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1988-04-25
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A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented at Seminar in RW 319 at
4.00 p.m. on Monday 25 April 1988

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SOUTH AFRICAN FICTION AND A CASE HISTORY REVISED: AN ACCOUNT OF RESEARCH INTO RETELLINGS OF THE JOHN ROSS STORY OF EARLY NATAL

by Stephen Gray

No. 230

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Stephen Gray

> I talk about the past mainly because I am interested in the present.
>
> Ngugi wa Thiong'o[1]

> The best sort of historical novel is the one which is really about the present and uses the past as a sort of working model for the present. Or, to put it another way, the best sort of historical novels are novels in which the human issues are the same as those we have now, and have always had to face.
>
> Thomas Keneally[2]

In 1825-28, during the establishment of a British trading outpost and harbour facility at Port Natal, a boy apprentice - commonly known as John Ross - spent a considerable period at the court of Shaka, first king of the Zulus. He was the only white eye-witness to affairs in Zululand who was consistently there at the formation of the Zulu imperium, and he came to act as a translator and mediator, liaising between the Zulus and the coastal settlement in some crucial dealings. In white accounts of his story he has been remembered exclusively as a minor character among the white pioneers, for whom, when they were ailing in 1827, at the age of 14 he undertook a remarkable marathon rescue-run from Port Natal to the Portuguese fort at Delagoa Bay in quest of "medicines and other necessaries." This feat is commemorated in many existing monuments, and has been the subject of much historical writing and fiction, including the SABC-TV serial, John Ross: An African Adventure. His biography is now also the subject of my own novel, John Ross: The True Story, published in 1987 by Penguin to coincide with the release of the movie.

This paper traces the research necessarily undertaken in order to reconstruct a biography of the period, and cast it in the form of a historical novel for modern-day readers. A summary of previous writers' reliance on the interpretative texts of historians is given, showing how the John Ross story has been used as a popular episode in larger projects ultimately devised to justify the rightness of white control in early Natal - in its outpost, settlement, annexed and colonial, union and Afrikaner nationalist phases. The chief sources for the formation of this supportive historical mythology by two of the Natal pioneers - Nathaniel Isaacs' Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa (1836) and Henry Francis Fynn's Diary (first published in 1969) - are examined, together with the very extensive secondary literature derived from them, in order to show how the biasing and manipulation of historical data and opinion has proceeded.

No writer to date has yet used the crucial third account - John Ross's own Loss of the Brig 'Mary' at Natal, with Early Recollections of that Settlement (1853), and other material by him - which gives a radically different perspective on the same events, challenging almost all of the major orthodoxies and stereotypes about black-white relationships in Natal at the time, and forcing an extensive revaluation of the very roots of white history-making. Basically, the issues of slave-trading and of the usurpation of territory which are generally omitted from the existing histories, now with John Ross's testimony become the vital factors of re-interpretation, as they were the major issues in his own life. This paper also shows, through the actual case history of this 'John Ross' figure, the implications a revised history and cultural reassessment can have for contemporary South African readers at any given time. A further aim is to analyse the status of the categories of 'fiction' and 'history' as they are currently reflected in the media.

The story of John Ross is first recorded by two of the four main pioneers, from whom virtually all the white history of early Natal is derived. In his Diary Fynn has everything and nothing to say about the outpost of British traders at Port Natal and its relationship with the Zulu kingdom from 1824 onwards. He has only these words to say about John Ross, the apprentice of Mr James Saunders King, partner of Lieutenant Francis Farewell, shipwrecked with his master in 1825 in the brig Mary at the Bay:

> ... the state of affairs [by 1827] in connection with the ship in the course of [re]construction was so unsatisfactory that King resolved to proceed to Delagoa Bay by land and obtain a passage to the Cape of Good Hope, where he would engage a vessel to go to Natal. This proposal, however, on the situation improving, was modified, it being decided that instead of himself a youth, John Ross, of about 15 years of age should make the journey for the purpose of obtaining medicine of which they stood in much need. To enable the lad to do this it was necessary for Isaacs to appeal to Shaka for an escort to protect Ross as well as provide him with food on his 300-mile journey there and back. Shaka supplied the escort and after a few weeks Ross returned safely.[3]

Although Fynn's account was not available to the general public until quite recently, and so has had little chance of being influential, he does establish clearly the Bay's position of dependence and respect for King Shaka, and he makes the expedition a routine affair. Phlegmatic and hard-nosed, Fynn was never one to aggrandise any remarkable achievements.

But Fynn is already practising selective telling - the situation which he does not explain is hardly a medical emergency. Farewell and King, the joint leaders, had not spoken to one another for over a year and had set up rival outposts, one on the north, one on the south of the Bay, both by courtesy of independently negotiated and extensive land-grants from Shaka. In exchange they were to rebuild the Mary, not for themselves, but as Shaka's vessel, to afford him a means to reach Europe. King, who by then anyway had trade links with the Cape Colony, had so delayed the floating of the ship that to placate Shaka he mounted this time-winning dash to Delagoa, ostensibly to acquire much-needed parts. Nor was Isaacs, Fynn's ally, in a position to plead with Shaka for a safe passage for the boy; Isaacs had just had his alternative trading-post at Tugela River Mouth burnt down, and been escorted back and confined to King's land.

In April-May, 1827, Fynn was 24, Isaacs was a mere 19, and the boy they call John Ross was actually 14 years old. All the members of the Natal expedition were exceptionally young - one of them, Thomas Halstead, was made a Zulu induna or headman at 15 and, contrary to the impressions given us by later historians, so cordial were relationships with Shaka that Halstead actually married one of the king's sisters - and this personal alliance happily outlasted the political detente it celebrated.

