tended not to engage with existing

histories that I found irrelevant or wrong-headed. I engaged only in passing with the historiography of Natal generally, not because I think that histories should not be located within a historiographical context but because I wanted the space to develop fresh interpretations, not go yet again over old ground. I tried to keep my differences with other historians out of the text and refer to them in the notes and then only when I had to. I dealt briefly with subjects that have been treated at length by other historians and by myself – like Shepstone's relationship with Colenso, or the 1879 invasion of Zululand (and Etherington is deaf to irony in the book, as in my 'as we all know' aside on the historiography of that war, or the 'interminable' trees under which Shepstone held court). I tried to dwell on aspects of Shepstone's official life that had not been addressed fully by historians: the 'Zulu contingent' controversy; Shepstone and governor John Scott and the tribal title controversy; or Shepstone's successful attempt to manipulate London's Colonial Office and his failed attempt to do the same to Natal's Legislative Council in the aftermath of the clash with Langalibalele, are only some examples of this.

I also tried to look at colonial Natal in fresh ways, dwelling on the way settler racism developed, how African autonomy was structured and how Shepstone encountered it, before his final defeat. '*... the Forging of Natal*' is not only a play on words, exploited I have to admit with some reluctance, but places boundaries around the features of Shepstone's administrative life upon which I concentrate. Etherington sees none of this: '*... the Forging of Natal*' indicates only a 'furthering narrowing of the topic' [p52]. I disagree. It is not a narrowing of *the* topic but of the topic he has decided should be mine.

He goes on to attack a particular argument, and does so repeatedly throughout the review, as an example of my gross methodological naiveté and professional inadequacy. In this case all I can do is hurl the charge back over the parapet – although with some additional ones attached. Etherington's attack concerns a short passage in the manuscript version of a report Shepstone wrote on 26 April 1846 on the instructions of the governor soon after his arrival in Natal. In it he stated that chiefs and their followers had come to his office to pay their respects to the new colonial governor and ask for land to be 'allotted to them' and that they be protected on it as British subjects. Over two years later this was attached to another report, which was sent to England and published as an enclosure in a British Parliamentary Paper on Natal. But there are differences between an initial manuscript

version of Shepstone's report and the published one and I chose to argue that one of these differences, the omission of the passage about chiefs asking for land referred to above, has a special significance. Shepstone was to forward the altered document to his official superiors, or refer to it, repeatedly throughout his life to justify a range of policy initiatives. This has a bearing on arguments I develop in the book: that African access to land, or its denial, is a dominant theme in the history of colonial Natal and Shepstone's role in it and its suppression here is significant; that this deletion removes a piece of evidence that suggests that Shepstone's ideas were not entirely of his own devising, as he liked to suggest, but that he took cognisance of African ideas and initiatives; that at the time when the passage was deleted it was particularly important for Shepstone to persuade his superiors of his extraordinary prescience in matters of African administration – in this case that he had addressed questions of African administration two years before they had become critical issues – as he predicted they would unless notice was taken of his ideas.

Then, emphasising a different aspect of the same topic, I argue that the fact that Shepstone was prepared to alter a document he wrote in Natal in 1846, and in 1848 pass it off as the original, is a significant early indication of other themes in the book. Firstly, that Shepstone's writings have to be treated with great caution for at times his deceptions could cross the boundary with fraud. Secondly, that through his knowledge of African languages he was able was able to promote his own interpretations of African opinion by the control he exercised over African spoken words when reporting them in writing.

Now I am of course well aware of putting too much emphasis on a single sentence. I discuss this in a note (14, page 81), which refers to the passage and the difficulties that might emerge given 'the interpretative weight I give to the differences in the two versions'. I argue however that on balance, given my argument in the book as whole, that it would be more deceptive to ignore this statement than to develop it as I did, as a piece of evidence which when considered in context supports a much wider argument.

