



Francis Farewell

BY 1828, an overland route between the Cape Colony and Natal was beginning to provide an alternative to the arduous and frequently disastrous sea voyage. It was this virtually unknown trail that was chosen by a small party of travellers who set out from the Cape for Port Natal in September 1829. Leader of the venture was Lieutenant Francis George Farewell, returning, after a short stay in the Colony, to the trading settlement at Natal. He was accompanied by Walker (a naturalist), Thackwray (an 1820 settler) and a number of native servants. John Cane, also on his way back to the Port, joined Farewell's group, and the expedition proceeded without mishap until the area of the Umzimvubu river was reached.

Here, Farewell decided to visit Nqeto, chief of the Qwabe, who had fled southwards from the Zulu kingdom after rebelling against Shaka's successor, Dingane. With Lynx the interpreter, Thackwray, Walker and some servants, Farewell went to Nqeto's kraal, leaving John Cane to guard the wagons.

The chief 'received them with apparent kindness, ordering a beeve to be slaughtered for their use, and gave them various other tokens of friendship. Scarcely, however, had night-shade fallen, before his mien altered . . . for both words and actions then assumed an air of hostility . . . Messrs. Thackwray and Walker now became considerably uneasy, but Mr. Farewell was still unwilling to believe that their host would venture to do them any personal injury. Their fears being somewhat quieted, and the natives being retired, they laid down to sleep, and all remained tranquil until dawn of day the following morning. Their tent was then suddenly surrounded, and all three horribly massacred, together with five of their native servants . . .'¹

John Cane was fortunate to escape a similar end. The Qwabe went on the rampage, plundering the travellers' wagons and causing widespread alarm among other tribes in the area.

A variety of reasons for Nqeto's treacherous behaviour is given by Henry Francis Fynn and Nathaniel Isaacs; the chief himself later swore that the murders had been committed without his knowledge by some of his warriors. The question of motive has, with time, diminished in significance, leaving the stark fact that this violent deed deprived Natal of her 'prime mover', the man upon whose energy and tenacity of purpose the settlement was founded.

That such an untimely and savage death awaited him in a strange land was no doubt far from Francis Farewell's mind as he embarked on a promising career in the British navy at the age of sixteen. Until he took this important step in 1807, his life had been in no way remarkable. As the second son of the Reverend Samuel Farewell of Wincanton, Somerset, he had received an average grammar school education, and he might have settled for a quiet, clerical occupation had



Lieutenant Francis George Farewell, R.N. (1793-1829), a founder of the first European settlement at Port Natal.

not the war with the French, with its prospect of excitement and adventure for a young man, enticed him away from his books.

His name first appears in the Admiralty Records on November 4th, 1807, as First Class Volunteer in the *Amphion*. If it was excitement he wanted, he certainly found just that during his four years of service with this vessel, under the command of Sir William Hoste. In February 1808, the *Amphion* was one of a convoy of sixty sail which joined the Fleet near Lisbon. She narrowly escaped disaster when, in a severe storm, the main top gallant mast was struck by lightning, and fire broke out on board. In May of the same year the vessel was cruising off Toulon, where she was involved in a heavy engagement with the shore batteries, as well as with an enemy frigate. After capturing a prize worth £20 000 in October, the *Amphion* added to her credit 38 French merchantmen, sinking six others. She prowled the enemy coastline, taking ships, convoys of supplies, and destroying batteries and castles on shore in one victory after another, until by November 1809 she had sunk and captured over two hundred French vessels.

With the *Amphion*, Farewell took part in the famous Battle of Lissa, when his ship successfully captured two frigates, and for a time Hoste placed him in charge of the Island of Lipa, a strategic point in the Adriatic. He was learning, in a hard school, to develop the courage, resourcefulness and endurance which were to stand him in good stead in his later role as pioneer of Natal.

He did not emerge from all this action entirely unscathed, being wounded in several operations, but he remained apparently undeterred and when the *Amphion*, finally exhausted after her glorious deeds, was put out of commission in 1811, he was transferred, with promotion, to the *Thisbe* and then to the *Bacchante*. Farewell continued to survive this dangerous existence, moving up the naval ladder through the rank of Master's Mate to that of Lieutenant in 1815.

