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978-0-521-10943-7 - The British Settlement of Natal: A Study in Imperial Migration

Alan F. Hattersley

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

NATAL BEFORE THE COMING OF THE
VOORTREKKERS

In January 1850 James Wyld the younger, geographer to the Queen and Member of Parliament for Bodmin, applied to the Colonial Office for permission to use any original drawings in its custody of the district of Natal.¹ It was a period when British professional mapmakers, their livelihood threatened by the enterprise of the ordnance survey, were turning their attention to distant lands. The Wylds, father and son, Aaron Arrow-smith and others had already produced on a small scale beautifully engraved maps of southern Africa; but these lacked the accuracy of detail which scientific observations could provide. In the year when the ordnance survey completed measurement of the first great base on Salisbury Plain (1849), Wyld the younger decided to publish a new map of Natal, the colony which was figuring so prominently in the emigration columns of British dailies. He was informed that no topographical information was available beyond what was conveyed in the lithographed sketch which Natal's surveyor-general, William Stanger, had supplied to accompany a selection of official correspondence.² Stanger had complained of the numerous errors in all the published maps. The extent of the territory which Britain had annexed in 1843 remained for many years unknown even to the executive government at Pietermaritzburg. It was left to Stanger to discover the sources of the Buffalo and Umzimkhulu Rivers, whilst the impressive western boundary of the Drakensberg was found to consist of two mountain chains of different geological structure.

The terrace formation of Natal made its interior difficult of access prior to the construction of a railroad. The coastal belt,

¹ J. Wyld to Secretary of State, 22 Jan. 1850. C.O. 179/13 (P.R.O.).

² *Correspondence, etc., Natal, 1847-8*, xlii (980).

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with its low stunted trees and brushwood scattered over undulating grassland, rarely exceeds twelve miles in depth. Deep-water indentations are conspicuously absent, whilst the rivers flowing eastward from the watershed of the Berg have heavily-barred lagoons at their outlet into the sea. No broad fertile valleys, no softly flowing rivers lead merchants and travellers by easy stages to the great rounded downs with their sweet grass, plentiful water and indigenous timber, that lie above the humid, sub-tropical terrace and stretch westward to the rocky kranzes of the ultimate mountain barrier. Even the promising Bay of Natal was, until late in the nineteenth century, obstructed by shifting bars of sand. Apart from ivory and big game, there was little to attract the trader and the sportsman, and Natal was never the starting-point for journeys of exploration into the sub-Continent. Over many decades of the eighteenth century, the only visitors from overseas were shipwrecked mariners. None of them ventured to penetrate into the midland regions, still less to reach the unknown passes which gave access to the lonely high veld. Natal accordingly remained until 1824 destitute of European inhabitants, and barely known in England or even at the Cape of Good Hope.

During the Napoleonic wars, however, the colonial possessions of Holland passed under British control: and, with the conclusion of peace, the Cape of Good Hope was retained on account of its strategic importance, as commanding the sea route to India. At that time, the British authorities were inclined to question the economic advantages of colonial possessions. The West Indian islands were sinking into a decline: and the Cape, with its problems of colour and its relatively unimportant exports, was classed among the minor slave-owning possessions of Britain. The mercantile interests of the newly acquired colonies of the Cape, Mauritius, and St Helena were largely a matter of indifference to the British public. The value of British trade with India and the Far East, especially of the growing cotton trade, on the other hand, was fully appreciated. Protection of the ocean route to the East made the Cape a vital

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factor in British calculations. But it was not intended to countenance any expansion of the colony in the direction of Delagoa Bay, whilst the development of trade with the natives of Natal was not considered to be deserving of official notice.

The security of the sea passage was another matter. In the decade which followed the assumption of British sovereignty at the Cape, a careful survey of the south-east coast was undertaken by the British Admiralty. The reports of the survey ships attracted the notice of enterprising Cape merchants. Men like Henry Nourse had already begun to seek new avenues for commerce along the coast north of the Umzimvubu River. In 1822 Nourse despatched the schooner *Orange Grove* to investigate the possibility of a trade in ivory with the native chiefs at Delagoa Bay. At the same time, many of the Albany settlers who had emigrated from England in 1820, among them the intrepid William Gradwell, one of the first white men to encounter Moselikatze at the Magaliesberg, were early engaged in the overland ivory trade. In the long run, this newly awakened interest led to the opening up of a regular land route from the eastern districts of the old colony to the territory of Natal and Zululand. Until the 'forties, the sea passage against the Agulhas' current was alone used: and gradually the coastal region of Natal, a broken, undulating country but not inaccessible to the ox-wagon even before the construction of roads, became known to European traders.

