

Press reflections on immigration to Natal, 1847–1853

by Duncan du Bois

This year sees the 175th anniversary of the arrival of British settlers to Natal largely organised by Joseph Byrne. Although literature on the subject is quite extensive thanks to Sheila O'Byrne Spencer¹ among others – and given that my great-great-grandfather James du Bois and his family were part of that immigration, arriving in Durban on 30 July 1850 – I was motivated to reflect anew on that brave and deeply significant historical mission. The result is a booklet premised on details gleaned from the newspapers of that time. Through the use of advertisements, letters to the editor, reports, editorials and articles, this modest account attempts to provide a hitherto somewhat neglected angle on the Byrne settler era. Through those primary sources, settler initiatives, disappointments and challenges may be better understood and appreciated.²

British officialdom's stand on emigration to Natal

In August 1847, Natal's first lieutenant-governor, Martin West, appealed to his superior, the Cape governor, Sir Henry Pottinger, for what he termed 'proper encouragement to be given to increase the number of civilised inhabitants.'³ His appeal came at a time when the little colony was haemorrhaging settlers as many of the Boer families were relocating to the Transvaal and Orange Free State because they did not want to live under British rule. What West did not know was that the Colonial Office in London viewed Natal as a liability unworthy of any serious expenditure. James Stephen, permanent under-secretary in the Colonial Office, regarded Natal 'as too worthless to justify throwing the burden on our national resources, even for a time.' Colonial Secretary Earl Grey said he had to 'discountenance the expectation that any plans for the improvement of the Natal district, which would involve large expense to be provided for by Parliament, can be adopted.' Instead, Stephen and Grey recommended a policy of benign neglect that would leave Africans to govern most of their affairs.⁴ And in the greater scheme of things, by 1849 the Colonial Office held the view

that North America alone afforded the best prospects for emigration while Australia and New Zealand were seen as too distant and, in any case, in need of capital and labour. Natal was not even on the Colonial Office radar screen.

Factors motivating immigration

Overcrowding, the unhealthy effects of industrialisation and the ravages of disease posed great risks to urban life in Britain in the 1840s. Consumption – TB as we call it – was common. All three Brontë sisters died of it, Anne, the youngest at the age of just 29. Cholera was rife. An outbreak in June 1849 resulted in 72 000 deaths by the end of that year.⁵ Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert died of typhoid in December 1861. So, health considerations were definitely a factor in motivating emigration from Britain.

Providing momentum to that motive were advertisements and articles in the British press. The London *Times* of 14 June 1848 referred to Natal's climate as 'the most salubrious in the world.' Byrne's prospectus on Natal, issued by the Emigration and Colonisation Office in 1849, claimed that 'Natal may be said to be unsurpassed in point of the salubrity of its climate.'⁶

Another key factor in motivating immigration concerned descriptions of the geography of Natal. Here's another excerpt from the Emigration and Colonisation office: 'The soil is extremely fertile and in all cases will yield two crops a year ... manure is unrequired ... streams and rivers innumerable arise in the mountains and are ever flowing ... droughts are unknown ... Pasturage is plenteous'.⁷ The appeal of fertile, well-watered open spaces and the prospects they afforded resonated with many who sought to escape from Britain's cramped, damp conditions.

Beyond the beckoning of health and nature, the allure of prospects of wealth was exploited. According to an editorial in the *Natal Witness* of 25 May 1849, Natal presented the 'prudent emigrant a fair and fertile field of investment of his industry, skill and capital.' But from the outset, the lack of capital became the biggest

stumbling block to development until the discovery of coal in northern Natal after 1878.

Of course, of immediate appeal to the prospective settler was the cheap cost of emigration. Three voyage options were offered: steerage cost just £10, intermediate, which was less crowded, was £19 and £35 secured a private cabin. Each emigrant was guaranteed twenty acres of land. Although, as events turned out, the land offer did not appeal to all, it nonetheless constituted a further alluring element at a time when only the elite could afford to own land. For instance, in 1876, according to historian David Cannadine, 56% of the land in England was owned by just 4 736 individuals.⁸

Byrne's role

Joseph Byrne was an Irish opportunist and a speculator to whom the growing emigration business appealed. In the 1840s nearly ten million people emigrated from Europe to the USA. At a time of official indifference towards Natal, his approach in 1848 to Earl Grey to set up an emigration scheme to Natal found favour because it was a private initiative. Grey's only stipulations were that the emigrants should be 'a better class' of person and that each emigrant was prepared to pay for his own passage.⁹

The important thing to acknowledge, therefore, is that without Byrne's initiative – despite its great shortcomings – British settlement of Natal would not have commenced in 1849 and our history would have been very different. And we should be grateful that the calibre of settler who arrived was better than many who immigrated to Australia where 40% of settlers were convicts transported there. Of course, in making that boast, we need to appreciate that most of those transported were convicted of very petty crimes and were simply victims of England's draconian penal code.

