

'No recollections worth recording'

The 2/5th in Natal, 1863–64

Introduction

Between 23 April 1863 and 9 June 1864 the garrison of Fort Napier was maintained by the 2nd Battalion the 5th (Northumberland Fusiliers) Regiment of Foot. They also provided detachments at Durban, Lower Tugela, and Fort Buckingham. The Battalion had been previously stationed in Mauritius, and eventually departed for East London.¹

A series of articles under the title *With the colours of the 2nd Battalion*, signed simply 'JKS', appeared in 1883 in the very first issues of the *St George's Gazette*, the monthly journal of the Northumberland Fusiliers. These articles covered several overseas stations, but only those which relate to Natal are reproduced here.

Identifying 'JKS' has been something of a challenge. There are indications within the articles that the author was a junior officer. The list of officers of the 2/5th transferred to Natal from Mauritius shows no one with such initials. JKS says that he joined the 2/5th Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1857, and that he retired in about 1881 or 1882. He describes himself as one of two Fusilier officers detailed for six months to Fort Buckingham early in May 1863, and implies that one officer was subsequently withdrawn leaving only himself. However, the regimental records list only Lieutenant J.J. Robinson at Fort Buckingham.² The Natal Almanac of 1864 has Lieutenant W.F. Langbourne at Fort Buckingham, so we may assume it was he who replaced Lieutenant Robinson at the end of 1863. In a later instalment of his memoirs JKS indicated that he was part of a detachment of three Companies of 2/5th which went to St Helena in July 1866 and stayed there for some months. The official list of officers of this detachment shows no one with initials JKS, but once again includes Lieutenant J.J. Robinson. Lieutenant Robinson begins to look like a candidate for authorship of these articles. Then, finally, in his last Natal instalment, JKS gives the game away when writing of himself as *factotum* of the Regimental Theatre at Fort Napier. At least he does so if one is fortunate enough to come upon D.L. Schauffer's thesis on the Pietermaritzburg theatre.³ Schauffer categorically identifies our author:

... the Regimental Amateurs of the 5th Fusiliers were well organised as a group and well versed in the management of Repertory theatre. The Manager was Lieut. Robinson "whom rumour invests with an already established dramatic celebrity."

This attribution can then be verified from the records of the Northumberland Fusiliers. Shortly after the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny it was decided to add second battalions to twenty-six regiments of the line, and as part of this process, the Second Battalion, Fifth Regiment, the Northumberland Fusiliers was raised in Newcastle in October 1857. On 23 October 1857 Lieutenant John James Robinson was appointed to the new battalion, transferring from the 31st, the Huntingdonshire Regiment. He served until 13 April 1881, then retired with the honorary rank of major. These dates correspond with those which JKS gives for his period of service with the 2/5th.

JKS's, or Lieutenant Robinson's reminiscences of his period of service in Natal appeared in the *St George's Gazette* between August and December 1883. They were kindly made available to me by the Curator of the Fusiliers Museum of Northumberland, Captain P.H.D. Marr, who also gave me much general help in relation to the Natal service of the 2/5th, and on Lt Robinson.

About the end of March, 1863, we got our orders for Natal and East London, the Head Quarters and five Companies being told off to the former, and the remainder of the Battalion to the Kaffrarian seaports.

Early in April the *Himalaya* came to carry us to our respective destinations, bringing with her the 2nd Battalion 13th Light Infantry as a relief; and on or about the 9th of the month we steamed out of Port Louis harbour, leaving behind us many kind friends and pleasant memories.

Our voyage to Natal was not an eventful one, the weather being splendid and the passage rapid. The *Himalaya* was then the finest and fastest transport in Her Majesty's service, but unfortunately commanded by a gentleman who did not do all he might have done to make things go smoothly. His mania was to find fault with every man — officer, non-commissioned officer, or private — who wore a red coat, and he carried this out so effectually as to take a great deal away from the pleasure of the trip. Nevertheless the journey was a pleasant one, the ship being beautifully clean and comfortable and the messing excellent, forming as strong a contrast to what we were treated to on board the wretched tub that brought us out [to Mauritius] as it is possible to imagine.