The actual survey of the port of Natal was made not by the Admiralty ship *Leven*, which William Owen commanded, but by James Saunders King, master of the trading brig *Salisbury*. Owen had been so hampered by malaria at Delagoa Bay that he had been unable to chart the Natal coast. King made the first detailed survey of the harbour after a lucky crossing of the formidable bar in a south-easterly gale. His ship had been fitted out by a joint-stock company, not for purposes of survey but to seek openings for trade along the coast. The men behind the venture were John Thompson, head of a mercantile house at

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the Cape, and Francis George Farewell, who hailed from Devon. Both Farewell and King had served for eight years in the British Navy prior to the conclusion of the wars with Napoleon.

Whilst King went to London to lay his tracings before the Admiralty and to ask for a lieutenant's commission, Thompson and Farewell began to make arrangements for the establishment of a small station at the Bay. King received scant encouragement at London, but his partners could count on the growing interest of Cape merchants in the coastal trade. Sufficient support was secured to justify the chartering of two small ships. The company of adventurers, twenty-six in all, included men of all ages and occupations. With the *Julia*, which sailed from Table Bay in April 1824, went Henry Francis Fynn, who had made a journey to Delagoa Bay two years previously and acquired some knowledge of native life. Farewell followed six weeks later in the *Antelope*. He had informed the Cape governor, Lord Charles Somerset, of the project, and received his permission to transport the tiny community to the vicinity of the Bay. To Somerset, Farewell's scheme was merely a commercial undertaking. He was well aware that Downing Street was unlikely to sanction any extension of British sovereignty. Nevertheless the venture was the first step towards permanent white settlement in Natal.

Natal, with its equable climate and reasonable abundance of food supplies, had been continuously occupied by man at least since the pluvial age, which corresponded in southern Africa to the ice age of western Europe. Rough fist-hatchets (*coup-de-poing*) of fine quartzitic sandstone testify to the presence of man in the period represented by the so-called lower and middle Stellenbosch culture.¹

Natal's coastlands were originally inhabited, it appears, by neo-anthropic peoples engaged in hunting. Only close to the

¹ Geologically this is the period prior to the deposit of the Berea red sand. J. G. Cramb: 'The Early Stone Age in Natal' (*South African Journal of Science*, xxxii (1933), pp. 483-93).

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sea and in marshy places, where animals and wild fowl naturally abound, would food supplies be sufficiently plentiful to sustain a considerable community. Traces of habitation of the rock-strewn beaches by neo-anthropic man are abundant in the kitchen middens, composed of discarded shells of mussels and limpets. Whilst stone-age flakes have been found in sand dunes north of Durban, the shell middens yield debris of a later period. It is clear that metal-using people with a considerable knowledge of pottery used Natal's beaches as harvest grounds for the shell-fish upon which, in arid seasons, they largely depended for food.¹ Coarse unglazed pottery and bone awls belonging to a period prior to the arrival of the Bantu testify to the gradual extension of human interests and activities.

These folk, commonly termed Bushmen or Strandloopers, belonged physically to a racial type characterised by small broad skulls and yellow wrinkled skins. Archaeological discoveries suggest that the precursors of the Bushmen—men of the Boskop type—were physically superior, with an enlarged skull capacity. The degeneration of the Bushmen may be attributed to long residence in a semi-arid environment.

In Natal, sustained aridity has not been present since the beginning of the Christian era. Lean periods may have caused human migration from particular areas where food supplies fell away, but the greater part of Natal has been continuously occupied by people of Bushman, and later of Bantu, stock.

Concrete evidence of Bushman habitation is scanty. Their improvised twig and grass huts have long since disappeared. Possessing no domesticated animals, except perhaps the dog, and lacking acquaintance with agriculture, they were dependent for food on the game they could kill with bow and arrow and rough stone axe, and on the roots and wild fruit of the bush.

¹ J. F. Schofield: 'Natal Coastal Pottery' (*South African Journal of Science*, xxxii (1935), pp. 508–27).

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Culturally the Bushmen represent in Natal the old stone age of Europe. This period lasted into quite recent times. In South Africa, there are no traces of an intermediate copper or bronze epoch. With the advent of metal-using Bantu tribes, Natal passed directly from the age of stone to that of iron. This transition occurred shortly after the first European discovery of Natal by the Portuguese.