Shortcomings of Byrne's scheme

In 1857, following Natal's achievement of representative government, which meant election of representatives to a legislative council and thus a say in

governance, an Immigration Board was established in Pietermaritzburg.¹⁰ But in promoting its objectives, the board was cautioned against seeking large-scale immigration at a time when Natal was undeveloped and had virtually no infrastructure.

Yet when Byrne promoted his scheme in 1849, no mention was made of the total lack of infrastructure and development. The glowing portents of this idyllic land were mere figments of fertile imagination. Natal was devoid of roads, bridges, rails, fences and hedges. Durban had only a single brick building in 1850. Wild,

untamed bush and veld prevailed. John Moreland, who had been Byrne's agent, remarked in 1857 in his position as a member of the Legislative Council that a major criticism of the Byrne scheme was its folly in luring immigrants to a place that in no way resembled the glowing descriptions in the emigration brochures.¹¹

Although the Natal government also came in for criticism for its handling of the scheme, in reality it had very little to do with what was a private initiative. In any case, the Natal government of 1849 existed basically in name only. Comprising a handful of officials on a shoestring budget, it was powerless to do anything beyond providing some tents



Joseph Byrne

to shelter the newly arrived.¹²

We are indebted to Thomas Phipson whose letters in the *Natal Witness* provide insight on the settlers' privations and challenges. Food, shelter and transport were in short supply and very expensive. Reaching Pietermaritzburg from the village of Durban was a three-day wagon trip. Destitution was a reality along with the added culture shock of naked Zulus. In that initial year after arrival, many existed on a mealie and pumpkin diet – two crops that grow anywhere and grow quickly. Here are a few lines from Phipson's letter published in the *Witness* of 29 June 1849:

Agricultural produce, never more than partially supplied, has become entirely deficient. Oats and flour and even hay for the horses are imported from Cape Town. Bread is, of course, extravagantly dear – white

5d per pound; brown 3d per pound. Indeed, we have remarked that we were more plentifully supplied with bread and potatoes all the way across the barren Atlantic than here in the midst of millions of acres of the most fertile ground.

A letter published in the *Natal Witness* on 9 November 1849 by a writer who signed himself Z provides a grim view of the reality many faced on arrival in Durban:

The emigrants lately arrived have been given to understand that they would have shelter provided for one month on their arrival here. Many of them have found no emigration agent and no houses provided and have had to tramp over the town with one of the government clerks begging everyone to let them use an outhouse. Others have found shelter in those degraded and degrading places – the canteens.

Exasperation with their circumstances turned to bitter disappointment and recrimination. It is estimated that as many as 1 000 left for Australia, although Alan Hattersley claims that many of those subsequently returned to Natal.¹³ An editorial in the *Natal Witness* of 8 February 1850 expressed the immigrant grievances as the following excerpt indicates:

There can be no doubt that some of the most cautious, prudent and respectable among the emigrants have been deluded by the government. They contend that the government being the only substantial party to the contract ... is bound in fairness and humanity, to extricate the unfortunate from the dilemma into which they have been brought. The emigrants now look for redress.

The only redress they received was Lieutenant-Governor Benjamin Pine's increase of the land allocation from 20 to 45 acres. But that did not alleviate the fact that many of the plots were situated on unsuitable ground and in any case were too small to generate a living.¹⁴ It must be remembered that most of the settlers were townfolk who had neither the interest in nor the ability for an agrarian life. Amazingly, despite letters sent to England deprecating conditions in Natal, emigrant ships continued to arrive. In a lengthy article justifying his scheme, Byrne claimed, among other things, that he had kept the cost of a steerage passage low at £10 when the going rate was £15.

Lack of capital was perhaps the greatest obstacle and barrier to progress. There were no banks – the first one was established only in 1854. Without any proper industries, apart from brickmaking, everything had to be imported from England with shipping costs adding to prices. Natal's sugar pioneer, Edmund Morewood, who produced the first commercial sugar in 1852, sold up and left his Compensation estate in 1853 citing the

lack of capital as his main reason for leaving Natal.

