



The Tribal History Project, 1862–4

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This essay¹ examines two extended pieces of historical research undertaken in the mid-1860s on the origins of the African people of the Colony of Natal.² The first took the form of the 1862 ‘Report of a Select Committee of Natal’s Legislative Council’. Based on historical records, it sought to give substance to the settlers’ claim to the land of Natal and its resources.³ The second research project used documentary and oral research to refute this report. It was undertaken in 1863 by Natal’s Lieutenant Governor, John Scott, and its Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone.⁴ In the first part of the essay I deal with the political context, colonial and imperial, in which this research took place and its immediate consequences. In the second part I look at the visual element in Scott and Shepstone’s report, in this case two maps, and then consider some of its implications for the concept of tribe in Natal.

The myth of the emptied land

Founding myths are hazardous grounds for historians. In the case of human origins the argument shifts far too easily from the geographical to the racial African. Claims to land in modern South Africa link racial stereotypes to concocted chronologies to create myths of rights to an empty land, which, despite the efforts of a generation of archaeologists and historians, continue to be propagated. Natal’s settlers, not a tenth of the population, had their own particular variant of *terra nullius*. It held that when the first traders arrived in 1824, but for a few starving survivors, the country had been emptied by the depredations of Shaka and the Zulu army. But not for long: the peace brought by the trekker defeat of Dingane in 1839 turned the once devastated land into a place of refuge for Africans from African tyranny; by 1840 there were more than 20 000 refugees in Natal, a number that had doubled when Britain annexed Natal in 1843. This increased more rapidly with the establishment of the location policy, carried out by the official responsible for native affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, of reserving land for Africans. These locations were too

Figure 1 (opposite).
Detail of Map 1, Figure 2

1 Nessa Leibhammer took over the editing of this essay after the death of Jeff Guy in 2014.
 2 This essay is derived from my *Theophilus Shepstone and the Forging of Natal: African Autonomy and Settler Colonialism in the Making of Traditional Authority*, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013. The research findings of the two extended pieces of historical research undertaken in the mid-1860s on the origins of the African people of the Colony of Natal can be found in different forms, both published and unpublished. The Colonial Office printed them, together with additional correspondence, as a confidential print, ‘Papers Relative to Native Affairs in Natal’, The National Archive (TNA), CO 879/2/6. They were later published by the Natal Legislative Council, 1890, No. 22, ‘Native Documentary Titles to Land’ (henceforth NDT).
 3 NDT, ‘Report of the Select Committee and Appendix’, 5 August 1862.
 4 TNA, CO 879/2/6, No. 1, Scott to Newcastle, 4 September 1862 and No. 6, Scott to Newcastle, 26 February 1864 and enclosures.