

A Curiosity of Natal Settler Literature

‘...comfort and Natal have yet to form acquaintance...’

— Coventry, *VIATOR*, p. 95-6.

In a corner of the library of the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, there sits on a shelf a strange little book. Its title is *Viator: A Poem of a Voyager's Leisure Hours*, (London, 1854). The author was an English surgeon who had sailed to Natal aboard a 390-ton barque named *Amazon* in the year 1850. His name was John Coventry and he seems to have been a dashing young man. There were 46 adult passengers and 14 children, most of them ‘un-approved’ emigrants, i.e. not entitled to any Government land because they had not before leaving deposited the stipulated amounts of cash with the Colonial Land & Emigration Commissioners. Some of the passengers later became well-known Natal figures, e.g. David Slatter, John Meek, and George A. Cope, but a number of them saw no future in Natal and within a year or two had sailed for the Australian goldfields. Dr Coventry himself stayed only a short time in Natal before returning to England.

The poem ‘*Viator*’ is not a work of great literary merit but simply a piece of minor narrative verse redeemed by vivacity, humour, and a dexterous style. It begins in pseudo-ballad vein:

All in the Docks a gallant barque was moored;
The *Maranon* ’twas easy to perceive:
And outward bound too — by the stir on board;
Her native country just about to leave
To cross the boundless Atlantean sea,
For the swart shores of arid Africa;
A wandering wight had come on board that day
Bynempt *Viator* — he right buoyantly
Pacing the busy deck — strung forth a roundelay; —

A bad start, pedantic and pretentious, but in a short time the poem recovers and come down to earth with lists of articles that the emigrants were shipping to Natal. The list of items is valuable to historians because it gives an idea of what the emigrants imagined they would need in Natal:

Wirehouses, awnings, tents, ploughshares, saddles,
bridles, boxes, chairs, tables, ‘fierce cut-throat
bowie-blades’, stilettos, spears, baking girdles,
wooden ladles, silver spoons, cradles, guns, pistols,
fowling-pieces, carbines, swords, ammunition, mosquito
curtains, calico, cotton, rods and reels, lines,
shark-tackle, clothes-props, pegs . . .

Next come the luxuries of the well-to-do cabin passengers:

Portraits by Beard, choice polkas, grand pianos,
prime Havanas, *eau de vie* in kegs, malt beer in
bottles and firkins, Devon cider . . .

Lastly, the foodstuffs:

potted milk, tripe, pickled eggs, salt beef, *bouilli*,
broths, soups, patent potatoes, bacon, flich,
gammon, dried haddock and cod, salmon, tea, coffee,
sweets, fruits, marmalade, jellies, spices . . .

At Gravesend the ship anchors in the Thames to receive more passengers as well as some visitors. Ladies are swung aboard from a small boat by means of a 'nautical armchair' suspended from a sling. The ship then weighs anchor for Falmouth where the last contact with old England is made — the author and his friends go ashore for a final meal at Dingley's — and then the ship sets off on its ocean voyage.

Twenty-five days later the *Maranon* enters tropical waters and Viator, at the taffrail one day, sees his first shark following in the wake:

With serrate teeth full armed, his horrid jaw
Displayed he fearfully as he swam askew:
His squalid carcase spreads a changeful tinge
Throughout the wave — as he ascends or falls;
Now grey, now brown, blue, green his trunk; his fins
Glimmer livid yellow as he sprawls.
But now th'alarm has spread — loud grow the calls.

The crew bait a huge hook which transfixes him in the jaw so that after a struggle he is hoisted aboard and hacked to death — 'Embowelled through, beheaded and betailed . . .' It is the standard incident of the emigrant ship diaries.

At the end of the sixth week of the voyage the ship crosses the Equator, an event which causes Viator to think deeply of the old world he has left:

. . . yon thick, fleecy sky
Of the north hemisphere, may well pourtray
Struggles of ardent souls — who vainly try
To burst the cerement clouds of dark obscurity . . .

However, his youthful optimistic spirit looks forward to his destination, the auspicious East, 'The land of promise, hope, expectancy . . .' He even forgets the ever-present danger of sailing by wooden ship — 'Your mortal life depending on a plank.'

In the long good weather days that follow he notes the myriad creatures of sea and air — the suckerfish clamped to the shark's skin, the booby¹ bird flapping 'his slouchy wings', the sea-swallow alighting on the rattlins, the flying fish with 'his curious piscine wing', and the bonito 'in hue and shape a tropic mackerel.'

At last having left the doldrums behind them, they reach Natal and exchange signals with the flag station on the Bluff. The return message is that a storm is on the way and that the ship must make out to sea. Viator blesses Marryat² the sailor-novelist:

To whose inestimable signal code
This night our safety mainly was assigned . . .

