

Colenso Letters

Introduction

The letters selected for publication deal with two events of crucial significance for the Colensos as a family: the death of Bishop Colenso in June 1883 and the destruction of the family home at Bishopstowe/Ekhukanyeni in September 1884. Two letters are written by Frances Ellen Colenso (1849–1887) who died at Ventnor, on the Isle of Wight, and the third by Harriette Emily Colenso (1847–1932), the eldest and the longest-lived of the Colenso family.

None of the Colenso children was born at Bishopstowe. Four were born in Britain while Agnes Mary, the youngest, was born in Pietermaritzburg, shortly before the newly-arrived family of Natal's first bishop moved into the newly-built home at Bishopstowe. Some memories of Forncett in Norfolk lingered, among them of strawberries tossed by their father to the young Frances Ellen and her little brother Robert as they stood obediently on dry ground in the garden; but Bishopstowe was the family home where the Colensos grew up. It was from the quaint house here that they rode into Pietermaritzburg for visits to Government House, balls and bazaars or, in the case of the boys, lessons from one of their father's clergy, while the Bishop himself rode into town at least once a week for services at St Peter's, or left Bishopstowe to travel about his diocese. For all there were picnics on Table Mountain and visits further afield.

Childhood in Natal was interrupted when their father, taking his family with him, went to Britain to seek support for his theological views and ecclesiastical position. The visit was important for all the Colensos. For the older girls there was the experience of schooldays at Winnington Hall where John Ruskin taught art and where friendships were formed. In England Charles Bunyon, their maternal uncle, was the main representative of Colenso interest until the Colenso sons went to England to study and then to settle. Charles Bunyon was relatively prosperous and helpful, but the Colensos realized that there were limits to the affection between the wealthy, evangelical and London-based Bunyons and the rather more straitened, unorthodox and colonial Colensos. Mrs K. M. Lyell, sister-in-law of the geologist Sir Charles Lyell, and a woman of talent and means, was probably the most important of their English friends both to the Bishop and his wife and to their children. Many distinguished people supported Colenso in the 1860s when significant judicial decisions were made, and the family was drawn into the social life of some of the intellectual élite of London. The Colensos returned to Natal in 1865.

A few years later the family began to disperse. In 1869 the sons, Frank and Robert, went to England for higher education at Cambridge and Oxford respectively, and for professional training, Frank as a lawyer and Robert as a doctor. They were away for about a decade. Each returned to Natal, hoping to remain permanently. But Frank's fiancée would not come to Natal, and he returned to Britain to marry, carve out a career as an actuary, and rear his own family. Robert John did not establish himself successfully either in Natal or on the Witwatersrand and he returned to Britain in about 1890.

Frances Ellen accompanied her brother to Britain in 1869 but only for a short visit, for she returned in 1870, being chaperoned by Bishop Wilkinson, the Church of the Province of South Africa Bishop of Zululand. She visited Britain again in 1879 accompanying Frank on his return from Natal. She attended some classes at the Slade School and paid a visit to Rome, returning to Natal in 1881. She went back to England in 1886 where she died after a short stay. Harriette, for all her intellectual gifts, did not receive the opportunities for higher education afforded her brothers: family resources were too limited for so radical a step to be considered. But, since both her brothers were away from home, it was natural that she should draw closer to her father, accompanying him on his episcopal visitations, and supporting him in his political confrontations with the authorities over the fate of Langalibalele and the injustices of Britain's Zulu policy. Agnes Mary Colenso was throughout her

life the loving and able supporter of those in the family who played a more public role, while ready to take the initiative herself when necessary.

For Frances Ellen the years 1883 and 1884 belonged to a very unhappy period. There had been an early close friendship that ended in separation, and by 1873 she was in love with Col. Anthony William Durnford who, committed to an unhappy marriage, could not give her the fulfilling relationship she sought. As 'Atherton Wylde' she wrote *My Chief and I* in honour of Durnford when, as commander of the force sent to pursue Langelibalele, he was blamed for the colonial deaths that occurred in the Bushman's River Pass. Isandlwana was a tragic turning point in her life. Her physical strength was eroded by the tuberculosis contracted while nursing a sick soldier in Pietermaritzburg and she grieved deeply for Durnford. But she devoted energy, emotional intensity and intellectual concentration to defending his reputation from what she believed was the unjustified blame for Isandlwana. With Anthony's brother Edward, she wrote *A History of the Zulu War and its Origin*, and she collaborated with him in the composition of *A Soldier's life in south east Africa, a memoir of the late Col. A.W. Durnford*. Her friendship with Edward, himself a married man, grew too intense for comfort. She undertook her last book, the two-volume *The Ruin of Zululand*, on her father's suggestion and it contains many references to Isandlwana. Convinced that Durnford was the victim of a conspiracy of silence and calumny, Frances Ellen believed that Offy Shepstone had stolen papers from the body of Durnford which, if recovered, would show quite clearly that Durnford had not received specific orders to take command of the camp. She pursued tangled, probably inconclusive and possibly irrelevant evidence on this point, and did so with a frightening intensity until her death.

