

The last of the frontiersmen who lived between empire and kingdom

John Dunn, *Cetywayo and the Three Generals, 1861–1879*

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The French historian Marc Bloch (1886–1944) states in his book, *The Historian's Craft*, that:

The historian is, by definition, absolutely incapable of observing the facts which he examines. No Egyptologist has ever seen Ramses. No expert on the Napoleonic Wars has ever heard the sound of the cannon at Austerlitz. We can speak of earlier ages only through the accounts of eye-witnesses.⁶

John Dunn's autobiography forms part of a historiography that offers us a fascinating perspective of a witness to his times. His account is certainly not that of a bystander or spectator because he had a vested interest in the outcome of the events he writes about. It is entirely possible that on occasion, as a key player, he even had a hand in shaping some of these events. Therefore Dunn's treatise is best read together with the other evidence in our possession, made up of official documents; further witness reports; and the oral histories of the Zulu nation, in order to arrive closer to the historical "truth" via triangulation. When reading this autobiography one has to constantly keep in mind the self-serving nature of the work, which is in reality Dunn's attempt to legitimise his status as a civilising force on, and intermediary with, the Zulu nation.

The account of this white Scotsman, who became a close confidant of King Cetywayo and one of his Zulu chiefs, and who married 48 of the king's subjects, has great potential to be an interesting story. First published in 1886, this new publication of the autobiography was edited by historian Duncan Moodie. Dunn may have made an even greater contribution to Zulu history had his allegedly copious writings, recording 18 years of his interactions with Cetywayo and the Zulu people, survived. His manuscripts, together with his friendship with the Zulu king, were destroyed by vengeful *impis* who looked upon Dunn's siding with the British as the ultimate betrayal. His efforts to survive in a perilous world, often torn between the culture that adopted and nurtured him and the culture to which he was born, takes on the form, in parts, of a Shakespearean tragedy.

Dunn mastered the Zulu language and culture as well as the skills of a hunter and horseman from an early age. These skills were acquired in the

6. M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1962), p 40.

comfortable surroundings of his father's home overlooking Durban Bay. His father's early demise, trampled by an elephant in 1847 when Dunn was a mere 13 years old, signalled a decline in John Dunn's fortunes. Early attempts to earn a living were frustrated by his tender age and he decided to discard a conventional way of life for the lure of being a big game hunter across the Thukela River in the territory of the Zulus. He took up residence among the Zulus with his young wife and survived by hunting and bartering and living off the land. Dunn's two year sojourn among the Zulus was cut short when he was retained by a British Army captain who saw to it that Dunn received a thorough education in the Western ways of life over the next six years. These dramatic events ensured that Dunn emerged from his formative years fully conversant with Zulu and Western culture in almost equal proportions. However, conversancy did not mean full acceptance into either one of the cultures and his demise followed shortly after the twilight zone he occupied disappeared when the British assumed full power over the Zulu nation in 1887.

When civil war broke out in Zululand in 1856, Dunn sided with Cetywayo's brother in his struggle for succession to the throne. This was an early instance, in a life filled with difficult choices, where Dunn's acumen for survival was tested. Cetywayo emerged victorious and in a gesture of magnanimity, or more likely possessing a keen political shrewdness, the new Zulu king embraced his erstwhile foe. Under Cetywayo's patronage, Dunn soon became one of the king's chiefs and thrived with land, cattle and many wives. His wealth and stature grew and he eventually ruled over some 6 000 subjects. Dunn played an important role in providing the Zulus with firearms and it is estimated that in the years between 1873 and 1878 some 15 000 weapons, both antiquated and modern, found their way via Dunn into Zulu hands. Further proof of his strong survival instinct is provided by Dunn's propensity to circumvent the law on occasion when acquiring firearms for the Zulus.

Dunn's white roots and his links with the Natal colonial government found use in King Cetywayo's court where he served as an advisor to the king, acting as his messenger and intermediary. Dunn's responsibilities grew with his status and he assumed the role of dealing with all the king's outgoing and incoming messages from the Natal government. At times he advised the king against military adventures such as the one against the Swazis. Mutual trust was further enhanced when Dunn, through quick thinking, managed to avert an assassination attempt on Cetywayo at the king's inauguration ceremony. However, when reading the autobiography one always has to keep in mind the self serving nature of Dunn's account of his life and the sometimes apocryphal nature of some of the events.

His intimate knowledge of Zulu culture and his prominent role in the Zulu court also made Dunn very useful to the Natal colonial government. He firmly believed that he played a central role in both camps, but unwittingly he became a pawn of both imperial power and the Zulu kingdom. However, because of his linguistic ability and his familiarity with both white and Zulu customs he was able to dissipate a considerable amount of suspicion that arose on both sides. He could claim that his efforts went some way to facilitating a working relationship between

Sir Theophilus Shepstone, the secretary for native affairs of the Natal government, and King Cetwayo.

The Anglo Zulu War of 1879 ended the many years of prosperity and influence that Dunn enjoyed under the auspices of Cetwayo. He went to great lengths to avoid this. His position as an indispensable intermediary was wholly dependent on a peaceful resolution of hostilities. The status quo was threatened by the British secretary of state for the colonies, Lord Carnarvon and his desire to expand the British Empire in southern Africa. Carnarvon sought to form a confederation of all British colonies that included the Boer republics and independent African groups such as the Zulus. Dunn's importance as a liaison inevitably waned because both sides gave over to heightened bellicosity. When war eventually broke out, he once again found himself in the unenviable position of having to choose sides in an armed conflict. His efforts at neutrality amounted to naught when Lord Chelmsford delivered an ultimatum to Dunn. He betrayed his erstwhile benefactor Cetwayo for the promise of eventual reinstatement to his former position in Zululand.

Dunn's subsequent service with the British colonial forces in subduing Cetwayo and his opinion of the three British generals he served under are, to a large degree, related by a man who was obviously disappointed to see his fiefdom disappear and many lofty promises broken. His judgement on the military abilities of the three generals: Chelmsford, Henry Hope Crealock and Sir Garnet Wolseley, who effected the final capture of an evasive and unsubmitive Cetwayo, are at times less than flattering. Dunn was offered one of the thirteen Zulu chieftainships, which he accepted on condition that Cetwayo would not be reinstated as the Zulu king. His wariness of Cetwayo's return was well founded for when the king was reinstated in 1884 Dunn and the other twelve chiefs were all stripped of their power.

Dunn was indeed a highly flamboyant man who led a colourful life on the periphery of the British Empire and Zulu Kingdom. He was witness to, and a participant in some of the most important historical events in that region of southern Africa. His autobiography naturally places himself in a central role amongst the giants of South African history, although he most probably played more of a supporting role in the bigger picture. Dunn, who enjoyed much financial benefit from acting as an intermediary, was in fact manipulated by both Zulu and British leaders who utilised his cultural and linguistic fluency and his resultant status in both camps, to further their own interests.

Dunn was often able to manipulate events to his benefit by association with both the imperial government and the Zulu Kingdom. He projected himself as a civilising force and at the same time harboured a paternalistic notion that he completely understood the Zulus and their customs and beliefs. Subsequent to his final betrayal of Cetwayo, Dunn found himself in an invidious position: he was neither fully trusted by his Zulu subjects nor was he fully accepted as an Englishman by his colonial superiors. His claims to be a true Zulu and at the same time an Englishman bringing the civilising influence of a white man were often mutually exclusive.

Book Reviews / Boekresensies

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