

John Ross

HIS REAL name, he said, was Charles Rawden Maclean and he had run away to sea at the age of 12. He arrived in Natal with Lieutenant J. S. King's party as an apprentice on the 150 ton brig *Mary* on 30th September 1825. This was an eventful introduction for, on crossing the notorious bar, the ship was wrecked off Point Fynn (the Point, Durban) fortunately without loss of life. King, Isaacs, Ross, Hutton the master of the *Mary*, Morton the mate, and 13 crew members had to swim for their lives. Ross was saved by a Newfoundland dog with which he had made friends on the ship. This canine hero afterwards lost his life in a tussle with leopards on the Bluff.

Nathaniel Isaacs in his *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* has most to say about this young pioneer. He accounts for the popular name thus: being a sailor the lad was called Jack (or by Isaacs, John) and Ross because of his ginger hair. He was courageous, cheerful and shrewd. He was born on 22nd November 1812. As Isaacs had also run away (from pen-pushing in his uncle's St. Helena office) the boys had something in common and were the youngest members of the party.

Ross's greatest contribution to the pioneer history of Natal was his spectacular walk to Delagoa Bay and back to fetch medical supplies for the Port Natal adventurers. Isaacs accompanied him as far as Shaka's kraal. So impressed was the Chief with this proof of courage and determination, that a group of 10 warriors was detailed to conduct him there, via Tsonga territory east of the Lebombo mountains, through trackless and often marshy country teeming with zebra and rhinoceros. After 18 days on foot, they reached the kraal of Makasane, a Tsonga chief. Here more guides were supplied to negotiate the Maputa river which enters Delagoa Bay after collecting its waters from the Pongola, Ngwavuma and Usutu. They crossed on Tsonga rafts built of half-charred tree trunks lashed together, and baled out the seeping water as they went.

At Delagoa Bay the governor suspected Ross of being a spy for Shaka — nevertheless he was not unkindly treated and was given permission to buy supplies. Most of these he got free from the captain of a French slaver in the Bay. Graham Mackeurtan has suggested that this captain was the 'infamous Dorval of Mauritius' who from 1825 carried on slave trade with Delagoa Bay.

John stayed no longer than three days for he was distressed by the slave trade and fearful lest some of his fine Zulu bodyguard might be captured. It took ten men to carry the load he had acquired. On the return journey they followed the coast and met King on the bank of the Tugela where he had camped during a surveying trip. Ross got back to the Port after an absence of three weeks (April — May 1827) and a journey of approximately 500 kilometres. That the Tugela bridge on the national road should have been named for him is most appropriate.

It is known that after five years at the Port he went back to sea, served in eight ships and obtained his Master's Certificate in 1833. Later news of Ross



John Ross (or Charles Rawden Maclean), apprentice to the naval officer James Saunders King who brought him from Cape Town in 1825. This more than life-size statue by Mary Stainbank, situated on the Victoria Embankment outside John Ross House, commemorates his arduous and dangerous journey.

comes from a *Natal Mercury* article which mentions a series of articles appearing in the *Nautical Magazine* from 1852 until 1861 under the name Charles Rawden Maclean. By this time he was 49 years old and here we lose track of him.

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