Allusions to political and ecclesiastical matters occur in the text. At the time the letters were written Zululand was in a state of chaos and uncertainty as civil conflicts continued after January 1883 when Cetshwayo returned to a mockery of his former position, and the situation was exacerbated after Cetshwayo's death in February 1884 by the intrusion of white landgrabbers. In regard to Church affairs the death of Bishop Colenso raised the formidable questions of a successor to him and of how the property he had held was to be controlled.

These three letters are among the papers of Frank Colenso which, having been preserved by his widow and his daughter, were donated to the Rhodes House Library, Oxford, in 1967. The permission of the Librarian to publish these letters is gratefully acknowledged. I have also to thank members of the Editorial Board of *Natalia*, Mrs Shelagh Spencer and Dr Sylvia Vietzen, for specific information incorporated in the footnotes.

Alterations to the text have been kept to a minimum. Changes to punctuation are so slight that they have not always been indicated and, in the interests of easy communication, the ampersands and the Colenso abbreviations have been replaced by 'and' and the full version of the words abbreviated in the original text. For the most part, however, the Colensos speak for themselves.

BRENDA NICHOLLS

Bishopstowe June 24, 83

My poor darling Brother¹ I am thinking a great deal of you through this almost unendurable time of sorrow for us all. It is so hard on you to be away, and I know how much you will feel that besides the grief and loss which we all share. Still I almost think that it was harder still for me to have been so near and yet too late. I see Mama has said something of that — but in point of fact it must have been just her own feeling that I had been 'wronged' and therefore must feel it so, for I never said a word of the sort and if I blame anyone it is Dr Scott² and the man in town who is paid to post our letters daily and apparently does it at his own convenience. I must tell you just what I know for you will wish to hear all that can be said about our dreadful loss. For the last 6 months we seem each to have been secretly anxious about *him*. All the while I was painting him I used to feel as though the lovely soul was daily shining more and more through the earthly form, and I think almost every loving look one has cast upon him has been accompanied by a momentary thrill of pain — hastily pushed away as foolish and needless. It has been rather the thought of what a

dreary blank the world would be were this to be which now is, than actual anxiety. For though very thin and tired looking he seemed wonderfully to keep his health, and my feeling always was 'when once the Zulu business is happily over he will rest — both heart and mind,' and here I must tell you how *very much* pleased he was with your late literary and political efforts. I don't think you could have done anything to please him more, and I am very very glad you did it, for your sake as well as because it was a good and right thing to be done.

But to go back to my miserable tale, (my part in it truly so) he went down to Durban on May 30, my birthday, and I was to have gone with him, but was not well enough, and for various reasons decided to go a week later. I was to stay away till Sept. It so happened that I went down at last the very day he came up. We knew it beforehand, but it so happened that it could not be helped. Our 2 trains stopped at the $\frac{1}{2}$ way house together for a few moments, just long enough for us to exchange greetings from our windows, unfortunately not opposite each other by some 4 or 5, and for me to have one look — my last — at his blessed white head. That thought did cross my mind as we passed on but only in the form of 'Suppose that were my last sight of him how should I bear it!' but of course I had no slightest reason for really fearing it except because it would be so dreadful. When I got to Durban I heard from Rob³ that our darling Father had had a touch of coast-fever down there, but that he was better when he started and Rob had treated him and was certainly not alarmed, and both he and I were relieved when our next letters from Bishopstowe gave good accounts. So a fortnight . . . passed, and I got comfortably settled in my winter quarters, feeling sure that Papa would manage to come and see me in the middle of the time.

But on a Tuesday morning — only last Tuesday, the 19th, I got letters from home written on Saturday night, and which ought to have reached me the day before. Harrie⁴ wrote, saying he was not well and they had decided to ask Dr Scott to come and see him next day, Sunday, on which day H. added a p.s. to the same effect. But though anxious they were not then when they wrote alarmed, nor do I think we in Durban should have been but for our having had no later news and Rob's not having heard from Dr Scott. Rob at once telegraphed to Dr Scott for information, but the reply was rather uncertain, and mentioned that the sender was *writing*. This did not look *urgent* you see, and though Rob said that he should go up, it was already too late for that afternoon's train, and no passenger train left again before 8 next morning. Meanwhile I also telegraphed on my own account to Dr Scott (who is my medical attendant) charging him to telegraph for me if there was any danger. About 7 p.m. came another telegram from Dr Scott asking Rob to come up by the night luggage train, but making no mention of me. Now I find that poor Harrie specially asked Dr Scott to send for me *also*, but he did not do so. I suppose he thought that any alarm would bring us *both* but he should have remembered that I was not situated like other people. In Durban I was under Rob's medical control, and as there could be no doubt that a sudden night journey into a colder atmosphere and without travelling conveniences would be a great risk for me, he might have been sure that nothing short of the full alarm would induce Rob to bring me. As it was Rob wished me to wait, not only for the morning train, but until he telegraphed for me, which could not be until the afternoon. In fact he was not sure from the telegrams whether there was immediate danger or not, or whether Dr S. was merely nervous about the responsibility etc. So, though Rob told me that I must decide for myself, he