The word 'Bantu' or 'Abantu' is of native origin and means simply human beings. No definite physical type is connoted, for the Bantu have never formed a distinct homogeneous race. Tribes vary considerably in skin colour, build and features, though they largely share a common outlook on life and speak languages which belong to one linguistic family.¹ The cradle of the Bantu people is largely a matter of tradition. It is conjectured that fusion some 2000 years ago of African negroes with Hamitic or Semitic folk from Asia produced the Bantu in the region of the southern Sudan.

In historic times the Bantu have gradually spread southward. Asiatic admixture brought mental and physical qualities which enabled them to survive and expand at the expense of the negro race. A process of more or less continuous migration introduced new elements into Bantu stock through the incorporation of remnants of vanquished communities. Then, as Bantu tribes reached the neighbourhood of the east coast, they mixed their blood with Arab and Asiatic traders, deriving at the same time the familiar appellation 'Kaffir' (unbeliever).

The chronological limits of these movements can only be approximately indicated. Bantu tribes started drifting south from the vicinity of the Great Lakes about the dawn of the Christian era. In the uplands of central Africa they encountered and drove westward forest dwarfs and Bushmen. At this time and until approximately the year A.D. 1000, Africa south of the Zambezi remained in the sole occupation of Bushmen and

¹ Sir Harry Johnston, however, enumerated 226 Bantu dialects, some of which ought perhaps to be considered as separate languages. H. H. Johnston: *A Comparative Study of the Bantu and Semi-Bantu Languages*, 1919.

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Hottentots. But at some period in the later Middle Ages, Bantu tribesmen crossed into southern Rhodesia and established commercial relations with Asiatic traders at Quilimane and Sofala. Organisation of the community on the basis of agriculture and cattle-raising, with some knowledge of the working of metals, produced the political system known to European cartographers as the empire of Monomotapa.¹

During the long southward trek the tendency to cleavage found expression in the separation of various branches of the Bantu family, and the development of wide variations in speech, physical traits and social customs. Of the various sections so formed, the first to reach Natal was that of the so-called Nguni Bantu. Whilst Vasco da Gama was breasting the Agulhas' current, the earliest parties of Nguni were rounding the headwaters of the Limpopo and coming within sight of the neighbourhood of Delagoa Bay. Here they became known as Abambo, a collective name for remnants of tribes in flight before the redoubtable Amazimba. The Abambo were doubtless the natives with whom the Portuguese came into contact along the coast north and south of St Lucia Bay towards the close of the sixteenth century. Meanwhile, another branch, the Tongas, penetrated farther south into Natal (c. 1550). In the course of the sixteenth century, Abambo clans occupied the greater part of the area between Delagoa Bay and Pondo-land, whilst Xosa and Tembu clans broke adrift from the main body and, moving through Natal and East Griqualand, eventually reached the neighbourhood of the Cape frontier. Not until the eighteenth century, however, did the vanguard of the Xosa irruption cross the River Kei.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a number of tribes bearing the Ama- prefix were in occupation of the territory of Natal and it is with these tribes that Farewell and Fynn found themselves in contact. The whole country south-east of the Zambezi was less densely occupied than it is to-day.

¹ It is unnecessary here to discuss the problem of the erection and use of the Zimbabwe ruins. See G. Caton-Thompson: *Zimbabwe Culture*, 1931.

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In 1824 Farewell calculated that 'probably 50,000 souls... form the whole population of the large territory' ruled over by the Zulu king, Tshaka.¹ This was largely guesswork. For the whole extent of the present Zululand a fair estimate would place the number of its Bantu inhabitants at a little short of 90,000. During the decade prior to Farewell's arrival it had been considerably enlarged through the forcible removal of defeated tribesmen to the vicinity of Tshaka's kraals. This accession of strength had been at the expense of Natal. Prior to the year 1810, though the pastoral highlands north of the Mooi River carried no more than a sparse Bantu population, density of settlement in the coastlands and eastern midlands seems to have been as great as in the Zulu kingdom. The actual figures have been variously estimated. Theophilus Shepstone calculated that the population of Natal in the first decade of the nineteenth century was approximately one million, settled in ninety-four tribes, many of them quite small.² On the other hand, a modern authority computes the inhabitants of Natal in the year 1816 as 'about 100,000'.³

Tribal government was highly developed along patriarchal lines. All property, including the tribal territory, belonged strictly to the chief as administrator of the community, individual tribesmen being entitled to possession only so long as their occupation conformed to customary requirements. Numbers might fluctuate, since a man could sometimes transfer his allegiance to another chief.