But the point of Fynn's record is not especially John Ross's age. To us it is appealing to think of a lad that young - such a junior member of the various parties that he had not been mentioned before - undertaking such a journey, but to his own contemporaries that sort of venture was par for the course. Fynn himself had once walked from Grahamstown to Cape Town in search of a job, and a year after John Ross one of Farewell's party - John Cane the carpenter - walked the entire distance from Shaka's capital at Dukuza to Cape Town and back - not for the whites, but for King Shaka. This was caused by the Zulus coming to realise they would not achieve a peace with King George IV through the services of Farewell and King, but should approach the rival power directly.

Our other prime informant, Isaacs, is the only member of the Natal expedition to have had his record published in a commercial form during his lifetime - or, at least, so we have been told. His bestselling Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa, Descriptive of the Zoolus, their Manners, Customs, etc., etc., with a Sketch of Natal - to give the work its full title - appeared in London in 1836, and has always been available in reprints. The journal of his leader, Mr King - he was never promoted to lieutenant except by himself - is quoted extensively in Isaacs, but since become lost. Ironically, Isaacs, our major informant, is usually the one left out of accounts of early Natal, possibly because there is something too obviously go-getting in his approach and a Jewish frankness which is all too easily construed as bad taste.

Isaacs knew John Ross better than Fynn did, because Fynn, if he was aligned to anyone, fell under Farewell - they had arrived together in 1824. King, Isaacs and Ross, trying to bring them provisions and reinforcements, were shipwrecked with them in 1825. Isaacs and John Ross arrived in Natal on the same catastrophic wave, as it were, and left on the same rather prosperous swell in 1828, once Shaka was dead and the Port Natal endeavour had to be abandoned as a result.

But the references to John Ross in Isaacs' work, although numerous, are hard to piece together into any coherent story. One thing is clear, however: Isaacs is by no means a reliable witness, as there was great enmity between him and John Ross. By 1828 Ross had so grown as Isaacs' rival, and had so forged an alternative way of coming to terms with the Zulus, that details of his further career were simply omitted. Their ways did utterly diverge: Isaacs became the slave-dealer he always meant to be, and Ross actually declared a private war on bootleg slavery as conducted by his former friend.

At all events, Isaacs has this account of John Ross's journey:

> ... it was thought advisable that we should endeavour to get [to Delagoa Bay], as among other necessaries we were greatly in want of medicines, - indispensable things in Natal; when John Ross, Lieutenant King's apprentice, a lad of about fifteen years of age, acute, shrewd, and active, was appointed to go the journey. No European had been known to make the attempt, and succeed in reaching that place from Natal. A man named Powell, one of Farewell's party, set off to reach Delagoa; but he was never heard of after his departure. I seemed to have a great inclination to accompany Ross, but Lieutenant King dissented. The boy too, by going without any other European, would not be likely to excite the king's suspicion that we wanted to obtain a vessel for the purpose of leaving his country, as he had a great desire to have white people with him. Shaka offered 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...
>
> It appears, after having left the residence of Shaka with his escort, he travelled moderately for eighteen days. From King Makasany [of the Tsongas], by whom he was well received, he obtained guides, and crossed the River Maputo in the native boats... The natives in the vicinity of Delagoa are a filthy, inhospitable, treacherous, and vicious race; but they treated him with civility and decency, not from courtesy, but fear...
>
> The Portuguese were exceedingly kind to him during his short stay, but repeatedly said that they could not help suspecting him to be a spy sent by Shaka, as no Christian would think of sending a boy like him that distance. John, however, said that he produced his dollars to show the

> Governor that he had arrived for the purpose of purchasing medicines and other necessaries... The Governor told him that he might purchase from the stores what he required. On his proceeding to do so, he fell in with a Frenchman, commanding a vessel in the slave trade, then taking a cargo, who furnished him with a great many useful articles gratis, so that he returned having only expended two dollars, and yet had as many things, of various descriptions, as ten of his people could carry...
>
> 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, in which the natives had never been blessed with the sweets of civilization 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 one that must be held as exceedingly bold, and wonderfully enterprising.[4]

Isaacs' heightened rhetoric mixes economic and moral themes, polarising the participants into obvious heroes and villains. Need John Ross have felt threatened if he had an entire Zulu impi as an escort? Note who are the genteel ones in Isaacs' book - the Governor of Mozambique, which that year exported 46,000 Shangaan slaves to the Empress of Brazil... and the French captain who, as a matter of fact, was destitute, just having been becalmed without water and having dumped an entire living cargo of 220 black people overboard. It is quite beyond Isaacs to mention the trade-war between Britain and Portugal; Farewell had already been cannoned out of Delagoa, and who were the Portuguese to welcome a rival port at the other end of Zululand? Then, why didn't these Britishers stranded at Port Natal try Algoa Bay? - because by their own Colonial Cape government they had been declared illegal, a fact no one mentions. The trip to Delagoa led by a young lad wanting medicines - when no one was ill - was a vast scam. Something else was at the bottom of it.

But Isaacs feels we must have conquering heroes who illustrate the potential for opening up the interior to exploitation, appropriate racist denigration included, and from his account flow a dozen histories of early Natal in which the minor John Ross episode is magnified and valorised into serving the various purposes of the writers' own times.

My first example of this is Graham Mackeurtan in The Cradle Days of Natal. First published in 1930, it is written after most of the major changes of Natal's status have occurred and the British interest is secure. A second wave of settlement at Port Natal has established it as Durban, one of the busiest ports in Africa. The Boer interest has located at Pietermaritzburg by mid-century and been annexed to the colonial government. The Zulu monarchy has finally been dispossessed during the Zulu wars, and the Garden Colony has in 1910 joined the Union of South Africa, which in turn is part of the Commonwealth network. Mackeurtan is the first to call up echoes of all the adventure histories that intervene between the 1820s and 1920s, as if now to confirm the truth of their assumptions - from the same Durban, after all, Allan Quatermain set off for King Solomon's Mines in the 1880s.

