

BOOK
REVIEW

John Laband

The Eight Zulu Kings

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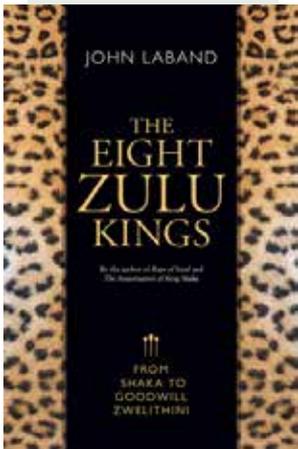
Barely a year since the appearance of his gripping account, *The Assassination of King Shaka* (Jonathan Ball, 2017), prolific historian, John Laband, has presented readers of South African history with another popularly written account of Zulu and South African history, entitled, *The Eight Zulu Kings*. This work is on a broader canvas than *The Assassination of King Shaka* and situates the reigns of the kings very firmly in the broader social and political contexts of their times, right up to the present day.

The eight kings are Shaka kaSenzangakhona, his two half-brothers, Dingane and Mpande, and Mpande's descendants: Cetshwayo, Dinuzulu, Solomon, Cyprian and Goodwill Zwelithini, a total of six generations stretching from the 18-teens to the 20-teens. It is undeniable that the Zulu monarchy has proved to be a durable institution, but it is an institution that has evolved, often under extreme duress, from being the major political player in south-eastern Africa, into performing a more limited, but nevertheless influential, role as a source of cultural conservatism in the 21st Century democratic South Africa. Laband unpicks the political threads that make up this compelling tale.

Having written so recently about King Shaka, how does Laband give the story of the Zulu monarchy a new gloss and fit it into a broader national narrative? As with *Assassination*, he selects a dramatic, or symbolic, event as a peg from which to hang his tale. In this case, it is the 1983 opening of the reconstructed Ondini *ikhanda*, or royal residence, in the new capital of the KwaZulu homeland, Ulundi, a hoped for symbol of resurgent Zulu greatness. This kick-starts the author's discussion of the structure of Zulu traditional society and draws the reader into his thoughts about how the society was formed and grew. And it is within this context that he writes about the kings. This is a good book for a number of reasons:

Firstly, Laband has a fluent easy writing style that is a pleasure to read. Secondly he has an encyclopaedic knowledge of Zulu history and society and how the monarchy plays a crucial part in Zulu political and social identity. Thirdly, he draws interesting and necessary distinctions between chiefs and kings in African traditional society (he uses and explains correct Zulu terminology for positions offices and events and relates them to commonly used English language terms).

He shows how every Zulu king, from Shaka to Zwelithini, had to manoeuvre within the threat of outside forces: be they the evolving constraints of intruding colonialism, or conquering imperialism, and, ultimately, suffocating apartheid. Shaka faced but the outriders of colonialism, the small number of British hunters and traders at Port Natal; they were a curiosity for him. Dingane fought a major war with the Trekkers (although Laband shows that it was internal Zulu rivalries that finally destroyed him). Mpande, was perhaps the most successful, and certainly the longest reigning monarch and sustained his power in a delicate balancing act between Trekker and British and later as a peaceful, but powerful,



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neighbour of the Colony of Natal. He was the only king, in the 19th Century, to die of natural causes.

Then came the two tragic heroes: Cetshwayo, the defiant king whose armies inflicted one of the worst defeats of the 19th century on the British army and who yielded in the end to overwhelming force; and his son, Dinuzulu, whose struggles to be recognised as king led him into one-sided agreements with the Boers and eventually into exile on Napoleon's island, St Helena, by the British. Dinuzulu was finally given restricted freedom by Prime Minister Louis Botha on the coming of Union in 1910, but he was never recognised as Zulu king.

Dinuzulu's son Solomon also struggled with the Union Government for recognition and Laband gives a new twist to the account of how "Paramount Chief" Solomon snubbed the Earl of Athlone, a member of the British Royal Family and Governor General of the Union, on his visit to Zululand. Eventually, after Solomon's death, the Nationalist Government recognised his son, Cyprian, as king, provided that he supported the Bantu Tribal Authority that eventually grew into the KwaZulu homeland. Cyprian was subjected to bruising pressures from the apartheid government and, perhaps understandably, turned to alcohol for solace.

Laband brings the book right up to date with his consideration of King Goodwill Zwelithini and the controversy over the Ingonyama Trust. King Zwelithini has astutely negotiated the transition between apartheid and democracy as well as the tensions between the ANC and the IFP. The monarchy has made substantial material gains in the process. He remains a ceremonial figure, but is capable of wielding significant influence and political leaders from Nelson Mandela to Cyril Ramaphosa, including, of course, Jacob Zuma and even Julius Malema, have beaten paths to his royal doorstep seeking his blessing. The king's complex relationship with Mangosuthu Buthelezi is teased out in fascinating detail. Buthelezi fully understood that the "figure of the Zulu monarch gave meaning and coherence to Zulu politics" (p 339), but his relationship with the king waxed and waned through various political twists and turns over the decades.

Basically, all the land of the KwaZulu homeland was bundled into the trust just days before the first democratic election in April 1994. The Nationalists were happy, the ANC acquiesced (until Kgalema Motlanthe looked at the devil in the details over two decades later), and the IFP was bought over and participated in the first democratic elections.

As KwaZulu Chief Minister, Buthelezi pushed a reluctant Zwelithini into an agreement that the king would remain above politics. The king was then wheeled out to grace many cultural occasions that looked suspiciously like Inkatha rallies. The resentment that Zwelithini felt, gave the ANC the opportunity to curry favour with him in the crucial year of 1994, a process in which one, Jacob Zuma, played a significant part. This wheeling and dealing also influenced the agreement behind the establishment of the Ingonyama Trust with King Goodwill Zwelithini as its patron. Basically, all the land of the KwaZulu homeland was bundled into the trust just days before the first democratic election in April 1994. The Nationalists were happy, the ANC acquiesced (until Kgalema Motlanthe looked at the devil in the details over two decades later), and the IFP was bought over and participated in the first democratic elections. There is a lot more to this story than Laband has been able to explore within the confines of a wide ranging book about a long lasting dynasty.

While Laband points out that the Zulu monarchy has benefited most of all the traditional kingdoms in the democratic era and relates this to *realpolitik* of 1994, he is not able to explore this thoroughly enough. This is an inevitable failing in such a wide-ranging book. His weaving is more deft when he is dealing with the threads of 19th Century history than with the half-hidden threads of events of the later 20th and early 21st centuries.

The publishers also seem to have rushed the publication process and there are several minor typographical errors. The one that particularly annoyed me, (as a maritime history hobbyist), is that on the same page (p 237), the *Natal*, a small coastal steamship that carried King Cetshwayo into exile after the Ango-Zulu War, is referred to twice: once as a steam transport, and once as a warship, *HMS Natal*. Of greater import is the howler on page 192, namely the caption for the photograph of Cetshwayo's "coronation" by Theophilus Shepstone. The date is given as 1 September 1879 instead of 1873. Silly errors such as this are most uncharacteristic of John Laband's writing.

Nevertheless, for anybody seeking an understanding of the roots of South African history and how the historic forces play themselves out in the modern era, *The Eight Zulu Kings* is a valuable contribution to our understanding of a complex and dramatic two centuries as seen through the lives and careers of a noble dynasty.