

## *Henry Francis Fynn*

OF ALL the whites who were trading from the settlement at Port Natal in the 1820s and 1830s, Henry Fynn is, to posterity, probably the best known. His repute today rests mainly on the adventure-book quality of his association with the Zulu king Shaka, and on the fact that this, in many ways the most fascinating period of his life, is also the best documented.<sup>1</sup> But it is often overlooked that of the forty-three years he lived in southern Africa, Fynn was resident only nineteen in Natal, and that for the greater part of his life after leaving England at the age of 15 he was based in the Cape colony. It is generally forgotten, too, that after his ten years of trading in Natal and the Zulu and Mpondo countries, he was for twenty-six years an official in the service of first the Cape and then the Natal colonial administrations. The romance of his 'pioneering' life in the kingdom of Shaka and Faku has tended to focus interest primarily on the earlier part of his career, but his years as a frontier official among the Thembu and Mpondo, and later as a magistrate in Natal, are equally deserving of attention.

For the present-day student of southern African history, perhaps the most significant aspect of Fynn's career is to be seen in the transformation of the young immigrant trader, who had thoroughly adapted himself to life in the autonomous Zulu and Mpondo states, into a colonial official responsible for enforcing a system of laws that was intended above all to maintain the status of white men as against black. Two portrayals of Fynn by contemporaries serve to highlight the nature of this transformation. The first is Nathaniel Isaacs's well-known pen-sketch of him as he looked in 1825 on his return to Port Natal from an eight-month trading trip among the Mpondos.<sup>2</sup> Beneath the crownless straw hat and tattered blanket that were his only covering was the determined yet versatile youth of 22 who, in travelling where very few white men had yet been, had depended for his life not only on his physical endurance but also on his ability to allay the fears and suspicions of hostile local communities. The second reveals Fynn, the white Natalian of some thirty years later, as he was in a moment of anger. On this occasion, as an acquaintance watched in approval, he accosted an African who had failed to salute him, and, on receiving what he regarded as an impertinent answer, proceeded to sjambok the man to his knees.<sup>3</sup> The figure of the bullying white *baas* is a stereotype in the history of southern Africa, yet it would be an oversimplification to regard the Fynn exposed in this ugly little incident entirely in this light. Far more intimately than most other whites of his time, he had come to know the native peoples of the eastern littoral, from the Zulu kingdom in the north to the frontier chiefdoms of the Xhosa in the south, and even if his knowledge brought him little understanding of the problems which these peoples were facing in the mid-nineteenth century from white expansionism, it brought at least a broad sympathy for them that he seems to have acquired early in his experiences and to have retained throughout his later career.<sup>4</sup>

The main outlines of Fynn's life are well enough known. He was born on 29th



Henry F. Fynn (1803-61), perhaps the greatest of the early Natal settlers. He lived long enough to see Durban firmly established as a port.

March 1803, probably in London, and in 1818 he went to the Cape to join his father, who seems at one time to have traded in the East, and was then keeping an inn in Cape Town. At the end of that year the young Fynn made his way to the government agricultural station in the eastern frontier region of the colony where Somerset East was soon afterwards laid out. He arrived during a period of commotion. In 1818 the rival Ngqika and Ndlambe sections of the Xhosa had fought it out at the battle of Amalinde, and in 1819 the victorious Ndlambe launched an unsuccessful attack on Grahamstown. The following year saw the settlement in the eastern Cape of several thousand British immigrants. Occurring as they did at an impressionable period of his life, these events must have left their mark on Fynn, but unfortunately there is virtually no indication of how he responded to the conditions of life on the frontier.

In 1822 Fynn left the eastern Cape and walked from Grahamstown to Cape Town, a distance of some 500 miles. It was to be the forerunner of many long journeys on foot later in his life. By his own account he seems to have had difficulty in finding a job in Cape Town and was tempted to return to England, but at this crucial juncture he was offered, and accepted, a position as supercargo on a vessel that was about to set off on a trading venture to Delagoa Bay. For six months Fynn and his companions traded for ivory among the Tsonga and other local peoples of southern Mocambique, and here he had what seems to have been his first experience of living for extended periods among native African communities.

The knowledge of local conditions which Fynn gained on this voyage was a major factor in his being invited, when he returned to Cape Town at the end of 1823, to join Lieutenant F. G. Farewell's projected expedition to Port Natal. Fynn was to go as trading manager in return for a share of the profits. Hope of financial reward was no doubt an important incentive in his decision to join, but it is worth recording that he had other motives as well. 'Travelling and new scenes were to me a greater object than any pecuniary advantage,' he wrote,<sup>5</sup> and however true this was, it is fortunate for historians that on this expedition, which saw the establishment of the first regular contracts between the whites and Shaka's newly created Zulu kingdom, there was someone with a lively curiosity about the people and places he visited, and the idealism to set down something of his observations in writing.

