

JOHN ROSS

Tony Cubbin

Dept of History University of Zululand.

The coast of Natal remembers the name of John Ross in its major highways, buildings, bridges and recently the College in Richard's Bay has been graced with his name. The question arises: who is John Ross? and why has he merited this distinction? Primarily he is honoured for his immortal and arduous return journey to Delagoa Bay in 1827.

Regrettably we know very little about John Ross or his heroic journey. His journey has been chronicled by Graham MacKeurtan in 1932 and Ruth Gordon in *Natalia* in 1974. Henry Francis Fynn and Nathaniel Isaacs are the main sources of information while John Ross later wrote briefly about his journey in the *Nautical Magazine* in 1853. These sources enable us to a large extent to separate fact from legend.

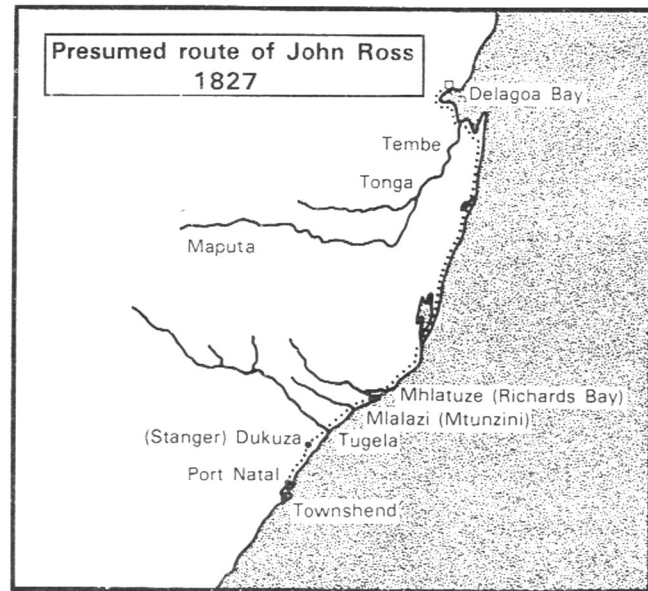
During May – July 1824 a party of English traders led by Lieutenant Francis Farewell, Lieutenant James King and Henry Fynn pioneered the settlement at Port Natal. They wished to establish Port Natal as an entrepôt for trade with the surrounding natives the most famous of whom was Shaka, King of the Zulus. The greatest problem besetting the Traders was to maintain links with the civilised world which meant either the Cape or the Portuguese at Delagoa Bay. After the loss of the sloop 'Julia', King had chartered the brig 'Mary' to develop the trade.¹

As a result of the wreck of the 'Mary' on the outer northern beach at Port Natal on 1 October 1825, Lieutenant James Saunders King and Nathaniel Isaacs began considering alternative means of assistance and rescue from Port Natal for the stranded traders. Prompted also by the unpleasant internecine squabbles between King and John Hatton, the shipwright supervising the building of the 'Elizabeth and Susan' at the shipyard at Townshend on the Bluff, Isaacs contemplated the necessity of an overland return journey to Delagoa Bay. This epic undertaking of 950 kilometers had been attempted only once before by the white traders. On this occasion Joseph Powell, Farewell's servant and an experienced traveller, failed to return and nothing was heard of him again.²

When the supply of medicine and other necessaries became critically low after 15 April 1827, King had no other alternative but to send his 15 year old apprentice, John Ross, to Delagoa Bay to get supplies. Isaacs described John Ross as being "acute, shrewd and active", which were most important factors when attempting an undertaking of "inconceivable hazard."³ Isaacs helped persuade Shaka at Dukuza (modern Stanger) to assist in the venture. Shaka "afforded us every

assistance in sending off the lad by at once giving him an escort to protect him and to furnish him with food on the way."⁴ This assistance from the feared Zulus was to be of inestimable value to John Ross when travelling along the wild Natal coastline. Isaacs took the added precaution of sending out messengers after twenty days to assist John Ross on his return journey.⁵