We landed at Durban or Port Natal on St George's day [23 April], and for once in my regimental life I was without a rose in my cap. I was not singular in this respect, as I doubt if anyone in the Battalion differed from me, but the want of the time-honoured old badge was depressing, and it was without surprise that I found myself in company with the Band and some others stuck on the bar of the harbour in an open flat boat. There we lay for hours, 'hot, thirsty, sick and sorry we'd come,' and here I will leave you, and what I have to say of the best quarter I was ever in, till my next letter.

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I do not know whether I am singular in thinking that pleasant quarters impress you less forcibly than disagreeable ones. Now I never spent three happier years anywhere than those I passed in South Africa, and yet I find it very difficult to commence an account of that time. I suppose the difficulty lies either in the fact that I am a firm grumbler, and having nothing to growl at, have nothing to write about, or that I have not the power of putting down my recollections on paper, or, to advance a third conjecture, I have no recollections worth recording. And yet I might be able to write pages of my experiences there, for a more complete change of life than from the Mauritius, or any other quarter I had been in, to Natal it would be difficult to imagine.

My first impressions of the place were not, however, so very favourable. As I mentioned in my last letter, I was stranded in a surfboat on the Bar of the river for several hours, under a burning sun, and with nothing to drink, and when we at last landed I fondly hoped both to quench my thirst and rest myself. But it was not to be. The camp that I foolishly imagined was within a stone's throw of the quay, lay a good three miles off, and the road to it was simply awful. No number of big, big D's that I can put down, or that you would print, can describe it, and I must borrow from the 'Pinkun' the word 'bally,' the only one I know of that will convey any idea of its peculiarities. That night and one or two more we remained in camp in Durban enjoying ourselves greatly. The climate and scenery were both new and delightful, and the hotel at which we messed homely and comfortable. The one thing I can remember taking objection to was the extreme friendliness of a snake that insisted on sharing my bed, and caused me to arouse all my neighbours by the horrified yell I gave when I discovered its presence. I had another contretemps, too, now that I think

of it, but that had nothing to do with the place. 'Big Jacko', one of the numerous monkeys that accompanied the Battalion, got at my portmanteau, and emptied a bottle of red ink over my shirts. I suppose he thought it was something good to drink, and to punish me for disappointing him he spoiled my linen. I forget how many days our march up to Pietermaritzburg occupied, but I think it must have been about on the fifth day that we arrived there. We followed the Indian custom of striking camp long before daylight and arriving at our halting place before noon; but so early a start was scarcely necessary as the winter was setting in, and the early morning was rather trying for us who had come from a country where cold is unknown. I remember seeing the leading cornet player in the band, one Jonathan Cunliffe, deliberately putting his instrument on the top of a lot of burning timbers so as to have it nice and hot when he commenced to play on it, and from the feeling of my fingers on that particular morning I did not feel disposed to blame him. Apart from the cold, and it from its novelty troubled us but little, there was nothing to complain of, and we all marched in to our new quarters in excellent health and spirits. At the time I write of, Pietermaritzburg was but a small place with a Fort, Government House, Cathedral, about a dozen other public buildings, and at most by (*sic*) a couple of hundred houses and shops. It was surrounded by hills, very well watered and healthy.

The Fort where all the troops were quartered lay on the top of a moderately steep hill commanding the town, and accommodation for the headquarters and about three companies of an Infantry Regiment, for a troop of Cavalry, and for the third of a Battery of Mounted Artillery. This latter branch of the service was quite peculiar to the Cape. The Battery in question [was] actually a garrison one, but equipped in every respect (uniform excepted) as a Battery of Horse Artillery. The mess was in the Fort, but there were no officers' quarters there, and we consequently drew lodging money and lived in the town. There was no great disadvantage in this, except in very bad weather, as we were all mounted, and rode to and from barracks for our meals and duties.

