

# *Sydney Powell's adventures in Natal*

by *Stephen Coan*

“FROM a municipal point of view the town of Durban gives little cause indeed for complaint, and may justly claim the title, often applied to it, of the model borough of South Africa. For this not only the energy and enterprise of the Town Council, but the keen interest which the burgesses as a body take in public affairs, must be held responsible.”

A glowing paragraph taken from the introduction to *Durban – The Sea Port of the Garden Colony of South Africa*, said to be the first guidebook to Durban, priced at one shilling and published in 1899.<sup>1</sup> The 99-page, soft cover book provides a history of the city as well as featuring places of interest in and about Durban – Mariannhill monastery gets a chapter to itself – as well as a guide to “Hotels and Board-

ing Houses” and “Statistics as to the Progress of the Town and Port during the last Twenty Years”. Curiously, despite the evident industry that has gone into the book’s production, not to mention its fulsome prose, no author’s name appears on the title page.

The book is also extremely rare. There is only one copy to be found in a public collection in Durban – and possibly the country – at the Don Africana Library. The cover image accompanying this article is that of the copy belonging to the Powell family in England who have always understood the book to have been written by their relative, Sydney Walter Powell.

Powell’s writing featured in an earlier volume of *Natalia* where his unpublished memoir, *Each to His Taste*, furnished much of the background to



the story of William Powell, architect of the Colonial Building in Pietermaritzburg.<sup>2</sup>

Sydney Powell was born in London in 1878 and came to Durban in 1892. Two years previously his father, William Powell, had arrived in the city to start a new life after his role as co-respondent in a much-publicised divorce case ruined his reputation and ended his successful career as an architect in London.

Sydney Powell, who died in 1952, wrote several novels and two memoir-cum-travel books, and it is in the 1986 reissue of one of the latter, *Adventur-*

*ers of a Wanderer*, that his nephew, Geoffrey Powell, recording that his uncle “contributed to a Durban paper” adds that he “also wrote the first guide-book to Durban”.<sup>3</sup>

Powell himself does not lay claim to the guide-book’s authorship either in *Adventures of a Wanderer* or the unpublished *Each to His Taste*. But author of the guidebook or not, Powell’s unpublished manuscript provides a fascinating glimpse of Durban and Pietermaritzburg in the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century.

“I divide my youth into two periods, the sacred and profane. Of the first I have not written and am not likely to write,” says Powell, writing in the late 1920s.<sup>4</sup> In fact he would write of it in the early 1940s in *Each to His Taste*. Here, as well as writing about his boyhood in England and the impact on his family of his father’s affair, Powell also recalls his youth in Durban when the Powell family lived in a house in Ridge Road on the Berea and the teenage Sydney attended Durban High School.

On arrival in Durban in 1890 Powell senior had set up an architectural practice in Durban, where he was joined by his elder son, also named William. His wife Anne, together with Sydney and his two younger brothers, Owen and Stewart, followed two years later. Another son, Norman, was later born in Durban.

Max O’Reil in his book *John Bull and Co*, speaks of Durban as “the prettiest and most coquettish town in the South African Colonies,” and few compliments were surely ever better deserved. The epithet “coquettish” seems exactly to express the peculiar charm of Durban, with the blue Indian Ocean washing her feet, and a bay that might dispute the palm of beauty with the Bay of Naples embracing her like a glorious arm, which no other town in the southern (or, for that matter, any) portion of this continent possesses.

*Durban – The Sea Port of the Garden Colony of South Africa*, page 9



*William Powell, father of Sydney and architect of the Colonial Buildings*

Sydney recalls his arrival by sea from England: "Our ship could not cross the bar, so we lay out; and a tug came to us, to convey the passengers ashore. On its deck I saw my father and elder brother. We waved to them, my mother and I, and then I saw a look of sudden anxiety come over his face. It became a look of anguish. He made signs to us, and my mother and I in the same moment glanced in the direction he was pointing. Absorbed in greeting him we had forgotten the two small boys ... they, having also recognised my father, had climbed the rail, on a rung of which they were dancing as if

they would fly to him. My mother and I rushed up and pulled them down."<sup>5</sup>

By the time they were joined on board ship by his father and elder brother all were "in a more or less excited state" which led to Powell making a "dreadful faux pas. When my father came aboard he kissed me, and then – I kissed my eighteen-year old brother! For a boy of fourteen to do such a thing – in public! – was inexcusable, and he showed the deepest embarrassment."<sup>6</sup>

