

Early proposed roads in the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg

Introduction

I RECENTLY came across two interesting reports on roads in the Government Gazettes of 1853 and 1871. Research has been published on the early Natal railways and harbours, but our early roads seem to have been ignored. The publication of these short reports may inspire someone to fill this missing aspect of KwaZulu-Natal's colonial history.

The first report, that of Captain R.J. Garden of the 45th Regiment, relates his experiences in 1853 while searching for a wagon road over the Drakensberg in the Underberg area.

The wagon road over Van Reenen's Pass was already in use in 1870. With the opening of the diamond fields in the late 1860s an alternative, shorter route was being sought. A wagon road over the Olivier's Hoek Pass was considered. The arguments for and against are presented in the second report published here.

A table of distances, found in the Natal Almanac of 1871, is included. The reports are produced here with the approval of the National Archive, Pietermaritzburg Archive Repository. I have included endnotes for clarity.

VAL WARD

NCP 6/1/1/4.

Government Gazette No 246, Aug 23, 1853.

GOVERNMENT NOTICE No 37, 1853.

The Lieutenant Governor directs the publication of the following Report. For general information.

By Command of the Lieut. Governor.

(Signed) W.C. Sargeant, Colonial Secretary.

Colonial Office

August, 16, 1853.

Fort Napier, Natal
August, 10th, 1853.

Sir,

I have the honor [*sic*] to inform you that I proceeded on the 9th June last, with one wagon, seven soldiers 45th Regiment, and one civilian (Mr Williams¹) to take the command of an exploring party, which had started the previous month, to find a road over the Drakensberg.

I joined this at the Umzimkulu River on 15th, and started from thence again on the 17th June, 1853.

On the 31st July, on my return to the camp, near the sources of the Umzimkulu River, after a patrol (*sic*) of thirteen days duration, I found the supplies of the expedition almost consumed, the soldiers having been on a reduced and scanty allowance for some days. I therefore broke up my camp on the 3rd August, and directed my course towards Pietermaritzburg. On arriving at the nearest kraals, belonging to a branch of Amahlubi tribe, under the petty chief Umkombini,² and being entirely destitute of every description of food, we fortunately met with Mr Toohey.³

From the benevolent and kind hearted gentleman we received coffee, sugar, tobacco, etc, through his intervention, meat and mealies from the Kafirs [*sic*], and subsequently at his farm of Good Hope, on the Elands River⁴, abundant supplies of coffee, sugar, meal, bread, potatoes, and pumpkins which were most grateful to men reduced as we were from hunger and the want of the necessaries of life.

I reached Pietermaritzburg on the afternoon of the 8th instant.

G. D. Greaves, Esq, Government Surveyor, will furnish a plan of the country, which he has surveyed; the acquisition of which will be most valuable and interesting, showing as it will the direction taken by the Patrols [*sic*], and the country through which the expedition has passed.

Both the Government and the public are alike totally ignorant of the difficulties, toilsome labour, and suffering from hunger, the members of the expedition have undergone.

Ignorance of the country, absence of guides possessing local knowledge, coldness of the weather, bad quality of the grass, impossibility of procuring supplies of mealies and vegetables from the Kafirs [*sic*], burning of the grass by persons either ignorant of or hostile to the party, badness of the draught cattle, the rocky

and precipitous nature of the country, and the breaking of the fore wheel of one of the wagons are the causes which tended greatly to delay the expedition.

The vastness and steepness of the spurs of the Drakensberg, the innumerable kloofs which had to be ascended, descended or avoided, the difficulty and toilsome labour of walking through long and slippery grass, the smoke arising from the country being on fire, which obscured the view, the pitiable and foot-sore condition of the horses from want of good food, and the stony nature of the country, and scanty daily quantity of our own provisions, at times barely sufficient to sustain life, are the obstacles which impeded the movements of the patrols [*sic*].

The line of the Drakensberg has been carefully examined from the source of the most South Western tributary⁵ of the Umzimkulu River, to the Giants Castle on the North eastern side, and I can honestly and conscientiously state that between these points there is no place where a wagon can be driven up the mountain without the construction of a road, and which latter could only be effected at considerable expence [*sic*].

The kloof at the source of the little Umcomanzi River⁶ is the nearest point at which a road⁷ can be made, and which I am confident has never been visited by any human beings, except Bushmen, maurauding Kafirs [*sic*] from the Sovereignty, and natives forced to fly thither for refuge during the reigns of Chaka and Dingaan.

