

## *Nathaniel Isaacs*

TEN YEARS before the annexation of Natal by the British Government in 1843, the principal merchants and prominent citizens of Cape Town were signatories to what has come to be known as the Merchants' Memorial. It was a petition to the king 'to take measures for the occupation of Port Natal and the depopulated country in its vicinity'. For corroboration of its statements concerning the desirability of this measure, the text of the memorial referred to Sir G. Lowry Cole, the late Governor of the Cape, and to 'the various documents on the subject transmitted to England by the Colonial Government, particularly to that which has been received from Mr. N. Isaacs.' It was sent to the Secretary of State in London by the Governor of the Cape, Sir Benjamin D'Urban, with his recommendation. After the lapse of nine months it was politely refused.

The reference is to Nathaniel Isaacs who had spent several years in Natal and Zululand at a time when the sight of a white man was still a source of wonder to the inhabitants, a 'monster from the sea'. He had explored the land and kept notes of his observations of its nature, its climate, its resources for commerce and agriculture and its people. He had been deeply impressed with the desirability of Natal as a country for colonisation, and was eager to persuade the British Government to extend its protection and authority over it. This proposition he had lost no opportunity of propagating in public and in private, through official and unofficial channels, and in the columns of the *S.A. Commercial Advertiser*. He had determined to return to Natal and settle there if it should become British.

His observations of the country, together with his remarkable personal adventures, were the substance of two volumes published in London in 1836, entitled *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa, descriptive of the Zoolus, their manners, customs, etc. etc. With a sketch of Natal*.<sup>1</sup>

Isaacs arrived at the Cape from St. Helena in 1825, then a youth of seventeen. He was born in Canterbury, England, of an Anglo-Jewish family. His first cousin, Saul Solomon, is famous as the Liberal leader for 30 years in the Cape House of Assembly. Isaacs's father died when Nathaniel was still a small child, and it was agreed by the family that he should join his maternal uncle, Saul Solomon, the principal shipper and merchant on the then flourishing island of St. Helena, and he trained there for a commercial career. His journey was, however, delayed for some years, entry permits being withheld whilst Napoleon was a prisoner on the island. But in 1822 he departed from England and was kindly received in the home of his uncle Saul. Nathaniel refers with affection to his good uncle, but he found that office work bored him; or, in his own rather stilted style: 'the insipidity and monotony of the counting-house became insupportable'. In short, he longed for adventure; and in the event he got it in good measure.

He made friends with Lieutenant James Saunders King, R.N., master of the

brig *Mary*, who took him, with his uncle's consent, to the Cape. Here King learned that his friend Lieutenant Farewell was lost in east Africa, and decided to go in search of him. Young Isaacs delightedly accepted the captain's invitation to join the expedition. The *Mary* reached Port Natal in October, 1825, but was wrecked in the Bay. All but one member of the crew survived the shipwreck; but they found themselves in an untamed land with no means of returning to civilisation. The sparse population, remnants of Shaka's conquests and massacres, was friendly, and Isaacs was soon in touch with the other white men in the country: among them Henry Francis Fynn, Lieutenant Farewell, his ship's carpenter, John Cane, and Henry Ogle.

The crew of the *Mary* recovered tools and some of the timbers from the wreck and with the addition of what they felled locally, succeeded in building, in the course of nearly three years, a new vessel in which they returned safely to the Cape Colony. Isaacs and King hunted and fished and cultivated the soil with the aid of natives whom they taught to use pick and hoe. Isaacs determined to visit Shaka with whom Farewell and Fynn had already established friendly relations. He trekked 130 miles inland with Thomas Halstead, a ship's boy about his own age. They were civilly received. Isaacs has left a lively account of that warrior monarch and of his unpredictable, often brutal methods of government.

Shaka declared friendship for 'his white people', as he styled them, but it was quite clear that their lives and safety depended on his caprice. One incident particularly roused the king's wrath; and Isaacs was in imminent danger of a violent death. Finally Shaka decreed that all the whites must assemble and form a company to engage in one of his campaigns. Though this adjunct to the Zulu army was a body of less than a dozen men, they were armed with muskets the fire from which was sufficient to create panic in the enemy's ranks and ensure victory.

Isaacs who received an assegai wound was able to plead successfully for the lives of the defeated enemies who would all have been slaughtered. Shaka honoured him, made him a chief and granted him by deed (a fantastic document) a vast tract of country, which Isaacs and King designed to develop; and Isaacs tells how they surveyed their estate and, selecting a conspicuous mound, planted thereon a Union Jack. King died of disease, and Shaka's assassination in 1828 put an end to Isaacs's plans. He travelled to the coast where he met an old friend, an American sea captain, and embarked with him on a voyage of exploration of the islands in the Mocambique Channel, assessing and recording the commercial possibilities of each.

Back at the Cape and St. Helena, he recovered his impaired health and pursued his propaganda for British annexation of Natal. On his return to Natal he became acquainted with Dingane who confirmed Shaka's grant of land to him. But subsequently Dingane's ill-will towards the whites was kindled, partly by the malice of Hlambanzi, the king's rascally interpreter, and Isaacs and his partner, Fynn, withdrew from Zululand, Isaacs returning to England. Here he joined as a partner C. G. Redman who owned ships trading with Sierra Leone. He still nourished the hope of settling in Natal, and made over to Redman Shaka's grant of land. Until 1844 they were both publicly urging the annexation.

Isaacs took up residence in Sierra Leone representing the firm. In 1844, apparently abandoning his hopes, he realised all his assets and launched out on his own account. He bought the little island of Matacong off the west coast,

part of the colony but outside the jurisdiction of the customs. Taking advantage of this anomaly, he built wharves and stores and carried on a flourishing shipping trade with England.

He was in good standing with the authorities until 1854 when he incurred the displeasure of the new governor, Captain Arthur Kennedy, who accused him of slave-trading. He got early knowledge of the charge and left Matacong for Liverpool. Governor Kennedy, about this time was appointed to New South Wales. He set sail, carrying with him the papers relating to the charge against Isaacs. His ship was wrecked and the papers lost. Consequently the English courts refused to proceed with the case. Isaacs retired to Liverpool in 1868. He died at Egremont in Cheshire in 1872.

Matacong went to his heirs, but was in 1882 declared to be French territory and the then owners were excluded by the French authorities. Nathaniel Isaacs, says Graham MacKeurtan in his *Cradle Days of Natal*<sup>2</sup>

. . . must rank along with Farewell, Fynn and King as a founder. His book is a vivid, detailed and accurate record of the birth of a great settlement, and he deserves the acclamation of every interested historian. He was hardy, bold, keen in perception and resourceful in action. He came to Port Natal a mere boy; he departed almost a stripling; but he left a vivid impress on its nascent years. The only trace of him today is the name of 'Cape Nathaniel' opposite the Bluff Point on a few faded maps. As time goes on, however, he will come into his own.

LOUIS HERRMAN

**Notes:**

1. Republished in two volumes with biographical sketch and notes by L. Herrman, Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1936 and 1937. Republished in a single quarto volume, with notes and an extended biography, ed. by L. Herrman and P. R. Kirby, Struik, Cape Town, 1970.
2. MacKeurtan, G., *Cradle Days of Natal*, London, etc., 1930, pp. 157-8.