> ... John Ross, a boy of fifteen, "acute, shrewd, and active," was sent, with a few natives, to walk to Delagoa Bay and back. This meant a journey of nearly six hundred miles on foot. The mission was entirely successful, but John must have had many an anxious moment at night in the Lebombo Mountains. He was a boy of courage and resource...
>
> At the bay itself he fell in with the captain of a French slaver, who furnished him with so much of his needs without payment that John spent only two dollars. Perhaps this was the "infamous Dorval of Mauritius" who began to buy slaves in Delagoa Bay in 1825. The ravages of Shaka and their repercussions had reduced the neighbouring tribes to such a state of despair that numbers of them sold themselves to escape starvation...
>
> It needed a brave heart and a wise head to complete the journey. As a physical effort alone it is worth recording; as a triumph of a mere child over the well-nigh invincible it is immortal. John Ross may, for all one knows, have died the undistinguished master of a leaky ship, but he sleeps in the Halls of Courage.[5]

Mackeurtan's version is interesting for a number of reasons. Apart from the direct (unacknowledged) quote from Isaacs, he takes over and extends the polarisation between blacks and whites. The information that John Ross's journey, now a "mission", was completed thanks to the hospitality of the Zulus, Tsongas and Shangaans, and with their active collaboration and assistance, is now turned around to look as if their territories were actually the enemies', while the actual enemies of the British - the Portuguese and the French - are recast as their allies and friends. The issue of slavery is dextrously manipulated, so that it now appears that the Zulus actively and voluntarily sold themselves into bondage. This is a fantasy addition which goes flatly in the face of historical truth - Shaka, in fact, was appalled at the depredations of the slave-traders and forbade his people to have dealings with them; a year before John Ross's visit he had razed the fort at Delagoa

Bay to the ground in an attempt to halt his rival, Shoshangane, using it to export white ivory, and hence the military escort he gave John Ross. Subsequently Shaka waged a war against Shoshangane on this issue, with the loss of some 30,000 people, which must be accounted the first modern war fought against the system of slavery. The Delagoa expedition being a "triumph of a mere child over the well-nigh invincible" must also be seen in a different light; Mackeurtan's account remains rather a triumph of wish-fulfilment over truth.

The key to his motives is in the lowering of the status of John Ross's escort into "a few natives" who are now viewed as mere assistants or servants, excluded from the glory of the white boy's achievement. Then Mackeurtan suppresses John Ross's story further by putting him to rest in the British "Halls of Courage" - that John Ross did become the master-mariner of a brig of his own, in about 1831, and sail it with a multiracial crew against slave-traders would be entirely beyond Mackeurtan to imagine.

There follows this example from Allister Macmillan's Durban Past and Present of 1936:

> ... when it was found necessary to despatch a messenger to Delagoa to produce certain much needed supplies, the person chosen for the enterprise was Farewell's young apprentice, John Ross, a lad of only 15 years of age, and it was thought politic that he should go entirely alone in order that Shaka's suspicions should not be aroused. The journey by the boy, John Ross, is perhaps one of the most amazing and adventurous in the history of the African Continent.[6]

Only six years later John Ross has been stripped of even his "few natives" so that the question of collaboration with the indigenous peoples is totally erased. Shaka, who was the actual sponsor of the expedition, is now turned into its enemy, and he is now "suspicious" and easily "aroused"; in short, he is thoroughly villainised.

By contrast John Ross is now elevated from the merely heroic into the "amazing" category, and African history itself is claimed as great only because of the white spirit of enterprise. The lone nature of John Ross's journey is important, as it calls on a stock response in English folklore - Dick Whittington is one example, and Bunyan's Puritan Pilgrim is another. A quasi-religious myth becomes activated about the figure of John Ross to validate a commercial venture which now has no regard for historical truth at all. Evidence of this is that Macmillan does not even bother to identify Ross's employer correctly (Farewell for King), let alone be able to conceive that Farewell and King had at this time actually gone to war over their claims at Port Natal - the only pitched battle fought at the Bay during the days of the first outpost was a civil one, conducted between Ross's white seniors. Further evidence of how ahistorical we have become is that at this time John Ross's employer was, in fact, neither King nor Farewell; it was Shaka,

to whom he had been sold by King - believe it or not - as a body-servant.

Nevertheless, by 1955, we have E. A. Ritter's Shaka Zulu, the perennially bestselling biography which purports to summarise the Zulu's own account of their history. Ritter gives a new twist to the John Ross story by dramatising his arrival at Dukuza as if the event were well remembered and familiar:

> Arriving at Shaka's capital on his march to Delagoa Bay, young Ross called on the king, who received him kindly. Great was Shaka's astonishment on hearing that this mere child contemplated so hazardous a journey, accompanied by two native servants, who even then had already acquired an abounding faith in the protective powers of a European, even though he was but a boy!
>
> "Mamo!" exclaimed Shaka with surprise, "kodwa unesibindi!" (My mother! but he has a liver! - meaning courage.) Filled with generous admiration Shaka provided Ross with an escort of two companies of soldiers and with ten pairs of elephant tusks to trade with the Portuguese. After the king had given careful instructions to the commanding officer as to the conduct of the expedition, he said to Ross: "By what means would you have prevailed over the difficulties without my help?" To which Ross answered: "My head, my heart and my gun."
>
> After Ross left, Shaka said to his entourage: "If their children are like that what must their men be like! Small wonder that they brave the ocean waves, which fill even our bravest warriors with fear. True, we only fear that which we do not know, but these White people do not even fear that!"
>
> There is nothing to commemorate the great deed of this brave Scots boy. The trail he blazed is now closely followed by the great north road from Durban via Swaziland to Delagoa Bay. Surely this highway could be aptly named after this heroic boy? Shaka rose nobly to the occasion and set an inspiring example to the fellow countrymen of John Ross. The Zulus salute John Ross as I-Qawu - The Hero.[7]