The Powell family lived in a "low white bungalow" with access to Ridge Road on the top of a steep hill and "on the extreme edge of the Berea, the residential hill suburb, and at the back of our house was thick bush."<sup>7</sup> Beyond the bush Powell claimed the "southern flank" of the Drakensberg could be seen<sup>8</sup> while the front of the house faced on to a garden with a view of the Indian Ocean: "Below us was a terraced garden, and the whole place was bowered in bush and trees. I could see large clumps of banana and bamboo."<sup>9</sup>

"Among all the luxuriance of green stuff and blossoms I was in heaven ... Everything charmed; not merely the hot sun, the caressing air and the surroundings, but the manner and mechanism of this new existence. Nor was there any disillusionment afterwards ... I throve mentally and physically."<sup>10</sup>

Though the weather in summer is somewhat too warm to be quite agreeable to our English constitutions, at no time in of the year is the town unhealthy to live in. During the winter months ... the climate is certainly as delightful as any in the world. Cloudless blue skies from week's end to week's end, with now and then a shower of rain to relieve any possible monotony, cool breezes from the south-west, the fresh salt smell of the ocean, an equable temperature day and night – Durban, through these months has a climate that could scarcely be excelled.

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Powell attended Durban High School – “with my father and brother I walked of a morning to a bus terminus; and we took first the bus and then a tram for town. I brought my lunch with me and sometimes had it at my father’s office [at 29 Field Street], which was a large block that he had built. His reputation was growing.”<sup>11</sup>

Back home on the Berea, Powell spent his time exploring the bush behind the house “just for the fun of the thing” with a friend. “Sometimes we would put up a small buck, or have to deal with a snake. I became an expert in dealing with snakes, not only out of doors but indoors.” Powell shared an outside room with his older brother and a nightly ritual was “turning the bedclothes down to the bottom” to check there were no snakes. A stick was kept in the room especially to deal with any snakes that might be found. “The snake that was not so easy to deal with was the one that stood up and disputed your path. If you had no stick it was best to retire, for nearly every snake was venomous. If you had one, you had to strike quick and aim straight. I was never afraid of snakes, though always careful of them. They belonged to my new life and my new environment, and were looked on accordingly. I found fault with nothing in my new life. There was nothing I could find fault with.”<sup>12</sup>

On one adventure the two ventured beyond the bush at the rear of the

house. “It did not go very far back, we found, and beyond it we came to a dip where there was a settlement of Indian market-gardeners. One could not call it a village; it was no more than a collection of biscuit-tin huts. But for me it had one important feature: a long, narrow pond.”<sup>13</sup> The ideal place for Powell to sail the model yacht given to him several years earlier in England by his father. However the first attempt to do so was partially frustrated by a group of Indian boys on the far side of the pond who, led by an older boy – “less a youth than a young man”<sup>14</sup> – threw stones at the boat and shouted abuse at Powell and his friend. When the yacht sailed to the other side of the pond Powell was forced to cross a narrow foot bridge over the water in order to retrieve it. The bully advanced onto the bridge towards him but when Powell kept walking the other boy backed down and Powell and his friend were allowed to fetch their boat and sail it unmolested, both then and on subsequent visits.

Another incident featured an Indian cook with a liking for “Natal rum ... a raw and powerful spirit, which should never have been sold”.<sup>15</sup>

On one occasion there was a “disturbance at the servants’ quarters one night, which my father went out and quelled. It appeared that the Indian gardener was at fault, though the cook was more the drunker of the two. My father sacked the gardener. The gar-

To the overworked business man, grown sick with the eternal dust and turmoil of the new Jerusalem – that golden city of the Transvaal; to the sea-borne traveller, whom a long voyage has wearied; to the dweller on veldt and farm and in up-country town, the sight of Durban must indeed (if the reader will excuse a biblical parallel) impart a thrill similar to that experienced by the desert-weary children of Israel on their entry into the land of Canaan.

