

From the Cape to Natal and back

5 JANUARY — 5 FEBRUARY 1846:

The Journal of an Unknown Visitor

Capetown: Monday 5th January 1846

With Captain McDonald¹ on board the *Louisa*² and breakfasted. The *Richard Mount*³ whose captain was at Gillman's (Jackson by name) sailed also. Had a fair west wind which increased towards night. Our quarters in our little vessel very close. Lodewick and self, Mr. and Mrs. Buchanan⁴ (going to set up a newspaper in Natal) and 4 children and servant, Mr. Munting, Keyter and 4 soldiers besides a bull on deck.⁵ All sick but Munting.

Tuesday 6th January 1846

The breeze increased to a gale with rain, and the sea became a wilderness of foam. Our little bark had part of the bulwarks carried away and the poor bull's fodder was all washed overboard. The little vessel rode it well although shipping much water. The captain never recollected such weather at this season.

Wednesday 7th

Rushed on deck on hearing the captain called. He took the helm and put the ship about and swore at the men for not hoisting the jib as he thought we were running close to the shore, and the wind was blowing furiously and his long grey locks stood straight out as he stood at the wheel. We were all in a terrible fright but we got safely about and it turned out the haze and rain made the land seem nearer than it was. A lee shore on such a coast in such a storm was indeed terrible to think of. We scudded along under bare poles. Came around Cape Recife after breakfast, the sea beaten into a fog by the long ridge of rocks which runs out from it. I could not help thinking of the fate of those dashed upon it with such a sea. We got into Algoa Bay but the sea was running too high and the wind blowing too hard to get into Port Elizabeth, where we were to take up Mr. Shepstone, the Diplomatic Agent,⁶ for whom the unfortunate Scholz was mistaken when murdered by the kafirs. We got near enough to see the town and shipping but soon left it behind again and went out at the other side of the bay to brave the gale, and we danced about in fine style. Towards evening it moderated and we passed the *Nancy*⁷ which had been driven along the caffer coast far from her destination, Algoa Bay. She was lying to and we passed her like a shot.

Thursday 8th

We got a little beyond the Kei river when the wind failed us and ultimately became contrary so that we were carried back many miles by the strong current during this and Friday 9th.

Saturday 10th January 1846

At night a beautiful breeze sprang suddenly up and carried us along all Sunday to the St. John's river, beyond which we had another calm. This was a fine part of the coast with high grassy hills in many places wooded with gloomy forests. This was the beginning of the Natal territory belonging to Britain. We saw a few huts and the natives occasionally, and here the grass had been burnt in many places by the natives, some of whose fires we saw. So also in the first part of caffirland, but not in the intermediate country for the tribes burn at different seasons. No cultivation was here visible, but we frequently saw patches of maize on the caffer coast.

Monday 12th and Tuesday 13th

Wind sometimes with us, sometimes against us, and current 4 or 5 miles an hour with rain occasionally.

Wednesday 14th

A fair wind but not strong, only about 40 miles from the port, delightful view of the coast, green grassy plains and hills interspersed with bush and dotted with trees. Towards evening we began to approach and on the morning of

Thursday 15th

found ourselves off the Bluff of Natal and dropped anchor about a mile from the shore. The Bluff covered with wood and on the top of it the Boors had their cannon planted during the disturbances. A low tongue of land runs from the mouth of the Umgeni, behind which are seen the masts of the ships in the port and a flagstaff and a few mud buildings. The life boat came off to us with a pilot and also a boat from the captain's brother's vessel, the *Pilot*,⁸ with fresh beef, &c. She was laying at anchor waiting for a wind and sailed in the afternoon. The *Souffren*,⁹ a French vessel from Mauritius, was lying a wreck upon the Point. She had been taking cattle on board and parted from her anchors during a gale and ran ashore. Her crew were saved by a rope carried ashore and the bullocks swam ashore. We lay all day waiting for a wind which never came.

Friday 16th

Towards the middle of the day the required breeze sprang up, an easterly wind in conjunction with the full of the tide are required to enter the harbour and clear the bar, upon which at full tides there are from 10 to 14 ft. water.

