

John Cane

AN EARLY death was the fate of many Europeans who were pioneers of Natal and John Cane was among those who came to a violent end. Little is known of his origins except that he came from Britain to South Africa during the time of the Napoleonic wars. Like many sailors on the trading route between England and the Far East, Cane saw the advantages of settling in South Africa and on a trip to Batavia in 1813 he decided to make this country his home. He first laboured as an assistant to a Cape Town wine merchant and then, moving to the eastern parts of the colony, became a carpenter to the famous Landdrost J. G. Cuyler. It was in this fashion that he heard of the trading venture of Francis George Farewell to Natal and beyond, and became a carpenter in the service of that entrepreneur. Cane thus became one of the first whites to settle in Natal and, like the rest, came into close contact with the Zulu king, Shaka.

In 1828 Shaka sent Cane on an errand to the Cape to obtain macassar oil among other assignments. It is said that this early journey overland to the Cape inspired A. G. Bain and J. B. Biddulph to undertake their journey to Natal in 1829. Cane's mission to the Cape proved to be a failure, as did a diplomatic mission sent by Dingane to the Cape in 1830, which he also accompanied. Cane's failure to report to the Zulu king on his return to the Bay was a factor in the worsening relations between the Zulu and the whites at the Bay. Later Cane took part in Dingane's forays against the Swazi chief Sobhuza.

In June 1836 Dingane stopped trade between the Bay and Zululand, and Cane took the initiative in opposing him in the plan. The whites at the Bay organised themselves and their black followers into a militia under the command of Robert Biggar, and Cane was one of the 'captains'. In the fighting that followed the Zulu massacre of the Trekkers, Cane and Robert Biggar led a force of fifteen whites and some eight hundred black followers against Dingane's *impis*. The rashness of this almost irresponsible collection of fighters led to a great number of casualties and Cane was one of those who were killed in the battle of Ndongakusaka on the 17th of April 1838. Here was a stormy petrel of early Natal whose life was recklessly expended for little advantage.

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