*Durban – The Sea Port of the Garden Colony of South Africa*, page 11

dener was a bachelor, the cook a married man. The cook was an excellent cook, clean, cheerful and respectful, and we did not want to lose him. He celebrating pay-day pretty regularly, but carried his liquor not badly as a rule."<sup>16</sup>

However one evening "the rule went to smithereens" and the cook, instead of "staying and drinking at the grog shop", brought a bottle home. Around nine o'clock he "was shouting and parading up and down at the back of the house. My father went to the back door, and told him to quieten down and go to bed. I went too, and saw a shadowy figure in the darkness. It moved off, muttering."<sup>17</sup>

Five minutes later the cook returned uttering "maniacal howls" and began to try and knock down the back door with a coal-hammer. Within the Powells demonstrated an almost absurd English sang-froid: father William continuing to work at his drawing board, the elder son "doing something with a specification", Sydney reading, and his mother reassuring the two younger boys in the drawing room that "it was only Ramsammy, who had too much to drink: he would be ill in the morning, and it was very silly of him."<sup>18</sup>

"Thumps and howls succeeded each other. The house reverberated; otherwise all was calm. I don't mean that nobody was apprehensive; probably we all were; but our parents had set the tone, and the rest of us followed it ... My father had a revolver, but I can understand that he did not wish to use it, which he might have to do if he met the man face to face."<sup>19</sup>

After a parental conference William Jr. was sent to the local police station. Meanwhile "the performance contin-

ued" though Sydney was more worried about his brother running into snakes in the dark. Finally, "under my brother's guidance, the police arrived ... a European constable and two natives" and following a "brief set-to in which one of the native police had a taste of the hammer. It was ended with a crack on the head from a knobkerrie."<sup>20</sup>

Durban was also the setting for the trials and tribulations of Sydney Powell's adolescence which brought him into conflict with his father, especially when he "reached the calf-love age".<sup>21</sup> The object of his infatuation was a girl who went for music lessons to her aunt who lived next door to the Powells. "I loved her passionately. There was not the smallest danger of any complications arising, but my father assumed that there was. It was a not unnatural assumption in a grown-up man, as the climate of Durban favoured sexual precocity. I was not quite fifteen and she thirteen, and girls no older did sometimes find themselves in trouble."<sup>22</sup>

When his father, informed by his wife of the romance, took Sydney aside for a talk and raised his concerns of where matters might lead Sydney was "shocked at the suggestion that I could soil my love in such a way".<sup>23</sup> His father ordered him to end the association; he didn't, though he became more discreet. "It was our first serious disagreement, and it stuck like a thorn in my mind."<sup>24</sup>

Nothing came of the romance. "It ended, as such affairs must end, sooner or later, when the fires of idealistic passion die down and there is nothing to replace them."<sup>25</sup>

"Round about this period I had another love affair. There were no meetings, no love passages. I fell in love with a boy."<sup>26</sup> A fellow pupil at DHS,

whom Sydney worshipped from afar. Indeed, the only time the two actually met outside school they simply “nodded and passed on”. The adult Powell recorded that “it was an infatuation, which I knew was a very odd one, but which I did not attempt to check or argue with. It, too, in time died down.”

For Powell these two incidents represented “the first landmarks of my adolescence. I was passing through a belt of strange country which lay between me and youth.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1894, at the age of 16, Powell intended becoming an architect like his father, with whom, having “reached the ‘difficult stage’”, he was now having “frequent disagreements”.<sup>28</sup> But when the time came for him to be articulated “my father told me that he feared we were too much alike in character – by which he meant too self-willed, I think – to pull together in the same office. He would article me, he said, to another man”.<sup>29</sup>

### THE BERA

Once there the pleasure-seeking visitor will find broad macadamised roads bordered by trees and flowering hedges, charming residences and well-kept gardens.

The Musgrave Road, especially, where are to be found the dwellings of most of Durban’s “aristocracy”, is a paragon of well-groomed comeliness. Soft green masses of foliage form a subdued and soothing background to the brilliant hues of flowering shrub and creeper which dazzle the eyes on either hand, and exquisite glimpses of the sea are caught here and there through the trees and at cross-roads. The Bera is a district ever fruitful of surprises, and an intimate acquaintance of many years only increases one’s admiration for the unique and wonderful loveliness of these wooded hills. Go where we may new beauties display themselves to our eyes at every turn, nature and art, those two so often opposing forces, being here most happily wedded. The distinctive note of the scenery is richness of colour, the soft and varied greens of the foliage in contrast with the red ochre hue of those roads which still remain unmetalled being especially striking. An artist might indeed spend a life-time among the nooks and bye-ways of this leafy region and yet not exhaust one tithe of its treasury. Were the Bera in Europe instead of Africa, a school of painters such as made famous the Forest of Fontainebleau must have assuredly settled in its midst. Seated on a wayside bank in one of the less populated parts, with a red patch of road and some great flat crowned tree for a foreground, swelling thickly-wooded slopes in the middle distance, a glimpse of the Indian Ocean stretching far away, and the bluest of blue skies over all, the most unimpressionable of mortals could scarcely fail to be impressed by the idyllic beauty of the scene. No description can do justice to the loveliness of these suburban hills. A cheap and withal very comfortable way of making a circuit of the Bera is by tram. Starting from the Town Hall, and alighting at the Musgrave Road terminus, a ten minutes’ walk brings one to Marriott Road, where a Florida Road car may be boarded, and so back to town; the entire journey being accomplished at the small cost of one shilling.