We got over the bar shortly after 6, just grazing it, and keeping very close to the Bluff along which the water is deep close to the shore, and we dropped anchor just opposite close to the land. The *Margaret*,¹⁰ engaged to carry the captain and crew of the *Souffren* back to Bourbon, was the only vessel in the port. As soon as the anchor was down several boats came off to us with the people of the place. They were mostly dressed in white straw hats, but seemed of the noisy Yankee sort, talking greatly about the place going ahead. Buchanan and his family went ashore, so did Munting without his little dog, which we stole and hid. It was a beautiful moon which lit up the bay with its picturesquely wooded shores. The few rough govt. buildings made of wattle and thatched, with the sentinels parading in front, gave animation to the scene.

Saturday 17th January

Sketched the govt. buildings, went ashore with Keyter, Ludwig and Munting and walked up to D'Urban. Munting's little dog began to bark as wild as if mad and he called to me and Cato¹¹ to kill it. Put up at McDonald's¹² and went and met Lodewick and Keyter at Milner's. In the afternoon went to the camp. Most part of the earthworks have been pulled down. Saw the burial ground of the killed and several soldiers' gardens with banana growing.

Went with Buchanan into a Zooloo's hut. Everything neatly arranged, his assegais and shield slung, his wooden pillow, bedding, holiday-toggerly, and he was eating the wild sugar-cane of which the natives are fond. Saw some cotton plants growing in the garden behind the hotel, and tobacco.

Sunday 18th

Keyter and Lodewick passed by on horseback for Mauritzburg. Captain McDonald breakfasted and dined with me. Munting called. Walked with Malcolm, a steerage passenger, to the Umgeni river. Road runs through a level valley with a rich soil on the outskirts of the wood. Millions of grasshoppers on the path. Went with a caffer called Jonas up to a kraal on the hillside and had some milk. The beads he wore, he said, were given him for his sister by Mr. Fryer. Gave him 6d. which an old savage wanted to take. The hut had doors just large enough to creep into, with a hard platform in front to sit upon. On our way back we met 2 of Panda's warriors fully equipped with spear and shield. Tall fellows but slim and wounded in many places. Many little boys were in the river spearing fish. Malcolm had seen much of the world, had been at St. Thomas, Canada, during the rebellion in which he was a volunteer, Demerara and India.

Walker,¹³ who keeps the halfway house to Mauritzburg and has lately been admitted an attorney here and was articled to Dimes of Austin Friars,¹⁴ came to McDonald's and [I] engaged a passage by his wagon. Promised to start tomorrow morning.

Monday 19th

Before breakfast walked down to the Point and on board the *Louisa* with Captain McDonald and got my things ready for coming on shore. Started a large bird with brown back and whitish belly. All the way through a wood with picturesquely gnarled trees of some size, to look after Walker's wagon at Bedingfields.¹⁵ Promised to start in afternoon. Walked over the fields towards the camp. Saw a snake with a red head and pouch.¹⁶ In the afternoon walked into the wood towards the Umgeni, caffer oranges, &c. Walker and Thomas dined with us. Strings of caffers, male and female, came into the yard with fruit &c. for sale. Martingolas, a nice native fruit, red, of the shape of an acorn, with a white milky juice.

In the evening very vivid lightning over the hills called the Barrier,¹⁷ and distant thunder. Some rain fell.

Tuesday 20th

A man lying outside dying from drink and has had a good education. Could hear him calling out from the hut where he was lying, close to my bedroom wall. Waiting for Walker's wagon. Started in it about noon with two caffer boys and Cameron as driver (has a brother ensign in an English regiment). Mr. Munting with us. Over the Barrier and outspanned.

Long rank grass and the hills scattered with trees, chiefly mimosa. Cooked a steak on the wood ashes. Our caffer leaders ate quantities of sugar-cane of which they had a stock of several bundles. Outspanned for the night not far from Cowies.¹⁸ Slept in the open air. Our caffers never seemed tired of eating meat cut into strips and just thrown on the embers, and it was all the same to them whether sweet or fresh. A thunder storm on the hills.

Wednesday 21st

Started at daylight and outspanned at Elliot's to breakfast. A fine grassy plain but trees almost wholly disappeared till a short way before reaching Mauritzburg, except in the remote kloofs. Pass the Uisendoorn over the Geel Hoogte before reaching Walker's, the Half Way House,¹⁹ so called from the steep and narrow road over the mountains which command fine views of the Bluff and port, off which we saw the *California*²⁰ lying, just arrived.

