

## Frank Emery (1930-1987)

While *Natalia* 17 was at the galley-proof stage of production we received the tragic news of the untimely death of Frank Emery, struck down by an express train a few kilometres from his home in Oxford.

Frank Emery was not a Natal man. He was a Welshman, and proud of it. He was a Fellow of St Peter's College, Oxford, where he had taught historical geography since the 1950s, and at the time of his death was its Vice-Master. He was an authority on the Oxfordshire landscape.

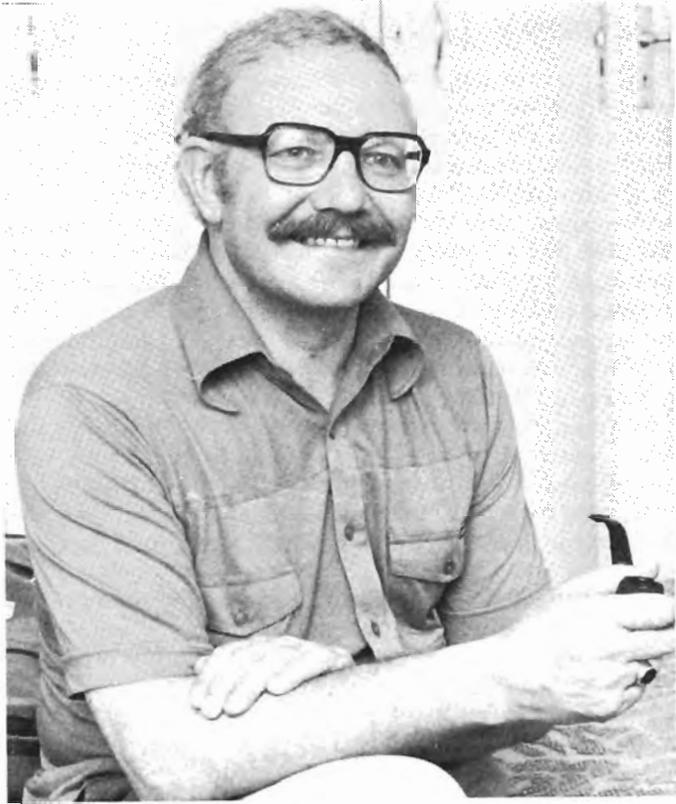
Yet Frank Emery's death must be recorded in *Natalia*. He had an abiding interest in Natal and Zululand, first aroused when in the late 1940s he did his national service in the South Wales Borderers, descendant of the 24th Regiment which was so decimated at Isandlwana and won such glory in defending Rorke's Drift during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. In the last letter which I received from him, composed while on holiday in Madeira in January 1987, he wrote, 'One feels very close to Natal here, partly because all those ships used to call in here for coaling (1879 transports and others among them), and partly due to the close likeness of the flora. All the South African flowers and fruit (even to the Kaffirboom, as it used to be known) grow in profusion here'.

Not only did he feel close to Natal. He came here on four occasions. The first was in the late 1960s when he lectured for a full academic year on an exchange in the Geography Department of the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg. In 1984 he was a visiting lecturer in both the Departments of Geography and History. In 1979 and again in 1985 he was brought out by the University as a distinguished academic to deliver papers at its Anglo-Zulu War Centennial and Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Conferences.

What did he have to offer? Not only 'Early Colonists' perceptions of Natal', his last paper, a penetrating blend of his disciplines of history and geography, but he discovered — and mined — a rich vein of historical ore, soldiers' letters. The Welsh recruits who fought and died in 1879 were surprisingly literate. Their letters home were offered to, and published in, a wide variety of provincial newspapers, old boys' magazines and other publications in response to an insatiable desire for news from Zululand.

In these dusty and forgotten journals Frank Emery found the perspective of the common soldier, a dimension very different from, and supplementary to, that of official reports. The result was *The Red Soldier: Letters from the Zulu War, 1879*, published in 1977. A later work of similar genre, painted on a broader canvas to take in all Queen Victoria's colonial wars in Africa was *Marching over Africa*, published in 1986. His paper for the 1979 Conference and two articles published in *Natalia* were on the same theme. He also delivered the annual Natal Society Lecture, published in *Natalia* 14, on 'Revd John David Jenkins (1828-76), Canon of the Cathedral of Natal', and at the time of his death was pursuing his researches on the famous (or notorious?) proconsul of Empire, Sir Bartle Frere.

On a personal note, I first met Frank Emery at the 1979 Conference when I asked a question at the conclusion of his paper. He buttonholed me afterwards with characteristic warmth and human interest. When he heard that I was visiting the United Kingdom later that year, his immediate response was 'But my dear chap, you must come and stay in my rooms at



Frank Emery (1930-1987)

(Photograph: Natal Witness)

College'. And so I did, living grandly as a pseudo-fellow and entertained warmly in his home every evening. He generously took me to Wales for three days, to see the Zulu War from the other side, as it were. He proudly showed me the famous colour of the 24th Regiment, to save which Melvill and Coghill gave their lives, now laid up in Brecon Cathedral. We stayed in a little pub in Brecon. Here Frank was as at home and as welcome in a humble working class environment as he was in the Fellows' Dining Room of his College in Oxford. In 1982 I again enjoyed the hospitality of the Emery home together with members of my family.

Frank was, until the last year or so when ill-health sapped his vitality, a letter writer every bit as productive and as vivid as any of those soldiers of the Queen whose literary gems he unearthed. Today I value a thick wad of 'Emery Papers'. I value, too, the memory of a warm and generous friend. Many people in Natal will hold happy memories of his company as a guest in their homes. With his passing, the increasingly beleaguered academic community in Natal, too, has lost a significant and influential friend overseas.

*Requiescat in pace.*

T.B. FROST