'You don't have to be a pitbull prosecutor to pick this case apart' (p55) Etherington writes and then proceeds to use the crudest, simplest tools to do so. The document was shortened, as Shepstone stated, 'to avoid unnecessary length', 'it was a simple exercise in economy'. But there is nothing simple about Shepstone. Greater familiarity with his memoranda generally would recognise that this is a stock beginning; an apology for their

inadequacy as a result of the lack of time, the complexity of the issues at hand, and so on. Such statements might have been true: but they also provide an extremely cautious man with a way out if ever needed.

And I can only treat as contemptuous the admonition that I took this document under discussion 'out of context'. Even in the short term the context Etherington provides is not only simplistic but wrong. It ignores, what my book provides in detail, the context in which Shepstone forwarded the doctored report. He was fighting the Secretary of State's attempt to promulgate Royal Instructions that would leave Natal's chiefs formally independent of colonial authority. The Natal Executive, to which Shepstone had been seconded to play a major role, opposed this. I suggest that in order to bolster Natal's case the two-year old document was retrieved and altered in a way more suited to the pressures now confronting colonial Natal, attached then to a new covering letter to show that, over two years before, Shepstone had already been aware of the difficulties to come. The document was altered to give it a different emphasis: the hint that Africans took any initiative over the crucial matter of land was removed to harmonise it with the new covering letter which stated that 'As a class, the natives look upon themselves as far inferior to the white inhabitants, whom circumstances have taught to view as their natural superiors and masters'. That is the new context.

In the end Shepstone won. London felt that Shepstone had "obtained an ascendancy" over Natal's Africans "by the energy and ability which he has shown in managing them" (page 133) and ultimately London recognised the authority of a 'Supreme Chief' with arbitrary powers. I deal with this at length and in detail in Chapter 10 entitled 'Legislation' whose final sentence reads that this

introduced a formal authoritarianism into South Africa law that was to last for a century and a half – and an informal ideological feature of South African political consciousness that was even more difficult to remove. (page 136)

And Etherington accuses me of 'trying to build a revisionist case on the interpretation of a single document extracted from its longer-term historical context'! (pp68-69)

He proceeds with a counterfactual: supposing 'for a moment' that Shepstone deleted the sentence to 'hide a solemn contract made with African chiefs' (p56). But at this point I must risk being charged with contempt of court and leave the case to the prosecutor. Where do I refer or

even suggest a ‘solemn contract’ that Shepstone wanted to hide? Argument and defence on the interpretation of existing evidence is one thing, but the invention of evidence in order to attack the accused is another. From now on the assumption that I assert there was ‘a solemn contract’ gains substance as it weaves its way through a number of speculative and rhetorical points to appear as an ‘oral promise’ and a ‘foundational oral contract’ on p58 and ‘a supposed secret deal’ on p59. He drives this home (p55) by selecting a passage from the end of the book where I supposedly condemn myself by asserting that: ‘It [the excluded sentence] was

essential to Shepstone’s success – but it was also his secret – he could not admit that his influence was the consequence of anything so ordinary as a trade-off – land for loyalty; it conceded too much to African initiative and diminished his reputation as a man of extraordinary insight and influence over them’. (page 519).

Now I did indeed write the quoted passage – but I did not write the pronoun ‘It’ at the start. In my book this passage begins with the word ‘Reciprocity’. Thus the passage reads, not ‘the excluded sentence’ but ‘Reciprocity was essential to his success...’. The ripping of ‘Reciprocity’ from the quotation and its replacement by ‘the excluded sentence’ is not only indefensible in itself but a reflection of the argument used throughout the review to attack my ability as a historian. It suggests to me the work of a pit-bull, angered and furiously asserting its dominance regardless of the damage being done.

It has also left me weary of warding off attacks grounded in baseless accusations. I object to having to defend myself for what I didn’t write and the insulting conclusion that ‘Guy’s handling of this particular document raises questions about his methodological approach to documents in general’ (p58). He has ‘climbed out on this long and untrustworthy limb because he departed from his initial methodology of steadily reading through the papers of the office of Native Affairs’ (p69). I deny this. To develop the reviewer’s metaphor, my arguments are selected and presented as a living part of the trunk of a tree, rooted in the land, and coming to leaf in an extraordinary variety of forms and textures, shaken continually by the roar of the winds of history. And the unfairness of an attack on my professional integrity, based on an accusation which replaces the subject of my sentence with another, and in the process changes a subtle interpretation to a false assertion demands that while trying to keep to the broader arguments and avoid the niggles I have to continue.