plainly thought that I *ought* to be patient and wait, and not risk getting ill, and making them all unhappy, perhaps without need. I am thankful to say that Rob and all of them say that if *they had known* the dreadful blow that was coming, they would not have dreamt of keeping me away, feeling with me that *nothing* could be so terrible an injury as to be too late to see him. So Rob went off by the 2 a.m. train and I felt that right or wrong, I could not stay behind, so I started after him by the first morning train, which should have reached Maritzburg at 2 p.m. but was nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour late. All the way up — six hours — I was feeling guilty and fearing it was selfish of me to come, but now that Rob was with him I don't think that I felt frightened until just that last half hour which happened to be beyond the time. I had telegraphed to Mr Egner⁵ to provide a trap for me for I did [not] want to trouble them out here or — in case I was doing wrong to come — for them to know it till I reached home. But meanwhile during the 6 hours I was in the train I *had* been sent for at last and Emil⁶ had telegraphed back to say that I was on the way. So at the P.M.B. station I found Dr Scott to meet me and Mr Egner, and a trap with a pair of large, fast horses. I knew from all their looks that the great fear of our lives was coming near, although Dr Scott's words were not *hopeless* — only that *he* was better in one way, but not so well in another. It was rather the extreme care and tenderness with which he looked after and cared for *me* than anything else that made me feel sure he had no hope. He was not coming out here with me but Mr Egner was and also Mr. Gallway⁷ [sic] whom we picked up in town by his request to Mr Egner. As we left the station the latter began to talk of Papa of how he had been in on Thursday — and so on and I just told him I could not talk of him if I were to get home and then Mr. Gallway [sic] came up and began 'the accounts are better today,' but I had said hurriedly to Mr Egner 'for God's sake tell him not talk to me of my Father' (I don't use such expressions naturally, but it seemed like some-one else speaking, outside myself) and so Mr Egner somehow managed to stop him, and we drove out, very fast, yet it seemed an age, and almost silent, I quite. Frank, it seemed to me that I had leapt back 4 years in an hour, and that it was again that day — the 24th Jan. 79, when I drove the *other* way, but in just the same swift, tardy silence, and with just the same terror, and almost certainty of the *worst*, yet clinging desperately to one gleam of hope⁸. I felt sure that we were soon to lose our darling Father, but I did not for a moment dream that he was already gone. It was two o'clock when all was over, and as they watched his parting breath, our dear Harrie (Mother tells me) said softly 'Oh! poor Frances!' Poor *indeed* to have lost the last look and word, to have been but just too late. I would have given all the rest of my life to have been just two hours sooner. He knew and recognized Rob, but had hardly strength to speak. Only on Saturday did he begin to be ill (as far as anyone knew that is — he was *too* patient and enduring), only on Tuesday did Dr Scott tell them there was danger, and on Wednesday all was over. Oh! Frank! he did look so very, very beautiful next day, it was hard to tear oneself away from gazing upon him. It seemed as though all the lovely qualities of mind and heart which he possessed in life were traced on every feature of his beloved face. How *are* we to live without him. At least we have not to say what is often said 'We did not know how dear' a lost one was till too late for he has been the very light of our existence for years. Harrie and Agnes⁹ have never had any interest in life apart from him, while to me my Father has been the great comfort of my life and for his sake I have cared to live. You will want to know how we all are. Poor dear Mother is very brave and good, but I think she feels that for her the separation is only for a little while, and that it

will not be very long before she is once more with the Beloved One who for nearly 40 years has been all the world to her. I feel as though we ought not to wish to keep her. Yet she is not ill though always very frail and weak.¹⁰ We can hardly tell yet how she will be. As to our dear Harrie, she is wonderful, truly she is worthy to be his daughter, and no more can be said than that! Though to her the loss is so very very great, she does everything — thinks of, and for us all, and most of all of everything that he would wish and of carrying on his work. I do not think she has faltered or spared herself for one hour, and she never shrinks from any duty, great or small. She sets us a noble example which Agnes follows gallantly, and I more halting and far behind, try at least to keep in sight of her. She went with Rob on Friday when they laid the mortal remains of our darling Father to rest beneath the stones just in front of the Communion Table, on which he stood to give the blessing for so many years. They say that nearly 4,000 people were present, and at least the universal sorrow is the best answer to all the old false tongues against him. I cannot write more to-night but will do so next mail.

I am my darling Brother your loving sister, my dearest love to my sweet sister, Nelly.¹¹

REFERENCES

1. Francis Ernest Colenso (1852–1910) second son of John William Colenso, then an actuary living in Norwich. He supported the political and religious Colenso causes in Britain.
2. Presumably Dr W.J. Scott, M.B.C.M.
3. Robert John Colenso (1850–1925) elder son of John William Colenso, a medical doctor at the time at Palmhurst, Beach Grove, Durban. His qualifications are listed as M.A., B.M. Oxon, M.R.C.S. Eng, M.A. Capetown.
4. Harriette Emily Colenso (1847–1932).
5. J.M. Egner, general dealer of Pietermaritzburg, churchwarden of St Peter's, member of the Church Council of the Church of England in Natal, later a curator of the properties of the Church of England.
6. Emil (or Emily) Colenso (néé Kerr) wife of Robert John Colenso, born in Canada of Scottish descent.
7. Michael Gallwey (1826–1912) attorney general and subsequently chief justice of Natal, friend and adviser of Bishop Colenso although a Roman Catholic.
8. She recalled the drive from Bishopstowe into Pietermaritzburg when first reports of Isandlwana were received.
9. Agnes Mary Colenso (1855–1932).
10. Sarah Frances Colenso (1816–1893) survived her husband for more than ten years dying in December, 1893.
11. Frances Ellen signed in the diminutive of her name which she preferred although 'Fanny' was the form used by her parents.