On their way to survey the mouth of the Umlatuze i.e. modern Richard's Bay,⁶ King and Isaacs met John Ross on 14 July 1827 on the banks of the Tugela. John Ross was then on his homeward journey from Delagoa Bay. John Ross was looking for his companions whom he had heard were shooting Hippopotami in the Umlalazi river i.e. modern Mtunzini.⁷



John Ross had a wonderful tale to tell his friends of his epic journey. After eighteen days from Shaka's kraal at Dukuza he had arrived at uMakhasane's (the chief of the Tembe Tongas) kraal. The country he had passed through he described as "low, level and frequently marshy" and "abounding with all description of wild animals, particularly the rhinoceros and zebras."⁸ Obtaining guides from uMakhasane, they had successfully negotiated the treacherous Maputa river.⁹

The natives at Delagoa Bay treated John Ross's party civilly and decently because they had reason to fear the wrath and possible retribution of Shaka, the mighty King of the Zulus who enjoyed undeniable hegemony of South Eastern Africa. During his short stay of three days the Portuguese traders treated John Ross with kindness and even apprehension because they believed him to be Shaka's spy. The Portuguese Governor allowed him to purchase the medicines and other necessaries from his stores. In fact John Ross was also given generous supplies by a French captain of a slaver and he had to spend only two dollars.¹⁰

During his stay at Delagoa Bay John Ross was appalled at the barbarity of slavery introduced by the Portuguese. He observed the "inhuman treatment to which the poor natives were subjected in being chained together and being treated with such great severity and brutality". He was apprehensive for his own and his party's safety and as a result of this he determined to leave Delagoa Bay as soon as he could.¹¹

As Nathaniel Isaacs, standing on the banks of the Tugela, gazed at John Ross as the latter resumed his courageous journey to Townshend, he was filled with admiration: "John Ross is doubtless the first European who ever accomplished a journey (by land) from Natal to Delagoa Bay and back. When I look at his youth and reflect on the country through which he had to pass, and that he had to penetrate through wild, inhospitable, and savage tracks, nor the light of reason, but were existing in a mere state of animal nature little exceeding the instinct of the brute, when I look at this, and also further reflect that the whole surface of the country was infested with every species of wild and ferocious animal and every venomous creature, all hostile to man, I cannot but conceive the journey of this lad as on the must be held as exceedingly bold, and wonderfully enterprising."¹²

It is interesting to note that John Ross's only known observation regarding his epic journey is his defence of the acculturation process underwent by the European Traders living at Port Natal in those early years. Twenty six years later he laconically recalls the "long and somewhat perilous journey from Natal to Delagoa Bay."¹³

Such is the modest appraisal of one of our brave young pioneers of Natal.

FOOTNOTES

1 CUBBIN, A.E., *Origins of the British Settlement at Port Natal, May 1823-July 1942*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. University of the Orange Free State 1983, pp.6-37. Covers the background of this early period.

2. HERRMAN, L. (E *Nathaniel Isaacs' Travels and Adventures*. Van Riebeeck Society. Vol. 16. p. 27 and p. 183.
3. HERRMAN, L (Ed.) *op.cit.*, p. 183 and p.182.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
5. *Ibid.*
6. STUART, J., and MALCOLM, D.McK., *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, p. 131.
7. HERRMAN, L. (Ed.) *op.cit.*, p. 184.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 185
9. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. MACLEAN, C.R., *Nautical Magazing*, April 1853. pp198-199.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CUBBIN, A.E., *Origins of the British settlement at Port Natal, May 1823 - July 1842*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. University of the Orange Free State. 1983.

GORDON, R.E., *John Ross. Natalia*, 1974. pp. 26-27.

HERRMAN, L., (Editor) *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*. Nathaniel Issacs. 2 vols. Van Riebeeck Society. Cape Town. 1936.

MACKEURTAN, G., *The Cradle Days of Natal 1497-1845*. Shuter and Shooter. Pietermaritzburg. 1948

MACLEAN, C.R. *Nautical Magazine*. April 1853.

STUART, J. and MALCOLM, D.McK., *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*. Shuter and Shooter. Pietermaritzburg. 1950.