Here the striking feature of the passage, apart from the bluff and bravado of the scene-painting, is the way Ritter co-opts even Shaka himself through the use of supposedly authentic dialogue into admitting young John Ross's superiority. The Zulu heroic virtue of bravely overcoming fear of the unknown is poignantly evoked, and the admiration and generosity of one warrior recognising another rings movingly true. At least in Ritter the Zulu factor is reinstated, but only that it may be outmanoeuvred by the white man with his highway. Of course the highway to the north had long been opened by the Zulus themselves, and if it was to be named after anyone it should be Shaka. Nor does the modern highway go anywhere near the route they followed; it has to circle all of Swaziland, while they avoided it by following the coast. But

Ritter does not suggest that this matters; he merely uses Shaka to chide John Ross's commercially-minded countrymen for their lack of an ability to acknowledge heroism. Ritter's own background is different from Mackeurtan's and Macmillan's - a post-World War II sentiment willing to allow the Zulu role in history is evident once it is no longer a threat, and can return in the form of the throbbing popular romance of spectacle and slaughter. Also, Ritter is the first to arm John Ross with a gun, which in Natal mythology is the only technological advantage the one militaristic society had over the other.

But Ritter also interprets the scene psychologically, making identification between Shaka and the boy so suggestive. Although he could not know it, and it must be stressed that the scene could not have taken place in any way like the one depicted here, Ritter is at least correct in one respect. There was a special bond between the omnipotent ruler and the little white underdog. Over the previous two years Shaka had adopted him as his own child. Shaka really loved John Ross for his agility in dancing the Scottish hornpipe in his sailor-suit and for how, chameleon-like, he had become a rather curiously adaptable white Zulu. Needless to say, the idea that Zulu history recalls this incident which could not have occurred is a fabrication. This stream of evaluative historians thus culminates in an illogicality: what is announced as 'history' has, in fact, become 'fiction.' This is an interesting enough literary observation, but in the society at large the 'fiction' has been read all too literally.

However, following Ritter's recommendation many monuments have indeed been raised to celebrate the valour of this fictional John Ross as if the story were factual. Here is the list:

In 1956 a paddling pool on Durban's esplanade is named after John Ross.[8]

On 21 March that year the Natal Mercury gives advance publicity to Mrs D. Strutt, curator of the Old House Museum, who has devised a "Puppet Play Based on the Boy Hero", dramatising his journey; the same Mrs Strutt later writes a fine pamphlet on The Early Settlers of Natal, which sorts out much of the misinformation.

In 1958 the MOTH's Ubejane Shellhole of Mtubatuba sign-posts their section of the new national road John Ross Highway - and this is also the main access route into Eshowe.

In 1959 the new flyover bridge over the Tugela River is named after him.

In Durban's old fort a tablet (in English only), mounted in stones in the centre of a subtropical, regimental garden, officially recognises Ross's meaning to history:

THIS TABLET COMMEMORATES
JOHN ROSS
(LIEUT. J.S. KING'S APPRENTICE)
A LAD OF 15 YEARS OF AGE, WHO IN 1827, BRAVING THE PERILS OF AN UNEXPLORED LAND INHABITED BY AN UNKNOWN PEOPLE, AND ABOUNDING IN WILD ANIMALS, WALKED WITH GREAT COURAGE FROM PORT NATAL TO DELAGOA BAY AND BACK (A DISTANCE OF 600 MILES) IN ORDER TO OBTAIN SORELY NEEDED MEDICINES AND OTHER NECESSARIES FOR THE HANDFUL OF PIONEERS AT THE BAY OF NATAL.[9]

Comment from the Natal Mercury: "What did his parents say when they found out?"

One of the Durban harbour tugs is accordingly named the John Ross.

Then on Durban's Victoria Embankment - the English-speakers always like their monuments practical - an immense, curved block of sub-economic flats goes up to house waifs, strays, students and destitutes: John Ross House.

At its entrance is a beautiful tiled mural depicting the lad sloping off up the beach, with bare feet and a cane. He is dressed in a brown jerkin to match his hair, and appears to be wearing blue jeans. Observed by a few Zulus in fancy dress, he travels alone.

Before the mural is another representation of him - a fine, more than life-size bronze statue of him in a torn shirt with kneebreeches. Here his hair is curled like a young Caesar's, his nose aquiline, chin firm, eyes far-seeing.[10] In one hand he grabs three hunting-spears some nine feet long - this would seem the ultimate appropriation of Zulu might, for this little Roman conqueror now carries their weapons against them. He is in mid-stride, raised on a podium so that passers-by can only look up to him.

When Richards Bay opens a school it is named John Ross College, and has a similar statue on display.

Meanwhile a tertiary category of the literature on John Ross develops with the first book devoted to him - in 1958 Rex Gutridge's novel for children called Thunder over Africa appears.[11] Now John Ross, the British Navy's powder-monkey, sets off barefoot, passes Captain Dorval's ship moored off approximately La Lucia, etc. By repetition the story becomes entrenched and seems to be firmly validated.

The white Natalians appear to have concocted a hero who can rival any thrown up by Afrikaners, too; indeed, by 1972 K. Schroeder affirms that this is at last so by including John Ross's story in Bravery in South Africa: Stories from our Heroic Past,[12] where he appears as one Englishman among a dozen Afrikaners and no blacks. Schroeder depicts John Ross as a guest of a kraal where he is much welcomed, but spends more time on his leavetaking than his arrival, as if to express great disapproval that he should have been there at all.

In 1974, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of what is now called the first settlement of Natal, the Natal Society publish in Natalia the biographies of those first pioneers (none of whom settled). It is interesting to see how various characters are rated and ranked in the pantheon: Francis Farewell, Henry Fynn, James Saunders King and Nathanial Isaacs are the leading four, with John Cane, Henry Ogle, Thomas Halstead and John Ross as supporting cast - a dozen or more other pioneers are not given entries, simply because there is fragmentary evidence about them in the original records. This is understandable, but it does illustrate how the naval hierarchies of Regency days persist in our supposedly more democratic world. Also, failed pioneers are given no space at all - the original ventures to Port Natal involved more individuals who returned to the Cape or perished than those who persisted.

