

THE LAST OUTPOST ON THE ZULU FRONTIERS: FORT NAPIER AND THE BRITISH IMPERIAL GARRISON

by GRAHAM DOMINY

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IN this scholarly and competent book Graham Dominy explores the influence the imperial garrison at Fort Napier had on the economy and class and gender relationships in Pietermaritzburg, as well as the wider Colony of Natal. Although he does mention the scares, conflicts and punitive expeditions in which the regiments posted at Fort Napier were involved, his main focus is on how the garrison impacted on settler society during times of peace. The gist of Dominy's argument is that the nineteenth century British Army, with its hierarchical divisions between officers and other ranks, contributed to the class-based Victorian society, which was replicated in the distant colony of Natal. He points out that there were always women with the army and this impacted on gender and class relations in the colony. The colonial elite encouraged their daughters to marry officers from the garrison, while at the other end of the class spectrum prostitution, often across the colour line, took place. A number of men from the garrison took their discharge and married and settled down in Natal. The garrison, argues Dominy, also played a pivotal role in the construction of concepts of masculinity among settlers.

Dominy points out that although the garrison was generally viewed as having a stabilising effect on the colony, paradoxically the problems of ill-discipline, lust and drunkenness heightened social tensions. The more respectable members of Maritzburg society were

often concerned about the behaviour of the soldiers from the fort and were at times vocal in their criticism of the garrison. Despite the negative aspects of military life, the men at the fort provided technical support and labour for the developing town. Fort Napier was the first major building project in Pietermaritzburg and took almost two years to complete. Much of the work was done by the soldiers themselves. The garrison was also a lucrative market for farmers and traders.

Dominy has researched the garrison and its impact on Pietermaritzburg in meticulous detail, and has produced a readable and interesting book. This work is a 'must read' for anyone who wishes to gain an understanding of the significant, and hitherto largely forgotten, role Fort Napier played in the history of Pietermaritzburg.

The main title, despite the attempted play on words, is misleading and unhelpful. The sub-title gives a clearer understanding of what the book is about. Considering the role St George's Garrison Church played in the city, it would have been enlightening to read more about this place of worship.

TONY CUBBIN

Editor's note: The Fort Napier Garrison was established by Lieutenant Charles Gibb of the Royal Engineers in August 1843 in order to house the 45th Regiment which intended to protect the citizens and the settlement of Pietermaritzburg under British colonial control.