Consider the statement that ‘Shepstone’s life from birth in 1817 to his

arrival in Natal in 1846 is treated in a few paragraphs...' (p51). It covers pages 57 to 65 in fact but I don't intend to argue how many paragraphs constitute 'a few'. I develop two arguments on these pages that I believe are significant. The first is the proximity of the 18-year old Shepstone to plans being devised on the eastern frontier of the Cape to create 'locations of each tribe', with chiefs as magistrates under an 'English Agent' to whom Africans had a right of appeal. 'In time' I write, 'Shepstone was to make' these plans 'his own' (page 59).

Then in this section on the young Shepstone in the Cape I consider the development of his character. It deals with personal psychology – interesting in my opinion, possibly significant, but always speculative. As an 18-19 year old Shepstone had to interpret at huge meetings of defeated Xhosa the terms of their surrender. The speeches were made by British officials and were ridiculous, bullying and over-inflated and we can only speculate how Shepstone translated them to an African audience that he knew well. But, I suggest, that having to interpret the blustering banalities of Benjamin D'Urban and the cacophonous capering of Harry Smith created in the young Shepstone the determination never to follow suit and to interpret not according to the text presented to him but as he saw fit, and present himself as everything these officials were not – that is as 'guarded, careful, ordered and firm...' (page 60). I suggest that here we have possibly some at least of the origins of Shepstone's notorious impassivity and secretiveness which became not just a trait in his character but subsequently a matter of political and historical significance. And I do all of this in 'a few paragraphs'? Even if this were so it is the weight and significance of these paragraphs in the context of the book as a whole which is important. After all I suggest that it is here that we find, possibly, one explanation for the demonstrable fact that Shepstone's official writing is so often deceptive and misleading, and his personal demeanour so secretive and enigmatic. This was commented on at the time, objected to by his enemies, complained of by Africans, and in the end a major factor in his loss of reputation. Etherington ignores my treatment of its possible origins – indeed an uncritical acceptance of Shepstone's views as he expressed them has always been a weakness in his treatment of the man.

Etherington writes:

Since chiefs were key figures in the administration of justice, it is necessary to delineate with some precision what kinds of people were recognised as chiefs. Guy gives us little or no guidance on this critical

question. Nowhere do we find a definition of chieftainship nor any indication of how many individuals were officially designated as chiefs. He [Guy] is unable to make clear connections to pre-colonial patterns of authority or residence. (p59)

I turn to the section on Maps (presented between pages 246-7). Map 2 depicts seven of the areas called locations on which chiefs were concentrated, deliberately vague in outline as were the locations themselves. I have taken these seven locations from files for the late 1840s and in the next two pages, in tabular form, identify the chiefs living there where I can, and give a brief account of their status derived from wider research. The result is a reconstruction of nearly 40 *amakhosi* who Shepstone initially recognised and their backgrounds. The Appendix of the book consists of over 80 biographies of whom about half are *amakhosi*. Chiefs are defined in their pre-conquest form on page 31, developed further in Chapter 6 entitled ‘*amaKhosi*’, and appear, in their different forms throughout the book with over 100 references to *amaKhosi* in the Index. But I find having to defend myself as a historian by counting references to counter an empty accusation a humiliating waste of precious time. I am therefore at a loss to respond to the passage quoted above beyond using a simple word – nonsense.