Of the country over the Drakensberg I know nothing.

I am of the opinion further that the Bushmen inhabit the country forming the immediate spurs or buttresses of the Drakensberg on the Southern side, and from whence from time to time they make incursions upon the frontier farms – whither they retire at the approach of a foe – and into which the pursuing parties have never yet sufficiently penetrated.

I have, etc, etc, etc,

(Signed) R.J. GARDEN

Capt. 45th Regt.

To the Honorable
The Colonial Secretary.

NCP 6/1/1/22.

The Natal Government Gazette, January 17, 1871.

L.C. No 5, 1871.

The following report of a Select Committee of the Legislative Council appointed to consider the correspondence respecting the Olivier's Hoek Road, and the postal communication with the Diamond-fields is published for general information.

By order of the Legislative Council,

THOMAS FOSTER.
Clerk.

11th January 1871.

Report of a Select Committee appointed to consider the correspondence respecting the Olivier's Hoek Road, and the postal communication with the Diamond-fields.

Your committee had before it the following documents referring to the proposed new road to the Diamond-fields.

1. A Letter from the Lieutenant Governor⁸ to President Brand, enclosing Address No. 44 of the Council.
2. The reply of President Brand thereto.
3. The report of the Colonial Secretary⁹, which is not dated, but which the Colonial Secretary informed the committee had been laid before the Lieutenant Governor on or about the 10th October, and which was laid before the committee on December 30th, 1870.
4. Report of the Civil Engineer¹⁰ for the colony, dated December 30th, 1870, and laid before the committee January 6th, 1871.
5. Report of Mr Allison, Border Agent, residing at Olivier's Hoek, not dated, but presented on the 6th January 1871.

The gentleman who furnished these reports gave evidence before the committee, in explanation of their several reports, and evidence was obtained from other gentlemen acquainted with the district, or who had travelled by the route along which it is proposed to make the new road.

The point of departure of the new road, it is agreed, should be at Estcourt. The committee would, in the first place, compare the two roads from their point of divergence to the frontier of the colony on top of the Drakensberg.

The Colonial Secretary, in his report, estimates both these portions of the roads to be exactly the same length. He stated the distance from Estcourt to Good Hope¹¹ to be 59 miles, and as it is just six miles more to the top of the mountain, the entire distance from Estcourt to the top of the Drakensberg by Van Reenen's Pass is computed to be 65 miles. The reports of the Civil Engineer and Mr Allison state the distance to be 66 and 65 miles respectively. The Colonial Secretary estimates the distance from Estcourt to the top of Olivier's Hoek Pass to be also 65 miles, while Mr Allison and the Civil Engineer say it is but 63 miles. It is therefore evident that the greatest saving in distance which can be effected by the new line of road to the top of the mountain will be two to three miles. But to effect this your committee was informed a new piece of road would have to be made from Loose Kop,¹² to Oosthuysen's Spruit,¹³ which would have the effect of shortening the existing road to the foot of Olivier's Hoek Pass three to four miles.

Though the actual distance to be saved is small, it was alleged in favour of this route, that the pass is much less steep, and that therefore a considerable saving of time would be effected in making the ascent, as the wagons could travel faster than they can up Van Reenen's Pass.

The Civil Engineer informed the committee that about £1 600 would be required to make the road from Estcourt to the top of Oliver's Hoek Pass suitable for heavy traffic, and that to bridge the three streams which would occasionally be unfordable – namely the Sterk Spruit,¹⁴ the Little Tugela,¹⁵ and the Great Tugela¹⁶ – would require

an additional sum of £3 200. But he also stated that this road when made would be a good road, comparatively level, would be sound and hard, and would be easily kept in repair, as there is good material in the vicinity of the road for that purpose. He also stated that the road up Van Reenen's Pass, though at present in good repair, was not naturally so firm, that the ascent up the mountain was steeper, and would therefore make the road at that part more liable to injury from heavy rains, and that there was no good material near the road suitable for mending it.

The only other evidence the committee took on this point was from Mr J.N. Boshoff,¹⁷ who was of opinion that the road up Van Reenen's Pass is as hard as any road over the mountain, and that there is plenty of suitable material near for repairing it. But Mr Boshoff stated that he had not seen Olivier's Hoek Pass.

Mr Boshoff and the Civil Engineer agreed in stating that were the road by Olivier's Hoek Pass made, that by Van Reenen's Pass would still have to be maintained, and that a bridge over the Tugela at Colenso would be as much required as at present.

