

A boy and a waterfall

Natalia here republishes an edited version of two articles written by
Natal Witness editor John Conyngham, about the Gordon Falls.

In the grounds of Hilton College there are two memorials to Guy ‘Dido’ Falcon. One is a drinking fountain near the classrooms which bears a brief inscription: In loving remembrance of a Hilton boy, erected by his mother. The other is a brass plaque in the dining hall, mellowed now by years of burnishing, that hints at how, one fateful Saturday in 1922, he fell to his death over the Gordon Falls.

For the past 80 years, both memorials have been familiar to generations of boys who have passed through the school. Yet invariably the question is asked: where are the Gordon Falls? Over the decades no amount of enquiry has produced a location but late in 2001, quite by chance, a fleeting reference in a book revived the search.

Jolyon Nuttall – onetime manager of the *Daily News*, and twin brother of Michael, former bishop of Natal – has published a memoir* about the literary friendship between his father Neville and Alan Paton. In the book, a quote from Neville Nuttall’s diary, dated Sunday, February 24, 1924, states: ‘On Thursday, Alan and I had another trip to the Gordon Falls – almost exactly a year since we last went there.’ No more is said about the place where, two years earlier, young ‘Dido’ Falcon had fallen to his death.

But who was Guy ‘Dido’ Falcon? He was the 14-year-old son of William Falcon, headmaster of Hilton College, and a pupil at the school.

William Falcon was a man of many parts. He had been a classics scholar and sportsman at Cambridge, a member of Lord Milner’s Kindergarten, and was an experienced schoolmaster, but he also had a great interest in natural history, specifically terrestrial molluscs (land snails). And, fatefully, as it turned out, he had passed on this love of nature to his son Dido who was a passionate butterfly collector.

And so it was on an expedition to find specimens that the two of them, accompanied by a number of schoolboys, set out early on the morning of February 26, 1922 for the Gordon Falls.

For what happened next we must turn to a letter written by one of the party, 13-year-old Bowen II, to his parents**. It is dated two days after the tragedy and describes the falls as being about 12 miles (19 kilometres) away from the school. It also says that, from top to bottom, the falls were divided into three ‘drops’ of about 30, 80 and 40 feet respectively.

The party left early in the morning and travelled part of the way by car and on foot,

**A Literary Friendship* by Jolyon Nuttall – The Valley Trust, Cape Town 2001.

***Lift up your Hearts* by Neville Nuttall – The Hiltonian Society 1971.



A long-range aerial shot showing the Gordon Falls nestling in their defile beneath the Swartkop massif.

reaching their destination in time for a camp breakfast before breaking up and heading off in different directions. Bowen spent about an hour searching for shells for the headmaster before joining up with Dido at the top of the bottom falls. He said that he then suggested going down for lunch but Dido replied that he wanted to catch just one more butterfly.

Minutes later, as Bowen was descending to the bottom of the falls, he 'heard a terrible crash, as though someone had thrown a big stone into a pool of water'. He thought nothing of it until he heard the headmaster being told that Dido had fallen over the falls.

Bowen then rushed down through the undergrowth until he could 'see poor Dido lying on his back between two jagged rocks, with his head hanging over the rock, shaking about'. When he finally reached his stricken friend and lifted his head, he discovered that Dido was already unconscious. He had a deep gash in his skull and his eyes appeared to be protruding from their sockets.

Bowen goes on to tell his parents about how Dido was carried to the car, placed across his father's lap on the back seat, and then driven back to the school sanatorium where he was dead on arrival.

'I can't write any more because my hand is getting shaky. I will try to write a little more. We then got changed and had prayers and went to bed. I don't think that I slept an hour during the whole night.'

Nevertheless, Bowen writes briefly about the funeral in the school cemetery the following day, recounting how the minister, the Reverend Griffith Jeudwine of the parish of Kirby-Hilton, recited the 23rd Psalm, how the cadets fired three volleys over the coffin, and how he, Bowen II, was given two bouquets of flowers to place on the grave.

Intrigued by the reference in Neville Nuttall's diary, several *Witness* staffers undertook to locate the mysterious falls.

First, someone contacted an elderly member of the Rambler's Club who recollected visiting them long ago on the Edendale valley side of Swartkop, the landmark mountain between Sweetwaters and Cedara.

Next, someone mentioned the name of a Johannesburg gunsmith, who happens to be compiling a register of the waterfalls in KwaZulu-Natal, and who had once unsuccessfully attempted to reach the falls. He confirmed the general whereabouts, as did the article in *The Natal Witness* that had reported the tragedy. It spoke of how Dido's 'whole-hearted devotion to Nature' had led to the fatal accident at 'the Gordon Falls near Edendale'.

A map in the Natal Society Library's cartographic collection, drawn up in 1897 by a Captain C.B. FitzHenry of the 7th Hussars, added another piece to the jigsaw with its reference to a headland called the Gordon Spur in the vicinity of present-day KwaBanjwa and Smero. Marked to the east of the headland was a river called the Skinsdale Spruit with an unnamed waterfall indicated in a wooded gully.

A further clue came from a map in the Surveyor-General's office in Pietermaritzburg on which the sites of waterfalls were pinpointed on the western watershed of Swartkop mountain. While there was no mention of the Gordon Spur or even a waterfall, the topographic features indicated the location of both, although the river was called the Mabane.

