

The 1882 Norwegian Emigration to Natal

It is hardly a mere coincidence that 1982 marks not only the centenary of the cresting of Norwegian emigration to North America but also that of the first organised migration from Norway to southern Africa. Domestic economic woes and a demographic explosion that raised the population of that Scandinavian kingdom from fewer than 900 000 in 1800 to over 2 000 000 a century later had triggered a mass exodus of Norwegians that waxed and waned for decades, in the end giving Norway continental Europe's highest rate of emigration. A severe depression made the United States less attractive during the 1870s, however, and some prospective expatriates began to cast about for alternative destinations. Natal offered what seemed to be promising conditions, prompting some 230 venturesome souls belatedly to sail from Aalesund, Norway, in July 1882, arriving in Durban forty-five days later. Though beset by difficulties that were never fully overcome, they formed one nucleus of what evolved into South Africa's considerable Scandinavian population.

Historians have paid northern European emigration to southern Africa disappointingly little attention. One probable explanation for this neglect lies in their preoccupation with the transplanting of well over two million Scandinavians to the United States, some 800 000 of them Norwegians.¹ Ingrid Semmingsen, the distinguished social historian at the University of Oslo, surveyed some aspects of the topic in her classic study, *Veien mot vest* (The Way West).² Being unable to conduct research in South Africa, however, she was compelled to devote a disproportionate amount of her treatment to the departure of the few Norwegians who eventually landed in Natal and the Cape Colony before 1882. An American scholar, Alan H. Winquist, presented additional information in a recently published thesis focusing primarily on Swedes in South Africa.³ Perhaps owing to the language barrier, South African colleagues have virtually ignored the subject. One will search such standard works as T.R.H. Davenport's politically-oriented *South Africa: A Modern History*⁴ or *The Oxford History of South Africa*.⁵ in vain for any mention of Scandinavians, although one can cull a few facts from articles on "Scandinavians" and "Port Shepstone" in the *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*.⁶ Most of the history of this migration remains to be written.

Norwegians began to trickle into southern Africa many years before the surge of 1882. By the early years of the nineteenth century, at least twenty had found their way to the Cape.⁷ Commercial and maritime relations between Norway and The Netherlands probably lay behind their presence there at that early date. The first Norwegians in Natal arrived much later, of course, but not long after the end of the Boer Republic of Natalia in the

early 1840s. As in other parts of Africa, Christian missionaries formed the vanguard of settlement. H.P.S. Schreuder (1817—1882), a minister of the established Lutheran Church of Norway, came to Port Natal in 1844 with the intention of proceeding to Zululand but was turned back by Mpande. Undaunted, the determined cleric returned six years later to found a mission station at Umpumulo just south of the Tugela. This strategically situated outpost soon became a staging area for a series of stations that Schreuder and his colleagues founded among the Zulus after Mpande allowed them to evangelise his subjects in response to medical assistance he received from Schreuder. Within a decade a number of stations dotted the landscape of Zululand at Empangeni (1851), Entumeni (1852), Mahlabatini (1860), Eshowe (1861), Imfule (1861), and Inhlazatshe (1861). The ambitious Schreuder also translated part of the Bible into Zulu and wrote a grammar of that language. William Charles Baldwin, a professional hunter, visited the modest mud church at Entumeni in 1855, three years before the first conversion to Christianity, and vividly recorded an early confrontation between Scandinavian Lutheranism and Zulu ways:

From the beams hung Kaffir ropes, the tent and sides of a waggon, loads of mealies, old saddles, yokes, skeys, neckstraps, and all apparatus for waggoning, old hats and bridles, and part of a splendid tiger-skin. In the midst of all this and ten times more, rose a pulpit, the cushions and hangings of which bore marks of a great deal of service; and in the pulpit a tall, bushy-whiskered Norwegian missionary, in a black coat buttoned to the throat and reaching to the heels, with spectacles of course, held forth. About thirty Kaffirs, men and women, squatted on a mat on their hams, huddling close together, two under one blanket, hunting the borders for — (presumably lice), and cracking heaps of them, or taking thorns out of their feet with wooden pins, unseen by the pastor, who held forth for more than three hours.⁸