There is a remarkable patch of red clay on the hill on the right and huge boulders of granite on the left. The ground here appears to be the most elevated between the Point and Mauritzburg. Met Lodewick with 2 horses not far from Walker's, having started that morning from Mauritzburg. He likes Natal much and most likely will stay at Otto's, Keyter's brother-in-law. We outspanned for the night at Potgieter's, near a small stream. Many fireflies visible at night.

Thursday 22nd

Continued our journey over similar country of grass hills. Went out of the road from the wagon with my gun after 3 oribi antelopes, but they had already got scent. Many locusts in places. Found places in the long grass where animals had lain. On going through a moist spot on top of a hill where a few bushes and creeping plants grew, started a grey buck with short horns about 4 ft. high, but did not see him in time to fire, and after my search was ineffectual joined the wagon close to an abandoned farm house upon a hill which had been burnt. Where we outspanned for dinner many mimosa trees were scattered over the hills, and wood and bush was seen in the kloofs. On the right tabular mountains are seen in the distance one of which bears the name of, and a striking resemblance to, Table Mountain.²¹ Crows of large size, both black and white-necked, began to appear and are numerous at Mauritzburg. Followed the course of the small stream where we outspanned, but started nothing but some 'addidis',²² dark slate coloured birds with long legs and beaks, which flew screaming from the trees. They are said to be good eating. The stream ran in a very deep cleft sometimes over native rock. When we had arrived upon the summit of the hills beyond, we got our first sight of Mauritzburg. First the camp at Fort Napier appeared, then the houses of the town scattered over an extent of three miles on a rich grassy plain at the foot of some fine green mountains near whose summits were considerable patches of wood. The long grass of the plain was of a brownish colour and resembled a huge cornfield. We descended steep hills to it, crossing the river Umgeni²³ which supplies the town with water and of which a branch runs round it. It is but a shallow stream, not exceeding 20 yards broad, but running clear and bright. Kaffirs were washing clothes in it.

After adjusting our attire a little we were not long in arriving at the village and, as is too often the case, the first object that presented itself was an Englishman reeling drunk. The houses are scattered far apart on erven of a morgen in extent. Called upon the Governor, Mr. West,²⁴ who has a neat house of 4 rooms newly built, who received me politely. His house is on the enormous square or quadrangle which is called the market and is overgrown with long grass. The 'trunk', a dilapidated white flat roofed building of one storey adorns the centre. Water has been brought from the Umgeni and is led through every street. Few of the erven have been cultivated but there are several gardens in which there were fruit trees and vegetables flourishing well. It is requisite water should be brought to the plants or they will degenerate and die. Quantities of the plant called in England 'Prince of Wales Feathers'²⁵ grew in the streets, also sorrel.

Called and presented my letter to Mr. Cloete,²⁶ the Recorder. He seemed to think the govt. salaries too small but he thought Mr. Harding,²⁷ the Crown Prosecutor, might want assistance down at the Point. If I had wished to farm he would have got me a good one for £5 a year or perhaps nothing, people having several being glad of the improvements. Went over to Landsberg's to get supper but he said he did not keep an inn and referred me to Botha. Went to his place, far at the west side of town. He said he did not keep an inn only a billiard room. However, we got a tolerable supper. Dark night and grass damp from rain, lost my way and obliged to call people to show a light on the path in the streets. Mistook market place and got far beyond Cloete's. Asked way at a cabin, but was told by the man, then half drunk, he would tell me if I would pay him for it. Slept in wagon with the caffers, alarm of wild beast. I fancied I saw a wagging tail, but only fancy.

Friday 23rd January

Walked in morning about the town and laid in coffee, sugar, &c. for the homeward journey. Went in wagon to Bothman's mill. A very nice one. Understand £900 was given for that and the farm. Night rainy and outspanned early at Usendoorns.²⁸ Two officers hunting, scouting the hills. Dead ox abandoned by another wagon. Heard the wolves like a dog's bark at night.