*Durban – The Sea Port of the Garden Colony of South Africa*, page 44.

But Powell refused to be articulated to another architect: "This was not from filial affection – though I had much affection for my father – but because I knew that as an architect he had no equal in South Africa."<sup>30</sup>

Powell then decided to try for an exhibition to gain entrance to Oxford University, but this came to nought as "over some trifle I set my back up against the headmaster. He told my father that things had reached such a pass that he could not have me under him any longer."<sup>31</sup>

This coincided with a period in which Sydney was having violent quarrels with his father, on one occasion walking out of the house "saying I would get a job in a shop and never come back."<sup>32</sup>

During this time of emotional upheaval Powell had begun writing, both prose and poetry. His father was so proud of a sonnet by his son published in the London magazine, *Temple Bar*, that he had copies of it printed for his friends at the Durban Club. "It was a happy incident," says Powell, "and I can't remember that we ever quarrelled afterwards."

Despite that, "the vision of Oxford was gone. I had just left the school, where the headmaster, for good reasons, would not have me, and it was too late in the day to send me to another."<sup>33</sup>

Powell's father then decided to put his son into the Natal Civil Service. "It was not a hard-worked one; the hours were from nine till four, and it did not do a great deal in them; it offered a career of sorts, and it was gentlemanly. My father knew something about it, for he was engaged in building the new Colonial Offices in Pietermaritzburg, the capital" and the father persuaded

the son that "here was the very occupation in which to indulge my literary tendencies .... In the Civil Service I should not only have the time but the surplus energy to write."<sup>34</sup>

Powell read up for the Civil Service examination while his father obtained a promise from the Principal Under-Secretary that if his son passed he would be given an appointment in the Colonial Secretary's office. Powell obligingly passed third "out of about twenty and got the appointment. I was just eighteen."<sup>35</sup>

"I found the Civil Service much as we had judged it to be. With rare exceptions, nobody overworked himself, and often four o'clock was a release from boredom – the boredom of putting in time. It was overstaffed on principle, the principle being that if there was a rush there should be plenty of hands to deal with it. Once I had to work all night, but only once, and usually I left the office on the stroke of four. I can only speak with knowledge of my own department, but I should say that in the others it was much the same. We took a pride in being leisurely; it was our cachet. It distinguished us from bank clerks, business people and others of the common herd."<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile Powell "wrote by fits and starts"<sup>37</sup> and enjoyed the "gaieties" of Pietermaritzburg, "but there was a not too subtle difference between them and the gaieties of Durban, which were less socially hidebound and more cosmopolitan."<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless he "wined and wenched like other young men" and with an older friend went walking and riding. "I got into plenty of mischief when I was not with him, but he kept me out of plenty more."<sup>39</sup>

Powell also continued writing, occasionally selling his "literary efforts lo-

cally or in other parts of South Africa, but I failed in further attempts on the English magazines.”<sup>40</sup> He presumably also found the time to write the Durban guide book.

“But writing was not my chief interest; life itself was that: and I already longed to explore it more fully than I could do here.” Life in the Civil Service began to chafe “but I saw no escape ... unless I simply walked out of it. But I was not prepared to do that – yet.”<sup>41</sup>

The advent of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899 provided the opportunity. “Here was a chance of breaking through my confines, if I could find a way of utilising it. I belonged to no permanent volunteer corps, and could not now have joined one, with any hope of getting away yet; but I knew a man in the Public Works Department who had been granted leave to organise an Indian ambulance corps, and he wanted leaders for it. He said he would take me if I could get leave. I applied for it and got it.”<sup>42</sup>

Powell served in the campaign to relieve the siege of Ladysmith. “I saw the fighting in Natal ... (but) it would be wrong to say I took part in it. Belonging to an ambulance corps I could not, but I found plenty of opportunities for observation, and I got some experience out of it.”<sup>44</sup>

This period of Powell’s life is also recorded in *Adventures of a Wanderer* where he recalls that an “Indian ambulance corps that wanted leaders was my means of going to the front, and in it I made the acquaintance of a young barrister whom I chiefly remember on account of his devotion to duty and his loving care for his men. His name was Gandhi.”<sup>44</sup>