Possibly attracted by the stream of reports that missionaries sent back to Norway, other adventuresome Norwegians reached Natal individually before organised emigration to southern Africa began. In nearly all instances they settled in or near Durban or other towns and assimilated quickly British colonial life. Hilmer Brudevold (1842—1913), the most prominent of these early adventurers, sailed to Natal in 1862 and began a sugar and coffee plantation near the fledgling hamlet of Port Shepstone. Shortly after his arrival, he joined the Alexandra Mounted Rifles, eventually becoming a colonel and fighting in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Brudevold, or Bru-de-Wold, as he dashingly spelt his name in Natal, later served as a justice of the peace and received citations from the government of the colony.⁹ Jacob Jacobsen Egeland (1864—1946) rose from an inauspicious beginning to become the best-known and probably the wealthiest Norwegian in Natal. A deckhand on a ship that broke up near Durban in 1880, the teenager was hauled ashore with other sailors and decided to remain in Africa and try his luck. Walking to Zululand, Egeland worked briefly for a farmer before returning to Durban. He greeted the first party of Norwegian immigrants when they disembarked there in 1882.¹⁰ During a second foray into Zululand, he opened an inn and shop that he operated for three years. When business stagnated, though, Egeland went to Durban once again and gradually became a tycoon with interests in shipping, fishing, timber, and

whaling. For decades he was not only the acknowledged economic kingpin of the city's expanding Norwegian community, but also a mainstay in its cultural life.¹¹

Egeland was not the first Norwegian to arrive in Natal unintentionally, however. In 1876 a party of twenty-four sailed in the employ of the British trading firm Porter, Muir, and Long to Madagascar, where two of their countrymen had begun to propagate the Gospel a decade earlier. The death of one of the company's owners led to its liquidation two years later, leaving its Norwegian agents unemployed. Several accepted a severance offer of free passage back to economically troubled Norway, but others elected Natal.¹² Notwithstanding the fate of this group, another coterie of approximately thirty sailed in 1879 from Bergen to Madagascar with the intention of continuing north to the Aldebra Islands, where they hoped to combine farming with missionary work. On reaching Madagascar, though, they were informed that the Aldebras had little more to offer than coral reefs and turtles. Several of the disillusioned Norwegians consequently proceeded no farther, but others set sail for Durban, where they formed the nucleus of the city's Norwegian colony.¹³

Yet these early immigrants were only a tiny fraction of the Norwegians counted in later South African censuses, and their numbers were utterly insignificant compared to the vast Scandinavian emigration to the United States prior to 1880. Why did so few uprooted Norwegians choose to settle in southern Africa before that date? The availability of inexpensive transportation across the North Atlantic and free acreages under the terms of the 1862 Homestead Act unquestionably provide much of the answer. Less obviously, the image of Africa in nineteenth-century Norway discouraged emigration to that continent. Beginning in 1842, two generations of Norwegian school children were subjected to Ludvig Kristian Daa's *Udtog af Geografien* (Elements of Geography), a textbook which created a thoroughly warped image of Africa in countless impressionable minds. That "immense peninsula", as Daa labelled the continent, supposedly lacked high mountain ranges; consequently, "there is little variation in temperature on the African landscape. Nearly the entire continent belongs to the hottest regions of the world." Even its ostensibly few fertile areas, he cautioned, are "unhealthy, indeed lethal, for Europeans". The native African peoples fared poorly under Daa's unenlightened pen. "The actual Negroes and Kaffirs are semi-wild barbarians," he declared. "Some tribes are as anarchic as the American Indians." Daa's description of Natal was mercifully limited to a sentence identifying it as a "province" on the Indian Ocean.¹⁴ C.W. Horn's briefer *Lærebog i Geografi for Middelskolen* (Textbook in Geography for the Secondary School) contained one scant page about Africa, only a few lines of which were devoted to the southern part of the continent. Horn stated cryptically that "Zululand is on the east coast" but told nothing about its climate or people.¹⁵ Other than these unreliable school-books, most Norwegians apparently had little access to information about Africa. The nation's press rarely carried pertinent articles, and apart from Henry Stanley's often sensational accounts, practically no relevant books existed in Norway until shortly before the organised emigration began. At least until

the 1880s the popular stereotype of Africa as a jungle populated by savages appears to have prevailed.