Your committee found that though only three miles would be saved between Estcourt and the top of the mountain, to obtain so small an advantage a first outlay of £1 600 would be required, and if the three steams were bridged £3 200 additional would be needed, and that a considerable annual extra expenditure would be required to keep the new road in repair.

It became necessary, consequently, to ascertain whether any large saving of distance could be effected beyond the mountain – in the territory of the

Orange Free State – to justify so large an expenditure as had been stated to be required on the Natal side.

The Civil Engineer clearly described to the committee the road he had examined. This road commences at the top of Olivier's Hoek Pass, and joins the present upper road from Harrismith to Bethlehem near the drift over Eland's River.¹⁸ The length of this piece of road the Civil Engineer estimated at 28 miles, while the distance from the top of Van Reenen's Pass to the same point by way of Harrismith is 44 miles, thus showing a saving of 16 miles. But the Civil Engineer stated that by making a road from the top of Van Reenen's Pass along the left bank of the Wilge River, not only would a saving of four miles be effected, but that wagons would be saved the necessity of crossing the Wilge River twice. If this piece of road were made the saving of 16 miles, which the Civil Engineer showed to be possible, would be reduced to 12 miles. The entire saving from Estcourt to Eland's River would consequently be 15 miles, or until the road by the left bank of the Wilge river is made, 19 miles. The report of the Civil Engineer states the saving to be only 18 miles, but this slight difference arises from a clerical error in the computation.

The Colonial Secretary and Mr Alison together inspected a road in the same locality. These gentlemen seem to have taken a course a little to the south of that explored by the Civil Engineer, and after travelling the same distance as that gentleman, nearly 20 to 30 miles, found themselves six miles from the Eland's River, and about the same distance from the upper road between Harrismith and Bethlehem.

They returned at this point without having seen Eland's River, or ascertaining by actual inspection whether there was any drift over the river in that locality, except the ordinary one about six miles to the north. This ordinary drift is the one near which the Civil Engineer's proposed road joins the wagon road at present in use. So that under any circumstances the road travelled by the Colonial Secretary and Mr Allison was at least six miles longer between the top of Olivier's Hoek Pass and the Eland's River, than that explored by the Civil Engineer.

The evidence given by the Colonial Secretary and Mr Allison of the district beyond the point where they stopped is based upon statements made by a Mr De Jager¹⁹ and the outrider of Mr Allison, and is not of such a character as to justify the committee in attaching much importance to it. In illustration it may be mentioned that Mr Allison, though he did not see Eland's River, was under the impression that it flowed to the eastward, whereas the evidence of Mr Mellersh,²⁰ who has resided in that locality for some weeks, and all the maps before the committee, showed that it flows slightly to the west of north. Also that the Colonial Secretary and Mr Allison state in their reports that they were informed that the distance from where they stopped to Bethlehem was only 18 miles, whereas the Civil Engineer states the distance from Eland's River to Bethlehem by the upper road to be 42 miles, in the accuracy of which statement he was corroborated by other witnesses, and as the Colonial Secretary and Mr Allison were six miles east of that river, they must have been 48 instead of 18 miles from Bethlehem, unless another drift

and road were made than that ordinarily used. No evidence was given before the committee of the practicability of such a drift or road, but on the contrary that the district through which such a road would have to pass to join the ordinary road at Leidenberg's Vley²¹ was hilly and swampy.

It seems, therefore, that the advantages to be gained by the proposed new road are,

1st. A saving distance between Estcourt and Bethlehem of 15 or at the very most 19 miles.

2nd. That the ascent of the mountain at Olivier's Hoek would be easier, and probably the road firmer than at Van Reenen's Pass, though the latter is capable of much improvement.

To obtain these advantages an immediate outlay of £1 850 to £1 900 is said to be required. Your committee are, however, afraid that the 28 miles of road on the other side of the mountain which is represented by the Civil Engineer, as well as the letter of President Brand, to be swampy, would cost more than the amount estimated to make it fit for heavy traffic. If the three large streams on this side of the mountain were bridged £3 200 additional would be required, so that the entire outlay would be from £5 100 to £5 500. Nor would this be all, as the maintenance of the entire length of the new line of road, extending over 91 miles through a stormy district, would be imposed on the colony, involving a large annual expenditure.

The committee, in estimating the cost of this road, have computed that the construction, and keeping in repair, of that part of the road which is within the territory of the Orange Free State would devolve on Natal, as President

Brand has intimated, in reply to the Lieutenant Governor, that his Government cannot construct a road through so swampy a locality.

