

## THE WRITINGS OF H.F. FYNN: HISTORY, MYTH OR FICTION?

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### Introduction

In his Preface to *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, James Stuart pointed out that:

'Fynn stood and still stands in a category of his own, and it is this freely and unanimously accorded precedence which straightaway invests almost everything from him about the earliest days of Natal and Zululand with a distinction and quality of its own'. (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:xii).

As early as the 1850s, material written by Fynn was being utilised by writers on the pre-colonial Natal past. J.C. Chase for example in his publication *The Natal Papers* incorporated a description obtained from Fynn on the 'devastation' of the Natal region by Shaka in the period prior to European arrival in the 1820s. (Chase, 1843:20). With the publication of Bird's *Annals of Natal* in 1888, Fynn became widely accepted as an authoritative source on the Shakan period and he was viewed as having been in a unique position of access to that past in that he was an eye-witness to important events. (Bird, 1888:6; 60-101; Gibson, 1903:21-24). Since the publication of the *Diary* in 1950, Fynn's texts have been used by both popular and academic writers as crucial sources on the Natal-Zululand region and this trend has outlasted major shifts in the approaches of historians. (Bulpin, 1953; Ritter, 1955; Morris, 1966; Thompson, 1969; Du Buisson, 1987; Ballard, 1989). Even the most recent arguments concerning the nature and historiography of the concept of an *mfecane* have drawn on Fynn's *Diary* to illustrate various issues. (Cobbing, 1990:3-5; Eldredge, 1992:12; Hamilton, 1992:41).

### 1. The Fynn Text as History

In 1988, Julian Cobbing described the publication of Fynn's *Diary* as 'one of the major disasters of South African historical literature'. (Cobbing, 1988:524). Yet, two years later he drew on material in the Fynn text to point to evidence of the slave trade (as carried out by Europeans) from Port Natal in the 1820s. (Cobbing, 1990:3-5). In the Preface of the *Diary*, Stuart had noted that Fynn in all probability wrote his manuscripts in the 1850s and not the 1820s. (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:xiii). The tendency to utilise Fynn as contemporary (i.e.

1820s and 1830s) material has survived amongst historians for the past forty years and despite recent research into the motives behind Fynn's writing, (Gewald, 1989), researchers continue to rely on Fynn as a key source to the pre-colonial Natal past and particularly the Shakan period. This can be partially explained by the images of Fynn that have emerged over the past 150 years and specifically the idea of Fynn as a reliable source which was entrenched by Bird's publication and by the *Diary*. It is possible to view these images as myths in a separate category as they are the result of the ideological contexts within which Fynn produced his texts. It is possible at another level to examine the texts as historical material.

I have selected three central extracts from Fynn's *Diary* for this analysis. All three of these were previously published in Bird's *Annals* and so served as sources for writers on Natal from the 1880s. The first text deals with the fairly well-known tradition of Dingiswayo kaJobe's exile and his supposed contact with Europeans some time during the late eighteenth century. A.T. Bryant had in his 1929 publication *Olden Times*, questioned the nature of Dingiswayo's contact with Europeans. (Bryant, 1929:83-4). Douglas Malcolm, who had taken over the editing of the Fynn Papers from James Stuart in the 1940s, was a Zulu linguist and Head of the Department of Zulu at the University of Natal. It is unlikely that he would have been unacquainted with Bryant's work. Yet, apart from using Bryant to verify the chronology of Fynn's account, Malcolm did not include Bryant's points in the *Diary* text. (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:4-8). Thus, the version that appeared in the *Diary* remained unquestioned until the 1970s and this served to reinforce the idea that Fynn had been the only person with access to the account. (Argyle, 1978; Koopman, 1979). The second text is an account of Fynn's supposed medical treatment of Shaka following an assassination attempt in July 1824. This was a central theme which had been used, since the publication of Bird, to build up a particular image of Fynn as a 'humane' individual and by the time that Malcolm was working on the Fynn Papers, had become firmly established in historical literature. (Gibson, 1903:23-4; Bryant, 1929:578-9; Mackeurtan, 1931:100-4). Malcolm followed this trend by stating that Fynn was known 'for his prowess as a pioneer doctor'. (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:72). Recent historical accounts have overlooked the crucial point that Shaka's 'own doctor' assisted Fynn, (Becker, 1985:185-6, Du Buisson, 1987:56-7) and it is probable that the former's treatment was more effective than Fynn's, given Fynn's limited knowledge and the

extremely restricted methods employed by Western medicine at the beginning of the nineteenth century <sup>1</sup>. A close examination of the oral traditions on Shaka produces at least one informant who was 'not aware' that Fynn treated Shaka. (Webb and Wright, 1979:232).

