

Ruined by a flood—a disastrous flooding of the Mngeni River in 1856

*(Reprinted from My African Home; or Bush Life in Natal (1852–7)
by Eliza Whigham Feilden. London, 1887.)*

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This extract about Natal's 1856 Flood¹ is compiled from the letters and diaries of Eliza Whigham Feilden (1810–1888), originally published in 1887². She was the daughter of James Kennedy of Knocknalling, Kirkcudbrightshire, and married John Leyland Feilden in 1851 in England. He was the youngest son of Sir William Feilden of Feniscowles Hall, near Blackburn, Lancashire, a wealthy cotton manufacturer and one-time MP for Blackburn. Leyland, as he was known, arrived in Natal as a Byrne emigrant in May 1850. However, in the same month, his father died and once the news had reached Natal he returned to England (date unknown, but he was certainly there by early 1851).

He and Eliza arrived in Natal on 4 May 1852 and took up residence in Durban. Feilden's main purpose in coming to the Colony in the first place had been to promote cotton-planting and export. The *Natal Times* reported on 9 June that he had taken over the landing, shipping and customs agency of one John Newton, and in the following October it was announced that he had also purchased George Christopher Cato's business as landing and shipping agent.

In the meantime he was also developing his farm *Feniscowles*³ 'on the Berea'. On 19 June 1852 a notarial agreement was made whereby Alexander Smith (1818–1893) and his family would work for the Feildens, Alexander as 'general superintendent' of *Feniscowles*, his wife Charlotte as housekeeper, and the children as cotton-pickers. At the same time Feilden & Co.⁴ advertised they would receive cotton for ginning and packing for export, and would shortly offer facilities for the cultivation and shipment of cotton on a large scale, while in November the firm announced it would also pack wool and pay cash for same. November was also the month that Leyland and Eliza moved to *Feniscowles*.

Cotton proved unsuccessful in Natal, one of the reasons being that the bolls did not mature at one time, leading to harvesting problems. By early 1853 Feilden's emphasis had changed to sugar⁵. He purchased leases of lots on Milner Bros' *Springfield* on the Durban side of the Umgeni River, and by October 1854 had 60 acres under cane. The

first auction of Natal-made sugar (eight tons) took place on Durban's Market Square on 23 June 1855. This was manufactured from Feilden's cane.

In October 1855 Feilden and six other *Springfield* tenants entered into an agreement with Milner Bros and their partner J.B. Miller, whereby the latter two would assign them the abandoned leases of three other tenants, and that their own leases would be extended for a further five years. It was also agreed that the mill, the machinery and the rest of the farm (making 1 223 acres in all) would be leased to the seven for 13 ½ years from 15 November 1855, and that for the 'improved' running of the mill they be enabled to obtain better machinery, etc., by raising a loan of £1 000 for two years on the security of *Springfield*. The Milners and Miller engaged to mortgage the farm for that amount.

Feilden was able to write in January 1856 that his *Springfield* plantation 'was in beautiful order; 130 acres of cane in different stages of growth'. He wrote to his mother in March that he expected to crush between 50 and 60 acres this season (about 100 tons of sugar) and with the ruling price being £50 he should get £5 000. He remarked that it looked well on paper, but he feared it was 'too good to be realised'.

Disaster struck in April, when about 690mm (27 inches) of rain fell in the Durban area in three days (14th–16th).

About eight months later, in a letter home, Eliza wrote that she was worried about *Springfield* (i.e. what had come to be known as the Springfield Sugar Co.)—it was 'too large for its means to carry on'. The flood was the main reason because the crops destroyed had been counted on to pay their expenses. Despite this, in April Leyland concluded a 10-year lease on four more *Springfield* lots (88 acres). At about this time Eliza wrote, 'The sugar estate looks well this year, as if it would redeem itself'.

However, by the end of July the decision had been made to visit England. At this stage it was uncertain whether they would return or not. When recording this, Eliza wrote that the *Springfield* shareholders had 'voted' that Feilden 'had been hardly dealt with', and wished to give him a ton of sugar to sell in London. He declined, 'but the offer comforted him'.

On 3 August Feilden gave his power of attorney to A.W. Evans to dispose of his farms *Feniscowles*, *Zee Koe Valle* and *Richmond*. On the following day the Feildens sailed for England.

Milner Bros sued for the balance of rent owing on *Springfield* from the Springfield Sugar Co. in December 1858 and demanded that the partners return possession of the farm. The case was not defended. In February 1860 Evans assigned Leyland's lease and his interest in the co-partnership to George Potter⁶, and on 11 April the lease between the Milners and Miller and the Springfield Sugar Co. was cancelled, and redrawn in favour of Potter.

The Feildens never returned to the Colony. Besides their flood losses, another factor in their decision was the Natal Government's offering settlers farms quit-rent⁷ in 1857–1858, which led to the serious depreciation in the value of Feilden's landed property.

