

**- JOHN DUNN -**

## **A POWER BEHIND THE ZULU THRONE**

### **AFRICA 4th September 1847**

Spring had arrived with a vengeance, and fingers of electricity were convulsing across the moody sky. The heat intensified, thunder filled the air, but still the much needed rain refused to come.

Suddenly a large bull elephant appeared out of the bush. Incensed by an unseen enemy, it lunged towards an incautious hunter and his son . . .

Too late the young British boy screamed a warning! Gasping in horror he watched the angry beast throw his father to the parched ground . . . Fear rose in John Dunn's throat as the sound of a million breaking bones stole any hope that his father would live through the attack. He sank to the ground, engulfed in grief. And in that quiet moment of lonely despair, the child became a man - A man destined to change history as he became a forceful power behind the Zulu throne.

The name John Dunn was soon to ricochet throughout the Kingdom of Zululand.

In 1820, John's father, Robert Newton Dunn, left his home and family in Inverness, Scotland. Lured by the promise of adventure and prosperity, Robert joined the influx of British settlers on the eastern shores of South Africa. Four years later, at Port Elizabeth, Robert married Anne Harold Biggar, the daughter of British immigrant, Alexander Biggar. Their union was to produce four children; Sarah Mary, Agnes, Louisa and John. John was born in 1834, the year the family moved northwards to Port Natal (Durban).

Ever eager to meet new challenges, Robert soon became a successful hunter and trader. Financially secure, he built his family an impressive homestead overlooking the Indian ocean, which he aptly named "Sea View" where, nestled snugly in the undulating, verdant hills of British controlled Natal, the Dunn family enjoyed a privileged colonial lifestyle.

John did not allow his father's wealth to separate him from the indigenous people of the area. He learnt to speak Zulu fluently; his personality displaying a unique coalescence of European and Zulu cultures.

From an early age John loved nothing better than to accompany his father on hunting trips. His proficiency with a rifle was to become such, that many years later claims were to be made that John's hunting prowess was largely to blame for the depletion of wildlife in Zululand.

Life was idyllic until that fateful day in 1847 when Robert Dunn was trampled to death by an elephant.

Financial disaster followed and Anne Dunn was forced to sell "Sea View" in order to pay the families debts. Anne and her daughters returned to Port Elizabeth where she died four years later, leaving 17 year old John, alone and penniless.

For a while John worked as a transport rider, until his unscrupulous employer duped him of his salary. Then totally disillusioned by "civilized" society, John retreated to the bush, taking with him 15 year old Catherine Pierce; the daughter of Robert Dunn's English assistant, Frank Pierce and a Cape-Malay woman.

The two teenagers led a nomadic existence on the borders of Natal and Zululand. Living by their wits and John's skill with a rifle, the couple were soon initiated into the untamed lifestyle of renegades and transfrontiersmen. In 1853, they married.

Inexplicably a friendship developed between John and Natal authorities eccentric Border Agent, retired British army officer, Joshua Walmsley, son of Sir Joshua Walmsley MP and controversial Mayor of Liverpool. Walmsley was shocked by John's coarse and uncultured lifestyle and, under of his auspices John finished his education and became the Border Agent's assistant. With a unit of Zulu policemen, it was John's task to monitor all traffic crossing the Thukela (Tugela) river to and from Zululand.

Meanwhile, tension was mounting in Zululand as Mbuyasi and Cetshwayo, sons of the ruling Zulu king, Mpande, vied for the right of succession. In 1856, the bitter rivalry between the two half brothers, culminated in a civil war.

In a land already copiously fertilized with the blood of a million dead warriors, John Dunn strove to bring peace to a tortured nation.

Distraught because of his inability to prevent the impending disaster, John tried to persuade Mbuyazi to move his women and children across the Thukela to safety, but Mbuyazi refused to concede any semblance of defeat.

