

PORTRAITS OF COLONIAL NATAL

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As a fifth generation descendant of an 1850 Byrne settler family, the author understandably has more than a passing interest in South Africa's currently unfashionable and much-criticised colonial era. He justifiably takes pride in the achievements of his ancestors while unambiguously acknowledging the many extensively publicised negative aspects of imperial penetration and colonial settlement in southern Africa.

Several of the twelve chapters which comprise this work have already been published in academic journals. These include, appropriately, *Natalia* – the journal of the Natal Society that the settlers established in 1851 in Pietermaritzburg. This establishment led to the creation of a library (now the Bessie Head Library) and a museum (now the KwaZulu-Natal Museum). These developments were not merely a consequence of the settler urge to keep in touch with the English-speaking world and the culture of the printed word which they had left behind. They were also driven by a curiosity to generate knowledge about the resources and potential of the new Colony of Natal whose relatively easy annexation had been inadvertently facilitated by earlier Zulu and Boer expansionism.

The book includes a 'portrait' of the midlands-based agricultural entrepreneur and politician Joseph Baynes, the inclusion of which demonstrates that the Colony's white politicians were not all third-rate incompetents or irredeemably prejudiced towards persons

of colour. For the most part, the focus of this collection is on southern Natal, a region that, prior to the author's interest in it, had been largely neglected as an area for research and publication. Based primarily on original archival resources and colonial newspapers, there are 'portraits' which trace the development of Umzinto, Umkomaas and Port Shepstone as well as of previously ignored sugar pioneers Michael Jeffels and James Arbuthnot. These notables contributed immensely to the economic development of that part of the new Colony. Another section outlines the career of Frank Reynolds who, prior to his knighthood in 1916, had almost £500 000 worth of investments in the local sugar industry, had created many new job opportunities and, by the time of his death in 1930, whose company controlled most of the plantations, comprising 19 425 hectares, between Umzinto and the Mzimkhulu river.

What emerges from these studies is that the southward advancement of Natal's white settler frontier was to a large extent driven by the infrastructural, investment and labour needs of the sugar industry. As on the north coast, that crop had emerged as the most viable option in developing an export staple best suited to local conditions and foreign market demand. Further 'portraits' reflect the extent to which this process was dependent upon imported indentured Indian labour. This was at a time when, following the formal 1833 abolition of slavery throughout Britain's empire, indentures were the most effective means

of maintaining a closely controlled labour force. Attention is also given to the daily experiences of Indians working under these conditions, the abuses to which they were subjected on some plantations, as well as the emergence of mounting prejudice against them when they became permanent settlers and traders who began to outnumber the white population.

Collectively, these 'portraits' provide interesting insights into both the entrepreneurial and exploitative dimensions of Natal's colonial era, which were not dissimilar to those in other regions of

the subcontinent and in other parts of the world. Such insights included overcoming the challenge of rugged topography, sometimes with adverse effects on the natural environment, developing viable exports and constructing access to markets, attracting investment capital as well as accessing labour resources, expropriating land and often abusing the human rights of indigenous peoples and of employees. *Portraits of Colonial Natal* offers candid glimpses of them all.

BILL GUEST