The John Ross biography cites only Fynn, Isaacs and their cannibaliser, Mackeurtan, although by then far more information on him is available, almost all of which serves to expand and even contradict the official mythology. R. E. Gordon's entry, however, is the first to mention that the expedition to Delagoa Bay was met by King at Tugela River Mouth "where he had camped during a surveying trip."[13] This is in fact the point from which King and Isaacs had been driven back, their trading-post in ruins. King was not there making any peaceful survey for his chart of the coast, but intercepted the convoy of porters before they could reach King Shaka to divert them to the Bay. Gordon continues, saying "Ross got back to the Port after an absence of three weeks" - three years would be more accurate, for John Ross had lived most of his time in Natal with the Zulus, not the whites. Gordon cites the series of articles Ross subsequently wrote to explain his moves - this is the Loss of the Brig 'Mary' sequence - but obviously did not study them, preferring for unfathomable reasons to stick with the old version of the story.

In 1977 the American scholar and editor of Africana texts, Edward C. Tabler, published his biographical reference work, Pioneers of Natal and South-east Africa. The entry on John Ross repeats all the information we have been given as sworn orthodoxy, adding the flourish for which there is no source - that on King's death on 10 September, 1828, John Ross was despatched to Shaka with the news. This is impossible, because four days later all the people at the Bay knew Shaka himself was dead and that their fates had utterly turned. So dependent on Shaka had they become that with his demise they evacuated their claims and the outposts fell into ruins. It is all very well for popular mythology to run awry, but when one finds speculation dressed up as irrefragable evidence in academic reference works we are into an area of voluntary deceit which can surely not be tolerated for much longer.

At the time of writing a TV serial of the adventures of John Ross in Zululand is nearing completion, and I have been privileged to observe much of the three-year process of mounting such a multimillion rand production. I have seen the exhaustive amounts of money and time, skill and care, that go into

preparing an epic movie such as John Ross: An African Adventure, and so have no wish to be flippant or facetious about it. I have visited locations during filming, have even contributed titbits of research material to their immense resources of background information. The aim of their final script by John Cundill is a forthright one - to make an enthralling action-adventure which will surely week by week capture the hearts and minds of its multitudes of viewers. Given the conservative nature of big-budget movie-making in general and its necessary reliance on tried and true formulae, John Ross: An African Adventure will be disturbing at the danger and derring-do level, but perhaps bland and placatory at other levels which we may consider more important, specifically as regards the depiction of race relations and home truths about the colonising process. Inevitably the movie promotes the view that young pioneers threw up this nation, producing the type of world we must maintain. The movie's story may have little to do with any truth empirically arrived at; the SABC-TV team are certainly not the first, with such an overwhelming back-up of precedents, to have every reason in the world to tell the old story in the old way.

But in this account we have reached a crisis point. Read as history, John Ross: An African Adventure tells us everything we need to know, actually not about the past, but about the present. If viewed as literature, it becomes a record of present-day beliefs about life in which the historical spectacle is used merely as what Lukacs calls picturesque costume-drama. This constitutes one text where it would be foolish to attempt to find any other truths than those which are platitudinously in favour of the apartheid status quo.

The only way to break through the surface of this situation is to establish another text, one which can play intertextually against the movie's text - and that is why I have written as an answer to it the somewhat boldly named John Ross: The True Story. This is a novel which, while retelling substantially the same story as the film, resituates it in an altered context where the basic assumptions of what constitutes 'history', 'truth' and 'fiction' are changed. My novel is a history, and proclaims itself as such, citing its sources and references (which a film has not time to do). But it is also a novel which draws attention to its fictionality in a way which few films have ever managed to do: films are all too often read directly in terms of social realism, the authenticity of the image, the authority of the camera's point of view, and so on. But my novel deconstructs itself, showing how the history was initially constructed, and pointing out that metafictional stories about stories are as interesting as the stories themselves. Using this strategy I hope to establish a comparative debate which will indeed bring the categories of history, truth and fiction into a controversial area, forcing the consumers of the two works into learning how to assess data relatively, and to sort out new meanings from them.

One of the curious observations that has to be made about this process of historical revaluation is that I am not the first to see cracks in the John Ross story as it has been elaborated and handed down by professional historians and our state institutions.

The warnings about how wrong the myth-makers could go should have been picked up long ago. For example, the first black African novel about the early Zulu days, written in Sotho, Thomas Mofolo's Chaka, first published in English in 1931, presents an utterly different portrait of the man who, after all, controlled John Ross's life.[14] Shaka was clearly no lurid, fantasy tyrant so beloved of the many writers who followed Fynn and Isaacs; in the Zulu oral tradition he was, and remains, perhaps the most respected recipient of praises. R. R. R. Dhlomo, in his Zulu novel of 1937, UShaka, presents yet another portrait, drawn more reliably from the elaboraste oral heritage of the people who should know, after all - the Zulus themselves. His brother, the journalist, H. I. E. Dhlomo, ceaselessly warned us to beware of experts, too - any 'expert' on Zulu affairs, he remarked, could be sure to have a hidden motive. But still even these warnings may be dismissed - obviously black historians and writers may make of history what they wish as well; it is all a matter of point of view. If you assume 'black' and 'white' are different, of course their points of view are different. We have been riding on literary sleights-of-hand like these for centuries. The use of black oral sources remains problematic for white historians; few references are ever made, for example, to the James Stuart Archive of Recorded Oral Evidence Relating to the History of the Zulu and Neighbouring Peoples, although much of this is published in translated and edited form.

