



John Dunn of Zululand
THE MAN THE LEGEND THE LEGACY BY CHARLES BALLARD

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Few personalities in the history of Natal and Zululand have aroused as much controversy as the legendary "White chiefs" John Dunn. He is mostly remembered for his taking of nearly fifty Zulu wives and the siring of over one hundred children.

But, this fact alone does not make Dunn singularly unusual, for many white men took wives and concubines from the indigenous black populace. Rather, John Dunn's exceptional place in history rests on his prominent role in events that were crucially important in the shaping of modern South Africa. In a sense, John Dunn's history is "living" history of his numerous descendants have formed a distinct and vital community in southern Zululand.

John Dunn's father was Robert Newton Dunn who was born in 1795 in Scotland. In 1820 he immigrated to South Africa and settled on the eastern Cape frontier near Port Elisabeth. Few settlers packed their belongings and struck out for Natal, among them Robert Dunn and his family. It was during that time that John Dunn was born at Port Natal and he would have been one of the first white settlers to be born in the frontier settlement.

It is important to remember that Dunn grew up in a white settlement that did not become a colony until 1843. Port Natal was a semi-independent white enclave beyond British imperial Conrail and it was much more vital for the traders to maintain friendly economic and political relations with the Zulus Kingdom and the local African populace.

The white traders readily adapted to African social and cultural norms. The scarcity of white women prompted nearly two thirds of the white traders to take black wives and concubines. The British traders also found it convenient to become petty chieftains and govern Port Natal. When Natal became a British colony in 1843 European culture and social customs replaced the way

of the African. A Brioche Colonial Administration replaced the rule of hunter trader chiefs. Natal's African population was territorially politically and socially segregated white society.

Against his background of ever tightening colonial rule and the insistence that white colonists conform to white standards of conduct. John Dunn became alienated from Natal changing society. Personal tragedy and financial setbacks soured his attitude even more.

His amazing skill with a rifle, his fluency in Zulu and his extensive knowledge of the physical and human environment of Natal and Zululand earned him a modest living as a guide for hunting parties. He then turned to transport riding, Dunn stated in his autobiography that he renounced civilization and left of the haunts of wild game in Zululand.

THE King Cetshwayo saw the end of a quest for a "white chief" to serve as his adviser when dealing with the Natal government. The Zulu heir apparent felt an acute political need for white assistant and Dunn possessed qualities that Cetshwayo found attractive.

Cetshwayo attachment to Dunn came to be based on more than mere expedience and the two became close friends and confidants. Dunn readily accepted Cetshwayo invitation to settle permanently in Zululand. Indeed, Cetshwayo had offered Dunn an ideal situation. He gave Dunn occupational rights to lands along the southern Zululand coast from Ngoya in the north to the Lower Tugela in the South. The number of wives and cattle in an individual's possession measured status in the Zulu kingdom.

And Dunn acquired an abundance of both. Between 1858 and 1878 John Dunn emerged as one of the most powerful chiefs in the Zulu kingdom. He ruled over nearly twenty-five square miles of territory land, six or seven thousand black subjects. Natal sugar industry owes much to Dunn. The coming of the Anglo Zulu War of 1879 was a time of supreme crisis for John Dunn. He at first tried to remain neutral, but as Brian and Zulu drew closer to war Dunn found that both were intolerant of a "fence sitter". Dunn was wary of remaining in Zululand. Dunn could have remained neutral but he had not only his own material well being to safeguard but that of his very large family and several thousand black subjects as well,

Dunn served Lord Chelmsford well and was named Military Intelligence Officer and awarded the local rank of commandant. After the war Dunn was made one of the thirteen chiefs as a result of the Ulundi Treaty of 1 September 1879. Not only was he made a chief, he received the largest and wealthiest of the thirteen chiefdoms. Dunn controlled nearly one fifth of Zululand and controlled a number of lucrative trade monopolies.

Ironically the post war settlement in Zululand, which had given Dunn his wealth and power, contained the seeds of its own destruction. After a short three month illness John Dunn aged 65, died of dropsy and heart disease at his Emoyeni home on 5 August 1895.

John Dunn is unique in South Africa's historical annals for he founded a distinct new community. The product of Dunn's union with forty-nine wives was an estimated one hundred and fifteen children the overwhelming majority of whom were classified as "colored". Yet, John Dunn unknowingly bequeathed a bittersweet legacy to his descendants. The distribution of John Dunn's property was immediately cloned with dispute. The chief's beneficiaries of John Dunn's fortune did not have long to enjoy it before natural calamities of catastrophic magnitude erased the accumulated wealth of half a century in less than two years. The Dunn's were reduced from a position of comparative to one of poverty and ever destitution Dominic Dunn said of this calamity that what had been a land of plenty became a land of desolation and moaning of bitter complaints of lean stomachs and downright starvation. From 1898 onwards many of John Dunn's descendants were forced to leave Dunn's land and seek employment in Natal, the Transvaal and the Cape. The Diaspora has continued to the present day of Dunn's descendants having settled as far afield as the United Kingdom, Canada Australia and the United States of America. In the 1950s Gladstone Dunn a grandson of John Dunn, became the spokesman for the Dunn community. He and his relatives had to wrestle with the interrelated problems of insecurity of land tenure. Gladstone Dunn's energies were devoted to promoting sugar cane production. This would make the Dunn community more prosperous and check the further out migration of Dunn's from Zululand.

In 1974 Daniel (Dan) Dunn son of Gladstone Dunn, was elected as Chairman of the John Dunn's Descendants Association. He has proven to be one of the most dynamic and effective leaders that the Dunn clan has ever produced. Daniel Dunn set out to achieve three goals for his people. The Dunn's have succeeded in a large measure because they identify strongly with their remarkable ancestor & endash; whose qualities of individualism and single-minded determination have inspired a sense of pride and perseverance in his descendants. The spirit of unity displayed by the Dunn community is a testimony to the towering personality of one of South Africa's legendary figures.

We recommend Daniel (Dan) Dunn as a Tour Conductor
Contact him by E-Mail: <mailto:ddunn@mweb.co.za>

