

A review of JOHN ROSS: THE TRUE STORY. Stephen Gray. Penguin 1987

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Stephen Gray, Professor in English at the Rand Afrikaans University, has written a book on Natal history that, I believe, will not be proud to own. A writer as self-laudatory and brash as Gray, needs to have his pontifical claims carefully examined.

WAS THE 'MISSING LINK' EVER LOST?

Key to Gray's *John Ross* is the use of Charles Rawden Maclean's (alias John Ross) account in *The Nautical Magazine* of 1853 on this article in the *London Times* on 3 August 1875. Gray maintains that "I have found John Ross's own records of his adventures in Zululand", p. 110 and p. 186. He further claims in the *Sunday Tribune* of 13 September 1987 that "no writer to date has used the crucial third account" and that "this is a yawning scandal". In this article he goes so far as to say that "The true scandal is that no one bothered to find it . . . and there is no excuse for not finding it". Agreed Professor Gray – the source has never been lost. Gray has made an erroneous and presumptuous claim because this source has, to my knowledge, always been readily available in the open files of the Killie Campbell Africana Library, the Don Collection of the Durban Municipal Library and the South African Public Library in Cape Town. As far as historians are concerned, Daphne Strutt (Local History Museum, Durban file 581) and I (*Isigijimi* vol. 6, no. 3 March 1986, *Unizulu* December 1986; *Yesterday and Today* no. 13, April 1987 and my Ph.D. thesis on "*The British Settlement at Port Natal*". 1983, p. 24 and p. 36 make use of this vital but limited source. But there is a crucial difference in approach because we place John Ross in a rather more modest perspective in Natal history. Except for his remarkable journey John Ross did not occupy the central stage of Natal history as Gray would have him play.

Professor Stephen Gray further claims the mantle of being "radically different", "forcing extensive reevaluation (sic) of the very roots of white history making" (Abstract p. 1 advertising John Ross). In his *Sunday Tribune* interview Gray regales his readers with claims of his "sensational findings".

The fact that John Ross is presumably Charles Rawden Maclean is no secret but what is the actual, not speculative, relationship of these two names? Had Gray answered this central question with verifiable information we would indeed have been beholden to him.

USE OF SOURCES

Gray's modest ('many works', p. 1?) bibliography contains only secondary sources all of which are available on request. If Gray is serious about posing as an expert on the subject of John Ross, I suggest that he gets down to some real work and consults the available primary sources. The hard but rewarding and exciting work begins as one delves through the large wooden box housed at the Natal Archives Depot, Pietermaritzburg, which contains the Fynn Papers; try folder 8, pp. 1–37 for details on the internecine strife between Farewell and King in which John Ross was involved. The Cape Archives Depot has a virtually inexhaustible mine of documents on this period; begin with *Government House* 1/39, pp. 34–58. James King to Lord Bathurst 10 July 1824 or *Colonial Office* /211, pp. 652–659. F.G. Farewell to Lord Charles Somerset 6 September 1824. At the Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban, the James Stuart Papers for example, are worth going through diligently. I also find it inconceivable that a person who poses as an expert on this subject has not worked through Dr Basil Leverton's *Records of Natal* 1823–Aug. 1828. These, and other sources, would have added immeasurably to the quality of a book of 188 pages on John Ross.

If Stephen Gray is to be taken seriously as an historian, p. 186 then he must provide the readers with adequate and verifiable footnotes. It is simply not good enough to say on page 48 that "there is an alternative version" and on page 128 he refers to "all these untold stories", without indicating his sources. Gray denigrates his basic sources, e.g. Isaacs' *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* and Fynn's *Diary* (mine, incidentally was published in 1950) with epithets such as 'devious', p. 117. I believe Professor Gray has overlook-

ed the fact that these two pioneers were not writing history to satisfy a person writing exclusively on John Ross. Isaacs and Fynn (the latter would be a lot more helpful if Gray would realise that the *Diary* is only a portion of the Fynn Papers), will always remain on basic sources for this early period of Natal history. But Gray, one notices, is far less critical when he makes large, unacknowledged borrowings from them on subjects not directly related to John Ross e.g. Hlambamanzi on page 85 of Fynn's *Diary*, pp. 179 – 188.

