

## THE PAPERS OF HENRY FRANCIS FYNN

The Natal Archives of the Republic of South Africa, which forms part of the state archival services of the country and is under the control of the Director of Archives in Pretoria, contains a large number of interesting and valuable government records but also houses several important collections of private papers which are the property of the archives and which, under certain conditions, are available to researchers.

In the category of private collections are the papers which are known to students as the *Henry Francis Fynn Papers*.

Henry Francis Fynn was one of the earliest British pioneers in what was later to become the Province of Natal in the Republic of South Africa. He was born in 1803 in the United Kingdom and was educated at Christ's Hospital, London, England. At the age of thirteen he found his way to Cape Town and there joined his father who, it was claimed, had visited the port of Natal as early as 1806 on a voyage from Australia to the Cape. In 1818 Henry Francis Fynn journeyed to Delagoa Bay, in Portuguese East Africa, as supercargo on a commercial speculation. It was on this trip that Fynn first came into contact with the Zulu tribes which then inhabited a large portion of Africa South of the Zambesi River, and it was then that Fynn first appreciated the possibilities of trade with the interior regions of Southern Africa.

Back in Cape Town, he joined forces with a certain Lieutenant Farewell and together they persuaded the Governor of the Cape Colony to grant them permission to trade with Natal.

It was Fynn, however, who reached Natal first and it was he who determined to make the first contact with the great Zulu king, Chaka, who had earned the reputation of being the Attila of Southern Africa. It is very possible that Fynn was the first white man to be seen by Chaka.

A small British settlement, mainly concerned with trade with the Zulus of the interior, was soon established at the Bay, near the present thriving port of Durban. This settlement was continually menaced by the might of Chaka, but Fynn was able to ingratiate himself with the Zulu chief by restoring Chaka to health after his arm had been pierced by an enemy spear. This ministrations saved the British at the port from Chaka's ire and gained for Fynn a grant of land almost 6,000 square miles in extent.

Fortunately for posterity Henry Fynn had a literary turn of mind and it occurred to him that he might with profit make notes of his travels and observations, especially as regards the somewhat strange Zulu customs and beliefs. He put pen to paper and had almost certainly compiled an enthralling story of his adventures when a cruel fate befell his initial manuscript. Henry's brother, Frank, died and in accordance with the native customs all his personal effects were placed in his grave. Too late did Henry realise that the natives had been under the mistaken impression that the manuscript was the property of Frank. No attempt

was made to recover the notes and other material as this would have been regarded by the natives as an unpardonable offence.

Henry Fynn, therefore, had to make a completely new start, and he again commenced his memoirs in the year 1830. This time he took great care with the manuscript (which was made up of many pages, each in size approximately ten inches by six); it was wrapped up in an ear of an elephant which he had shot himself! It was said, too, that it was Fynn's custom to wrap it up in sacking and to have it transported from place to place on the head of a native bearer. After the initial misadventure Fynn was careful to take no unnecessary risks.

It is readily understandable that, in the remote places into which Fynn penetrated while on his round of trading, he should have experienced great difficulty in obtaining suitable writing materials, and it is said that when he ran short of ink he used the juice from a certain white flower which turned black when it was bruised. It is thus no wonder that certain portions of the Fynn manuscript, as preserved for posterity in the Natal Archives at Pietermaritzburg, have faded and, in certain instances, have not survived the ravages of time.

While Fynn concentrated his activities in Zululand, he did not ignore the southern part of Natal and Pondoland (across the border of Natal in the present Cape of Good Hope province of the Republic). He soon became an experienced and fluent linguist in various native languages, and was regarded as an authority on native customs and sociology in general. Some, indeed, have gone so far as to say that his knowledge of the Zulus surpassed that of Sir Theophilus Shepstone, the renowned native administrator in the Natal Colony government for more than thirty years, and whose private papers, incidentally, are also housed in the Natal Archives.

In the course of his travels Fynn came across many starving and homeless natives. These he assisted as best he could. To many of them Port Natal was made a place of refuge from the wrath of the Zulu king. To most of the natives Fynn became affectionately known as "Mbuyazi" or "Father of the People." It was not long before he became almost legendary, especially as a result of his rather eccentric dress — a crownless straw hat and a blanket fastened round his neck!

Henry Francis Fynn witnessed the great massacre of natives by Chaka at the Bulawayo Kraal, and he was present on the occasion of another great massacre that took place on the death of Chaka's mother. These events are vividly recorded in his manuscript as well as others of less drama. On one occasion Chaka compelled Fynn to accompany a band of warriors which went out to attack a neighbouring tribe. When Chaka was murdered by Dingaan in 1828, Fynn remained in Natal and was fortunate enough to survive a Zulu attack on his life. He was thereafter honoured by Dingaan who became the paramount chief of the Zulus.

In 1834 Fynn left Natal to become headquarters interpreter to Sir Benjamin D'Urban, Governor of the Cape Colony, at the outbreak of

the Kaffir War. He subsequently filled several government posts in the Cape Colony and returned to Natal in 1852 and was appointed as a Resident Magistrate. He retired shortly afterwards and then settled down to supplement the notes which he had previously made. The task was, however, beyond him and he obtained the assistance of four or five other persons, whose influence and style are apparent in the Fynn records.