Then came the end of the Napoleonic Wars. It was an older and possibly somewhat bitter Farewell who, like hundreds of his countrymen, was turned adrift on half-pay. For the next few years his wanderings took him to India, Mauritius and the Seychelles. None of the mercantile transactions into which he entered during this period was very successful, and it was not until 1820 that his life took a new and definite direction.

In this year he was 'managing owner' of a vessel of 261 tons, the *Frances Charlotte*, which was engaged in trading pursuits from her home port of Bengal. Fortune brought Farewell to the Cape of Good Hope, and here he lingered. No doubt he was influenced in this decision to stay by Miss Elizabeth Catherina Schmidt, the step-daughter of a Cape Town merchant, Johan Lodewyk Petersen. They were married by special licence on August 17th, 1822.

Shortly after this auspicious event, three vessels left the Colony to carry out a Government survey expedition along the south-eastern coast: they were the *Leven*, commanded by Captain William Owen, the *Barracouta* and the *Cockburn*. Several important areas were charted during this voyage, including Cape St. Lucia. Another vessel from Cape Town, the *Orange Grove*, had meanwhile commenced explorations on her own — mainly to ascertain trading possibilities—and she met up with the Government expedition. Malaria took a heavy toll among the crews of the four ships, and in April 1823 they returned to the Cape.

The travellers' fascinating stories and the cargo of ivory and ambergris brought back on the *Orange Grove*, stirred up a great deal of interest, particularly among the merchant community. As much intrigued as anyone else was Francis Farewell, who was on the lookout for new opportunities. During his months at the

Cape, Farewell had used his fast-dwindling capital to charter the *Salisbury*, a brig commanded by James Saunders King, and the two men had become firm friends on trading trips to West Indian ports.

With the financial support of John R. Thompson, Farewell and King joined forces in preparing for an expedition up the coast. Farewell was convinced that the source of the ivory which found its way to the Portuguese traders at Delagoa Bay was the domain of Shaka, King of the Zulus, and the object of the journey was to establish a trade link with this powerful ruler. After chartering the *Salisbury* and the *Julia*, Farewell, Thompson and King left Cape Town in June 1823.

At St. Lucia Bay, where they intended to go ashore and make contact with the Zulus in the interior, misfortune struck in the shape of bad weather, which prevented a successful landing. Both Farewell and Thompson were nearly drowned when the boats overturned in the surf. The *Salisbury* and the *Julia*, forced to put to sea, left behind several sailors who had managed to swim to the beach. It was five weeks before the wind abated sufficiently to enable the vessels to pick up the stranded men, and by that time the notion of landing at St. Lucia had been abandoned.

Characteristically, Farewell was not to be daunted in his purpose, and after replenishing supplies at Algoa Bay, the expedition set out again, seeking a more suitable port. After they had sailed along the coast for some time, the weather once more turned against them. In the face of a gale they took refuge at the Bay of Natal, risking the sandbar across the entrance channel and arriving safely within the harbour. It was a chance landing that was to have momentous repercussions.

During their short stay, while King charted the Bay and communication was made with the local natives, the significance of the port gradually dawned upon Farewell. Although there were few inhabitants in the immediate vicinity, the Zulus were not far away and might be persuaded to trade at Natal instead of Delagoa. The idea of forming a trading settlement was born, and on the expedition's return to Cape Town in December 1823, Farewell lost no time in furthering his new plans.

Before he had been a month in Cape Town, he had so represented the great advantages to be derived from a trade in ivory by way of the port . . . that he induced his father-in-law, Mr. Petersen, and another Dutch gentleman of the name of Hoffman to join him in partnership.²

It was not long before Henry Francis Fynn allowed himself to be persuaded by Farewell's assurance that 'immense profits would be derived from the speculation'. Preparations went forward rapidly: the *Antelope* and the *Julia* were chartered, a great variety of articles for native trade and gifts for Shaka were purchased, and several volunteers joined in the project, inspired by Farewell's enthusiasm. Government sanction was necessary, and Farewell approached Lord Charles Somerset, Governor of the Colony, hoping for his support:

Towards the conclusion of my last voyage, we found a port, where a small vessel can lie perfectly secure; I am therefore to venture another trial, hoping that by making some stay there we may get the natives to bring their produce to exchange for our goods; which in time might lead to important advantages. My intentions are to keep a vessel lying

constantly in port, and to have a small party on shore to communicate with the natives, and carry on the trade.