Saturday 24th January

Road very dirty and greasy from the rain. Went after game when we outspanned for breakfast and started a buck near the top of a hill but too late to fire. Munting's little dog ran away. Reached Walker's and dined. Walker, the innkeeper, attorney, dog breaker, horse doctor, &c. &c. not at home. Outspanned for the night at Elliott's. Rainy. He had lost his sheep by a tiger²⁹ or lion and we loaded gun and pistols ready to receive any beasts, but none arrived. Rain made roads in a beastly state and difficult to draw.

Sunday 25th

Started early and arrived again at the Point in the afternoon. Overtook a caffer chief tastefully decorated with beads, his face well smeared with fat and quite the gentleman. Went after a large bird and fired my rifle at it without success. Several snakes in a tangled copse by a stream near Cowie's.

Monday 26th

To Milner's³⁰ about a return passage by the *Louisa*. Caffers with a monkey for sale for 4/-. Stories about the habits and superstitions of the Zooloos. Think they shall turn into snakes at death and will on no account kill one. Will not eat fowls, except the young people, nor pork either. If you put a hair from your head in the fire when they are sitting around they will all start up in a fright. If one is wounded they always cut the flesh to the bone to cure it. Price of a wife 10 cows and if not approved returned to father and the price received back. Said to be particularly chaste and virtuous. Before the governor came it was the fashion to take the law into one's hands. Walker of 'Spalsman's Lodge' had lost some money and he went up to the kraal and summoned the chief whom he told if he did not produce the thief he would burn the kraal on a certain day. He disavowed all knowledge of the theft, and as the money was not returned W. went up with another armed with guns at the day appointed, but the natives had fled and he burned the kraal as it stood. He was out shooting one day after a buck and he saw two boas after it. He fired a barrel at each and killed both, which were of large size.

Tuesday 27th

Went for a walk up to the Umgeni, to the kraal I had before visited and found Jonas who had just brought in a heavy load of wood. Went into his hut, many marks of intercourse with civilised people there. Plates, and clothes stowed away as usual without being worn. Endeavoured to change beads for an assegai or two, but his stock seemed much neglected and he seemed to have plenty of beads, and he wanted too much for some little baskets. So I went away, giving him some. I was standing by one of the large Euphorbia trees scoring the rind with my knife and tasting the acrid milk, when several caffers advanced and kindly warned me it was poisonous. Some were fine stout fellows and one or two looked like good humoured fellows, calling out, laughing and joking with each other and some women. One, a tremendous fat fellow of great size, came along with several women behind him, strutting in grand style. Showed one of them my beads, and went with him to his kraal, some distance to the left of the road back, and disposed of them all for assegais and shield without understanding any of their language, laying the price upon the article I wished to purchase. One took the shield and assegais and showed me their gestures when in battle with their enemies, rattling the shield and making horrid faces. Indeed, I was almost frightened when he rushed towards me with the assegai levelled as if to transfix me. He had several 'picaninis' on whom he bestowed the beads and whom he treated very affectionately. I could not prevail on him to sell me his costume, which was not, however, a very handsome one. For some gilt beads he particularly admired, he offered me 6d. cash which he produced and afterwards some coppers. On taking leave shook hands with both cordially. The caffers I met were much amused at seeing me carry a shield and assegais. Bought another assegai, (which by the bye is not their name for it but 'sponti' or some such) of a young caffer for 6d.

Wednesday 28th

Got a caffer to take my things down and went to the Point and embarked on board the *Louisa* again for Cape Town.

All the Natal gentry on board as usual to get all they can of the captain's grog and wine &c. Two splendid pair of koodoo's horns taken on board. About 3 o'clock, high water, we sailed out but owing to some mismanagement nearly ran head on to the rocks before entering the narrows and had we not let go the anchor that instant should have been on them. All on board in great excitement. Crossed the bar without difficulty. As before, immense quantities of porpoises in the bay outside. Burdon shot a fish the day before inside. Sailed out with a smart breeze, though a head wind. I was soon sick and remained so for three days, suffering dreadful nausea. Had a good run, mostly some distance from the coast to beyond Algoa Bay when we got headwinds and calms. We were in ballast trim, having nothing but fowls and maize. One morning amused ourselves fishing and caught several silver fish in a very short time. Met the *Thunderbolt*,³¹ war steamer with troops for the Cowie off Cape Vaches, disturbances being apprehended on the frontier. At last a fair breeze sprang up which lasted us to the Cape and early in the morning of the