NOTES

12. F.W. Chesson (1833/4–1888) journalist and secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society.
13. Eothen (1883–c. 1976), the eldest surviving child of Sophie and Frank Colenso whose first-born, Esmond, died in infancy. Sophie Colenso (*née* Frankland) had German family connections.
14. This work, which Frances Ellen wrote in co-operation with her brother Frank and sister Harriette, was published as *The Ruin of Zululand*, 2 volumes (1884–5).
15. P. Davis, printer, publisher and bookseller of Pietemarienburg published some Colenso texts in Zulu.

Durban
Sept. 9. 1884

My darling Frank,

I feel as though you had been very badly treated, and I fear you have really suffered, and are suffering, more than any of us in consequence of our disaster. We did immediately think of sending you a cablegram, but then it seemed needless as the *Witness* was sending one to England, and Statham¹ certainly *ought* to be, if he is not, friendly enough to assist us in such a thing. So we went in to him to be sure to include in his cablegram that we were all safe, which indeed, was as much as there was to say then. I am afraid it has cost you a great deal, both in anxiety and money, that you might have been saved.

I will now tell you what I can of the event. For the last 3 months Harrie has gone out on every still afternoon, with all the men she could collect, to burn round the place. Never before has so much been done (though we have always been careful) for the season was unusually dry, and H. felt especially responsible for the property this year. Destructive fires have been unusually frequent, and again and again, had anyone *but* Harrie, with her long experience in the matter, her remarkable presence of mind and energy, and her special influence over the natives around, been in charge the same thing would have happened much sooner, and when it was avoidable, which it was not when it did happen. It was the most tremendous hot gale I ever experienced, — all day no-one could face it, and this fire (which is said to have come from 10 miles away) was blown, or hurled right across our defences — i.e. as wide a burnt strip as the oldest colonist would have thought necessary for safety. When you think that flakes of flaming grass were hurled from the haystack *beyond the stables* over them and the chapel, and fell upon the roof of the house at the *furthest* end — i.e. over the drawing room and my room upstairs, you will see how useless were the broadest burnt strips. I say all this because some enemies² have been sneering at this as the result of leaving the place in our (women's) hands! as though any dozen Natalian men would have been as fit for the charge as Harrie, or as though any of them could or would have done half she has done. No man could have done more, but no human power could have saved the house that day, in such a gale and drought, and the fire directly to windward. Harrie had been intensely anxious for weeks, while she was burning round, (she came in one evening with her eyelashes and front hair singed off, but with no hurt) and would constantly stay out four to six hours over the work. When we objected to her over-taxing her strength so much she often said 'Do you *want* to be burnt out?' However her mind was fairly at rest on the morning of the 2nd, as we were well burnt round on every side. The day was a most oppressive one, hot and heavy, the air heavy within, the sky lurid and dull, and a fierce hot gale blowing without. These, as you know, are common features of

a bad windy day — fortunately rare occurrences — but no doubt they were greatly increased by the great fire advancing upon us though not yet in sight. About 2½ [2.30 p.m.?] it came over the crest to which Cope's hill belongs, and the alarm was given. Harrie ran out with all the men she could collect, but in a few minutes the fire had leaped across and swept through the young plantations down towards the stables. Katie, Emil, Eric³ and I were at this moment the only people at hand. K. cut the horses loose, and she and I led them down just beyond the old kitchen tying them to the trees there. I had been a good deal out of sorts for the previous fortnight, hardly leaving my room, and was actually in my dressing-gown when I came down to look out and seeing Katie leading a horse out of the stable, went, as I was, to help her. After that I thought I had better go and put on a dress, hat, and boots, not that I expected danger to the house then, but simply to be more useful. I went up-stairs, and was certainly not 5 minutes dressing, and came down again at once. As I left my room, that dear pretty room, so full of pretty things, some instinct made me take up a basket into which I had put, some days before all the important papers in our case against O.S.⁴ in order to take them to town to show them to a lawyer, and I carried that down with me. It could have been no expectation of danger, or I should have carried off my box of letters etc., at all events, which I could easily have done then had I known it was my last chance. I went back to the horses, thinking that looking after them was about the only use I could be, and found the whole of the back, one thick dense smoke. Emil's German maid, our two little black maids and I got the horses further off, round the next corner of the house, i.e. between the window of the room you used to have (and which was still called 'Frank's room') and the carriage drive. Here we remained about five minutes when a great dense blast of dense smoke came pouring round the front upon us, while we were struggling for a clearer spot, the horses getting frightened, and I finding it most difficult to draw a breath, (the smoke did not suit my weak lung) two or three wild-looking men (natives) rushed through the gloom, caught the horses from us, shouting to us that the house was on fire and we must follow the rest. We did not in the least understand *where* — but ran into the house at the back along the back verandah, and down the long passage, looking for the others. We saw no-one only smoke everywhere and I caught up my basket which I had left in Emil's room down-stairs and ran out to the front where I was met by Mr Phipson⁵ looking for us. He almost dragged me out of the house and looking up I saw the whole roof in flames. He took me round the garden, (the front lawn was in flames) and across to the mulberries in the centre of which I found Eric sitting in his grandfather's study chair, with his mother, our mother and Katie around him. Harrie was still trying to get things out of the study, but she had to give it up as hopeless in a few minutes having, however, saved the papers which she cared most about of His. Emil's German girl (a very powerful and sensible young woman) did good service by catching up the drawing room table-cloth with all its contents, including all Mother's little array of framed photographs — yourselves and Eothen, Eric and so on and various little treasures, worth more to her than their money's worth, also folios of her flower-paintings, and some books. My portrait of Papa, and Sophie's of you were saved, but no other pictures, except mine of Helen,⁶ and the great Millais print from the dining room. Everything was got out of the dining room, which was the last room attacked, but it only contained tables and chairs, the old piano, one bookshelf of books and the best china tea and dessert sets. Everything else is gone — not a thing left from upstairs except that basket of papers in O.S.'s case. Surely I am to succeed in that! I suppose I have lost,