Somerset's reply was brief. He gave permission for the 'commercial undertaking' but emphasised that no territorial possessions were to be annexed without his consent.

Farewell sent Fynn on ahead with the *Julia* to Natal, while he wrestled with the remaining business — and his co-partners — in Cape Town. Eventually he followed in the *Antelope* with, among others, Petersen, and Josias Hoffman and his son. They landed at Natal in July 1824, some six weeks after the *Julia*. Fynn was not there to welcome them — he had already gone in search of Shaka. Farewell sent messengers after him and while awaiting Fynn's return, the *Antelope's* party offloaded her cargo and made camp.

The native inhabitants of the area intrigued Farewell. These people were remnants of the Tuli people, who had been scattered by Shaka's warriors, dispossessed of land and cattle, and reduced to a meagre existence on the south-western shores of the Bay. In this 'most wretched set of beings', as he described them, Farewell saw for the first time the drastic consequences of disobedience to the Zulu king.

He was soon to meet Shaka himself, for Fynn hastened back to the Port, and a few days later Farewell, Petersen and Fynn, with an interpreter and three Hottentots, set off for the royal residence. Escorting the small group was Shaka's chief *induna*, Mbikwana, with a hundred of his men who carried the king's presents. This unusual caravan proceeded slowly through the bushy country — halting on the way for Farewell to search (unsuccessfully) for gold in the Umgeni River — and accompanied by the imprecations of Mr. Petersen, who was over sixty, bad-tempered and corpulent and found the terrain too much for him. He accused his son-in-law of intending to kill him by bringing him to this barbarous place, but the prospect of the ivory ahead encouraged him to persevere.

Farewell's first visit to the king was brief, but memorable. He had chosen Shaka's presents wisely in Cape Town — woollen blankets, a quantity of brass and copper, pigeons, cats, dogs, a pig, and a full-dress military coat decorated with gold lace. Shaka was more than satisfied, and presented Farewell with some elephant tusks before the latter's return to the Bay.

By now, Farewell was increasingly confident of success, and could see his dream of a trading settlement slowly becoming a reality. He returned to the royal capital in August, and a deed was drawn up ceding about three thousand five hundred square miles of land at Port Natal to 'F. G. Farewell and Company'. On August 27th, the British flag was hoisted at the Bay with much ceremony, marking the acquisition of the territory, and Farewell immediately wrote to Somerset. Despite his enthusiastic description of Natal as ideal for settlement and commerce, however, the grant was never ratified.

When the *Julia* left the Bay on September 7th, 1824, she carried not only Farewell's letter to Somerset, but nine of the party as well. Later this vessel made a return trip to Natal, and took a further eleven of the original group of adventurers back with her. (They should have shared Farewell's optimism and remained at the Bay, inhospitable as it was, for during this journey the *Julia* sank with all on board.)

Reduced to a skeleton, the settlement still clung to the shores of the Port. Without financial resources or Government backing little could be achieved. The

small group of men continued hunting and trading in the vicinity, with Shaka's permission. Farewell made regular visits to the king, taking pains to please him, and supplying him with medicines and other items. He realised that the defenceless establishment at the Bay depended for its survival on the capricious whim of the Zulu monarch, and he was under no illusions as to Shaka's character. 'History perhaps does not furnish an instance of a more despotic and cruel monster . . .' wrote Farewell. But the 'monster' was fairly well-disposed to the subjects of 'UmGeorge' (as Shaka called the King of England), and it was largely due to Farewell's efforts that the settlers held a strangely privileged position, regarded by the Zulus as being under their ruler's protection.