All night the ship runs before the storm but in the morning it returns to Port Natal and takes aboard the port captain Bell and Archer the pilot. As the ship threads its way into the harbour, the passengers gaze on the wreck of the emigrant ship *British Tar*³ lying on the beach. On the bar itself their own ship suffers some 'odd scrapes and delves' but no real difficulty since there is a depth of 14 feet of water and the *Maranon* draws only 11 feet.

Once ashore at the Point they see their first black man and then climb into an ox-wagon for the two-mile journey to the town. D'Urban itself is a great disappointment:

The one great feature from the point you land
Until to dusty D'Urban you arrive,
Is all summed up, in — sand! sand!! sand!!! sand!!!!
Pity more varied phrase is not at our command . . .

Viator notes that the buildings, all of one storey, are scattered over the sandy plain. One of them, 'Mazeppa Cottage', has a galvanised iron roof. Of the hotelkeeper of the town, Hugh McDonald, he speaks well — 'A better heart ne'er beat 'bove Scottish kilt.'

The author looks with interest on the black man:

The Natal Kafir has our sympathy, —
To 'Baas' or 'Master' simply looking forth
For the two facts of his rude dictionary,
His 'skof' or food, and 'sabenza' or work.

As for the white men at D'Urban in 1850, Viator regards them with displeasure. To him they seem a degenerate society.

Viator and his friends obtain horses and ride to the newly-established Wesleyan settlement of Verulam⁴ about 30 km north of Durban. There they observe fields of tall mealies and crops of indigo, fig, senna,⁵ castor, tamarind,⁶ cotton, coffee, and capsicum.⁷ The poet is moved to prophesy, though not quite successfully:

Natal's grand source of future wealth and power,
One plain perceives will be that yellow cotton flower . . .

Leaving Verulam, the party of horsemen arrive at Mount Moreland, the Byrne settlement a mile or two east of Verulam, where they climb the hill, then covered by bush, to view the prospect. The undulating land around, not yet cleared, has little value, says Viator, mainly because there is no bridge across the Umgeni.⁸ Consequently when the river comes down in flood the traveller runs the risk of being swept to his death if he tries to cross. The alternative is to endure up to two months' quarantine until the waters subside. Another hazard in wading across the Umgeni is the watchful alligator.⁹ This bridgeless river is therefore the reason for the lack of buyers of land situated beyond the Umgeni.

Digressing a little at this point, the poet blames promoters like James Erasmus Methley, J. C. Christopher,¹⁰ and Joseph Charles Byrne¹¹ for

publishing over-enthusiastic accounts of the land of Natal. One might think from their books that Natal flowed with milk and honey instead of being a place of storms, floods, and hurricanes of driving sand, a region where vermin of all shapes and sizes flourish:

A purgatory of flies — a paradise
Of ticks, fleas, scorpions, spiders, centipedes,
Cockroaches, pismires, beetles, and all lice . . .

As for Natal beef and mutton, also praised by Methley in his book *The new colony of Port Natal* (London, 1850), Viator maintains that one good English rumpsteak is worth all the meat in Natal:

'tis wretched stuff, rancid, rank, coarsest-grained . . .

Poultry, too, is inferior in the new colony:

Your Natal fowl we manfully maintain
About just equal to a tough blackbird . . .

But he returns to his subject, the party's visit to Verulam:

Some thirty miles the Zulu land lies off —
Wallowing in fat and fierceness Panda there —
Dread relic of the fearful Dingaana stock! —
Rages like some fierce tiger in his lair,
His bloated body seamed and studded o'er
With that fierce form of ulcer so well known
By the much dreaded name of Natal sore . . .¹²

After these rather superficial observations on Mpande (whom he had not seen) Viator returns with his friends to D'Urban. He does not seem to have travelled much inland for he admits that he has never visited Pietermaritzburg, though he has heard much about it:

'Tis quite a paradise say some, elysian
Its site, and fair its dwellings, some aver . . .

The poem ends with his discovery that the schooner *Douglas*, a ship well-known to him in England, is lying in the bay, ready to sail. He therefore makes arrangements to accompany the ship on its return voyage to England. His long narrative poem concludes with a five-verse *L'Envoi* to Natal:

Adieu! ye streets of D'Urban sand!
Ye swampy shores and rough!
Adieu! thou would 'twere happy land!
Adieu! thou blustering bluff!

Adieu! ye haunts where baseless hope
Too oft deception rues!
Where mourns full many a hapless dupe
Of speculatists' views.

But further comment here we cease,
Fair let our parting be;
Natal! we wish thee health, hope, peace,
And more felicity!!!