On 2nd December, Mbuyazi's hopelessly out-numbered impi was massacred on the banks of the swollen river. Six of Mpande's sons, including Mbuyazi were killed as Cetshwayo claimed his bloody inheritance.

Waters flowed red with blood as the mighty Thukela claimed the battles victims, only to spew them out, days later, on the shores of the Indian ocean. Caught up in the fighting, John was plunged into the water amidst the mass of writhing humanity, his flailing arms blindly embracing the nearest solid object. Suddenly, he recoiled in horror as he realized he was holding a young woman with a baby pinned to her dying body by a assegai!

The carnage was horrific and its violent reality was to live on the mirror of John Dunn's mind for the rest of his life.

After the war a spiritually crushed and fearful King Mpande, relinquished all but ceremonial duties to Cetshwayo.

The differences that had divided John and Cetshwayo before the war, now became the catalyst for mutual respect. A strong friendship developed between the two equally ambitious and far-sighted men. Recognizing John's extraordinary talents, Cetshwayo invited him to become his secretary and diplomatic advisor.

Thus John Dunn took his first steps towards becoming the second most powerful man in the Zulu political area.

"Chief" John Dunn was ceremoniously installed into office with traditional gifts of land, cattle and, much to Catherine's disgust - two hand picked Zulu maidens. Although her dedication to her head strong and handsome husband, never wavered, Catherine was never able to accept John's concubines - of which there were to be many. Until the day she died, Catherine maintained an air of superiority over them.

In a land teeming with wildlife, John proceeded to build his empire.

Catherine, having acquired the distinction of being John's "Great Wife", was housed in grand European style at Mangete, John's principal home. Of all of John's wives, only Catherine was to bear the honour of being allowed to enter John's presence without first being summoned. But no amount of wealth and status could compensate Catherine for the unsurmountable pain she felt at having to share her husband with 48 Zulu wives, whom she considered, were little more than savages.

In 1873, King Mpande gave some farm land, next door to John's, to an English missionary named Alfred Adams. Born in West Maudstone, Kent in 1841, Alfred originally came out to Africa with the famous missionary/explorer, David Livingstone, directly after the latter's discovery of Victoria Falls.

In May 1873, Alfred married Selina Wood whom he had met on board the "Thukela" during his voyage out from England in 1864; the Wood family were emigrating to Port Natal. Their marriage was to last barely three years before Selina died, leaving Alfred with a 2 year old son, Charles Frederick.

Despite John's inherent dislike of missionaries, he and Alfred became friends and he offered Alfred and the Reverend Robert Robertson, who had founded the first Anglican mission in Zululand, land on which to establish a mission station and school. John was anxious for his fifty plus, school-age children, to be educated to strict European standards, and for them to be schooled in the niceties of Victorian society.

St Andrew's Mission was built and St Augustine's College, Cambridge sent out a Mr Shildrick to take charge of the school.

But all did not progress peacefully in the Zulu Kingdom, as first the Boers and then the British, strove to appropriate Zulu land. Considering the possible serious consequences of conflict with either party, John urged Cetshwayo to adopt a policy of peace.

On 18th October 1872, King Mpande died aged 74 and amid much pomp and ceremony, Cetshwayo finally claimed his much coveted throne. Due mainly to John's influence, Cetshwayo became the first Zulu king to take transfer of power without Zulu spears first being washed in blood.

It was to be almost twelve months before Cetshwayo's reign was officially acknowledged by the British Government and he was crowned by Sir Theophilus Shepstone. Pre-coronation talks resulted in Britain - anxious to portray herself as an ally - half-heartedly, promising British support to the Zulus in their land disputes with the Boers.

In 1874, John accepted the position of Protector of Immigrants, offered to him by the Natal Government. Maximising on his success in the political and economic arenas, and taking advantage of his influence with both the British and the Zulus, John greatly enhanced the wealth and stability of Zululand. However, tensions once again intensified as Britain became more and more aggressive and Cetshwayo vowed to protect his Zulu sovereignty

at all costs.