Captain Nils Landmark (1844—1923) deserves much of the credit for improving the Norwegian image of southern Africa and encouraging emigration there. While in command of the Norwegian Missionary Society's vessel *Elieser* from 1872 until 1879, he visited Natal several times and was impressed by the climate and fertility of its coastal regions. In September 1879 Landmark wrote to the Land and Immigration Board in Maritzburg to inquire about the conditions under which it would accept and assist Norwegian immigrants. C.A. Butler of the Board replied immediately, informing him of its willingness to sell fifty families a common grazing area of 2 000 acres and plots of 100 acres to each family for seven shillings and sixpence per acre, payable in ten annual instalments. He also conveyed the Board's offer to underwrite their passage to Durban, a week's lodging there, and transportation costs to the appointed place of settlement. The Norwegians' new home, Butler disclosed, would presumably be in Alfred County, near a German hamlet of recent origin called Marburg. Landmark found the terms reasonable and published them in one of the Norwegian capital's newspapers. Perhaps anticipating unfavourable comparisons of them with those of the well-known American Homestead Act, he noted that the superior climate of Natal made costly houses and outbuildings unnecessary. Landmark revealed that he envisaged a self-contained Norwegian settlement with its own administration, school, and minister. The idealistic captain urged interested countrymen to apply to him and enclose not only objective information about ages, trades, and familial and financial circumstances, but also letters of reference from their parish parsons.¹⁶

The response was overwhelming, although in retrospect the number of respondents is not surprising during that decade of rapidly rising Scandinavian emigration. Within a month, Landmark received more inquiries than he could handle, including many from individuals who had ignored his warning that it was inadvisable to emigrate to Natal with less than 2 000 Norwegian crowns in liquid capital. In an article printed in several newspapers, he emphasised that his initial intention was to establish a model colony "consisting to the greatest possible degree of decent, Christian people who can form the basis for a more general Norwegian migration to Natal." Hence, only those applicants who met his stringent criteria would be considered, and only if they agreed to remain a unit after settling in Africa. "The entire undertaking will be a failure if, instead of uniting and forming a Norwegian community, these emigrants spread hither and yon throughout the colony," Landmark wrote presciently, "for then it will be impossible to organise a society capable of supporting qualified teachers for the children and a minister for the church."¹⁷

The scheme suffered a setback, however, after Landmark conveyed the applications of thirty selected families and four bachelors to the Land and Immigration Board. Butler replied in August 1880 that since so much time had elapsed since the offer had been made the previous November, the plots had been designated for another purpose. No doubt to the dismay of some of the applicants, he also informed Landmark that "a large number" of them had occupations unsuited to the proposed settlement.¹⁸

Yet the appetites of land-hungry Norwegians for inexpensive acreages in Natal, whetted by Landmark's enticing rhetoric, were too strong to be quelled by a few strokes of a colonial official's pen. Ignoring a warning by a Norwegian who had arrived in Durban in May 1880 only to discover that owing to an influx of immigrants after the Anglo-Zulu War "the employment situation was not much better here than in Norway,"¹⁹ several rebuffed applicants renewed their efforts. They contacted Emil Berg (1842—1913), curate at the Norwegian seamen's church in London, and requested him to pursue the matter on their behalf. The young cleric forwarded their request to Walter Peace, the Land and Immigration Board's agent in London, who extended an offer similar to that made in 1879. Peace sweetened its conditions by promising to erect "comfortable cottages" on all of the fifty plots but also cautioned that immigrants could not expect any assistance from the government of Natal beyond the terms of their agreement.²⁰

The Aalesund group accepted these terms and, after sifting a large number of applications, selected fifty families to form the first settlement. Many had difficulty in disposing of their property, however, and only thirty-four families, together with about sixty young men and women who accompanied them as servants, embarked when the *Tasso* docked in Aalesund on 14 July 1882. The married men included thirteen farmers, three fishermen and sailors, three carpenters and cabinet-makers, two merchants, two teachers, a mason, a blacksmith, a goldsmith, a bookbinder, an agronomist, a tailor, a landscape gardener, a weaver, a painter, a minister, and a versatile handyman who listed both "mechanic" and "cobbler" as his trades. The party numbered approximately 230, nearly all of them from western Norway.²¹

After crossing the North Sea to Hull and continuing their journey by rail to London, these Norsemen boarded a second British steamship, the *Laplant*, which would carry them to Durban. Emil Berg accepted a call to accompany the emigrants as their minister. Several of the intrepid voyagers wrote to friends and relatives in Norway when the *Laplant* took on provisions in Madeira. "We are travelling like lords, if not better," boasted one passenger. "The food is outstanding, but some of the farmers do not always tolerate it, because they are not accustomed to such fine fare."²²