Following the charge that I fail to identify chiefs the review begins to fragment over a number of pages which, apart from suggesting the extent of the reviewer’s knowledge of the archival holdings, should be seen ‘in relation to Guy’s [non-existent] argument that Shepstone’s regime rested on continuous unrecorded oral negotiations with autonomous or semi-autonomous chiefs...’ as distinct from Etherington’s ‘continuous process of definition, codification and bureaucratisation of chieftainship’. He goes on to demonstrate this (p63) by summarising decisions in a ‘fulsomely documented, developed system of colonial administration...’. His selected examples strike me very differently in that they suggest not a developing administrative rigour but a number of contradictory decisions and arbitrary pronouncements. Where Etherington sees a colonial administrative system in the process of developing, I see informed but wary legal pragmatism and political opportunism. Etherington believes in a Shepstone system and the usefulness of the concept of indirect rule; I believe, not that they are unimportant, but that they are not only semantically but historically misleading concepts which cannot be extended arbitrarily but have to be rooted in an understanding of the societies being ruled. I was unable to find in the literature descriptions of pre-colonial societies at the same depth as

those which pertain to Natal nor social concepts to which I could sufficiently relate. Lists of the decisions of magistrates with nothing on their character, their shortcomings and their strengths, in authority over districts, named but not firmly rooted in their specific geographical and historical environments, I find of little use. This is one of the reasons that I spend a chapter on the short tenure of George Ryder Peppercorne, a remarkable but unstudied magistrate appointed over what has remained an extraordinarily difficult part of Natal. Unlike any other magistrate he brilliantly and bravely exposed Shepstone's opportunism and pragmatism, and lost his job for so doing.

But the examples in the last paragraph are differences of approach and opinion and therefore within the realm of legitimate historical debate. What is illegitimate is condemnation on invented grounds. For example it is held that reading

the Act of 1875 without reference to the body of case law and administrative practice developed over the previous thirty years led Guy into an error, which cannot be allowed to stand. (p68)

But the Native Administration Act of 1875 did not address case law. It did however address administrative practice and restricted the administrative powers which Shepstone had developed over the previous 30 years and which are dealt with extensively in my book. So is my detailed account of the manner in which Shepstone's Native Administration Bill was amended in the legislature (which Etherington discounts) to become the Native Administration Act by which 'The Native Administration Law, 1875' was promulgated.

The Act did require however that native law 'as at present practised' be codified. Etherington continues: Guy's '[s]econd leap in the dark [my first I treat on pages 82-83 above] was to view the codification of Native Law within the very narrow compass of the Legislative Council debates of 1875' (p69). There is no truth in this. I examine the codification within the work of the Board appointed by the Legislature to codify the law and I write how it 'consulted earlier statutes, Shepstone's circulars and regulations and magistrates for their opinions'. I also point out that the Board found that this documentary and oral research 'produced such a confusion of local practices that the board came to the conclusion that there was no native law at all, but rather "native public opinion, fashions, or properties, or partial customs..."' (page 465). As a result the Board felt that it had to proceed not on precedent but on "'well-defined leading principles": "[t]he subjection of the female sex to the male"' of "'children to their father"' ; "'primogeniture"' and the

“incapacity” “of women to own property” (page 466). Not quite Etherington’s ‘fulsomely documented, developed system of colonial administration...’ drawing on the ‘body of case law built up by Shepstone...’.

And finally Etherington writes of my ‘[i]maged transition from Shepstone’s personal and purely oral African administration to a world of black letter law’ and comments that if Guy had ‘looked into the records he would find that after 1875 nothing much had changed’ (p69). This is unacceptable. If the reviewer had looked into the book and the chapter on ‘Settler law in theory and practice’ he would find pages of evidence of my research and my interpretation of just what had or had not changed. It is true that in my analysis I find ‘changed’, even with the qualification ‘nothing much’, too crude. I use the metaphorical ‘undermined’ with its implication of an apparent, but increasingly superficial, continuity. As I write: “Undermined” is used to emphasise that it [African society] was not changed, immediately, or in any obviously identifiable way’ (page 468) and later of ‘African-colonial, traditional-modernising social forces – all of them were present in a halting, advancing, retreating process of change. This was demonstrated in ...’ (page 471).

But I don’t want to go on in this mode – repeatedly having to return to allegations which the text of my book demonstrates are without foundation. I want to continue by turning from the main title to the book’s subtitle *African autonomy and settler colonialism in the making of traditional authority*. ‘African autonomy’ evokes a bemused comment from Etherington that it ‘evidently refers’ to my ‘contention that chiefs retained a considerable degree of autonomy pursuant to Shepstone’s supposed secret deal’ (p59). Well Etherington might feel so but it is not the point I make. African autonomy is a theme that threads its way through the book in many forms and many guises and in so doing draws attention to the considerable degree of independence Africans retained in the colonial regime, on what it depended, how it was exercised, and how it was both maintained and undermined.