The committee has not ascertained that any reports, or evidence respecting the proposed road, except the letter of President Brand and the report of the Colonial Secretary, accompanied by a sketch of the district (which the committee has not seen), and a table of distances prepared by Mr Allison, were before the Government at the time when the Lieutenant Governor in his opening speech informed the Council that the Government had not “desisted from pushing forward the repairs of the pass by Olivier’s Hoek, and the completion of the road leading to it, by which line of route I am persuaded, *after full enquiry*, a very considerable saving of distance may be effected”.

Your committee is of opinion that the advantages expected to be gained by the proposed new route are insufficient to justify at present the large outlay which would be required for the construction of the road, and for keeping it in repair, especially as the expense both of making and maintaining it, on both sides of the mountain, would fall on this colony. The committee would, however, recommend that as the road on both sides of the mountain is to some extent practicable for wagon traffic, that a sum not exceeding £300 be expended in improving the Pass, so that transport riders may have an opportunity of testing the suitability of the road.

The committee would point out that no reference is made in President Brand’s letter to the line of road beyond Van Reenen’s Pass, which

by keeping along the left bank of the Wilge River, would enable wagoners to avoid that river, and thus prevent the necessity of crossing it twice, as well as shorting [*sic*] the distance which was mentioned in the address to the Lieutenant Governor from the Council on the 8th September last, and would recommend that negotiations should be entered into with the Government of the Orange Free State, with a view to making the road available.

Your committee has carefully considered the correspondence on the subject of improved postal arrangements with the Orange Free State, and the report of the Postmaster General²² thereon, and is of opinion that the plan proposed by the Postmaster General, as improved by the Lieutenant Governor, should be carried out as early as practicable.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Mr Williams - not identified.
- 2 Umkombini - not identified.
- 3 Mr. Toohey – Daniel Charles.
- 4 Eland’s River is a tributary of the Upper uMkhomazi River.
- 5 The south-western tributary of the Umzimkulu is probably the Mlambanja River on which the Drakensberg Gardens resort is situated.
- 6 The uMkhomazana River
- 7 Now the Sani Pass.
- 8 Lieutenant Governor of Natal, His Excellency Robert W. Keate. Lincoln’s Inn barrister admitted 1844. Came to Natal as Governor in 1867. Previously Commissioner of Seychelles Islands 1849; Lt-Gov. of Granada in the West Indies 1853; Lt-Gov of Trinidad 1856. Arbitrator in boundary disputes South African Republic and Orange Free State 1870 – for Republic; South African Republic and Griqua chiefs 1871 – for the Griquas.
- 9 Colonial Secretary, Hon. D. Erskine.
- 10 Colonial Engineer, P. Paterson.
- 11 Good Hope, six kilometres from top of Van Reenen’s Pass.
- 12 Loose Kop, probably Loskop.
- 13 Oosthuysen’s Spruit, probably near Bergville.

Early proposed roads in the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg

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| <p>14 Sterkspruit, Champagne Valley south of Winterton.</p> <p>15 The Little Tugela, near Winterton.</p> <p>16 The Great Tugela at Bergville.</p> <p>17 J.N. Boshoff, Resident Magistrate, Klip River (later Ladysmith); Legislative Council member for Klip River</p> <p>18 Elands River, Orange Free State.</p> <p>19 Mr de Jager. Unidentified, there were several farmers in the area with this name.</p> | <p>20 Mr Mellersh. Legislative Council member for Klip River.</p> <p>21 Leidenberg's Vley. Not identified.</p> <p>22 Postmaster General: F. Becker (absent on leave). Acting, E.F. McGill, Chief Clerk and Accountant in Colonial Engineer's Department.</p> |
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DISTANCES THROUGH NATAL TO THE VAAL
RIVER DIAMOND FIELDS

via HARRISMITH	Miles	via OLIVIER'S HOEK	Miles
From P.M.Burg to Estcourt	62	From P.M.Burg to Estcourt	62
Estcourt to Colenso	22	Estcourt to Little Tugela	23
Colenso to Dodds'	17	Little Tugela to top	
Dodds' to Good Hope	20	of Drakensberg	42
Good Hope to Wilge R.	20	Top of Drakensberg to junction	
Wilge R to Harrismith	12	of road to Harrismith	7
Harrismith to Bethlehem	60	thence to Bethlehem	39
			<hr style="width: 100%; border: 0.5px solid black;"/>
			173
		Difference	40
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Total	213	Total	213

Natal Almanac 1871.