*Sydney Powell in uniform*

In *Each to His Taste* Powell adds slightly more detail regarding his brief encounter with one of the most famous names of the twentieth century: “The poorly nourished Indian bearers suffered greatly but a young Indian barrister pulled them through. He was one of our leaders, and he took my attention at once by his gentle, bright manner, his aliveness, and his complete unselfishness. His name was Gandhi. I met him afterwards in Durban, and – believe it or not – we had a drink together. In a public bar. What he drank I don’t remember, but I drank a whisky.”<sup>45</sup>

When Ladysmith was relieved, the ambulance corps was disbanded. “I had seen battles and retreats. We had some heavy work to do after Spionkop: a carry of twenty-five miles. I had seen things that surprised me: British officers losing their heads and their tempers; British soldiers broken up with



fright, who had run miles from the firing-line. I saw one sitting by the roadside who had thrown away his rifle and equipment. One of us, an old Irish soldier, gave him a tongue lashing, but he was too abject to be affected by it. And I saw what pained me, middle-aged Reservists, so soft that, unused to the heat, they could not march. They were wretched with the feeling that they had disgraced themselves, but the disgrace, I thought, was not at their door."<sup>46</sup>

Powell returned to Pietermaritzburg and his job and for "a while resumed the life I had dropped. But I had had a taste of what I wanted, and I wanted more."<sup>47</sup>

As it happened there were no "stabilising influences that might have counteracted this"<sup>48</sup>. Powell's former friend had left town and his father was in poor health. He died on 7 June 1900 at the age of 50. Work on the Colonial Building continued under the direction of William Jr. and was completed in 1901.<sup>49</sup>

William Powell's widow, Anne, returned to England – "[she] had never liked Natal"<sup>50</sup> – taking the younger children with her. "That left my elder brother only, and he and I had never had much in common."<sup>51</sup>

Powell grew increasingly restless. Even his writing outlets were curtailed

when the premises of a Durban newspaper for which he had been writing a daily letter was destroyed by fire, thus bringing "this work to an end".<sup>52</sup>

Bored and frustrated, the 23-year-old Powell resigned from the Civil Service and "joined a mounted irregular corps"<sup>53</sup> in Durban in late 1900. Alas, despite his ability to ride and shoot, he was given a post in the recruiting office thanks to his civil service experience. Three months into the six-month enlistment period he "felt I could not spend another three months here, and I made up my mind to desert."<sup>54</sup>

And so, "very early one morning", Powell dressed in his civilian clothes and left. When a tent mate woke up and asked him where he was going he responded that he "was taking a day off. I had once before been absent without leave, so he probably thought no more about it."<sup>55</sup>

Powell's plan was "to walk to East London, through East Griqualand and British Kaffraria, a nice little tramp of four hundred miles." Once in the Cape Colony he intended to re-enlist. In the meantime he would keep "out of the way for a little while" putting in time in Kokstad and Umtata "while this affair blew over".<sup>56</sup>

That he had little money "merely added sauce to the adventure. I meant

#### THE BLUFF

Few more pleasant spots, indeed, are to be found in the neighbourhood of Durban in which to loiter away a few hours or even an entire day. At the Bluff Retreat ... one may make one's repast in a cool arbour with a roof of boughs, and the blue waters of the Bay before one's eyes. From this hostelry to the summit of the Bluff is an easy climb of some ten minutes' duration. A battery of two guns of modern construction pointing seawards from the summit are of some interest even to a civilian, and must impress fairly emphatically upon his mind the fact that Durban would not be wholly at the mercy of any foreign invader who might pay these coasts a visit.

*Durban – The Sea Port of the Garden Colony of South Africa*, page 46.

to pick up a job of some sort in Kokstad, and do the same in Umtata. Jobs were not hard to get anywhere in South Africa. If a man starved it was his own fault."<sup>57</sup>

By the time he had covered 120 of the 150 miles to Kokstad Powell was on a bread-and-water diet. When rain threatened he took shelter in a barn but the farmer kindly allowed him to sleep in the farmhouse, fed him up the following day and gave him a sovereign to send him on his way.