because I possessed, the *most* actual property. All that pretty furniture that the Colonel had made for my room, all the nice things I brought out from England, all my books, photographs, casts, painting materials, pictures, including 4 genuine Burne-Jones drawings,⁷ not to speak of copies, Sophie's portrait, Edward's⁸ portrait, all the work I have done since I came out, and of course, worst of all that box of letters etc. which and I always carried about with me. My watch, heavy gold-chain, silver ornaments, 3 gold brooches etc. etc. all gone, but I had on the black and gold brooch with spray of small pearls on it, belonging to Grandmama's hair bracelet, also Dora's⁹ gold bracelet, and the rings that I always wear, all except one. Not one of us saved her watch except Emil, whose maid got hers out and was nearly suffocated in doing so. The extreme rapidity of the fire and the awful smoke, which, driven before the level wind, was something indescribable, were what prevented our saving more — I think if I had had the full use of my lungs I should have tried for my little box, and I believe I could have got *to* my room, but I do not think I should have got back again. The whole thing was over in an hour, during which we stood in the mulberries, out of danger as long as the wind did not change in our direction, which mercifully it did not. We were really surrounded by fire, but the smoke from the house did not come our way. I think having Eric with us prevented our feeling alarmed for ourselves, we were so anxious about him. The darling boy was so good, never gave us any trouble at all, and hardly ever complained when the smoke made his eyes smart. When we could get away we went over to Bishopthorpe at Mrs Bonifant's¹⁰ invitation, where we camped the night. She did all in her power for us, but of course had not real accommodation for us — 7 of us, in that little 4-roomed house. However, we were only too thankful for a roof over us, mattresses and blankets on the floor (besides one bed), and a meal of tea, bacon and first-rate eggs. Next morning Emil, Eric, their maid and I were sent down here, where I am to remain for the present. It is a great trouble to me to be away from them all at such a time, but I know it is the best thing for them as well as for me, that it would have been only selfish in me to insist on staying. They have moved into the farm buildings,¹¹ and are no doubt writing to you from there. Mother has borne it all wonderfully well. After last year nothing would distress her much except the loss of one of us. None of us seem the worse for the fright and distress, and after all *what* a different thing it would have been if any one of us had been lost!

I must now say a little on business. I had fortunately sent you, the day before the fire, my latest written ms. taking our tale down to the end of the libel trial.¹² I mean, this week to write a single chapter, or sort of summary of what is yet to come, and explaining that as the whole of my materials have been destroyed and must be re-collected, a 3rd. vol. becomes a necessity. I can say a good deal in that last chapter. We had better, if we can, bring out the 2nd vol. at once, and the 3rd next year.¹³ I am going simply to *ask Dora* to enable us to bring out the 2nd vol. I shall write to her next mail, and I feel pretty sure she will. I shall begin next week, as soon as my last chapter and preface are sent off to you, to re-collect my newspaper materials by going daily to the library here, and copying what I want from the files, and please do you or Mr Chesson send me out *at once* copies of the 2nd and 3rd vols. of our 'Digest', especially the 3rd beginning with the 'restoration'.¹⁴ If this subscription business comes to anything we may be able to pay for vol. 2 ourselves. *You of course*, must not think of risking more. I only hope you have not risked too much with vol. 1. I shall send my letter to Dora through you, on the chance of people having already subscribed enough to make it needless. Dears, believe that we are none

of us broken down by this calamity — after the great sorrow we have gone through the loss of property seems comparatively light to us, and even that of sacred relics however dear, is endurable, however painful. If you show my letter to anyone beyond yourselves carefully scratch out the sentences about writing to Dora, please. By the way there was 1/5 to pay on each of the copies of vol. I you sent out, otherwise they would have been burnt. The one day's delay saved them.¹⁵

Now goodbye darlings, think of us as cheerful, and not unhappy since we have each other. Some people call us 'stoical', and cannot understand us at all.

I am your loving sister Nelly.

P.S. I was just getting over a bad cold which had thrown me back for a while — but I am going on well now.