Then there is *settler colonialism*. Again it is difficult to answer criticisms as hostile as Etherington’s. By the time I reach the 1860s not only have I failed to write the full-blown biography he wants but I, like so many historians before me (nothing new in this book), depict a political situation dominated by Shepstone *v* his settler critics. The “Shepstone system” (a term I reject) ‘is reduced to the man’ (one of the reasons I did not attempt a full blown biography). This is just not so. Having established my topic – a history of Shepstone within the context of the setting up of colonial Natal – I refine it

in the subtitle *African autonomy and settler colonialism*. In doing this I point to the significance of the interaction between African autonomy, economic and social, and the settlers' material ambitions within the context of their capitalist times. It is this dynamic that provides the context for the emergence of a vicious settler racism. I write this up as a historical process in which a range of different settler responses to Africans acquire an increasing conformity, and racist intensity. No matter – Etherington doesn't see it this way therefore no argument is needed:

most white settlers came to Natal with a fully developed sense of racial hierarchy and were up-to-date on the latest doctrines from Europe and North America. (p74)

This was simply not so as their letters, their attitudes, their controversies and their differences indicate; indeed I deal at length with the material ambitions of the settlers and show they interacted with an African view of the world to create these particular racial prejudices. But, Etherington insists, 'to prove a hardening of attitudes after 1867 we need some documentation on the allegedly softer attitudes of the 1840s and 1850s'. Well proof is a difficult word in this context, but David Dale Buchanan, editor of the *Natal Witness* (which Etherington has read together with other Natal newspapers) and leading Natal lawyer, wrote in the early 1860s about hardening attitudes and published commentaries on the move from 'jealousy' to 'hatred' (page 338). I refer to them in the book. Etherington not only ignores this but then treats me with contempt. My treatment of pathological racial hostility in Natal 'carries vulgar Marxism [to] the point of caricature' (p74-75). I would respond by saying that the vulgarity lies in Etherington's treatment of my chapter on 'The pathology of settler colonialism'.

I now want to move away from these demonstrable examples of inaccuracy and unfairness and deal briefly with the reviewer's failure to understand the substantial argument of the book. I don't of course demand agreement, but I do expect understanding from a historian of his reputation and experience. To return to the subtitle as a whole. I worded it carefully: it is out of the interaction of *African autonomy* and *settler colonialism* that we get *traditional authority*. Now Etherington is well aware of the important general discussion on the nature of tradition, the social and political power of the concept and at the same time the degree to which it is invented and its vulnerability as a concept when considered historically. The debates, academic and analytical, political and emotional on the subject of tradition are a feature and a force in modern life, and the literature on the subject is

immense. And in South Africa today the debate is especially significant and I spend a few pages on it in the 'Introduction' under the sub-heading 'Traditional authorities and customary law' (pages 13-17).

Traditional authority – that is chieftainship – is recognised, conditionally, by the 1996 South African Constitution and legislation has been passed with references to traditional authority and to extend its powers. But the history of the concept and its application is controversial and contested. For some it represents the essence of African culture to which western thought is blind. For others traditional authorities grew out of apartheid's tribal authorities and these in turn from the native authorities integral to the interwar policies of segregation. And it widely held that policies of segregation were influenced profoundly, and some believe modelled on, Shepstone's policies.

One prominent aspect of this debate is chieftainship – who are legitimate chiefs, how deep are their historical roots, over whom do they exercise authority and what historical claims, to land especially, can they legitimately make? I don't deal with the contemporary debate directly in the body of the book, but I refer to it and it was certainly very much on my mind as I wrote the book, as were the questions that spring from it: what is essentially African? Has the idea of being African changed radically and if so how and when? What is the most useful chronology we can impose on South Africa's past? What concepts can we best use to analyse and debate South African tradition and modernity with some subtlety? To take, from the review, just one example of what makes questions like these important, Etherington chides me for not providing 'economic data' on 'visible native autonomy'. Before I could attempt an answer to such a question I would have to ask what does 'economic' and 'autonomy' mean when they are disassociated from understandings developed within the context of capitalism.

