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

Alan F. Hattersley

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THE  
BRITISH SETTLEMENT OF  
NATAL

*A Study in Imperial Migration*

BY

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## PREFACE

A century ago, repeal of the corn laws and the full impact of a revolution in transport diverted the economic policy of Britain away from a course which, with few significant changes, it had followed for centuries into new channels, unfamiliar to all and highly distressing to many. One consequence of the immediate crisis thus provoked was large-scale emigration to the colonies and America. The outward flow of saddened, sometimes desperate, Britishers continued until, with an unexpectedly sharp turn of fortune's wheel, the dark clouds of depression were lifted. Despite the menace of foreign importation, British agriculture recovered and could even be said to have entered a golden age. Railway construction, halted by the George Hudson scandal, was resumed. The mercantile marine survived the removal of the acts of navigation and went from strength to strength with the evolution of the iron ship. The cholera receded. The fabric of old Britain was found to be by no means in the state of decay that the pundits had imagined.

This study was undertaken in a period, the circumstances of which presented many aspects of striking resemblance. Its resources and its powers of endurance strained by two world wars, Britain faced, it seemed, a stern struggle for survival as a great and a prosperous power. When investigation into the circumstances of the emigration of 1849 took the present writer to the United Kingdom for the bleak winter of 1946–7, a second great outward movement from the British Isles was on the point of inception. Again whole families were emigrating, many to Natal, and there is to-day no sign of slackening of the tide. The hopes of these emigrants are centred on the great dominions beyond the seas. The old Britain of established security and commercial prosperity, the land of plenty, seemed to have sunk beyond the horizon of history.

Though the repetitions of history are no doubt misleading, the British people may take some courage from the experience

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#### PREFACE

of the emigrants of a century ago. The good things of the past, with even better promises for the future, may return as unexpectedly as they did in the 'fifties of the nineteenth century. Tides of new life may sweep over the old country, bringing renewed confidence and a new vision, such as was brought to Victorian England by the aftermath of the great 1851 Exhibition.

With the passage of time and the ravages of totalitarian war, it was feared that, unless undertaken without delay, investigation into the circumstances of the 1849–51 emigration to Natal might fail to produce the information that was required. Much is already beyond reach. Since the emigration was in the main the enterprise of modest and humble folk, though of people of taste and intelligence, the works of reference are silent, and traces of what had happened to individual settlers were fast receding into the distance.

These men were at the same time adventurous pioneers and home-builders. They belonged to the age of the Californian gold discoveries. Many of them had traversed strange parts of the world, and had already won and lost fortunes in territories oversea. The story of the settlers reaches out into distant countries. The old colonial homes that remain, with their decayed stoeps and fanlights over yellow-wood doors, represent in some cases the final stage in life's journey. But, with all the characteristic dislike of commonplace routine, the spirit of the pioneer was tempered by much devotion to things of the home, to the Bible and to prayer, sometimes to class and even to canons of Victorian respectability.

This book has been written to commemorate a centenary: but also in the hope that it may reveal to young Natal not only the debt owed to the first home-builders, but the strength to be drawn from the past. It has been published with some generous assistance from the Natal Provincial Administration.

A. F. HATTERSLEY

UNIVERSITY OF NATAL