

A Rare Piece of Africana

First impressions of Natal, by a Perthshire ploughman, is now a rare piece of Africana. Not even the British Museum library has a copy. None of the libraries whose holdings are recorded by the Mendelssohn Revision Project of the South African Library in Cape Town have an original copy of this pamphlet. For this reprint, the Editorial Board had to use a typescript version, copies of which are in two Durban libraries, the Don Library and the Killie Campbell Library.

The author of this letter was Thomas Duff (1825-1905), a Scotsman from Logiealmond, Perthshire, who emigrated to Natal with his father, John Duff (c.1784-1864).

Life for Thomas in Natal had its ups and downs, but his strength of purpose, which is evident in these letters, ensured ultimate success in his adopted country.

The Duffs emigrated with the intention of farming, and on their allotment near Verulam they grew potatoes and mealies. It soon became apparent, however, that with marketing difficulties and the low prices fetched by farm produce, few profits were to be made in this line. Thomas was thus led into other pursuits, and only in the 1880s did he again solely depend on farming.

In common with many other colonists, he turned to Zulu trading. Although his first expedition into Zululand in November 1850 did not prove very profitable, he carried on in this business for the next eight or nine years. He also made one journey south, into Pondoland, in 1856.

Thomas suffered his first major setback in 1856. Lung sickness was prevalent throughout the country, and swept through the herd of cattle he had built up from his trading. Very few animals remained of his original total of about 120 head.

In 1860 he married Anna Maria Doyle, the niece of Henry Shire of the farm Milkwood Kraal near the Umhlanga River. The Duffs settled on part of Milkwood Kraal, which they named 'Woodlands'. The area later became known as Duff's Road, a name that it bears to the present day.

From itinerant trading, Duff turned to general storekeeping. He also supplemented his income with sugar-growing.

Economically the sixties were a depressed time for Natal, and indeed for the rest of South Africa. Duff had his share of misfortune, both financial and domestic. In 1861 a fire from the nearby canefields destroyed the Duff home and their possessions, resulting in a loss of between £700 and £800. Six years later, Thomas's wife died and he was left to bring up four young children.

Thomas remained at Duff's Road until 1881, when he moved his family to Mooi River for the sake of his youngest son's health. There he farmed until the early 1890s. After selling his Mooi River farm 'Epworth', he settled in Town Bush Valley near Pietermaritzburg. He died in Durban in 1905.

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