John, his loyalties now divided, was forced to support the British Imperial Policy; Cetshwayo, the man who had befriended him since boyhood, became his enemy.

At dawn on 11th January 1879, troops crossed the Thukela river, near Fort Pearson - the British invasion of independent Zululand had begun!

John played an active role in the Anglo-Zulu War, his intimate knowledge of the Zululand bush giving him a distinct advantage. Following initial defeats at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, the British gained a bloody and hard-fought victory.

After being defeated at the Battle of Ulundi, Cetshwayo was taken prisoner. He was sent to the Cape Colony where he was to live in exile for the next four years.

On 1st September 1879, Independent Zululand ceased to exist as Britain carved up her spoils of war. John Dunn became one of thirteen "Kinglets" when one fifth of Zululand was given to him by the British Government, adding to his already substantial land holdings.

John administered Dunnsland effectively and efficiently. Employing senior officials from all walks of life, awarding his 6,000 plus subjects, the security of a politically and economically stable environment.

The hunting fraternity adored his lavish hospitality. His reputation spread throughout Europe, bringing in its wake, many influential people to enjoy a unique cross-cultural experience as guest of the "White Chief of Zululand".

Meanwhile Cetshwayo, still in exile, became extremely bitter towards the friend whom he considered had betrayed him. He mistakenly believed John to be behind a powerful conspiracy opposing his return to power. He longed to reclaim his throne and in 1882, the British authorities allowed him to travel to England to plead his case before Queen Victoria. The queen was fascinated by him; she later described their meeting as "enjoyable". Cetshwayo; originally displayed to London society as a curiosity, became the darling of the press; his quiet charm winning the hearts of the British people.

On 10th January 1883, the much maligned Cetshwayo was unceremoniously restored to his Zulu throne. But his victory was to be fleeting: barely a year later, Cetshwayo died at Eshowe, an embittered victim of British bureaucracy.

John Dunn wept; bitterly regretting the passing of the single most influential man in his life. Though estranged, the umbilical cord that had bound the two men in friendship and affection, had remained intact.

On August 5th 1895, after taking little part in politics since the death of Cetshwayo, John Dunn passed peacefully away. His had been one of the most extraordinary lives of any European in Africa. During his 61 years, he married 49 wives and fathered 117 children, leaving his family a unique inheritance: an identity all of their own.

For almost a century the Dunn family struggled to retain their identity and their land. The greatest threat to them came with the South African government's apartheid system. In 1950 the Race Classification Act divided the family as members were segregated according to the colour of their skin, those classified as white having a distinct advantage in education and socially over those deemed coloured.

The strain on the family was tremendous as relatives, divided by colour, were forbidden by law to mix socially. Some previously classified as white had themselves reclassified as coloured, unable to bear the burden of being white.

For years the Dunn family struggled to obtain title deeds for Dunnsland (Mangete and Emoyeni). In 1974 Daniel (Dan) Dunn, great grandson of John, was elected Chairman of the Dunn's Descendants Association. Here at last was a dynamic leader reminiscent of John Dunn himself. As a result of Dan's hard work and dedication his family finally received title deeds to their properties - 84 years since the death of John Dunn.

Not satisfied with his accomplishments thus far, Dan proceeded to diffuse the centuries old feud between the Dunns and the Zulus. On September 19th 1974 the Dunn family, under Dan's guidance, hosted a reception for King Goodwill Zwelitini. The family presented the Zulu king a bronze bust of their respective ancestors, King Cetshwayo and John Dunn.

Finally the wheel of fate had turned full circle almost 125 years since it had forced a 17 year old boy and his child bride to face a cruel, yet heroic destiny. But the legend lives on.

ENDS

FOOTNOTE: Alfred Adams had two more wives: Elizabeth Best from Croghanhill, Kent (1883) and Ellen Norwood from Beckenham, Kent (1887).

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