But in 1957 the Natal Mercury carried a piece called "Identity of Young Natal Pioneer Hero Solved"[15] - and there began the first sign of a questioning on the white side of history, which has since become an alternative direction of revaluation. The piece carries a picture of the commemorative tablet quoted above, and tells the story of a very conscientious researcher. Her name is Elizabeth Gooderham, a British journalist working in Durban at the time. As anyone before her could so easily have done, she was having trouble with the name 'John Ross' - indeed, both Fynn's and Isaacs' records are replete with Johns (John Cane, John the Hottentot, three Johns who are the jolly jack tars of the Mary), and often they are not called John at all, but Jack. When Isaacs goes on a foraging trip inland for grain on 27 August, 1826, and takes John Cane, Rachel the Hottentot and 'John Ross' with him, this John comes back a few days later named 'Jack.' So the first name John is in the line of a generic nickname. And I have since found out this is not our John Ross at all, because at that date he was at Shaka's court, where incidentally he was commonly named Jackabo.

But as Gooderham discovered, his real name was nothing like John or Jack; he was called Charles!

Nor was his surname Ross. There was any number of Rosses about in South Africa at the time: the government printer at the Cape of Good Hope who produced The African Court Calendar and Directory was Geo. Ross; the Dictionary of South African Biography lists a near-contemporary Glaswegian John Ross on the Border, and there was Brownlee J. Ross, the missionary, there, too. 'Ross', then, could also be a nickname for a Scotsman and/or redhead, which it was in this case: our lad was called Ross for having the only carroty tresses in the whole of South-East Africa, and a braid Scots accent to go with it. His real surname, it turns out, was Maclean. Middle name: Rawden.

So our story is about 'John Ross' only in terms of fabricated myth; behind the myth is a man called Charles Rawden Maclean. All those monuments are up to the wrong person.

Maclean was born on 22 November, 1812 - Gooderham learned from the Registrar of Shipping and Seamen, Cardiff - and served in eight ships, beginning with the Mary in 1825. After pioneering in Natal he set out to sea again, trading between London, the Southern States and the West Indies, gaining his master's ticket in 1833-34. This record continues to 1861, and it was not then known what happened to Captain Maclean on his retirement.

Armed with the correct name, key dates and the markers of a biography, Gooderham also found that Nathaniel Isaacs was not the only Natal pioneer to go into print with his memoirs: Captain Maclean himself did, too. His 20,000-word account, written mostly as a corrective to the new missionary histories of early Natal, The Loss of the Brig 'Mary' at Natal, with Early Recollections of that Settlement, was published in serial form in the Nautical Magazine, London, between January, 1853, and March, 1855. This Gooderham generously deposited in the Killie Campbell Africana Library for the use of all future researchers. Thus we have a vital alternative source for the same events Fynn and Isaacs recorded - and as far as the 'John Ross' story is concerned, Captain Maclean's record can be taken as coming from the horse's mouth.

Because Gooderham's project concerned Farewell, she made little use of her John Ross discoveries. Rather, she opened another can of worms in an excellent historical novel called Febana: The True Story of Francis George Farewell, Explorer, Pioneer and Founder of Natal, which she published under her maiden name in 1962.[16] Like many works that retell history too originally, Febana was ignored; is now forgotten. My own work, a full twenty-five years later, is the first to use Captain Maclean's account of himself, religiously and in full. I hope that the time is finally ripe for what he has to tell us of black-white relationships in early Natal history.

In 1966, the naval scholar, Donald R. Morris, produced his monumental The Washing of the Spears, a history of the rise and fall of the Zulu nation very much on the revaluative side. His framework implicates not only the history of Natal settlerdom but that of all Southern Africa. Although he knew Febana, he

missed The Loss of the Brig 'Mary', and so makes several factual mistakes about John Ross (that he travelled alone, spoke no Zulu, etc.). But what Morris did discover was a letter from Captain Maclean written to The Times in 1873, by which date he believed he was the last survivor of the original Natal white parties. This is also held in the Killie Campbell collection. It is an intensely passionate document, telling his truth, none of which Morris used.

More recently Morris has continued to dilate upon Shaka's character, in the most impeccable and logical style, proving him a homosexual and child-murderer,[17] raising the old unfortunate libels once more. John Ross did not find Shaka so... in fact, he goes into quite some detail about Shaka's wives and children, and was certainly never himself abused. Morris has obviously not kept abreast of historical research; the findings of the Nguni Workshop at Rhodes University in 1979[18] alone make his assumptions about Zulu organisation during the difaqane period appear the wishful guesswork they actually are.

On the revaluative side then came Brian Roberts in 1974 with The Zulu Kings, the first work to pursue the Fynn-Isaacs alliance and analyse their motives for writing of Shakan times in their letters to the press in cahoots and in such a blackening way. A century and a half after Shaka's death, Roberts still finds the issues unsatisfactorily explained or resolved. But of course he is right: both were deeply enmeshed in a world of seething intrigue at the Bay. Both fought for their huge stakes of land in a country the size of England. During the brief period of the first outpost, they rose to take over the whole business venture from their own leaders, Farewell and King respectively. They were heavily involved financially. Their potential harvest was staggering: of the three million elephants in Zululand, by 1828 they had bagged only a third of them. With Shaka gone, to protect their claims in Zululand they needed to arrange for British military intervention in Natal; Roberts quotes the infamous private letter written by Isaacs to Fynn, in which he tries to sort out a press campaign to assert the validity of their claims, and make it seem morally imperative that the Zulus be utterly subjugated: "Make them out as blood-thirsty as you can," Isaacs recommended.[19] In a context as warped as this, of course their accounts of John Ross co-opt him to their cause. What it boils down to is this: if even a British cabin-boy could outsmart the Zulus, move in because it can only be a pushover. Roberts is obviously correct. We have not yet taken the fatal bias out of their propaganda.

In his article called "The Maligned Monarchs" and in subsequent highly tendentious pieces, Louis du Buisson takes up the cause of correction with a wonderously sharp anger.[20] Labelling Fynn and Isaacs ferocious character assassinators, he charges them with unholy ingratitude. Shaka had made them chieftains and clan-leaders out of sheer hospitality. All the profits and pleasures of Zululand were theirs: no European capital investment had ever multiplied faster, nor had the

little gods bred quicker. (When their company departed in 1828 they left behind several dozen children.) There is a mild word to describe their joint policy: opportunism. Du Buisson has many other more acute ones.