In attempting to provide arguments which enlighten us on such questions I try to avoid chunks of theory, preferring to integrate them in historical narrative when possible. From my study of the sources I develop a structural argument that gives form to the book and frames its content. I can only state it here not develop it, but the book identifies and examines the material foundations of African social existence in pre-colonial times using the concept labour power and how it was realised, utilised and organised. The book moves on to demonstrate how these particular pre-conquest African societies were organised around practices by which men exchanged cattle for women whose reproductive and productive capacities created the

surplus and the value upon which society was founded, whose equivalents in cattle measured wealth and status, and whose possession was confined to men. Cattle initiated the reproductive and productive processes upon which the society was founded when they were exchanged for women upon whose labour the reproductive and productive unit – the homestead and the land associated with it – was created and sustained, socially and economically.

Stated in this bare manner in a language whose historical development took place at a great geographical, economic and conceptual distance from what it is describing is difficult indeed. But as Etherington points out I have been developing these ideas for years – and he has not been shy of using aspects of them himself. But in this book I advance them further, less theoretically, more historically, inching my way forward to tentatively suggest that, in its barest, most honed-down form, what happened in the course of Shepstone's life, in a process in which he intervened, was a shift from a pre-capitalist society based on the accumulation, control and the value of living things – people – towards (note the towards, Etherington ignores it) a capitalist one based on the accumulation and control of material objects – things.

I understand how difficult it is for Etherington to sympathise with this, although I don't understand why he should make a travesty of it as he does (pp69-70) when he refers to my 'people or things' 'formula'. He does not object to my 'attention to a momentous transition to modernity' but that I 'ahistorically' reduce it 'to absurdly narrow chronological and geographical bounds' (p70). What, he argues, of the century-long 'economy of things' on the East African coast, and the trade goods still traversing southern Africa in Shepstone's time? Well my answer to this is that trade in things must not be confused with an economy of things: exchange has to be distinguished from production – the market is of course important, but without production there is no market, and an analysis which concentrates on the market to the exclusion of production has its eyes so dimmed by the glamour of gold, guns and ivory that they are unable penetrate the darkness of the 'hidden abode' of production.

Nor will his approach assist historians in the crucially important but difficult process of distinguishing continuity from change; or, as I treat it in the book, what changes when it appears to stay the same, and what stays the same when it appears to change? Somehow we have to find a way to identify shared markers against which we can measure change, periodise events, and the contribution of, and impact on, the people whose lives were

associated with them. This I believe is at bottom the historian's task. And this particular identification of significant markers of change I would like to see extended to other histories of southern African agro-pastoralists – within their specific contexts of course.

Failure to theorise adequately – overtly or covertly – concerns not only the temporal but the conceptual. My book seeks to demonstrate that we have to distinguish between apparent surface continuities and those with depth. Fundamental historical changes are to be sought in production and social reproduction – and before I am lectured on the vulgarities of Marxism and archaic views of base and superstructure, let me say read my book and see if I succeed in linking social, political and economic elements of a historical process in a narrative of dynamic change. I argue that there is not just a temporal but a conceptual difference between contemporary chieftainship and historical chieftainship: this difference came about as part of historical events that I relate in the book and although remnants of the past still cling to the present, careful historical analysis does suggest ways of distinguishing the more fundamental from the more ephemeral aspects of change. I examine the changes in production and social reproduction that took place in African society when confronted by the fundamentally different settler society, when they met, not accidentally, in Natal in the nineteenth century. A historical analysis of what happened, and how and why, demands the identification on what was unique and essential to their different social structures, and how these were changed in their interaction. I demonstrate that a society based on the accumulation of material objects began a process of destruction in a society based on the accumulation of human beings, and suggest how we can identify, theoretically, the point of no return.