Feilden, a man with wealthy connections, but young and inexperienced, arrived in the Colony, 'ready for the plucking'. From the first he was taken advantage of by the unscrupulous. Mrs Feilden wrote soon after they had landed that one of their first tasks was to examine the state of their affairs, left in the hands of agents. 'A nest of confusion, fraud, and neglect came to light'. She confessed that she did not know which proved



VIEW FROM OUR HOUSE AT DURBAN, NATAL.

The Feilden house was in what is now Stellawood Cemetery

worse, ‘the men who got us into trouble, or those who pretended to get us out. Between them we were half ruined’. An example of the wily business practice he was subject to can be found in Henry Milner’s⁸ machinations. Feilden estimated his 1855 cane could produce £1 100 or more. However, his agreement with the Milners stipulated that Henry receive one third of the processed sugar and all the molasses. Consequently Milner made sugar out of a small proportion of the crop, which yielded only £480, and rendered the rest into syrup, which he then reboiled, making it into what he called ‘molasses sugar’, clearing an extra £600, with Feilden receiving, after transport costs, only about £300, instead of more than £700.

In her December 1856 – January 1857 letter Mrs Feilden stated that the flood had ‘proved...more disastrous...than we first counted upon. It has completely upset us, and will bring us near to beggary...for not alone the hand of God has been laid heavily upon us, but also the hands of unprincipled worldly men’.

A person of great energy, Feilden possibly over-extended himself. Nearly a year after the flood Eliza reported to her mother that Leyland was looking ‘haggard and careworn’, owing perhaps to his having ‘too many irons to attend to at once’. This is unsurprising, what with superintending two farms, one at the very southern extremes of the Durban borough (i.e. the Umbilo river) and the other at the town’s northern boundary (the Umgeni river), the affairs of the Springfield Sugar Co., his landing-agency and the oversight of both his and his brother Montague’s farms at Richmond.

Sources dating to 1882 and 1886 show Burwash in Sussex as the Feilden residence. After Eliza’s death, Leyland remarried in 1894. He was living at Newent in Gloucestershire in 1910, and died there five years later.

Feniscowles remained in the Feilden family until 1930. Feniscowles Road (which Feilden had created as a shorter route into Durban than the original access track) and Feilden Drive, skirting the cemetery, are reminders of the Feildens.

NOTES

1. For more on this flood see the article by Pam Barnes in *Natalia* 14, 1984 pp. 33–41.
2. Reprinted in Durban in 1973 by T.W. Griggs.
3. Part of *Sea View*, bordering Durban's Townlands, the boundary running along the top of the Berea ridge. Today it is the suburb of Carrington Heights, while a portion of it is in Stellawood Cemetery (the Durban Corporation having purchased part to extend the cemetery). The Feilden house was in what is now the cemetery.
4. Presumably comprising Leyland and his elder brother Montague Joseph, whose Natal connections predated Leyland's emigration, but who does not appear ever to have come to the Colony.
5. Sugar was one of his crops on *Feniscowles*. Alexander Smith had planted their first cane at the end of 1850 or early 1851. That it flourished led to Feildens importing 3 000 canes from Mauritius to acclimatise and then sell. However, it was found that the settlers were too poor to buy them.
6. A partner in the Springfield Sugar Co.
7. For a small rate per acre, paid annually for 30 years, by which time the land would become freehold.
8. One of the three Milner brothers.

SHELAGH SPENCER

April 17th, 1856. A fearful flood has half-ruined the sugar planter on the coast. One week ago, gentlemen were riding over the plantations to see if the canes could really be so fine as represented, and all returned with great hopes for the progress of the colony. We were rejoicing in the tons of sugar our canes were to produce in a very few weeks. All looked fair and beautiful and after so much toil and outlay, it seemed only reasonable to begin to count on the profits. Alas for our hopes! The river Umgeni rose so rapidly and so high that the whole country in its neighbourhood became a lake. Twenty or thirty feet of water covered many of the plantations. I am told that several islands, one above 100 yards long, floated over my husband's sugar canes. My husband and brother rode over to Springfield to see the wreck of last year's hopes, when on the point of realisation. Each got a fall by the horse's legs sinking in holes, the ground giving way under their feet. Neither were hurt, and today, the waters having subsided, they wish me to accompany them to see all the wonders of the flood at Springfield.

I was soon equipped for the ride, and a ruinous sight we went to see. We had steep, slippery bits of road to go down or up, and I felt my brows knitted a good deal as I held my hand pretty firm on the bridle to be ready to hold the horse up in some of the worst steps. As we arrived in sight of Springfield Flat, we stopped to overlook. The flood had greatly gone down, and most of our cane was there, leaning over its roots, weighted down by the water and sand that had been washed over it. A man came up to us and told us that Spearman's¹ cane, below ours, was all washed away, with another man's stock and half of his oat forage. Poor men, I felt very sorry. One cane of Spearman's was washed uphill into Mrs Smith's² garden. This has been given for me to eat at my leisure at home; it is a remarkably fine cane, very heavy and large.