After calling at St. Helena and Cape Town, the *Laplant* dropped anchor in Durban Bay on 28 August, forty-five days after its weary passengers had left Aalesund. C.A. Butler came on board and held a lottery to determine the distribution of the 100-acre plots near Marburg. A handful of the Norwegians who had previously arrived in Durban then emerged from the town's European population of some 4 000 to visit the ship. The *Laplant* thereupon steamed back down the coast to the mouth of the Umzimkulu River near Port Shepstone, about 120 kilometers southwest of Durban, arriving there that evening.²³ The following morning the 230 immigrants were taken ashore in a lighter through typically heavy surf. On the beach they were welcomed by Hilmer Bru-de-Wold, then a twenty-year veteran of life in rural Natal, whom the colonial authorities had hired to assist the newcomers, two other Norwegians, a Swede, and representatives of the Land and Immigration Board. Four hundred of Duka Fynn's Zulu warriors, adorned with "full war paint and regalia, with shields and assegais glittering

and decorated with white ox-tails on (their) legs and arms, and showing great horns on their heads," also greeted the Nordic contingent. During their frenzied dance, recalled one of the settlers, "many of our ladyfolk got very uneasy when they noticed some big pots being brought by these



Hall of Memory at the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Marburg which serves as a museum for the 1882 Norwegian settlement.

(Photograph: Frederick Hale)

warriors, and put on a fire." Their fears were assuaged, though, when four cattle were herded into the circle and slaughtered. The ensuing feast initiated an era of generally harmonious relations between the two groups.²⁴

After the rustic Zulu banquet, the immigrants began the arduous task of transporting their belongings to their farmsteads. Some of the plots lay only two or three kilometres from Port Shepstone, while those surrounding Marburg were about six kilometres inland. The lack of roads in the vicinity made the chore all the more laborious. Adding to the tribulation, the "comfortable cottages" which the Land and Immigration Board had promised the Norwegians proved to be a pair of grass hovels on each acreage. "We had to chase out the snakes, owls, and bats that were living there," wrote one young supplanter who also related the immigrants' hunger until they learned how to bake with the sack of maize meal the government had donated each family.²⁵

What became of Nils Landmark's vision of an economically viable, Christian settlement in Natal, one in which Norwegian folkways and ethnicity would be diligently preserved? Initially, the prospects of its fulfilment seemed promising. Emil Berg gathered a congregation at Marburg almost immediately after disembarking. Twelve months later the immigrants dedicated as their first permanent building, a modest brick sanctuary which also housed an active Sunday school and a women's guild.²⁶ The Norwegians on the Umzimkulu thus had from the outset a cohesive, well-organised social and spiritual fellowship, something which most Scandinavians in North America lacked for several years. Early in 1884 a school was opened, meeting initially in the church building. Gustav Kjönstad, who had been a teacher in Norway, and Berg's Netherlandic wife taught forty children the language and history of Norway as well as English and Christianity. In the 1890s the government of Natal furnished two-thirds of the £300 needed to erect a separate school-house.²⁷ Religious discipline extended beyond the curriculum as parents imposed pietistic strictures on the younger generation. "We children were therefore not even allowed to whistle on Sundays," recalled Edward Haajem. They soon learned Zulu, however, and "therefore got on fine in that language."²⁸

Agriculture, the backbone of the community's economy, also seemed encouraging at first. By Christmas the Norwegians' fields were planted with sugar cane, cotton, maize, bananas, and other crops.²⁹ Daytime temperatures in the upper twenties, an adequate water supply, and far more sunshine than any of the immigrants were accustomed to elevated hopes of abundant yields.³⁰ In the meantime Landmark, still in Norway but encouraged by a stream of roseate reports from Marburg, completed a book titled *Natal, dets Geografi, Næringsveie, Historie etc. En Bog for Udvandrere* (Natal: Its Geography, Economy, History etc. A Book for Emigrants) in which he urged more of his countrymen to emigrate to Natal and contribute to the fulfilment of his dream.³¹

Yet disillusionment soon set in. One root of several related problems that stifled the prosperity of the Norwegian settlement was its relatively remote location. In April 1883 a Norwegian in Marburg wrote a lengthy riposte to a newspaper in Norway countering the glowing accounts some of his fellow immigrants had sent home. "What good is it to have a farm full of bananas, potatoes, maize, and oranges," he asked rhetorically, "if the expense of

transporting them to market exceeds the price they will fetch?" Moreover, a sandbar at Port Shepstone hindered shipping, while the primitive road to Durban was ostensibly little more than a Zulu trail. This disenchanted pioneer also complained that the cows yielded "practically no milk" and diseases had struck both them and the horses. "I'll tell you more when I return to Norway in two or three weeks," he promised.³²