But I do this with hesitation. The language we use, a historical production in itself, does not make these concepts easy to represent. But I believe the argument deserves better than Etherington's dismissive 'the formula Guy consistently employs – "people or things"' (p70). My distinction between societies structured around *abantu* and those around *izinto* allows us to assess and measure social change. It enables us to argue that regardless of the dancing, the leopard skins, the marriages and the appeals to traditional culture, that the traditional of post-colonial times is not in essence that of colonial and indeed of pre-colonial times. The continuity is a surface not a fundamental one. It is of course significant but for reasons that are deceptive, and it is the historian who is best placed to uncover these deceptions. But, Etherington writes,

Perhaps the most unexpectedly enduring development during Shepstone's tenure of office was the cementing of chieftainship as an indispensable institution of colonial government... [Chiefs have] survived, do survive in the twenty-first century, thanks to the way they had been built into a relatively cheap but necessary agency of the colonial state. (p66)

This passage is important. Firstly it shows that Etherington chooses not to understand my book, its approach, its first principles, its argument or its intentions. Secondly, that like his contemporaries and most subsequent historians he does not understand Shepstone and remains caught in the mythology that settlers created around Shepstone in a process that I document. This is not solely because he misrepresents me and my arguments but because his review deals largely with surface meanings and he does not invest in his idea of chieftainship the historical dynamism it requires to be understood in depth. To repeat, this does not mean that chieftainship is insignificant – indeed it is not, and in so far as it is expressed today in chiefly bids for greater power it indicates the manner in which old struggles continue in the new South Africa. But the historian's role goes beyond documenting struggles, they have to be explained, and this means examining origins, identifying what has changed and what has not in new forms and old guises, and explaining the processes involved. As far as chiefs in South Africa today are concerned it means looking at the changing bases of their power and influence in which tradition plays a part, but only a part and that a deceptive one, for much of the meaning lies below the surface, where, with hard work and much luck, historians can make it accessible.

But this will not happen if we expend our energies, as I have had to do in writing this response, in defending ourselves from unnecessarily hostile reviews by our erstwhile allies. From my point of view Etherington's interpretations are unconvincing, his refutations of my arguments are insubstantial, and his assessment of evidence I put forward invalid. To be held to account, out of context, for not contextualising my arguments is bad. Criticism without considering the argument or the evidence is worse. But to be attacked for writing what I did not write is completely unacceptable. And after all this Etherington cuts his attack short – as far as his contribution to the *Cambridge History of South Africa* is concerned my interpretation is irrelevant. He would not change a word. 'Not a word' (p75).

And so, as often happens in the academic world, the ladder is pulled up to be stored away in the ivory tower's attic. This makes intellectually

profitable discussion of South African history impossible just at a time when attempts at a more public history are especially important. In the case at hand what is seen as traditional authority is a concept being used in a struggle for power over millions of people with a stake in rural South Africa, in a conflict whose outcome will have a substantial effect on the quality of their lives. The meaning of traditional authority is not just a subject for academics to debate: it is also a part of the struggle for the distribution of resources, and the linked question of where political power will lie and how it will be distributed.

In saying this I am not presenting my book as any sort of political manifesto, nor do I believe that it will have any direct political or popular impact, nor was this my goal. Probably the most important reason for writing it was personal: the excitement of archival research, the satisfaction of imposing meaning on evidence of past events, and the contradictory enjoyment/trials of writing. But there is also the wider less obvious sense of satisfaction in making a contribution to a wider understanding of where we are now and how we got here. Etherington writes that failure on his part to respond to the few lines in which I refer to his historical writing would imply that he accepts them. I use the same argument against the 12 000+ words he uses to refer to mine, 'lest it be thought silence signifies assent'. But I would go further. To admit by my silence not just the interpretations, but the allegations he makes in his review, would also be to admit my own failure to understand not just Theophilus Shepstone, but South Africa's past in the present. And this is something that I am not, just yet at least, prepared to accept.

## Note

- 1 I use 'page' when I refer to the book under review, and abbreviate it when I refer to the review itself [as it appears here – eds].