NOTES

1. F.R. Statham (1844–1908) author of *Blacks, Boers and British, a three-cornered problem* (1881) and intermittently editor of the *Natal Witness* was a supporter of Bishop Colenso but the family quarrelled with him when he insisted on regarding William Grant as the 'agent' of the Aborigines Protection Society, thus implicating the Society in Grant's role in facilitating the 'Boer' seizure of land in Zululand and blunting its criticism of white filibusters.
2. Among themselves the Colensos frequently called their critics 'enemies'.
3. Sister-in-law of Warwick-Brookes (the firm friend of Colenso and Natal's first superintendent of education whose suicide in 1878 deeply grieved the Bishop), Katie Giles (d. 1910) was a life-long and admiring friend of the Colensos and at the time of the fire a member of the household. Eric John Colenso (Robert's son) later followed a military career. After the death of his aunts, Harriette and Agnes, in 1932 he donated the Colenso papers to the Natal Government Archives.
4. Offy (Theophilus) Shepstone (1843–1907) lawyer, politician and later agent with the Swazi king. Frances Ellen's suspicions of him culminated in an enquiry in Pietermaritzburg in 1886 by means of which Offy pre-empted further effective action against himself and secured an apology from Colonel Luard who, as Frances Ellen's 'Sir Lancelot', had made allegations against Offy on her behalf.
5. Presumably a neighbour, possibly an assistant in managing the estate.
6. Helen Shepstone, neé Bisset, wife of Offy.
7. Georgiana Burne-Jones was a friend of Frances Ellen Colenso and her link with the artistic world and the warmth and vitality of the Burne-Jones's social circle. In 1887, when Frances Ellen left the convalescent hospital knowing that her case was regarded as incurable, she hoped to stay in the Burne-Jones's home 'to get well again', but it was in lodgings at Ventnor that Frances Ellen died.
8. Edward Durnford, brother of Anthony William.
9. Dora Lees, a friend of Frances Ellen (possibly since their schooldays) and evidently a woman of means.
10. Evidently a neighbour on the Bishopstowe/Ekukhanyeni estate.
11. This cottage, known as 'The Farm' or 'Seven Oaks' or 'Little Bishopstowe' was the Natal home of the Colenso women until about 1900. It was itself destroyed by fire in about 1964.
12. In September 1883 John Wesley Shepstone, 'Misjan', brought a libel case against the *Natal Witness* which, with F.R. Statham as editor, had published Zulu reports of coercion and violence in the Reserve where J.W. Shepstone was commissioner. Harriette Colenso gave evidence at the hearing which resulted in Shepstone receiving £500 damages. The Colensos maintained that the issue was not decided on the merits of the case.
13. The third volume of *The Ruin of Zululand* was completed but, because friends warned that it would not sell, it was never published.
14. Colenso's *Digest* was a running commentary on Zulu affairs in which official accounts of events were countered by Colenso comments. Printed on the Bishopstowe press, the sheets were circulated among sympathetic friends in Britain. The 'restoration' was the return of Cetshwayo in January, 1883.
15. Publication of *The Ruin of Zululand* was financed partly from the Colenso Sympathy Fund, i.e. money collected in Natal to assist the Colensos after the fire.

Bishopstowe
(‘The Farm’)

Sept 8, 1884

My dearest Frank

Much as you will want to know all about us, you will recognize that we have not much time for writing letters, besides I know that Frances is writing to you. I send you the *Witness* and *Times* accounts of the fire but as they have managed to make several mistakes, I'll add a few notes. We had been burning more extensively than usual this year, and had fair reason to consider ourselves safe unless from some carelessness within the charmed circle, and even against that we were somewhat prepared, strips burnt or cleared in various directions, when there came a day of wind such as happily we don't have more than once in many years — the sort of wind in which we can see the Maritzburg dust hanging in a cloud over Table Mountain. Sotsha came to me in the study to say that they wanted branches as there was a fire coming by Martens' red road. I got my hat and matches and went with the men, but no sooner had I got out above the stable than I saw the towers of smoke rolling along towards us and already at the top of the hill, swooping down on the porcupine [bushes?] you know. It was plain that there was nothing to be done except at home, since it had already leapt all our outer defences. The only thing to be done was to try to light an opposing fire along the path running along the top of the mulberries, and what a hazardous business this was, owing to the fury of the wind, you may judge from the fact that I measured today one place where the main fire has scorched and burnt afresh *34 yards* across a place which we had burnt only a month ago and where there was only here and there a green blade sprouting for it to burn, we struggled along for a few yards on either side of the angle where the path along the top of the mulberries meets the road to the village (all along which we had previously burnt as a precaution) and then, just by haystack, the main body of the fire came upon us up from the river, transversely, from Zandile's trees,¹ — there was just one sweep of flame and (in 3 minutes Phipson says) the front roof of the house itself was blazing, and we were carrying . . . Eric and the leather despatch box etc. into the mulberry grove, the front wing of the fire had already partly swept through here, and we were safe, and *tolerably* out of the smoke. The smoke was choking though at times and Eric was as good — as his grandfather's child — all through. Just before the main fire came up, Katie got the horses out of the stable, and Frances with a boy looked after them and kept them out of the smoke, and finally they joined the rest of us in the mulberries. The cows, the Hlubi² women drove right out into the burnt grass the other side of the house (we had burnt the whole, from the house to the farm) and we got the baby calf out of the cow house, the two pigs were ranging the plantations eating acorns, and one poor thing was killed, so also were many poor little duykers [sic — duikers] though there are some left. We got out from the study the leather Despatch box containing all His³ private money matters, our Debentures etc. two tin boxes containing Diocesan accounts and Church Council business (one of them in fact the box which I had prepared for the Church Council, another small box containing letters of His to Dean Williams⁴ etc, His big letter book with Zulu Affairs at one end and Horace at the other. His own interleaved copy of 1st. part of Digest, nearly the whole series of his Almanacs which he used as Diaries, his paper case with his