No less seriously, many of the immigrants soon discovered that their skills and labour were superfluous in the vicinity of Marburg. Kjönstad, soon to become one of the community's teachers, conceded later in 1883 that many of the colonists had already departed to seek employment elsewhere in Natal. Several had found it in railway construction between Durban and Newcastle. Six had taken jobs in building trades at Lion's River, but one had complained that drunkenness and related crude behaviour reigned there. Another had become the foreman of a sugar plantation. Fore-shadowing later Norwegian participation in a movement that cut across ethnic lines, two had joined the exodus from the countryside into Durban.³³ In short, within a year after the festive landing at Port Shepstone, the dream of a thriving, well-rounded Norwegian settlement in Natal seemed badly eroded.

Subsequent developments confirmed this trend. Perhaps most significantly, in 1884 news of the discovery of gold in the Rand prompted another flow of Norwegians from Marburg, this time to the Transvaal. Some of the Nordic argonauts whose hopes of instant wealth were dashed returned to the settlement; others simply remained in the north — where they eventually fought on both sides during the Anglo-Boer War — or sought work in Durban or other towns in Natal. Indeed, by 1890 there were enough Norwegians in Durban to launch a building fund for what is now St. Olav Lutheran Church.³⁴ Secular ethnic societies followed around the turn of the century as shipping, whaling, and other interests developed.

The Norwegian experiment in Natal thus became a predominantly urban one. Immigration from Norway continued on a small scale, but it was not the general folk migration that Landmark had envisaged. The new immigrants were overwhelmingly men, most of them specialists in non-agricultural trades. Strictly speaking, many of them were not really immigrants seeking a new homeland, but temporary residents whose tentative plans of returning to Norway were realised within a few years. Whalers, for instance, were typically stationed in Durban for from one to three annual seasons. Others remained and pursued a variety of occupations. The South African census of 1921 enumerated 1 353 Norwegians in the Union, 719 of them (including 458 men) in Natal. 422 of those in Natal were classified as "urban" and 297 "rural". Durban alone had 355. In contrast, only 63 Norwegian-born still resided in the Port Shepstone magisterial district at that time.³⁵ The improvement of the harbour there and the extension of the southern coastal railway to the Umzimkulu in 1901 gave the original Norwegian settlement a new lease on life but also made it even more subject to social influences that further diminished its ethnic distinctiveness.

By 1920 most of the first generation had died or migrated from Marburg. Moreover, as one of the original Norwegians there lamented, "there are only a few children who have taken over their parents' farms." The

departure of the others had forced the school to close, one inevitable result of which was the rapid disappearance of the Norwegian language from the region. Linguistic assimilation and population decline in turn sealed the fate of the town's Norwegian church, which has long been used only on ceremonial occasions.

Perspicacious Norwegians perceived fairly early that Landmark's experiment could not succeed. H.J.S. Astrup, a missionary in Zululand, blamed its demise partly on unprincipled individuals among the immigrants "who have brought shame on Norway through deceit, swindling and other evils."³⁶ L.M. Altern, a surveyor who had emigrated independently in 1882, admitted in 1913 that the Union's economy had stagnated and predicted that black majority rule would eventually become a reality.³⁷ A Norwegian pharmacist who had lived in Eshowe for several years discouraged further emigration in 1924, stating that "if South Africa really is the land of the future, it is so more for the black people than the white."³⁸

Opinions on that sensitive issue differed sharply even then, of course, but apparently very few people in Norway regarded South Africa as the land of their own future after about 1905. Norwegian immigration naturally plummeted during the Anglo-Boer War, and a brief upswing after its conclusion was not sustained. From 1906 until 1915 only 132 Norwegians emigrated to Africa as a whole.³⁹

The rate never recovered. Lacking a substantial influx of compatriots, those already in Natal became increasingly interwoven with other Europeans there. Such ethnic institutions as the Norsemen's Federation chapter and St. Olav Lutheran Church in Durban testify to the dominant role that city has played in the Norwegian cultural life of Natal, but even they have revealing histories of considerable assimilation. For the most part, the Norwegians of both Durban and Marburg long ago became inconspicuous fibres in the variegated warp and woof of South African society.⁴⁰

REFERENCE NOTES

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- ⁴⁰ I wish to express my special gratitude to Mark Erling Hestenes of Johannesburg, who helped me gain access to books and archivalia at both the University of the Witwatersrand and Rand Afrikaans University in that city as well as at the University of Natal in Durban.

FREDERICK HALE