Fynn landed at Port Natal with the advance party of the expedition in May 1824. A fact that has not been sufficiently stressed in accounts of this venture is that it does not seem to have been intended as a deliberate colonizing expedition. Fynn for one had been given to believe that it would be over within six months. In the event he stayed for ten years. His activities during this period are described in his published diary and there is no need to chronicle them here, but a point that needs emphasis is the importance of the role that he played in gaining Shaka's tolerance of the presence of the white traders. The Zulu monarch seems to have been attracted to his personality, and to have enjoyed his company and conversation much as he enjoyed the wagon-loads of gifts which Fynn and the other traders were careful to present to their patron. Another measure of Fynn's ability to make rapport with the African peoples whom he encountered at this time is that he was able to win the trust of many of the refugees who sought shelter in southern Natal from the raids and persecutions of Shaka and Dingane. Ultimately several thousand of people regrouped themselves as clients of the white traders. Fynn named his own following the *Izinkumbi*, or locusts, and

under that name some of their descendants still live in southern Natal. The veneration felt for him by his adherents survived through his long absence at the Cape, and lasted until after his death.<sup>6</sup>

After the breakdown of relations between Dingane and the Port Natal traders, Fynn returned to the eastern Cape, though the exact reasons for his departure, which took place in September 1834, are not known. On the outbreak of war on the Cape frontier in December 1834, he joined Sir Benjamin D'Urban's headquarters staff as interpreter. Three months later he was back in his old trading haunts when D'Urban sent him on a diplomatic mission to Faku to ensure the chief's neutrality in the war. Though he remained among the Mpondo for a year, virtually nothing is known of his activities during this period.

In January 1837, in terms of one of the treaties that followed the end of the war, Fynn was appointed diplomatic agent to the Thembu chief Maphasa on the upper Kei. He remained in this post for eleven years. Again, little is known about his career at this time, though research into the official records of the Cape Colony and into the Fynn Papers now held by the Natal Archives would certainly throw light on it. One intriguing question to which an answer might be found is why in 1845 the Cape Governor, Sir Peregrine Maitland, passed over Fynn for appointment to the post of diplomatic agent in Natal, the position which went to Theophilus Shepstone. Aged 42 at the time, Fynn was fourteen years older than Shepstone and, with twenty-six years of frontier experience behind him, including ten spent in Natal, must have appeared an obvious candidate.

Fynn's post among the Thembu fell away in 1848 when Sir Harry Smith scrapped the frontier treaty system. Once again he was sent among the Mpondo, this time as Resident Agent to Faku. This period of his life is slightly better known than the preceding one;<sup>7</sup> all that can be said here is that he did not make a success of his office. By inciting a Mpondo attack on some suspected Bhaca cattle thieves, Fynn was responsible for sparking off a series of incidents which eventually involved not only the local chiefdoms but a number of Wesleyan missionaries and the Cape and Natal Governments. By the time affairs had been smoothed out, Fynn's long-standing reputation among the Mpondo was in tatters. In 1852 his post was abolished, and after an absence of eighteen years he returned to Natal, which since 1843 had been a British colony. He joined the government service as a magistrate, and was stationed first in Pietermaritzburg and then in what later became Umzinto. Ill-health forced his retirement in 1860, and on 20th September 1861 he died in Durban at the age of 58.

One hundred and thirteen years after his death, *Mbuyazi weTheku*, as he was called in Zulu, still awaits a biographer. In assessing his career, white historians have so far tended to see him as one of a band of courageous 'pioneers' who cleared the way for the coming of civilization to Natal. Black historians of the future may well see him as one of a band of alien intruders who opened the way for the destruction of the established Zulu order. Perhaps the fairest comment that can be made at this stage is that in accommodating as he did to life in an African society, at least for part of his early career, Fynn showed a pragmatism and courage, even perhaps a humility, that have been all too rare in the history of European immigrant peoples in southern Africa. His failure to exhibit a similar flexibility in his later career is a measure not simply of his own weak-

nesses but of the strength of forces which, throughout his life, were operating to convince the white colonist in southern Africa that he was master in the land that he had occupied.

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**Notes:**

1. See H. F. Fynn, *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, edited by James Stuart and D. McK. Malcolm, Pietermaritzburg, 1950; N. Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*, 1st ed. 1836, Cape Town, 1970.
2. See Isaacs p. 18; also Fynn, p. 117.
3. Stuart Papers (Killie Campbell Africana Library), File 58, notebook 33, pp. 2-3 statement of William Leathern, 23.5.1910.
4. See his own statement, *Diary*, p. xv; and J. W. Colenso, *Ten Weeks in Natal*, Cambridge, 1855, p. 216.
5. *Diary*, p. 56.
6. See for instance Stuart Papers, File 65, item 4, pp. 85-7, statement of William Bazley, 25.6.1907.
7. See J. B. Wright, *Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg 1840-1870*, Pietermaritzburg, 1971, ch. 6; and also unpublished thesis by D. G. L. Cragg, 'The relations of the amaMpondo and the colonial authorities (1830-1886) with special reference to the role of the Wesleyan missionaries', Ph.D., Oxford, 1959.