The Bantu inhabitants of Natal were agriculturists as well as stock farmers, but horned cattle was their peculiar pride and distinctive form of wealth. Inter-tribal warfare was commonly the outcome of competition for fresh grazing land. Knowledge

¹ J. Bird: *Annals of Natal*, i, p. 192.

² In a paper read before the Society of Arts in Natal, 22 Jan. 1875. The boundaries of the Colony of Natal included a part of the old Zulu kingdom, whereas the name 'Natal' originally designated merely the coastlands in the vicinity of the Port.

³ A. T. Bryant: *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*, 1929, p. 82.

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of the art of smelting iron spread gradually from tribe to tribe, but pottery, wood-carving and mat-weaving were common accomplishments. These industries were for the most part indigenous, and not the outcome of contact with European skill. Early Bantu hoes are of Egyptian pattern. Maize, millet and beans were grown by the coastal clans. In the midland regions the country was more congenial to cattle. Everywhere, except close to the mountain fastnesses where predatory Bushmen lurked, the inhabitants of Natal lived among plenty and in conditions of tolerable security.

These conditions were rudely disturbed in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Unrest originated in the region of St Lucia Bay and spread through Zululand and into Natal. A project of wide military overlordship was conceived by the fertile brain of an Umtetwa chieftain, Dingiswayo. His original name was Ngodongwana. Discovery of a plot against the life of his father, Jobe, was followed by Ngodongwana's hasty flight. Shepstone's conjecture that, during his exile, he established contact with the white man in the eastern Cape Colony, learning there the use of the horse and the value of military discipline, is based on native legend.¹ The story that he went northward to Delagoa Bay is less improbable, but the refugee could scarcely have obtained possession of a horse in a country notoriously 'fatal to horses'. It seems more likely that the animal, on which he is reported to have made his triumphant return to Zululand, was procured either from a wandering Griqua or from a survivor of the ill-fated expedition despatched by the Earl of Caledon to explore the country as far north as Mozambique.² Whilst Ngodongwana, who took the name 'Dingiswayo' (wanderer) on his reception as chief by the astonished Umtetwa, certainly organised an efficient regimental system, it is not necessary to suppose that he derived new ideas of military organisation from his experiences in exile.

¹ Bird: *op. cit.* pp. 162-3.

² For the expedition of Dr Cowan (1808), see the *Morning Chronicle* (London), 13 Sept. 1809, and 15 Jan. 1810.

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For the tactics developed by Dingiswayo, and afterwards utilised by Tshaka, took the form of an encircling movement by warriors attacking in crescent formation, which was obviously an elaboration for military purposes of a familiar hunting device. The regiment was essentially the age-group of young men who had been initiated together as young boys.

Dingiswayo's ability and enterprise led to the consolidation of what afterwards emerged as the Zulu nation. The careless disunity of weak Bantu clans, incapable of combination for a common good, clashed with his instinct for orderly government. Though no military tyrant, he could not ignore the fact that the only recognised title by which a tribe held its lands was its ability to defend them against all comers. Only spear-power could guarantee the essentials of life. His conquests were intended to introduce discipline and cohesion on familiar patriarchal lines over a large area of Bantu country and did not involve arbitrary dispossession, still less extermination, of defeated clans.

His successor, Tshaka, entirely lacked his wisdom and magnanimity. Only as a commander was his reputation high. Tshaka consolidated what Dingiswayo had begun—the subjection to a common ruler of the great majority of the Bantu tribes inhabiting Zululand and coastal Natal. Before his rise to power, the Zulu (or Amazulu) had been an insignificant tribe occupying the upper reaches of the White Umvolesi. With others, they had submitted to the authority of the Umtetwas. Tshaka himself had entered the service of Dingiswayo, and proved his valour and powers of military leadership. It was natural that Dingiswayo should reward him at the first suitable opportunity. The death of Senzangakona left vacant the headship of the Zulu tribe. Tshaka was not the legitimate heir, but he was distinguished by personal qualities which marked him out for a career of distinction. He was tall, endowed with immense muscular strength and possessed of an indomitable and unscrupulous will. His towering height and relentless ferocity had gained for him the appellation of 'Great