Two days later and "within ten miles of Kokstad" Powell was overtaken by a mounted Natal Police sergeant. Was he being followed, he wondered? They talked for a while, the sergeant slowing his horse to walking pace, before riding on after bidding Powell a "friendly farewell, saying that he expected to see me in Kokstad."<sup>58</sup>

The two met again at a hotel in Kokstad. When Powell indicated he was interested in joining the town guard stationed at the Cape Mounted Rifle camp on the hill the sergeant told him there were Boer commandos in the area. Accordingly, the next day, Powell enrolled under a false name happily anticipating a "scrap sooner or later."<sup>59</sup>

Powell met the police sergeant "whose station was on the border ... on several occasions afterwards."<sup>60</sup> On one of them the sergeant revealed he knew his real identity and had recognised him when they first met – "if I hadn't known all about you, I should have pinched you – or seen that you were pinched in Kokstad."<sup>61</sup>

The sergeant had recognised Powell because of his likeness to his elder brother whom he had met at horse race meetings – "my brother's passion was racing" – and had been informed of Powell's desertion. "I'd had word of

you as a deserter and there you were. I had two minds what to do about it, but I said 'no.' Your brother's not a bad sort, is he?"<sup>62</sup>

Powell told him the reason why he had deserted and the sergeant was sympathetic indicating that he would be safe in the Town Guard under an assumed name. However the scrap the sergeant promised never materialised. "There were Boer commandos [*sic*] about, but the mounted troops were keeping them at a distance."<sup>63</sup>

Powell spent five months in Kokstad which he found "a pretty little place, anything but stagnant under its quiet surface, and I lived pleasantly enough here, gaily even. The climate was perfection, the air sparkling."<sup>64</sup>

When the Boers were no longer considered a threat the Town Guard was disbanded and Powell was discharged. After saying goodbye to friends Powell "set out to walk to Umtata ... a journey of a hundred miles through native territory"<sup>65</sup>

"There were no farms, and wayside stores were few. I bought what I wanted at the stores and wasted no time, for I had to get through this country as quickly as possible."<sup>66</sup>

He found the local people unfriendly, refusing to sell him "even a drink of kaffir [*sic*] beer". A new experience for Powell, as previously he had found "the native hospitable and forthcoming wherever I had met him; but these people were utterly aloof."<sup>67</sup>

Not so their dogs. "From the moment I entered the territory until I left it, they took an intense and unpleasant interest in me. From every kraal they rushed out as soon as I was sighted. They came in packs, big black mongrels, barking furiously. At first they alarmed me considerably, especially as

their masters made no attempt to call them off. They would snap at my heels and try to encircle me, and I had to fight them off with a stick I was luckily carrying.”<sup>68</sup> He soon found it was more effective to pick up a stone when they were still at a distance: “they at once turned tail and dispersed.”<sup>69</sup>

“About the middle of the year 1901 I stood upon the rim of a cup of hills, looking down on the township of Umtata in British Kaffraria”<sup>70</sup> – the opening sentence of *Adventures of a Wanderer* at which point the published book and unpublished manuscript proceeded along similar if not exactly parallel lines.

Powell worked for a month in Umtata as a clerk to the Commissioner for the Territory before proceeding to East London where he joined the Queens-town Mounted Infantry. After a brief spell as paymaster based in Tarkastad he joined the squadron in the field where “little scraps” were “bright little incidents that broke the tediousness of continual riding.”<sup>71</sup>

When the squadron was paid off due to the Cape Defence Force being reorganised Powell returned to East London and joined Damant’s Horse. Two months after joining he found himself in hospital with fever and was sent to Johannesburg, where he spent three months in hospital convalescing

on “chicken and bottled stout”.<sup>72</sup> Returned to his regiment he took part in a “little hard riding on one of those big sweeps that gathered in the Boers in a net, and the next thing I heard was that peace was to be declared”.<sup>73</sup> The regiment headed for Kimberley to be disbanded but Powell’s fever recurred and he was hospitalised before being sent on to Cape Town to be paid off. “What I should do next, where I should go next, I did not consider. It was enough for me to feel that I was without a tie.”<sup>74</sup>

This was the beginning of Powell’s wandering years. They would take him to Southern Rhodesia – and service in the British South Africa Police – then to Australia, Thursday Island, New Zealand and Tahiti.