Gray is quite happy to denigrate 'previous writers' p. 142 and 'later writers' p. 170, but regrettably he is not bold enough to identify his claims nor indeed the writers and their works. Has Gray, one wonders, considered that he may be wrong? He makes a major issue that John Ross ran the return distance from Stanger to Delagoa Bay in twelve days, p. 139. Isaacs, *Van Riebeeck Society*, vol. 1, p. 18, indicates that John Ross set out from Townshend (i.e. the Bluff, Durban) after 15 April 1827 and was returning (between Mtunzini and the Tugela) by 15 July *Ibid.*, p. 186. This is far more realistic when one considers the sandy and marshy terrain to be traversed. The attempt to make John Ross into an erstwhile Bruce Fordyce in the chapter entitled "The Zulu Marathon", p. 131, is stretching the imagination somewhat: "wild, record-breaking marathon", p. 137, indeed!

I do agree with Gray when he describes the mission as an Anglo-Zulu alliance and co-operative venture, p. 166, and would like to have seen this point developed because I don't believe that John Ross could have accomplished his mission successfully without the Zulus' knowledge and expertise of the terrain and Shaka's umbrella protection p. 160. But John Ross also, according to Gray, needed Lieutenant King's credentials, p. 151.

Gray curiously attacks all the memorials to John Ross. But the statue along the Es-planade is unaccompanied and holding assegais for obvious reasons. The Old Fort plaque erected by the Historical Monuments Commission is not nearly as inaccurate as Gray would like to think. The actual distance is speculative and in 1827 the country north of Stanger was virtually unknown to white people and '14 not 15' is indeed a quibble as he was 14 at the time p. 185.

FACTUAL ERRORS

Stephen Gray makes innumerable important factual errors which are often inexplicable given his bibliography and his claim to have "cross-checked, queried, double-checked every of a thousand details." Consider: that Farewell was killed at the instigation of Ngqetho, chief of the amaQwabes on 27 September 1828 and not by Dingane, p. 183; that Halstead, Gray's village idiot, married Shaka's sister, p. 114, is a slur on the Zulu nation as is the assumption that suitors had access to Shaka's sigidweni with Mbopa's connivance p. 108; that Farewell obliterated the 3.5 million p. 173 elephants, p. 70; that "sugar-cane was cultivated in Natal long before the Europeans came, p. 108, has Gray heard of imfe – the indigenous sweet root; that the distance between Port Natal and Stanger is 150 miles (I've always known it to be approximately 45 miles); that Shaka's women's regiment was one of his few reliable ones; that Shaka intended that Dingane should become paramount, p. 181 and p. 123; that Shaka had many offspring, p. 123; that £5 was half the price of the Newfoundland dog, p. 9; that there are mountains at Dakusa, p. 78; that Lisbon was rebuilt on the proceeds by the L.M. Co., and that none of its employees were paid, p. 147; that the Zulu-Shangaan war of 1828 must be accounted the first modern war waged against slavery, p. 173. And so the list continues, that John Ross was the first to attempt the journey to Delagoa Bay.

IS GRAY'S JOHN ROSS SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN?

Professor Gray makes a claim on page 140 that the John Ross saga is "suitable for children, too, as there are no explicitly sexual or violent crisis". I agree, that is until Stephen Gray got hold of the story. All Librarians, Headmasters and parents are urged to peruse carefully the following pages before allowing children free access to this book: pp. 14, 82/3,

93, 113, 117, 120/1, 125, 129, 149/50, 155 and 180. "Bugger off" on pp. 149/50, the "piss and vomit", p. 21 and "shit", p. 155 are not, in my opinion unreservedly suitable episodes for children. I leave the readers to decide whether these versions are the "true story" advertised on the cover.

