

## What do an Indonesian volcano, Frankenstein and Shaka Zulu have in common? The Mfecane and Great Trek

In April 1816, 18-year-old Mary Godwin travelled to Geneva with her lover, the poet Percy Shelley. (They had eloped and were to marry later in the year.) They stayed in Geneva for the summer with her half-sister, Claire, and another of England's great poets, Lord Byron. But the weather was terrible. Instead of rowing on the calm and pleasant Lake Geneva, Mary wrote of a 'wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain [that] often confined us for days to the house'. It was during one such dark and stormy evening that a member of the travelling party suggested a game: each should write a ghost story. After several days of toying with different ideas, Mary Shelley conjured up Frankenstein, the story of Victor Frankenstein who creates a monster in a scientific experiment. Published in 1818, *Frankenstein* changed literary history and is today considered one of the first science fiction books. It still sells approximately 40 000 copies per year.

But 1816 was not all fun and games. The 'year without a summer', as it would come to be known, caused mass starvation across Europe. Lord Byron put this most succinctly in the poem 'Darkness':

Of famine fed upon all entrails – men  
Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh ...

Baron Karl Drais was witnessing the same devastation in Mannheim, not too far from Lord Byron and Mary Shelley's holiday home. One thing that struck him was the deaths of thousands of horses. The rivers were

in flood. Transportation, which then relied on horses and boats, came to a halt. Baron Karl, a mathematician and inventor, had an idea: what if one could substitute horsepower for human power? Although his initial idea was to invent a four-wheel carriage, he soon realised that this would be too heavy for a human to pull. He refocused, ultimately designing his *Laufmaschine* or 'running machine'. Today we know it as the bicycle.

It was not just in Europe that the weather was unusual. From Asia to the Americas, reports came of strange weather conditions, although no one could identify the cause. In southern Africa, too, we have evidence of dramatic weather changes. Our sources are different. Because we do not have written accounts from those who must have experienced this, we instead use oral histories and even evidence from tree rings. All of these sources reveal the same thing: a prolonged drought early in the nineteenth century, around 1815.<sup>73</sup> The Nguni remember this time as '*madlathule*', literally 'let one eat what he can and say nothing'. Reconstructed rainfall data shows a significant decline during the period. Tree-ring evidence in Zimbabwe confirms slower tree growth during this period, suggesting a severe drought.

The drought had major implications. As chapter 7 mentioned, maize was introduced into Africa around 1600. By 1800 it had spread all the way to the south coast of the continent, where Bantu-speaking farmers, in present-day KwaZulu-Natal, preferred its higher yields to those of sorghum and millet. Yet, as mentioned before, maize has one major disadvantage: it is not drought resistant. When a severe drought hit the region at the beginning of the century, disaster ensued.

The lack of food led to famine and war. The two most powerful polities during this time were the Ndwandwe and the Mthethwa. Under the leadership of King Zwide, the Ndwandwe defeated the Mthethwa and murdered their leader, Dingiswayo. One year earlier, in 1816, the leader of one of the Mthethwa's minor clans, Chief Senzangakhona of the Zulu, had died. He was replaced by his illegitimate son, a young but ambitious soldier, in a relatively bloodless coup. When Zwide defeated Dingiswayo, this young soldier swore revenge against the man who had defeated his chief. Only two years later, after strategically bringing all the defeated forces together and by using innovative military tactics,

Shaka, king of the Zulu, defeated the mighty Ndwandwe in a series of battles.

These battles were the beginning of the Mfecane, a period of chaos and suffering in much of southern Africa. After their defeat, the Ndwandwe split up and moved, some into eSwatini, others into Mozambique (to establish the Gaza empire) and others much further north into Zambia and Malawi. Wherever they went, they caused turmoil as they uprooted other groups. The arrival of the Ndwandwe in Mozambique, for example, pushed some Tsonga across the Lebombo Mountains into Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

The loose alliances within the Zulu kingdom could also not endure the devastation. The Khumalo clan under Mzilikazi split off from the Zulu but, after defeat in several clashes, Mzilikazi chose to move away in the direction of present-day Pretoria, where he set up the Ndebele state. The Ndebele would later be pushed further north and ultimately settle in Matabeleland in present-day Zimbabwe.

The conflicts also sparked migrations in the west. The Kololo group under Sebitwane moved from present-day Lesotho, plundering Tswana settlements on their way through Botswana, before settling in present-day Barotseland in Zambia, where they conquered the Lozi people. Along the coast, refugees from the Zulu wars, known as Mfengu, moved into the lands of the Xhosa. Such migrations had a domino effect, further exacerbating the effects of drought and warfare. It was indeed a scattering, a *mfecane*, of people all across southern Africa.