In 1914 Powell returned to Australia and enlisted with the 4th Battalion of the 1st Australian Division. He fought at Gallipoli, where he was badly wounded.<sup>75</sup> During his recovery in England he fell in love with Margaret, “the quiet and gentle Highland nurse who ... cared for him as he recovered from his Gallipoli wounds”.<sup>76</sup>

Powell subsequently returned to Tahiti before joining Margaret in Australia, where they married. Powell earned an income writing potboilers for the New South Wales Railway Bookstall series.<sup>77</sup>

## CONCLUSION

... when we consider the well nigh perfect climate that the town enjoys in winter time, its charming situation and surroundings, its varied sources of amusement and its proximity (as distances are reckoned in this continent) to that great centre of wealth and industry which may surely be nominated the metropolis of SA, the causes of Durban’s increasing popularity as a health and pleasure resort demand no explanation; and the time is not far off, we venture to prognosticate, when she will be recognised and formally enthroned as the Queen of South African sea-board towns.

*Durban – The Sea Port of the Garden Colony of South Africa*, page 82.

According to Powell's nephew, Geoffrey, with "a small legacy they bought an isolated cottage in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, where their nearest neighbours were Norman Lindsay, the artist and writer, and his wife."<sup>78</sup> The two men "both in their way recluses, became intimate friends although they could quarrel fiercely, usually on literary questions. Like Lindsay, Powell easily took offence."<sup>79</sup>

Powell began working on a literary novel and an impressed Lindsay recommended he send the manuscript to a London publisher where, says his nephew, "it was accepted with enthusiasm. A literary career beckoned, and England seemed the only place to develop it. In 1925, he and his wife sold up and left, a decision Powell was to query until the end of his days."<sup>80</sup>

In England Powell and his wife led a migratory existence moving from cottage to cottage, "sometimes around Salisbury, sometimes in Bournemouth". Powell did reviewing work for the *Times Literary Supplement* and wrote novels, most of which "had as their background either the South Seas or contemporary England"<sup>81</sup>. For three or four years Powell "wrote leading articles and reviews for *Poetry Review*, but something went amiss, and he severed his connection one day in a rage."<sup>82</sup>

According to his nephew, Powell's life "drifted gently towards its end. Happy enough in the society of his wife, he could blossom when any member of his family broke into his seclusion. Otherwise his pen was his outlet ... He died in 1952, a few months after losing his wife."<sup>83</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 *Durban – The Sea Port of the Garden Colony of South Africa*, published by P.Davis & Sons, Pietermaritzburg and Durban, 1899.
- 2 The story of William Powell is told in "A tale of two phoenixes: The Colonial Building and its architect William Powell" by Stephen Coan, *Natalia* 42, pp.33-44. A photocopy of a section of the unpublished manuscript of *Each To His Taste – An Autobiography* by Sydney Powell was sent to the author in 2003 by Geoffrey Powell, Sydney Powell's nephew, and provided the basis for the article "A Victorian Affair" published in *The Witness* on 29 July 2004 of which the *Natalia* article was a revised and enlarged version. The original manuscript, as well as books and other material relating to Sydney Powell, was donated to the National Library of Australia in 2003 by Geoffrey Powell where they are held as Papers of Sydney Powell, Bid ID 3646265. *Each To His Taste* is thought to have been written about 1942 and is a sequel to the earlier *Adventures of a Wanderer* published in 1928.
- 3 Sydney Walter Powell, *Adventures of a Wanderer*, Century Hutchinson, 1986, p.x. The book was first published by Jonathan Cape in 1928. The 1986 reprint published in The Century Travellers series is introduced by Powell's nephew Geoffrey Powell. This quotation is from Geoffrey Powell's introduction to the 1986 edition published by Hutchinson, p.x. Geoffrey Powell (1914-2005), soldier, author and historian, was the only child of Owen Powell, the son of the architect William Powell, and his wife Kitty. During World War Two while serving with the 1st Airborne Division he took part in the battle of Arnhem in September 1944 where he won a Military Cross. After the war Powell served in Java, Malaya, Kenya and Cyprus. He transferred to the Civil Service and for 12 years worked for MI5, on security policy and counter-espionage. On leaving MI5 in 1977, he founded the Campden Bookshop in Chipping Campden and also helped to establish the Campden and District Archaeological and History Society. Among his books are *The Kandyan Wars: The British Conquest of Ceylon* (1973), *Men at Arnhem* (1976) and *Suez: The Double War*