and my cheque books, his desk and chair, and cushion, and my account books, more or less burned, but that does not matter as Mr James⁵ has duplicates. From the drawing room His picture in oils, and Helen's in water colours, and the whole contents of the large middle table including all Mother's flowers (my collection), the King's⁶ Book and our Prayer book, the book of Addresses to Mother last year, Mother's old Bible and box of His old letters, photos of Him, of the King, and half a doz. little 'Eoceans' as Ekky⁷ calls her! and my bound copies of Langa, Matchana, and Natal Sermons, our last copy of the Humiliation Day Sermon. From Mother's room her old trinket box, pictures of Him and large mattress and blankets, from the dining room nearly every thing, as this was the last part which took fire, the table, leather chairs, old piano, Sophie's pictures of you, the Huguenots, Cardinal Wolsey, Mr Heale's birds, and the green dessert service. From the next room (Katie's) a chest of drawers and two mattresses and blankets, oh! I forgot the dining room bookshelf, including Shakespeare, Clarendon, Lyell, with the College arms, His name. The carriage too was saved (with a hole burnt in the seat), and now I've given you a pretty complete list. Mr Phipson was very kind and fetched over his little wagonette to drive Mother and Katie across to the Bonifants, who offered us two rooms for the night — as you may suppose, we did not have much sleep (we sent the horses to the barn here) and next morning Mr Phipson and I set off early to hunt for some money which I had had tied up ready to take to the Bank, we got it all but £3, also my watch, Dean Stanley's⁸ little tray (from study table) His seal, and spectacles, His rocking chair, which is iron and only needs a fresh covering. The other things are surely relics. The heat was so intense that the glass, windows, bottles, inkstands, everything is run together and twisted, the ashes in it showing how it was molten when they dropped on it. The walls stand a great deal better than I should have expected — you remember how we used to walk about on a windy night 'to hold the house up.' But it is rather a ghastly sight. The bare walls. Every scrap of wood gone, every door plate and window frame, and nothing visible in the heaped up ashes at the bottom of the foundations but a few tin boxes and numerous iron bedsteads twisted in all directions, as if they had been tortured to death. In the drawing room too are visible the remains, one — iron plate I suppose — of the poor dear piano, a little collection of springs marks the drawing room sofa while the mangled remains of a coffee pot and tray [are] where we drank our last cup of coffee. The study is of course still more grievous. Again the little heap of springs marks the sofa, crucibles and iron stands stick out from the ashes which lie in heaps — some parts two and three feet deep, and still red hot, (I set my dress on fire with them yesterday). These are still legible and are greatly prized by the relic hunters and sightseers, who are just now my daily care. They are many of them quite reverent and all well behaved when I am there, but I had to stop one from riding his horse up into the ruins, and they will go poking and scratching for themselves when it is quite hopeless for them to find anything unless I tell them where to look, and they don't know then what they've found till I tell them. Glass from the study window is a very favourite relic. Two photographers have been out so in due time you will see how terrible it looks. One of them lamented it as the 'Stratford on Avon of Natal.' Well! its only what Natal deserves, to lose it entirely, though I've done my best to avert the catastrophe. The very lawn, mowed a week before, and just beginning to show a tinge of green is burnt black, and the rose trees round it charred to the ground. The great gum tree will I think, recover, tho' somewhat scorched the orchard has to some extent escaped, some of the gum trees between the house and

stable will recover, others are charred, some burnt white by the blaze of the chapel, which just flared up and settled down in 15 minutes, the ground by it [as a result of] the way the wind blew the fire, i.e. towards the house, is *baked red*. So it is all along in front of the house. The font is shattered to atoms and the harmonium smashed. The type in the printing office was all running about molten the day after, fortunately there was not much in hand there. The old bell tree will recover. We sent off Emile and Eric with Frances, the next morning to Durban. Offers of house room have poured in on us, rooms at Govt. House, and . . . a room at Col. Mitchell's, Kenneth Hathorn's country house, Mrs Hulley's Mrs Barter's, Mrs Windham's, Mrs Robt. Acutt's, Mrs Pepworth's,⁹ but we have decided to remain for the present, here at the Farm. There is only a three roomed cottage, *tolerably* habitable, but there are other rooms needing flooring, whitewash, glass and doors, which will do to keep some of our salvage in, and there is the barn for the horses close to us, and we are *on the spot*. I go up daily and dig, and keep order and have found many little odds and ends my flint implement an ugly lump of bits of metal which was the plate chest etc. Tomorrow I am going to hold a meeting under the Bell Tree to warn the abantu against cutting the trees, while my last new friend Mr Blunderfield the butcher, has a thorough search for Frances' watch, and my dressing-case — that is for what little morsels of gold may represent it. I have asked Frances to send you a copy of a letter from Egner with our reply. I enclose a note from the Mayor to the papers. Mr James and I standing in the warm ashes agreed that it would be a great pity to let such good walls be destroyed by the rain and that the first thing to be done would be to have out a competent man to examine it, and give estimates. But this you see is *in mabibus* [sic] [*In manibus* = in hand].¹⁵ It will have to be done with Church funds — (I mean we can't do it,) and there are none — unless the income for this vacant year could be used for this purpose — I don't quite see why it should not, but this you see is only an idea of mine, and not, I fear, likely to bear more fruit than the idea of having Sir G.C. [Sir George Cox] as Bishop.¹¹ Meanwhile, — for the next few weeks at any rate, we mean to stay here, and though we have no room and little furniture, we are faring sumptuously, for as we've only an open fire place here, our friends keep sending us cooked provisions, and roast fowls, hams, eggs, and cake pour in till really we shall have to give a party!