Chief Minister Mangosuthu Buthelezi, a descendant of the Zulu dynasty - one of the longest-lasting in power in the world - has other descriptions. At the Shaka Day mass rally in September, 1986, according to a report in the Star, he called for correction of the "grossly distorted image of King Shaka as a bestial, insane tyrant."[21] He branded Fynn and Isaacs as "depraved liars... who scattered sperm around kwaZulu as other men scattered footsteps." They were "greedy nobodies who wormed their way into Shaka's favours, were given vast tracts of land and hordes of cattle, and then rewarded the king's generosity by publishing lying indictments against him and the Zulus." But how was it possible for a mad tyrant, he asked, to have achieved what Shaka had in his brief 12-year reign? Shaka had created a vast empire with offshoots as far away as Zimbabwe and Mozambique, and had left Zulus with a deep sense of morality and a commitment to high ideals which had remained intact despite the centuries of brutalising racist suppression.

This speech was made near Shaka's burial site at Stanger, where most of the action of my novel is set. I have stood there, too, but in an imagined past, when Shaka's shield-shaped city of Dukuza administered one of the most extensive human organisations Africa had known. Now there are the usual sad dorp facilities - the UBS, second-hand cars, advertisements for hair-straighteners, He-Man Lotion, an Indian school, and the switchback tar roads which lead to gravel and the black location. Red flame trees, mimosa - and rolling sugarcane. There is hardly a thorn-tree left of all that glory, not even a handful of crane or lourie feathers. The bloody-minded whites have built right over it, to keep it buried.

But I have heard Chief Buthelezi's mother, the late Princess Magogo, sing the beautiful praises of King Shaka. How can her sweet version ever connect with our vile one?

And now I have found the voice of John Ross, that was accounted dead. That has not yet lived.

Enter Captain Maclean.

He is the crucial evidence, which no one has yet taken the trouble to read. He was a slight, short child then, so he saw all of this mighty history from below. He made of it something so different from what we have been told on either side that it opens up a third, new way of seeing.

To begin with, Charles Maclean recorded so many stories that no one has heard before. One is the legend of Mr Hutton, the mate of the Mary, and his love for the refugee woman, Dommana. Fynn and Isaacs censored this kind of story out, but when Hutton died of the fever in 1828, we learn, so faithful to his memory was Dommana that she died of grieving for him. It is one of the

great love stories of our heritage. By using the tactic that we have been cheated of our rightful history, perhaps I can break the logjam of received truth.

John Ross ran to Delagoa Bay, that is true, even though he did not think of it as much of a feat. But what Fynn and Isaacs do not tell us is who he ran for - he ran for Shaka, not for the whites. He was one of a Zulu trading party numbering 31 people. By rendering the mythically heroic as mundane and routine, perhaps I can bring history down to a human level.

Like most of that first batch of pioneers, he was in Zululand for four years. He spent three of them, not at Port Natal, but at Dukuza with King Shaka. He actually had no option: he was sold to Shaka by his owner, Mr King (in part exchange for Durban Bluff!). By reassigning meaning to familiar landmarks, perhaps I can alter the entrenched markers of the past.

By the end of their stay, most of these pioneers were dead - or had become the most hopeful, sunbeaten derelicts in all the world. Dressed in feathers and skins and bandoliers, they always hoped for such affluence. They became a bizarre tribe of their own, substantially integrated with the Zulu people, adopting their 'worst' customs, like polygamy, and none of their 'best'; suggesting that this was a common frontier experience demystifies its glamour.

But John Ross is the only one of them who became a Zulu. When he returned to the Bay he could hardly speak a word of English, and none of his mother-tongue - which, incidentally, was Gaelic. To white historians that seems a circumstance so traitorous that no one has dared to utter it before, but the truth is he chose the Zulus above the British, and such crossings over were common. He had good reason: King Shaka treated him better. Drawing him out of the Halls of Fame and reinserting him in the world of fact is a polemical act.

He found the Zulu world preferable to his own: he must have done, for when Shaka's reign collapsed about him and the whites could poise themselves to take over, this John Ross devoted the rest of his life to fighting for black liberty. That sort of twist has definitely been expunged from our histories, but Captain Maclean became a most eloquent spokesman for the emancipation of blacks all over the world. This is recorded in the Anti-Slavery Reporter. To achieve his goal he manned his Caribbean ship with freed black slaves, and blasted anyone who threatened their freedom out of the water. One of the debacles he caused in the Southern States contributed to the outbreak of the modern world's second war against slavery, the American Civil War. So we may realise he had learned to have nothing but contempt for King, Isaacs and Co., whose real goal was to keep blacks out of the human family.

A further tactic is to reintroduce his own voice, which in the interests of white solidarity has been suppressed. Here is a sample of his passionate way of stating his convictions, from an address to the Zulu people made in 1855, once the colonisation of the Zulus by the British was a foregone

> People of Zoolu, I leave this record of you in the day of your greatness as a nation; none of you may ever see the greatness of mine, but its influence is already surrounding you, and I write this in testimony of my gratitude for the many favours I received at your hands. It is too much for me to expect that a revolution in your habits, so great and so opposite to all you have been accustomed, can be effected in your generation, without doing violence to your happiness. The white man's notions and yours differ widely on this point, and I am concerned for you in the struggle. But I look forward with hope that your successors will enjoy the advantages and benefits which you cannot appreciate.
>
> I *am a decided advocate for your liberty, in common* with the whole African race's, and rejoice that my country has been the first to acknowledge that right, and has set the example of your freedom to the rest of the world. Other advantages will follow: the Genius of universal emancipation has set her foot in every land, before which slavery must be for ever trodden down; the work is begun, and the pseudo-Christianity that reduces you to the condition of the brute creation is fast losing ground. Greater and more talented minds will rise to vindicate your rights as members of the human family. I have had occasion and done so under great disadvantages and in the very strongholds of slavery, and I trust discharged my duty with fidelity commensurate with its importance.[22]

The reasons why history is written are as interesting as the history itself. I am convinced this story of 'John Ross' the *liberty-man - the freedom-fighter - will not go away, now.* It is no coincidence that the race memory throws up the urge to rediscover the past when the present is in ruins. Out of this past, which we eliminated - did not even know we had - comes the authority to sort out a future.