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The Colonial allowance for the officers of all ranks was three shillings a day with rations and forage for a bat horse. The field and mounted staff officers of the regiment drew the regulation allowances for their chargers in addition, together with certain other payments, the nature and amount of which I cannot remember. Although we, in the junior ranks, were very fairly treated and, the dear prices of most things considered, twice as well off as we were in our last quarters.

I only remained a week at headquarters, and then went up with my company (No.9) to Fort Buckingham, an outpost on the Upper Tugela, some 78 miles distant.

Our march up was uneventful, one or two of us got knocked up with rheumatism from not being sufficiently warmly dressed and that was about all that went wrong. I was not a little surprised when we arrived at our destination to find how very peculiarly the fort was situated.

It was perched on the side of a 'kloof' or ravine commanding nothing but a small spring of water, and being itself commanded on every side. Who put it there I never was able to find out, probably some highly-educated individual who has since blossomed into an Army Reformer or a War Office official. In addition to our men the little garrison consisted of half a troop of the Cape Mounted Rifles and a Sapper, and we counted altogether four officers, namely, two Fusiliers, one subaltern in charge of the C.M.R., and an assistant surgeon. The two latter were married, living some little distance off in pretty bungalows that they had built themselves, whilst my comrade and I lived in a very ramshackle old wattle and daub hut in the fort. For the



2nd Battⁿ 5th Fusiliers

Handwritten list of names in cursive script, including names like 'Robinson' and 'Robinson'.

Officers of the 2nd Battalion 5th Fusiliers 1860/61. The photograph was taken in Mauritius, and most of these officers came with the regiment to Natal. Though Lieutenant Robinson's name appears in the handwritten caption, it is difficult to identify him with certainty.

(Photograph by courtesy of Northumberland Fusiliers Regimental Archives)

short time I spent there I found it a very pleasant station, but I very much doubt if I should have cared to have stopped on much longer than I did. I am not a sportsman, and the main attraction of the place was the good shooting. Beyond that and taking riding and walking exercise there was nothing to do, and when I came to be left alone, after the gradual removal of all the other officers, I longed to be back again with the battalion. Luckily I had not to wait for the realization of my wishes for I was relieved before my time there (six months) was up, and by one who was just as enthusiastic for sport as I was indifferent to it. The march back differed little from the one up, except that we were all in better health and condition, and that we accomplished it in much less time and without a single man falling out or going sick. I have said that the distance was about 78 miles, and as we started late on a Tuesday afternoon and arrived at the Fort on Friday at about 3 p.m., we cannot be said to have done badly.

The summer weather was just then commencing, but the heat gave us little or no trouble as it lasted during part of the day only. As a rule the sun commenced to be felt at about four, and the heat went on increasing till about three or four p.m., when we almost invariably got a thunderstorm accompanied with heavy rain. This passed over in an hour or two, and the air after that, and till the following morning, was as fresh and pleasant as could be wished. Of course there were some hot nights, but they were few and far between, and the day I have just described may be taken as a pretty fair specimen of the weather during the hot season at Natal.