UNHAPPY CARICATURES

Another aspect of this book that I find regrettable and unsuitable for our youth is the fact that virtually all the characters are made to be unhappy and full of faults. I expected some fully developed and realistic characters from Professor Gray. Witness James King as portrayed on pages 65/6 and pp. 120 – 22. The neglected Nathaniel Isaacs is described on pp. 91/2 as "such a pariah in the world at large for his Hebrew religion. He could not establish warm relationships. He stuck to his beads, counting them, multiplying them into dead skins and tusks. He called himself a trader but he was killer at heart; he felt safer with life packed away to his profit". But the classic in the parade of caricatures is Thomas Halstead. Isaacs V.R.S., vol. 16, p. 20, describes Halstead as being "anything but intelligent" and "his movements not being of the most rapid description". Presumably, as a result of this latter source, Gray describes him variously as having "suffered a blow to the head", p. 34, "gangly", p. 37, "wailing and cowering", p. 45, "lacking in 'co-ordination'", p. 61 and on page 120 we are presented with "the unfortunate deranged settler . . . unable to speak . . . mentally defective and a 'moron' p. 122. Is this really the man the Trekkers selected as interpreter in their crucial negotiations with Dingane. On the 6 February 1838 he died bravely killing two of his attackers of William Wood' *Statements*, p. 26. Fynn, in this story, is usually associated with "cannibals", p. 40 and spoke 'pidgin Zulu', p. 52, whereas he was fluent in that language having spent six months in the bush for the purpose of learning the language in 1824. Natal Archives, Fynn Papers, No. 5, Folder 5 and of Fynn's *Diary*, p. 183. The purser is a stark outline associated only with a set of books, p. 27 and dies via the jaws of a crocodile "clutching his satchel of ledgers", p. 75. Farewell, p. 120, Cane and Ogle, p. 53 and Elizabeth Farewell, p. 116, all come in for similar treatment and are stick figures. Finally even the Newfoundland dog is "stupid", p. 28.

LANGUAGE

Originally I was excited to learn that Stephen Gray was a Professor of English and anticipated a sparkling dialogue and graphic and sensitive descriptions. But I was disappointed. Take for example the first sentence of chapter three. One would expect as the opening sentence explaining a key event that it would at least assist the narrative: "The shock of losing the 'Mary' took them various ways, but all new that they had it." p. 28. I find this somewhat ambiguous and unworthy of the vital significance of the loss of the 'Mary'. I take it that the sentence could mean that the stranded party realised that they were now dangerously isolated from the European world. Another curious example is found on page 75: "As John Ross rose in the Zulu's grip, it happened". Gray also makes dubious use of sarcasm: "Everyone knew chains were not needed to prevent sacks of potatoes escaping", p. 147.

I find that the dialogue is often inappropriate. Rachel, an apparently educated Khoi from the Cape says: "Will you do the honours? on page 34. Hlambamanzi, an escaped Xhosa says: "I'm sure you can rig up something, . . . Look to it, men." Shaka is made to say: "No Zulu boy can read a shopping list and write out extra items, and count out Rix-dollars all the way to sixteen and know what they mean", p. 136.

Whilst one is busy examining the language there is a curious mis-spelling of important names: Farwell for Farewell, Townsend for Townshend, Rachael for Rachel and Rocinante for Rosinante.

CONCLUSION

The fact of the matter is that Stephen Gray is making a mountain out of a molehill. Not only is John Ross a minor character in this pioneer period of Natal history but except for the journey there is, comparatively little that one can write about him. Gray himself endorses this as "minimal information",

p. 28 and on page 141 he mentions what we know i.e. that Maclean wrote only "one and a half lines" concerning his journey.

In conclusion I feel I must apologize that I found little to enthuse in the treatment of such a promising subject. It seems to me that Professor Gray is out for pyrotechnical sensation

and sudden fame which definitely has South Africa's latest media in mind: "has there ever been more perfect material for a T.V. serial?" p. 140. But I believe that after Gray's hiccup, John Ross and not Charles Rawden Maclean, and Isaacs and Fynn and not Stephen Gray will continue to be gratefully remembered.