There have been other terrible fires here, at Durban (by the bye, they declare that the ashes from Bishopstowe reached Durban) at Boston, at Kranskop [?] etc. I wonder if all these fires will have cleared the air and land, and so spare us the cholera or small pox or something.

The enemy are loud against Dean Williams. But I got a telegram today from Dr. Atherstone in reply to a note of mine. He says 'Charges will be entirely disproved, vestry and congregation unanimously forbid resignation, will publish unanswerable refutation. Congregation larger than for two years.'¹²

I have no Zulu news — can't have while the Passes Bill¹³ prevent their getting to me. Nor have we heard from Mr Grant¹⁴ again since I wrote to Mr Chesson. Please tell him this — say I could not write this mail — perhaps he will like to see this letter. Tell Sir G. Cox too about the Dean. I had just done up a parcel of Bishopstowe photos for him, to show him the house that ought to be his, and they have gone with the study table! Give our love to Uncle Charles too, and tell him all about us — and Mrs. Lyell,¹⁵ for I don't know when there will be time to write more.

Goodbye Dear Frank and Sophie,
from your loving sister,
H.E. Colenso

Poor dear Agnes was away in Durban, and had a sad 'coming home' next day — except that the first feeling was of relief that we were all alive.

Mrs Sarah Frances Colenso, widow of the Bishop added
Dear A's face when she arrived at the Bonifants, was the brightest and sweetest thing I have seen for a long while and none of our whole party mopes.

NOTES

1. The allusion is obscure, but Frances Ellen used the pseudonym 'Zandile' when she wrote her short novel called *Two Heroes*.
2. Probably refugees who moved to Bishopstowe after the 'eating-up' of Langalibalele.
3. The Colensos usually used a capital letter for the third person singular when referring to the Bishop, and did this even before his death.
4. Bishop Colenso and Harriette visited Grahamstown in October/November 1880 where Bishop Colenso conducted a confirmation for F. H. Williams, the Dean of the Cathedral of St George who was feuding with the Bishop of Grahamstown, Nathaniel Merrimen. The Dean succeeded in excluding Merrimen from the cathedral of St George, obliging him to found his own cathedral of St Michael.
5. W. H. James, a Church of England supporter, a member of the Building Committee of St Mary's and subsequently very involved in the running of St Mary's school.
6. An imperial blue book on Zulu affairs relating to the affairs of the Zulu king, Cetshwayo, entrusted to Bishop Colenso.
7. Eothen and Eric Colenso, grandchildren of Bishop Colenso.
8. A. P. Stanley, Dean of Westminster.
9. The list includes the wife of Charles Barter, a neighbour; the wife of the judge of the Native High Court and mother of the Windham sons who became civil servants in Natal and Zululand; and the wife of Robert Acutt, prominent businessman of Durban, churchwarden of St Paul's and member of the Church Council of the Church of England who supported Bishop Colenso as lawful bishop while deprecating his theological views. Kenneth Hathorn was the prominent Natal lawyer and later judge of the Supreme Court. He undertook legal work for the Colensos. Colonel Mitchell was presumably the subsequent Governor of Natal (1889–1893) when Harriette Colenso was in vehement controversy with officials over the fate of Dinuzulu then exiled at St Helena.
10. Harriette's Latin and her meaning in using the phrase are uncertain. The context suggests that she means 'in God's hands'. The walls were incorporated when, in about 1900, rebuilding made the old site inhabitable. The Colenso sisters lived there until evicted by the Church of the Province of South Africa in consequence of the Church Properties Act of 1910.
11. 'Sir' George Cox was elected bishop by the Church Council of the Church of England, but was never consecrated.
12. Dr W. G. Atherstone (1814–1898) member of a medical family of Grahamstown and a man of many talents and interests. Atherstone performed the first surgical operation under anaesthetic in South Africa and identified the diamond discovered at Hopetown in 1867. He was a staunch supporter and churchwarden of Dean Williams who, in August 1884, was awarded a derisory one shilling damages in a defamation case which he had brought. Atherstone wrote a pamphlet attempting to vindicate the Dean who refused to resign but died in 1885.
13. The Colensos dubbed legislation requiring Zulus to obtain passes on visiting Natal, 'The Colenso Extinction Bill'.
14. William Grant went to Zululand as unofficial agent to Cetshwayo with Colenso's blessing but he was subsequently criticized by the Colensos for his role in the alienation of Zululand to the 'Boers' of the New Republic.
15. Charles Bunyon and K. Lyell, brother and friend of Bishop Colenso's widow.