When Smith was going to bed the first night of the rain, he said to his wife, 'I don't feel quite easy about that horse of Mr Feilden's, I think I'll go and bring it up to the house-stable tonight.' He did so and in the morning the river was above the roof of the poor animal's shed, and a barrel of tar had been washed away. The horse was saved. The Flat for some days was a lake, and then it sank to a swamp, with the course of the great river tracked in water through its midst.

After looking for a little, we rode on, but presently had to dismount, and lead our horses down to Smith's house, which has only suffered from damp. Here we had some

tea and bread and butter, and then it was decided to go across the upper bank or fields to the mill. This was the worst of our ride; neither I nor the mare liked it through the wet, boggy grass. The mill looked a wreck; I do not wonder at the first, exaggerated reports. The facts were bad enough, for the water had got inside and had loosened the great sugar pans from their place, and everything had been floating.

We were told that an elephant had been carried down the stream, bellowing all the way; ducks, fowls and pumpkins were all afloat. Mr Benningfield had lost 100 cattle; the Umgeni rose from sixty to seventy feet. The four great sugar pans—all united, I think—while floating could be moved by the touch of a Caffre's hand; when I saw them they were moving *one* with a pulley and six or eight men, without the aid of water. Most fortunately there was no sugar in the mill. Poor Smith was very dull about it. This cane had been his pride; he planted and watched it as if it were his own. May so good a servant be long preserved to us. We returned home by a cross-cut over the grass, and found it as good as the longer road for the time. There were deep ruts and holes in the new road made by the soldiers, which quite spoiled it.

The effects of this sad flood were greater and worse than we at all anticipated, and finally drove us out of Natal. This most unfortunate storm was nearly as destructive further inland. We heard later on that, on Captain Stephenson's³ farm, the hailstones were as large as pigeon's eggs, and that they killed 240 sheep running on Mr. De Koc's [*sic*] farm. This gentleman with his wife dined with us a few days after the flood; he then knew nothing of his own misfortune, the swollen rivers having made it impossible to cross them. One family, to escape being drowned in their house, climbed into the loft under the roof, and lived there upon beans and Indian corn for two or three days till their signals were seen by a gentleman⁴, who made a raft and brought them all away.

Some weeks later (June 8th) my husband sent the following account of the flood in a letter to England:

'This flood has been a sad disaster; the mortality among cattle and horses has nearly ruined us all; I have only about thirty-three oxen left out of all my cattle and have lost four horses. My loss by the flood alone is estimated at £2 000, which, coming upon other losses, has crippled and disheartened me.

'Could you have witnessed the flood sweeping over all our magnificent cane-fields, you would almost have despaired; but it was a grand sight. The whole vale of the Umgeni was one sheet of water, rushing on to the sea in an impetuous torrent, carrying everything before it in its headlong course. Trees, houses, islands and an enormous hippopotamus were borne along within a few feet of the mill, in which the water rose nine feet, destroying the work of many days, breaking down the batteries and turning the inside of the place into a complete wreck, sweeping off 300 loads of fuel, implements, carts, wagons, cattle and everything within its reach. The water rose from sixty to seventy feet and was truly a magnificent sight, though a sad one. Durban had a very narrow escape from being washed into the ocean. Fortunately the sandbar at the mouth of the river burst, and in one hour the water sank four feet.

'We had nearly got all things in readiness to commence crushing in May; I should have had about 120 tons of sugar for market by Christmas. You may imagine my feelings, when so much depended on my sugar crop; that gone, and I was ruined. At one time I did not expect to see a cane left. The first report I heard was in Durban, that the mill

was washed away and all the cane carried out to sea. The back beach was a wonderful sight, covered with the carcasses of oxen, bucks, poultry, etc. etc.

‘I rode out at once to Springfield with my brother-in-law.⁵ We pulled up our horses on the summit of the hill to look upon the magnificent scene below us, and were so struck with its grandeur that it was not till I came close to the mill, and saw the sad devastation, that I thought about my own and others’ loss. One side of the mill was swept out, a wagon that was secured to a tree had lost its sides, and a large iron sugar pan was lying there. In the distance a few tops of green sugar-cane just appeared above the surface of the highest ground of the Flat. Islands of some hundred yards were carried away. In about a fortnight the water had gone down so far as to enable a few of the most venturesome of the men to go on the Flat, wading far above the knees in mud.