Byrne's fate

Before he commenced the immigration scheme, Byrne was in debt to the tune of £2 000 and declared bankrupt in September 1850.¹⁵ This news inflamed public opinion about him. Nonetheless, seemingly impervious to criticism, Byrne visited Natal in April 1852 and was treated to a public dinner in his honour at McDonald's hotel in Durban. In his speech on that occasion, he admitted his 'errors of judgement and the defects of administration' but insisted that his motives as regards Natal had always been honest. He noted that he was departing for the Cape where he intended to form a large company that would promote Natal.¹⁶ But that was the last Natal heard of him. He never returned. Instead, he went to the goldfields of Victoria in Australia where he ran up more debts and died in 1863.¹⁷

British settlement of Natal that commenced 175 years ago was premised on misrepresentation and disingenuousness. Yet those who came here and stayed laid the foundations of what evolved into a fine province. For all his deviousness and misrepresentation, historically the role of Joseph Byrne deserves credit.¹⁸

Settler society

New Zealand historian James Belich has distinguished between an emigrant and a settler. The former, he says, joins someone else's society. A settler replicates the society from which he came.¹⁹ That's the reason for featuring various advertisements in the booklet which concerned the transplanting of British culture to Natal. As the heading of the advertisement for the 1851 Christmas Ball stated 'The Old House and Home must not be forgotten nor yet its Customs.'²⁰

Two settler nodes that flourished were Richmond on the Illovo, as it was called, and Verulam on the banks of the Umhloti. Published on 11 October 1850 in the *Natal Witness*, a report on Richmond noted fifteen to twenty dwellings and a store. A sluice had been dug to lead a stream of water from one of the nearby kloofs. A fund had been started to build a chapel. In 1853 St Mary's of Richmond became the first consecrated church in Natal.

Thanks to the initiative of William Josiah Irons, a Wesleyan Methodist, who believed that colonisation was one of the noblest occupations in which a man can engage, a party of pilgrims was organised with the patronage of the Earl of Verulam. Through Irons' efforts promoting emigration 400 settlers were absorbed

into the Byrne scheme. By May 1851, there were 156 inhabitants of the Verulam settlement. Within a year of its establishment, agriculture was flourishing. Crops grown included maize, potatoes, cabbages, turnips, carrots, beans, peas, lettuce, celery, radishes, beetroot, and of course pumpkins. Lemon, fig and pomegranate trees had been planted. The settlement also had 200 head of cattle and eighty pigs.²¹ Other settlements that made progress were at Dalton, Riet Vlei, Lidgetton, Howick, Pinetown and Isipingo, although Isipingo was not part of the land designated under the Byrne settler scheme.

One has to admire the pluck and attitude of those settlers. In the midst of extreme hardship and misfortune, they refused to neglect their cultural pastimes and traditions. No matter how grim circumstances were, they found the time and energy to celebrate and to enjoy themselves. That disposition persisted throughout the formative years of colonial Natal and was especially poignant in the remark made by the Alexandra County correspondent of the *Natal Mercury* published on 31 December 1876. After reviewing what was a very distressing socio-economic year in that county, the writer affirmed his commitment to Natal with the words ‘Natal is our adopted land’.

NOTES

- 1 Shelagh O’Byrne Spencer, *British Settlers in Natal: A Biographical Register Vols 1–7* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1981–2001).
- 2 Copies of ‘Press reflections on immigration to Natal, 1847–1853’ are available from the author at duncanldubois@gmail.com.
- 3 Enid Hammond, ‘The settlement of the Byrne immigrants in Natal 1849–1852’ (MA thesis, Unisa, 1926): 4.
- 4 Norman Etherington, *Preachers, Peasants, and Politics in SE Africa, 1835–1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978): 10.
- 5 Alan Hattersley, *The British Settlement of Natal: A Study in Imperial Migration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950): 123.
- 6 Quoted in the *Natal Witness*, 18 May 1849.
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New York: Vintage Press, 1999): 16.
- 9 Hattersley, *The British Settlement of Natal*: 106–108.
- 10 Natal Parliamentary Papers, 93, no. 3, 1863, ‘Report of Immigration Board’, 11 November 1862.
- 11 Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR), CSO 99, no. 27, 13 October 1857.
- 12 *Natal Witness*, 1 February 1850.
- 13 H.M. Robertson, ‘The 1849 settlers in Natal: the Byrne scheme and its smaller rivals’ *South African Journal of Economics* 17(4) 1949: 437; Hattersley, *The British Settlement of Natal*: 221.
- 14 *Natal Witness*, 29 March 1850.
- 15 Robertson, ‘The 1849 settlers in Natal’: 433.
- 16 *Natal Times*, 2 April 1852.
- 17 *Natal Advertiser and Mercantile Gazette*, 3 August 1855; Hattersley, *The British Settlement of Natal*: 111.
- 18 Albion, [letter], *Natal Witness*, 29 August 1851.
- 19 James Belich, ‘The rise of the Angloworld’ in *Rediscovering the British World* edited by P.A. Buckner and R.D. Francis (Calgary: Calgary University Press, 2005): 53.
- 20 *Natal Times*, 12 December 1851.
- 21 *Natal Witness*, 30 May 1851.