While most fled the Zulu, one notable exception involved the Sotho under Moshoeshe I. He gathered several smaller clans together, strategically used the rugged terrain of the Drakensberg mountains and fought off several attacks, ultimately establishing the kingdom of Lesotho.

One of the defining characteristics of the twenty years between 1815 and 1835 was the way it changed the spatial distribution of people. Not only did famine, war and migration reduce population numbers substantially, but it also caused more people to live in rugged areas – places, like Lesotho, where they could protect themselves more easily. Here it is perhaps useful to reflect on the Nunn and Puga paper discussed in chapter 11. These scholars suggested that many Africans, in an attempt

to escape the ravages of the slave trade, settled in rugged areas far from the coast or in inhospitable mountainous terrain. The same could be applied to the Mfecane. The only places that remained densely settled were the rugged areas in the Eastern Cape, Zululand, Eswatini and Lesotho (the most rugged country on earth). While this strategy was a great way to protect oneself against conflict, it had detrimental economic consequences: ruggedness increases trade costs, and this in turn reduces the incentive to produce a surplus and trade.

But there was an even bigger consequence of the migrations into rugged areas. By the 1830s, many of the regions once densely inhabited by Bantu-speaking groups had become desolate. Vast tracts of land in the interior of southern Africa were now only sparsely settled, both because of an absolute decline in population numbers and because of a shift towards rugged areas. This was an opportunity for bands of settlers – frontier farmers in the Cape Colony – to move in and occupy the land. It was a migration that would become known as the Great Trek.

Why these frontier farmers left the Colony is a subject of much debate. After the British takeover in 1806, the institutions set up by the Dutch East India Company in the eighteenth century began to change slowly. English became the new language of government. From the 1810s onwards new political systems, labour laws and property rights regimes were introduced, the most important of which, as we saw in chapter 14, was the emancipation of slaves. In 1820, the British government sent about 4000 British subjects to the Cape and settled them in-between the Dutch farmers and the Xhosa to stabilise the frontier region. It did exactly the opposite.

Although the exact reasons for the Great Trek of frontier farmers are still up for debate, what we do know is that by the 1830s frontier farmers were already exploring the area beyond the Gariep (Orange) River – a region that would later become known as the Orange Free State. Hunters had returned to the Cape Colony, noting the devastation of the Mfecane and the possibilities of settlement across the Gariep. By 1836, several bands of farmers left their farms and trekked in ox-wagons into what they considered unclaimed land. These were not the most prosperous farmers. In fact, one of the ringleaders, Piet Retief, was clearly trying to

escape debts he owed in the Colony. Some would have been motivated by notions of political freedom and independence, frustrated by the changes British rule had brought (including emancipation of the slaves). But it is equally likely that some Voortrekkers (literally, ‘those trekking first’) were motivated by financial gain, opportunistically hoping to claim land that could be sold to the next wave of trekkers.

The consequence of this outward migration of settlers from the Cape Colony into the southern Africa interior would be – after several skirmishes against, notably, the Zulu of Dingane and the Ndebele of Mzilikazi – the establishment of two Boer republics: the South African Republic (1852) and the Orange Free State (1854). Within forty years, from 1815 to 1855, the South African economic and political landscape had been transformed entirely. It went from a settler colony at the southern tip of Africa with densely settled Bantu-speaking groups dotting the summer-rainfall interior, to a largely depopulated interior settled by scattered Boer migrants on large, pastoral farms with densely settled Bantu speakers mostly limited to the lush but rugged regions of the country. This pattern of settlement established by the 1850s would, largely, persist into the present.

The drought that began all the conflict in 1815 was not just a normal one – and it was not unrelated to the changing weather conditions in Europe, Asia or the Americas. It would be only in the 1890s that researchers studying these disparate events drew links to another event that happened in 1815: the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia on 10 April. It was the largest volcanic eruption in recorded human history. It was so large that the explosion was heard 2600 kilometres away, with ash deposits found as far as 1300 kilometres from the volcano. An estimated 100 cubic kilometres of ash were ejected – reducing the height of the mountain by 1500 metres – much of which stayed in the atmosphere for months and which was blown by longitudinal winds around the globe. That is why weather patterns changed, not only causing a ‘year without a summer’ and the birth of the bicycle and Frankenstein’s monster in Europe, but also igniting a series of conflicts in southern Africa that would have enormous repercussions for the region’s future.