‘One poor fellow had every bit of his cane washed off, except a few roots so buried in sand as to be useless. Almost all of my cane that would have been crushed this season was laid flat, some quite washed away, some buried; while almost all the young cane has been wonderfully improved by a deposit of rich mud being left a foot deep. So much for good coming out of evil. The cane in places soon began to recover, and a few showers helped to wash a portion of the mud and sand off it. I may save forty or fifty tons.

‘We commenced at once to repair damages, and all put their shoulders to the wheel. I have got one set of batteries finished, and the other nearly so. We started the mill last Monday, and yesterday brought twenty-six bags of sugar to market—two tons—a portion of which sold for 34s. a cwt.’

This flood has made our house builder and joiner fear that their payment will not be forthcoming, and they have consequently been very troublesome, and I must name one trait in our dear old neighbour, Mrs Bowen.⁶ When I went to call on her after the disastrous flood, she said to me in an apologetic manner, as I was leaving, ‘I dare say there will be heavy demands on Mr Feilden, and small tradesmen will all be sending in their bills at once, fearing his ruin; now I have £20 in the house, more than I want, and it is quite at his service.’ I thanked her, but declined the money, and she said, ‘Well, I know how people press on the unfortunate, and it is here if you find you want it.’

Had the flood happened a little sooner we should probably not have built our new kitchen; meantime, it is an incalculable addition to our comfort, to mine in particular, and I wonder how we have managed so long without it; but except on stormy days we did not think much about the discomfort of cooking under the sky, or in the iron shed without a chimney. Now my new kitchen, with its scullery beside it, and my storeroom opposite, is the admiration of all who see it. The ample chimney draws well, and during the winter months we do not find it too hot to take our meals at its large table; thus we keep it as a sort of parlour-kitchen, and have all the dirty work done in the scullery or further away still. I have got my china and glass cupboard and linen chest from the house in the bay, which we had no room for before, and look quite snug.

My brother’s room above is the most comfortable-looking of any we have; he often takes his visitors to it, and keeps it in clean and beautiful order. I wish my husband was half as particular; he is only particular in wishing each article put in its usual place so that he may find it easily.

Our two nephews⁷ have begun housekeeping for themselves in Gudgeon’s⁸ cottage, which they have made quite habitable for Natal. Daniel can make bread as well as I can, and as they are not yet engaged with any business, their housekeeping and garden

occupy nearly all their time. I see the smoke rising cheerfully three or four times a day. They are making the little garden quite neat; already their beans are starting into life, and they have a fair promise of pineapples for next season.

When they want any assistance out of my kitchen they come to borrow, sometimes a pan, or a dish, or anything else. They were pleasant, amiable young men and gave but little trouble in our house. Still, with having to do so much with my own hands, I was glad when they began to do for themselves, for two extra in a house like ours must cause more work to the cook; I had to devote my time exclusively to housework, which would have been too much for my feet and head if longer continued, but no visitors could have been more accommodating or unpretending, and I was sorry to let them go. It was their own proposition. When on their tour lately to see the country, and choose their further course, they walked twelve miles daily.

NOTES

1. George Spearman, a fellow member of the Springfield Sugar Co.
2. Mrs Alexander Smith. The Smiths were resident at *Springfield* at this time.
3. Capt. David Stephenson, ex 51st Regiment. His farm *Sweet Home* was in the present Eston area.
4. Samuel Beningfield, a Durban auctioneer and a pioneer coffee planter.
5. Feilden's brother-in-law was Andrew Brown Kennedy, sugar planter of *Sea Cow Lake* on the north bank of the Umgeni river.
6. Mrs Melesina Bowen was the Feildens' elderly neighbour at *Kefentrenfa* (which consisted of three of the Durban Borough's Umbilo lots, totalling roughly 38 acres). These lots extended from today's Prospect Road to the Umbilo river. *Kefentrenfa* lay approximately between present Harrietwood and Stanley/Birkenhead Roads, which branch off from Prospect Road. It is necessary to give this precise location because in Glenmore, the suburb adjoining Carrington Heights in the north-east, there are Bowen Avenue and Melesina Road. Apparently at the time of their naming, it was known that Mrs Bowen had lived somewhere in the area. Only in recent years has the site of *Kefentrenfa* been correctly identified.
7. Daniel Faber Whittaker (1829–1893) and Edward Leyland Whittaker (c.1834–1 November 1857? Durban) were the sons of Rev. John William Whittaker, DD, Vicar of Blackburn, Lancashire, and his wife Mary Haughton Feilden, J.L. Feilden's sister. They came to Natal in 1850 and then went to Australia (1851–1856). There are still descendants of Daniel in KwaZulu-Natal.
8. John Gudgeon, the servant who had come with them from England. An alcoholic, the Feildens put up with his frequent desertions until mid-1855, when Feilden decided to send him back to England. However, he forestalled this by taking passage to Cape Town in July 1855 as cook on the *Cleopatra*.