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Not long after my return from Fort Buckingham we commenced to build a Regimental Theatre. A plot of ground close to the Parade was granted for the purpose, and I and several others set to work at it with the greatest enthusiasm. From the time the ground was laid out to our final performance only six or at the most seven weeks elapsed, and as we did every bit of the work in the regiment, work that included scenery, costumes, upholstery, and decorations, it will be seen that our enthusiasm never grew very slack. When completed the theatre held about five hundred people, of whom seventy-two were accommodated in the stalls, sixty in the second seats, and the remainder in the gallery. We opened with two pieces, viz., a farce called 'Done on both sides,' and a comic drama in two acts 'Take that Girl away,' and that we succeeded in pleasing the public was shown by the fact that we acted to crowded houses for the seventeen performances we gave, and that during that time we had only three vacant seats in the stalls, seats for which we charged five shillings. Had we stopped longer in the Colony our venture would have been a great financial success; as it was, after starting with a debt of over £450 we lost nothing, and brought away a lot of valuable costumes and properties and an excellent theatrical library. Our principal performers were Dr Close, Captain Mason, Mr (now Major) Vincent, Mr Taubman, Captain Harford, C.M.R., poor young George Shepstone⁴, the Colonial Secretary's son who was killed at Isandula (*sic*), Private Williams, Private Burke, Sergeant Hawkins, and the writer of this article. The two Privates were exceptionally good comedians, better by far than many professionals of good standing in the London theatres, and as good-natured and free from conceit as they were clever. It was good fun whilst it lasted, owing a great deal to the hearty support the public, headed by the Lieutenant-Governor, Mr Scott, gave us, and partly also to the ability and cheerfulness of the actors. A subject on which I can speak with some authority as I fulfilled the duties of Stage Manager, Acting Manager, and Treasurer.

The order to leave Natal for Kaffraria came for us quite unexpectedly some time in June or July, and a most unwelcome order it was, as we were all very well contented where we were and in no hurry to move to a quarter where the Colonial allowance

was smaller and British soldiers were more numerous and consequently less appreciated. Our march down to Durban was not a very cheery one, and our spirits were not raised by the treatment and accommodation afforded to us on board *H.M.S. Valorous*. Discipline and order are, I grant, more important on board a Man of War than almost anywhere else, but I maintain that both could have been carried out to perfection without one being forbidden to sit down whilst on deck. It is all very fine for a bold mariner to swagger up and down there and sniff the invigorating sea air whilst the vessel is plunging and rolling, but it does not come so easy to the soldier, especially when his 'stummick' happens to be in an advanced state of mutiny. There was no room for us in the ward-room and no berths to lie down in as we slept in hammocks, so we were not sorry when our short voyage was over and our feet were once more on dry land at East London. Of that place and of Kaffraria generally, I may say here that except in the matter of Colonial pay (1s 6d a day instead of 3s) and of society, it differed very little from Natal, and that when I left it some few years afterwards I did so with great regret.

NOTES

1. A summary of the service of the 2/5th in South Africa is given in H.M. Walker, 1919, *A History of the Northumberland Fusiliers 1674-1902*, pp.400-401. Details of the movements of the Regiment and its various detachments, with names of the officers involved, can be found in the (undated) *History of the Second Battalion, the Fifth or Northumberland Fusiliers, 1857-1911*. For the Natal period see pp.6-11; for J.J. Robinson's service with the regiment see pp.2 and 41.
2. Fort Buckingham is situated some 35km NE of Greytown. Begun in 1861, it had fallen into disrepair by 1870, but became the base for Durnford's No.2 Column in the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879.
3. The detailed story of the Garrison Theatre can be found in D.L. Schaffer's University of Natal doctoral thesis of 1978: *The Establishment of a Theatrical Tradition in Pietermaritzburg, prior to the opening of the first Civilian Playhouse*. The theatrical productions of the Northumberland Fusiliers appear on pp.143-176. Hattersley also has a brief comment on the regimental theatre: 'St George's Theatre, at Fort Napier, Pietermaritzburg, a large room within the cantonments, completed in 1864, was the first house built for purposes of theatrical entertainment . . . The garrison theatre was . . . Used for amateur performances by the officers' mess, and for little besides'. (Alan F. Hattersley, 1940, *Portrait of a Colony*, pp.140-141.)
4. George Shepstone would have been only 15 years old at the time of his appearance in these productions. His name is not given in the published programme for any of these performances, so he must have appeared under a pseudonym, possibly that of Mr Swan, who appeared as a page in one production. Robinson incorrectly refers to George's father as the 'Colonial Secretary'. Theophilus Shepstone was at that time Secretary for Native Affairs in the colony.

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