Above all, the writer's task is to persuade his readership of the living reality of his material. For me this began to clear in small details. When I heard that, as John Ross presented himself as a gift at Shaka's court, the monarch (stark naked - no matter what Morris says in his letter) asked to fondle the boy's voluminous red hair, and came out with the opinion that it resembled a steer's tail, I was hooked.

Another detail: traipsing on the road back and forth to Dukuza, the kid had so much foot-trouble his Zulu guides carried him piggyback in trading blankets - so much for the savage hordes, who lolloped along with him so tenderly.

A further detail: John Ross suffered terribly from sunburn, *so the Zulus plastered him in mud all the time. He lived like* that for the best years of his life - a pampered bloody savage.

When John Ross the apprentice was sold to King Shaka, for what was to become one of the richest pieces of real estate in the world, to use his own words: "Shaka kept me with him, first

as a sort of rare pet animal, on whom he bestowed a large amount of kindness, and I must add a large share of indulgence, and latterly as a confidential companion... "[23] For those confidences which no other white shared we have only to turn to his account. Experienced at the height of romanticism, when 'freedom' was an emerging concept, and coincidentally the historical novel in English was being born, it can only be a subversive document in our unfree, antiromantic society.

With that in hand the revision of South African historical writing can begin. The historical novel, which since the days of Scott has become the genre in which a new national spirit can be formulated, seems an appropriate place to start with such a campaign.

NOTES

This paper was delivered at a conference on Southern Africa held at the University of Montpellier, 22-24 May, 1987.

1. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, quoted as the epigraph to Luli Callinicos, Working Life (1886-1940), Vol. 2 of A People's History of South Africa (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987), p. 7.
2. Laurie Hergenhan, "Interview with Thomas Keneally," Australian Literary Studies, Brisbane, Vol. 12, No. 4 (October, 1986), p. 453.
3. The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn, compiled from original sources and edited by James Stuart and D. McK. Malcolm (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1969), p. 131.
4. Nathaniel Isaacs, Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa (Natal), edited by Louis Herman and Percival R. Kirby (Cape Town: Struik, 1970), pp. 102-3.
5. Graham Mackeurtan, The Cradle Days of Natal (1497-1854) (London: Longman, Green, 1930), p. 139.
6. Allister Macmillan, Durban Past and Present: Historical, Descriptive, Commercial, Industrial (Durban: Brown and Davis, 1936), p. 15.
7. E. A. Ritter, Shaka Zulu (London: Longman, Green, 1955), pp. 153-5.
8. The following items of information are from the John Ross cuttings collection, Killie Campbell Africana Library (KC), University of Natal, Durban. See "John Ross," Natal Witness, Durban (16 October, 1956).
9. See "Forgotten Boy Hero Now Remembered," Natal Witness, Durban (22 January, 1954).
10. The statue is by Mary Stainbank.
11. Rex Gutridge, Thunder over Africa (London and New York: Frederick Warne, 1958).
12. K. Schroeder, Bravery in South Africa (Cape Town: Nasou, 1972).
13. See R. E. Gordon, "John Ross," Natalia, Pietermaritzburg, No. 4 (December, 1974), p. 26.
14. The subliterature on Shaka in Zulu and many other languages is an immense field, stretching from Mofolo's sources to the present. See, for example, Mbongeni Malaba, "The Legacy of Thomas Mofolo's Chaka," English in Africa, Grahamstown, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 61-71, which cites most of the key works, culminating in Wole Soyinka's Ogun Abibiman (1976). For the social and economic background during the contact period, see Peter Colenbrander, "External Exchange and the Zulu Kingdom," Bill Guest and John M. Sellers (eds.), Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1985), pp. 99-119.
15. Natal Mercury, Durban (11 December, 1957).
16. Elizabeth Paris Watt, Febana (London: Peter Davies, 1962).

17. See his letter, "The Zulus," Leadership, Cape Town, Vol. 5, No. 6 (1986), pp. 91-94.
18. J. B. Peires (ed.), Before and After Shaka: Papers in Nguni History (Grahamstown: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1981). See also Glyn Hewson, Shaka's Kingship and the Rise of the Zulu State (1795-1828), M.A. dissertation in History (unpublished), University of Wisconsin, 1970.
19. See Brian Roberts, The Zulu Kings (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), pp. 217-220.
20. See Louis du Buisson, "The Maligned Monarchs," Leadership, Cape Town, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1986), pp. 97-100. Morris' letter is a riposte to this. See also Du Buisson, "Heroes or Villains of Shaka's Time?," Sunday Times Magazine, Johannesburg (26 October, 1986) and "An Open Letter to Bill Faure," Style, Johannesburg (February, 1987), which detail the factual inaccuracies of SABC-TV's Shaka Zulu serial point for point. See also Kaiser Ngwenya, "Whose Shaka is This?," Drum, Johannesburg (January, 1987), which laughs the serial's authenticity out of court.
21. "Call to Correct Shaka's Image," The Star, Johannesburg (29 September, 1986) and see "Historian Agrees that Shaka Should be Given more Credit" (30 September, 1986).
22. C. R. Maclean, Loss of the Brig 'Mary', The Nautical Magazine, London (February, 1855), pp. 64-5.
23. C. R. Maclean, copy of his letter to The Times (3 August, approx. 1872), KC Collection.