In 1834 Fynn had composed a few chapters of what was to be a history of Natal, but the greater part of his early work was sketchy and not woven into a continuous story. The years 1859 to 1861 were devoted extensively to supplementing his notes, but even then no single narrative was built up and many gaps remained.

The Fynn Papers were not lost sight of after the death of the compiler in 1861 and were fairly extensively used by John Centlivre Chase, a Grahamstown (Cape Colony) notary public, for the compilation of the *Natal Papers*, which was a reprint of many authentic government and other documents. In this connection it is interesting to note that Chase came to the conclusion that Fynn's account of early Natal history could be depended upon, it having been stated by some that Fynn had exaggerated many of the events that he described.

Chase had published his work in 1844 and the Fynn documents were again drawn upon in 1855 by the famous Bishop of Natal, J. W. Colenso, with the publication of the work called *Ten Weeks in Natal*. Special reference was made in this book to Fynn's account of the lamentations of the Zulus on the death of Chaka's mother, Nandi.

In the 1880's John Bird, a Natal Colony public servant, compiled for publication a whole series of documents which traced the history of Natal from 1497 (its discovery by the Portuguese mariner, Vasco da Gama, on Christmas Day and hence the name "Natal") to 1845 (when the area became a British Colony). It was not unnatural that Bird should have drawn very largely on Fynn's manuscript for his publication which was entitled *The Annals of Natal*.

Thereafter little was heard of Fynn's papers until 1905 when the diary, which had until then remained in the possession of the Fynn family, was handed to Mr. James Stuart, a former Native Commissioner and Under-Secretary for Native Affairs in the Natal Colony government. It was Stuart's intention to publish the papers within a very short period (fifteen months) but the work, in point of fact, took no less than 37 years, and even then was not finalised. When Mr. Stuart died in 1942 only the first volume had been completed.

In view of the fragmentary nature of the diary the long delay was not to be wondered at. An immense amount of research was needed to bring the papers into some sort of order and to elucidate many obscure points. Not satisfied with mere speculation in the solving of many problems, Mr. Stuart interviewed numerous natives who, he thought, might be able to throw light upon vague allusions in the manuscript.

It is said that this mass of information, at the time of Mr. Stuart's death, filled no less than three hundred note books.

In 1926 Mr. Stuart had left for England and had taken the Fynn papers with him to complete the work. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 came as a direct menace to the continued existence of the documents and, by some miracle or kind fate, they survived no less than nine air raids on London! After the initial misadventure Fynn's papers seemed to have had a charmed life.

In May, 1944, a further scene of the drama of the Fynn Papers was enacted. This time the setting was South Africa House in London, where the widow of Mr. Stuart called upon the London representative of the South African government. Mrs. Stuart was followed by two men who carried a large wooden chest which would have stirred the heart of that lover of pirate stories, Robert Louis Stevenson. The key of the chest was handed over and it was opened — to reveal a veritable treasure-house of documents. For some while now the papers had been overlooked by scholars and the immense Africana value of the papers was soon realised.

It was not surprising that no chances were taken with this rediscovered treasure and that it was considered unsafe to transport them back to South Africa by sea. They were eventually returned to Cape Town at the end of 1945 in the private aeroplane of the Governor-General of South Africa, the Rt. Hon. G. Brand van Zyl.

The papers were at first sent to the Van Riebeeck Society, an institution which publishes rare and interesting South African manuscripts, and were provisionally placed in the Cape Town library. It was discovered, however, that an error had been made and the documents were brought to Durban in 1946 and returned to the Fynn family. Phillip, brother of James Stuart, came from Cape Town to Durban in order to continue work on the examination of the Fynn diary and many papers, but died shortly afterwards.

At the request of the Stuart family, Mr. D. McK. Malcolm, one-time lecturer in the Zulu language at the University of Natal, completed the remaining work on the papers with the assistance of Miss Killie Campbell, whose comprehensive Africana library in Durban materially assisted the new editor in elucidating hitherto unsolved difficulties in the text of Fynn's writings.

A limited edition of 1,700 copies of the diary appeared in 1950 and forms to date, the most complete published version of the Fynn Papers, the diary and accompanying notes on the history and customs of the Zulus. In 1840 one of Fynn's contemporaries, Nathaniel Isaacs, had urged Fynn to see that his papers were printed, and more than a hundred years later Fynn's dream was realised. The Fynn Papers remained in the possession of the Fynn family and were highly treasured, being very rarely removed from their strong container.

In September, 1961, one hundred years and one day after the death of Henry Francis Fynn, the Fynn Papers were handed to the Natal Archives

through the co-operation of the executors of the estate of the late Henry Francis Fynn and the public spiritedness of the surviving members of the Fynn family.

The donation of the entire collection of papers to the Natal Archives will ensure that it will be adequately preserved for posterity and made available for genuine historical and other research. It is a condition of donation that the papers should not be used for private gain, that they be kept in the Natal Archives at Pietermaritzburg (except for temporary purposes), and that they are never to be removed from the Republic of South Africa.

The papers now await proper archival arrangement and classification. Special binding treatment will be necessary so that wear and tear will not in the future play havoc with the, by now, brittle pages of some of Fynn's writings.

Students who use the papers will inevitably come to the conclusion, which was first stated by Nathaniel Isaacs when he wrote to Fynn himself that Fynn knew "more about the Zulu nation than anybody else", and that Henry Francis Fynn was a man of many-sided ability — trader, adventurer, philanthropist *and* writer.

B. Leverton.