The year 1825 brought unexpected additional strength to the settlement when, in September, James Saunders King arrived in the *Mary*, bringing with him Nathaniel Isaac and the boy John Ross. Though the *Mary* encountered heavy seas at the bay and was totally wrecked, all on board were saved, and Farewell returned from one of his trips to the interior for a joyous reunion with his friend King. The two immediately started to plan a new partnership, and in order to raise the necessary capital, King returned to the Cape in April 1826. With him he took a letter from Farewell, addressed to himself, which pointed out Natal's possibilities and which it was hoped would assist King in obtaining financial assistance.

Nathaniel Isaacs, who remained at the Port, watched the activities of the settlement with avid interest. He was amazed at the 'singular appearance' of Farewell's house, which 'was not unlike an ordinary barn made of wattle, and plastered with clay, without windows, and with only one door composed of reeds. It had a thatched roof, but otherwise was not remarkable either for the elegance of its structure, or the capacity of its interior'. This was in fact only a temporary dwelling; work was beginning on a more permanent building, to be called Fort Farewell. 'To the house, which is to consist of one floor . . . will be attached a store. A mud fort had been commenced, at each angle designed to mount three 12-pound carronades . . . In front of the Fort, a square piece of ground had been fenced in, intended for a garden . . .'

King arrived back at Natal in October 1826, accompanied by Elizabeth Farewell, who was determined to join her husband at this settlement which had divided them for so long. She must have been of stern stuff to withstand the primitive conditions which greeted her.

At about this time the other settlers began to notice a deterioration in the friendship between Farewell and King, for what Isaac calls 'pecuniary' reasons. The truth behind this regrettable dispute remains vague, but the quarrel grew out of all proportion, destroying the harmony that had existed previously at the Port, and ending in such enmity that when King lay dying, in September 1828, Farewell would not visit him. Even at the outset, the ill-feeling caused a clash of interests and a rift in the group which hindered progress.

Work continued, however, on the Fort, and also on the building of a schooner, the *Elizabeth and Susan*, which was launched in March 1828. A month later she left for the Cape, with Farewell and his wife, James King, and Nathaniel Isaacs on board. The vessel's first voyage was highly unsuccessful, for two Zulu emissaries, sent by Shaka to take his greetings to King George, were subjected to numerous indignities by Government officials at Algoa Bay, who thought the Zulus might be spies. This unfortunate occurrence undid all the efforts of Farewell and the others to retain the friendship of Shaka, and from then onwards the Zulu king's attitude towards the settlers altered considerably. The failure of the

mission was a personal blow to King, who shortly after this return to Natal fell ill and never recovered.

His death was followed within a few months by the murder of Shaka, and the succession to the Zulu throne of Dingane. In the midst of these unsettling events, Farewell left Natal once more on the *Elizabeth and Susan*. It was her last voyage: at Algoa Bay the ship was impounded by the authorities, because she was not officially registered.

The unexpected fate — caused by unjustifiably severe officialdom — of the vessel which had taken so much time and effort to construct would have made a lesser man than Farewell give up in despair. He, however, travelled to Cape Town, arriving in time for the birth of his son, and after a short sojourn in the Colony, determined on opening up an overland communication with Natal, still convinced that there was a future in the Port, he again went through the process of finding the capital to back this new venture, and set out with Thackwray and Walker in September 1829 on the journey that was to end so tragically a few weeks later at Nqeto's kraal.

Though Fort Farewell crumbled slowly into ruin, and its builder died without seeing his hopes come to fruition, the way had been paved for Natal's future. Farewell is to be remembered for his 'resistless spirit of opposition' in the face of heavy odds — lack of means, an indifferent and uncooperative government, and a primitive territory fraught with danger. Often difficult and autocratic, which earned him criticism, his optimism was boundless. Even Nathaniel Isaacs, who never forgave him for his treatment of King, mourned the loss of the man whose efforts had opened up Natal, and who was 'resolute to a fault'.

R. J. GADSDEN

Notes:

1. Isaacs, N., *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*, p. 170.
2. Fynn, H. F., *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, p. 56.
3. Chase, J. C., *The Natal Papers*, p. 16, F. G. Farewell to Lord Charles Somerset, 1.5.1824.

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