5th February 1846,

At daylight, Captain M. thought we had run past the Cape and that he saw Table Mountain behind us, but some clouds made that appearance. However, we found ourselves when the thick fog cleared away, which concealed the mountains, not far from Cape Point and about 1 o'clock we came to anchor in Table Bay. Distressing intelligence awaited the captain. His wife whom he had left well, had died in a fit and was buried. The *Travers Spaight*³² lying a wreck upon the shore at the Salt River, the *Diana*³³ run ashore close to the town, the *Kate*³⁴ completely dismasted with all her bulwarks carried away, which occurred when she was near Natal in the gale of 6th January. The *Macedon*³⁵ and other vessels under repair.

Transcribed and edited by B. J. T. LEVERTON

Notes:

1. Captain John McDonald was in charge in the *Louisa* until 28.11.1846 only.
2. The *Louisa* was a schooner of 58 tons and traded on the coast from Cape Town to Angra Pequena. Passengers, as entered in the Natal register, were Mr. and Mrs. Buchanan and four children, Messrs. Lodewyk, Munting, Taylor, Cato and one servant, and six steerage passengers. The *Louisa* was but the sixth ship to arrive at the Bay after the establishment of firm British rule in December 1845. The Durban agents were the Milner brothers.
3. No details available except that she sailed for London on 5.1.1846.
4. David Dale Buchanan, later editor of the *Natal Witness*.
5. According to the Cape Archives Chamber of Commerce records, Messrs. Fryer and Eagar were also passengers.
6. Theophilus Shepstone, later Secretary for Native Affairs under representative government.
7. Schooner of 83 tons, captained by Thomas Metcalf. Arrived at Cape Town 14.12.1845 and departed thence 5.1.1846.
8. A brig of approximately 100 tons under Captain H. McDonald. This ship was involved in the skirmishing between the Boers and British *circa* 1842. It had arrived in D'Urban on 28.12.1845, bringing to Natal Donald Moodie and family, Walter Harding and family as well as several military officers.
9. No details available.
10. Schooner of 47 tons captained by S. Drake, had arrived at the Bay on 3.1.1845 ex Cape Town.

11. Presumably G. C. Cato.
12. Hugh McDonald's *Commercial Hotel*, later named the *Masonic* and ultimately the *Royal*.
13. Arthur Walker, known in Natal as 'Hookey', a clever but somewhat unscrupulous lawyer.
14. R. N. Currey in *Letters of a Natal Sheriff*, O.U.P. 1968, says he had experience in a Dublin law office.
15. Presumably Samuel Beningfield.
16. Could not be identified by Dr. J. Pringle, Natal snake expert.
17. Clearly a corruption of the word 'Berea'.
18. William Cowie of Cowie's Hill.
19. Possibly Botha's Hill of today.
20. A barque of 187 tons under Captain Duggan ex Algoa Bay, arrived 20.1.1846 with, *inter alia*, Mr. and Mrs. T. Shepstone and four children as passengers. She was registered at Boston N.S.
21. Possibly the first English language reference to this geographical feature.
22. Ibises known, because of their call, as 'Adidas' or 'Hadadas'.
23. Actually the Umsindusi, a tributary of the Umgeni.
24. Martin West, who had arrived at Natal on the *Rosebud* on 3.12.1845.
25. *Amaranthus Hypochondriacus*.
26. Henry Cloete.
27. Walter Harding, later Natal's first Chief Justice.
28. Uysdoorns, south of Pietermaritzburg on the road to Durban.
29. Leopards were then commonly called tigers.
30. A shipping business run by Thomas and Henry Milner.
31. The H.M.S. *Thunderbolt* had sailed from Cape Town on 2.6.1846 for Simon's Bay, where, presumably, the troops had been embarked.
32. Referred to by Theal, *History of South Africa from 1795*, Vol. II, as the *Francis Spaight*.
33. A barque which arrived at Cape Town on 26.12.1845, bound from Pomba under command of Lt. Mends and detained by H.M.S. *Mutine*.
34. A schooner of 85 tons, well known at D'Urban, captained by Glendining.
35. No information traced.