Given the relative inaccessibility of the area, the logical next step was an aerial reconnaissance. Thanks to the generosity of a member of the Pietermaritzburg Aero

Club, a flight was arranged for one Saturday morning.

No sooner had the plane risen from the Oribi tarmac than it was banked westwards up the Edendale valley. Far below, the Umsunduzi River wandered through the foothills. As it had rained several days before, the tumble of the Georgetown Falls and the expanse of Henley Dam were easily discernible.

Guided by the Surveyor General's map, the pilot swung northwards from Georgetown and up a tributary towards the distant bulk of Swartkop. The densely populated valley soon gave way to rural uplands with scattered homesteads and herds of cattle grazing on the hillsides. After swooping low across a plateau, the plane rose up and over a headland and then descended into the adjoining valley. There, nestled in a forested cleft, with its height foreshortened from above, was a waterfall with the telltale three 'drops' that Bowen II had described so many years before.

As the inscription on the old brass plaque in the Hilton College dining room commemorates, far below was clearly the place where, on the morning of February 26, 1922, young Guy 'Dido' Falcon, 'with laughter on his lips and innocence in his heart, chased a butterfly over the Gordon Falls and into eternity'.

John Conyngham appended a footnote to the article asking for further information and several people wrote in to the *Witness*.

Among them was Natal Museum malacologist Dai Herbert. Although not a scientist himself, 'Dido's' father, William Falcon, was an avid collector of molluscs (land snails), and on his death his collection had been donated to the museum. Herbert had long wondered about the whereabouts of the Gordon Falls as they are frequently listed as the place where various snails were found.

Another letter writer, Rob Guy of Underberg, remembered hiking from Blackridge to the falls in about 1944. He also raised the surmise that they may have been named after a Major George Hamilton Gordon of the Royal Engineers who was a watercolourist and had been stationed at Fort Napier in the 1860s. Thanks to this lead and the staff at the Pietermaritzburg Archives, watercolours of the falls have been found, strengthening the theory that they were named after him.

Someone else with a link to the Falcon drama is Pietermaritzburg resident Colleen Williams. Her father, Robert Bowen, was the 13-year-old Bowen II who had been one of the group of schoolboys at the Gordon Falls that fateful Saturday morning who wrote about it in the letter quoted above. His twin brother Humphrey – Bowen I – had been at the top of the third 'drop' of the waterfall and had seen Falcon plunge headlong over it. While this happened, Robert Bowen had been on his way down through the undergrowth and was consequently the first person to reach the mortally injured Dido on the jagged rocks beneath.

Williams says that in February 1967, almost exactly 45 years after the incident, her father Robert Bowen, then a Bantu Affairs Commissioner in Pietermaritzburg, made a pilgrimage to the Gordon Falls. While at the place where his friend Dido had died, Bowen took a number of photographs. One shows Swartkop and the cleft of natural bush where the falls are located. Others show the place where Dido slipped on the wet stone and the rock on which he landed.

In yet another letter, Jolyon Nuttall from Cape Town, whose memoir about his father Neville and Alan Paton had been the catalyst that started the research, quotes a memorable description from this father's diary after a visit to the falls on Saturday,

February 24, 1923, almost exactly a year after Falcon's death.

'We had a fine day yesterday. Left at 6.30 am and arrived at 10 – after a great deal of climbing over hillsides and tramping through bush – at one of the loveliest places I ever saw. A deep, thickly-wooded valley – quite a big stream – tumbling over falls – and rushing down in one glorious cascade after another. The sort of thing one sees sometimes in bioscope films of Canada but hardly credits. But this was it – Alan and I alone here – and with a thousand sounds and scents around and the stream and those cascades.

'We sat on shaded rocks in the middle of the stream and ate lunch with relish and talked. Walked back in the afternoon after a splendid day – another rosy bead in my chain of memories.'

Another lyrical reminiscence about the falls was written by Eunice Walls of Plettenberg Bay. Now in her mid-seventies, she used as a girl to stay with an aunt and her family on a farm in the Plessislaer area. She remembers a highlight of those holidays being the expeditions to the Gordon Falls.

The party would inevitably set out at dawn and only reach their destination after an arduous trek across the hills. 'In the lush cool surrounds at the base of the falls, we rested, drank tea and started eating our haversack rations. Once [we had] cooled down, we changed into swimsuits and cavorted in the cool, deep pool at the bottom of the falls. We would edge along the rocks until we were behind the spilling curtain of water, thrilled to be in a whooshing, hidden-from-the-world place.

'Later, lying on the sun-dappled rocks, we would warm up, finish our rations and, too soon, have to change back into our clothes to start the long walk home'

Why do the falls appear to have 'vanished' in recent years? Perhaps the reason is because of apartheid – their location in the vicinity of present-day KwaBanjwa and Smero made them inaccessible as a picnic destination for white hikers. Furthermore, a colonial name seems linked to a past era because the people who now live around the falls refer to them differently.

But so memorable were her visits to that particular landmark that Walls – like many other people – has carried them with her ever since. 'Throughout my adult life the enchantment of the hidden Gordon Falls has sustained me and, in fantasy, I am often transported back to that most magical place.'

JOHN CONYNGHAM