- (in collaboration with Roy Fullick)(1979);  
*Plumer: The Soldiers' General* (1990) and  
*Buller: A Scapegoat?* (1994).
- 4 *Adventures of a Wanderer*, p.21.  
5 *Ibid.*, p.21.  
6 *Ibid.*  
7 *Ibid.*, p.23.  
8 *Ibid.*, p.41.  
9 *Ibid.*, p.22.  
10 *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.  
11 *Ibid.*, p.23.  
12 *Ibid.*, pp.23-24.  
13 *Ibid.*, p.32.  
14 *Ibid.*, p.34.  
15 *Ibid.*, pp.27-28.  
16 *Ibid.*, p.28.  
17 *Ibid.*  
18 *Ibid.*, p.29.  
19 *Ibid.*, p.30.  
20 *Ibid.*, p.31.  
21 *Ibid.*, p.24.  
22 *Ibid.*, p.25.  
23 *Ibid.*, p.25.  
24 *Ibid.*, p.26.  
25 *Ibid.*, p.26.  
26 *Ibid.*, p.26.  
27 *Ibid.*, p.27.  
28 *Ibid.*, p.35.  
29 *Ibid.*, p.36.  
30 *Ibid.*  
31 *Ibid.*  
32 *Ibid.*, p.37.  
33 *Ibid.*  
34 *Ibid.*, p.38.  
35 *Ibid.*, p.39.  
36 *Ibid.*, p.39.  
37 *Ibid.*, p.40.  
38 *Ibid.*, p.40.  
39 *Ibid.*, pp.40-41.  
40 *Ibid.*, p.41.  
41 *Ibid.*, p.41.  
42 *Ibid.*, pp.49-50. Colonel T. Gallwey, principal medical officer of Natal, who instituted the Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps (NVAC). At the same time Indian lawyer Mohandas Gandhi raised an Indian Ambulance Corps that was incorporated into the NVAC.  
44 *Ibid.*, p. 50.  
44 *Adventures of a Wanderer*, p.18.  
45 *Each to His Taste*, pp.51-52.  
46 *Ibid.*, p.51.  
47 *Ibid.*  
48 *Ibid.*, pp.51-52.  
49 In Durban William Powell senior designed a building at Durban Boy's High School and the public swimming pool, both since demolished, and the dining room of the Durban Club. In Pietermaritzburg he designed the Victoria Hall at Maritzburg College and the recently restored Colonial Building in Church Street. He also designed St James Anglican Church in Dundee.  
50 *Ibid.*, p.52.  
51 *Ibid.* Sydney's elder brother, William, returned to England a few years later.  
52 *Ibid.*  
53 *Ibid.*, p.52.  
54 *Ibid.*, p.53.  
55 *Ibid.*, p.54.  
56 *Ibid.*, p.54.  
57 *Ibid.*  
58 *Ibid.*, p.58.  
59 *Ibid.*  
60 *Ibid.*  
61 *Ibid.*, p.59.  
62 *Ibid.*  
63 *Ibid.*, p.60.  
64 *Ibid.*  
65 *Ibid.*, pp.60-61.  
66 *Ibid.*, p.60.  
67 *Ibid.*  
68 *Ibid.*  
69 *Ibid.*, p.62.  
70 *Adventures of a Wanderer*, p.17.  
71 *Each to His Taste*, p.69.  
72 *Ibid.*, p.75.  
73 *Ibid.*  
74 *Ibid.*, p.76.  
75 Powell also wrote poetry but had difficulty getting it into print. "Despairing of his work ever being published, in 1932 he entered his epic poem *Gallipoli* for a festival or poets under forty years of age which John Masefield, the Poet Laureate, was organising. Awarded the prize, Powell well over the age limit, then 54, admitted to the deception by return of post and gave back the prize cheque of £25. Masefield was understandably annoyed, but the ruse succeeded. The following year the *Poetry Review* published the poem, and in 1934 Harrap brought out a collection of Powell's poetical work, *One Way Street*."

Sydney Powell's adventures in Natal

- Introduction to *Adventures of a Wanderer*, by Geoffrey Powell, p.x. The poem is reprinted in the 1986 edition. John Masefield (1878-1967) served as a Red Cross orderly towards the end of the Gallipoli campaign.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p.ix.
- 77 These books, published by the N.S.W. Bookstall Co., Sydney, included *The Maker of Pearls* (1920), *Hermit Island* (1921); *The Great Jade Seal* (1922); *The Pearls of Cheong Tah* (1922) and *The Trader of Kameko* (1923).
- 78 Norman Lindsay (1879-1969), major Australian artist, sculptor and writer.
- 79 *Adventures of a Wanderer*, p.ix.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p.x. The “literary novel” that impressed Lindsay was probably *Tetua: A Tale in Five Parts*, Constable, London, 1926.
- 81 *Ibid.* A list of works by Powell can be found at <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/3646265>.
- 82 *Ibid.*, pp.x-xi.
- 83 *Ibid.*, p.xi.