Dr Coventry returned to England and thereafter disappears from literary history. A well-read and intelligent young man, with a fund of energy and plenty of spending money, he should have done well for himself in his profession, but the biographical dictionaries are silent. Unknowingly, however, he achieved his niche in Natal history, mainly by arriving at the end of that dynamic year 1850 when some 2 500 Byrne settlers were starting life afresh in a new and strange country. An observant man with a scientific bent, Coventry noted Natal's vegetation and its varied wild flowers, shrubs, and trees. He observed, too, crops like cotton, sugar, coffee, and indigo which the emigrants had planted experimentally in Durban and along the coast. He even cast an enquiring eye at the bright stars that adorned the Natal night-sky. As for the Port itself, he speaks of its defects — 'the extremely dangerous and uncertain entrance of its harbour,' with the depth on the bar in 1850 varying from 4 or 5 feet to 16 or 18 and no safe passage for vessels upwards of 300 tons.

Other features of the colony mentioned were the dramatic thunderstorms that built up, especially towards the Zulu country, the absence of surface rivers, the abundance of poisonous reptiles, insects and vermin in general, the prevalence of the Natal sore and horse-sickness, and the misery caused to the inhabitants of Durban by sand blowing everywhere.

He mentions also the expense of house-rents in Pietermaritzburg and Durban and the extreme dearness of the necessary provisions of life, for example, bread. Another standard complaint he noted among the settlers was the difficulty of obtaining and retaining good labourers and servants.

For much of his information about Durban, Verulam, and Natal generally he was indebted to Messrs Chiappini ('whose glorious cotton plantations are amongst the pride of the Colony') and Mr Elliott of Natal.

Wherever he went he observed the small detail. For example, in houses he visited he saw chameleons moving about on boughs suspended from the ceiling. They were 'as common and used for the same purpose as paper fly-catchers were in England . . . We long had one in the cabin of the *Douglas* schooner . . .'

Coventry apparently had no desire to settle in the young colony. Neither the climate nor the European inhabitants appealed to his temperament and he was shrewd enough to see that the country lacked capital and consequently would have a slow growth rate. The unfortunate settlers who had too eagerly read the books of the emigration promoters had simply to make the best of it by hard work and the slow acquisition of capital.

Professor A. F. Hattersley read the poem and in 1956 wrote a letter about it to Dr Maple (recently deceased), then the University of Natal librarian at Pietermaritzburg. He says:

I never paid much attention to 'Viator', chiefly, I suspect, because I distrust narrative in verse but also since the author described the voyage only and not Natal. But I may have missed something good . . .

One hesitates to differ from this wise and distinguished Natal historian but if there is 'something good' in the poem *Viator* it may well be the atmosphere of 1850 settler-Natal created in words by a talented visitor.

JOHN CLARK



Brig on the Waters. A very early photograph (1856) showing the kind of ship used for the transport of emigrants to America, Australia, and Natal in mid-Victorian times.

(See article: *'A Curiosity of Natal Settler Literature'*)

Notes

1. A seabird of the gannet tribe, absurdly easy to catch.
2. Frederick Marryat (1792-1848), captain in Royal Navy, novelist, adapted Popham's signalling system to the mercantile marine.
3. The *British Tar*, a Byrne emigrant-ship, ran ashore on the South Beach, Durban, on Sunday, 29 September, 1850, during an easterly gale. No lives were lost and the baggage was saved.
4. Verulam, founded 13 March 1850, had been in existence for about eight months when Coventry saw it.
5. Senna: a shrub (*Cassia*) whose leaves were used to prepare a kind of tea with purgative powers.
6. Tamarind: a large tropical tree whose pod produces a pleasant acidulous pulp.
7. Capsicum: a tropical shrub which produces cayenne pepper.
8. In 1864, fourteen years after Coventry's visit, a bridge was built across the Umgeni. The bridge lasted only four years before being swept away in a flood but was soon replaced.
9. Alligator: for many years the settlers referred to crocodiles by this name. The alligator belongs to a mainly American family of reptiles and has a broader snout than the crocodile.
10. J. C. Christopher was a brilliant but wayward personality. He wrote an emigration book — *Natal, Cape of Good Hope* (1850) — but his plans for Natal came to nothing.
11. J. C. Byrne's book, *Emigrant's Guide to Port Natal*, was widely read when it appeared in 1848. It seems that he had not visited Natal and that his material was a compilation from many sources.
12. In his Notes Coventry says: 'At Verulam on my road to the Zulu Country I saw some scars or pits of the Natal sore in which one might bury the top of the thumb, and this on the person of a delicate English lady.'