A third extract from the Fynn text deals with the assassination of Shaka in 1828. Malcolm, in keeping with the idea of Fynn as a recorder of historical events, did not mention Bryant's point that there were in fact no European witnesses of Shaka's death. (Bryant, 1929:662). Malcolm retained Fynn's quotation of Shaka's dying words as 'what is the matter, children of my father?' (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:157) and this served to reinforce the notion that Fynn had been a unique eye witness to these events. Again, a discrepancy arises within oral tradition where Shaka's last words are reported as 'the land will see locusts and white people come' <sup>2</sup>.

## 2. The Fynn Text as Myth

Even the limited analysis above makes it possible to detect major discrepancies between Fynn's accounts and other sources and a number of crucial questions arise around Fynn's construction of such texts. These problems lead to a re-defining of the Fynn text as a series of myths rather than as 'history'. McNeill has redefined the interplay between history and myth as a concept which he terms 'mythistory' and he suggests that all 'history' in fact takes this form, noting that 'the same words that constitute truth for some are, and always will be, myth for others, who inherit or embrace different assumptions and organizing concepts about the world'. (McNeill, 1986:19). Most historians and literary analysts would agree that it is no longer possible to view text simply as text and that a framework or context for what the writer has said is essential in order to understand the point from which he or she is writing. (Eagleton, 1978:50-55; Stickland, 1981:67-108). At the same time, some have argued that the text is in and by itself a valuable entity (Barthes, 1954:9-29; Barthes, 1976:4-5) while others have argued that texts as collective forms of knowledge can be used as authoritative power bases. (Foucault, 1973:219-220; Foucault, 1981:48-9).

Whatever the various arguments, it is still important here to provide a context for the Fynn text in order to arrive at the starting-point for the kind of 'mythistory' created by that text. (Lincoln, 1989:3-15). While it is possible to examine the text as **historical text**, as I have tried to demonstrate above, it is now widely accepted that history or 'mythistory' is produced and shaped within very specific contexts. (Tosh, 1984:1-16). Fynn wrote the bulk of his

manuscripts in the 1850s in colonial Natal where he was employed as a Resident Magistrate under the Natal government. This was obviously a particular political context and the kind of colonial ideology which shaped Fynn's writing was based on notions of the legitimacy of European presence in the Natal region and colonial domination over indigenous populations. Fynn, like other Natal writers of the 1850s, was attempting to justify European rule by describing pre-European Natal as being in a state of anarchy and 'devastation' due to the actions of Shaka. The 'devastation' stereotype or myth as propagated by writers like Fynn was to become central in the emerging historical literature on the destructive impact of the *mfecane* over a wide south-east African region. (Wright, 1989:272-91; Wright, 1991:409-25).

Interwoven within Fynn's writing on Shaka's 'devastation' were the supporting myths of Fynn's supposed 'friendship' with Shaka which was a direct result of Fynn's medical treatment and the idea that it was due to this 'diplomacy' exercised by Fynn that Shaka 'gave' land to Farewell in July 1824 'extending 50 miles inland and 25 miles along the coast, and including the harbour of Natal'. (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:86-8). Within this combination of myths or images it is also possible to detect subtle pointers to the wider political mythology of European superiority at Port Natal, a colonial 'discourse' which eventually formed the basis for 'indirect rule' up to the 1940s. (Ashforth, 1990). An example of this was Fynn's medical treatment of Shaka which can be viewed as an instance of the progressive nature of Western technology. (MacLeod and Lewis, 1988:1) juxtaposed against the negative behaviour displayed by Shaka who, Fynn states, 'cried nearly the whole night, expecting that only fatal consequences would ensue'. (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:84). The extent to which such myths endure has recently been demonstrated in the visual imagery presented by the S.A.B.C. T.V. series *Shaka Zulu* where 'Fynn the doctor' is portrayed, not only as the talented individual who healed Shaka, but as the voice of Western liberal reason and the representative of negotiation between white and black or inherently between civilisation and barbarism. (Mersham, 1989:336).

The framework for Fynn's 'mythistory' can also be examined on a far more personal level than the wider colonial context. During the late 1850s, Fynn was in the position of attempting to obtain a land-grant from the Natal government, claiming that his original farm in the Isipingo area had been given to Dick King for the latter's services to the Natal government while Fynn was employed on the Cape frontier in 1843. Fynn's letters to the Natal authorities included statements to the effect that Fynn had been given land by Shaka

due to his precedence as the first European in the Port Natal region<sup>3</sup>. Thus Fynn, in portraying himself in his writing as the person ultimately responsible for Farewell's land grant, was stressing his role as the instigator of European rule in Natal, a fact that the Natal government of the 1850s was, in Fynn's view, overlooking.

The images constructed by Fynn about his own role at Port Natal were far-reaching and have been reworked right up the present, although a kind of 'reversal of villains' has occurred in recent literature, particularly in attempts to 'popularise' history. (Oakes, 1988:76-77; Hamilton, 1990:141). This trend has been extended onto the platform of political debate where the negative Shaka and the positive Fynn have been exchanged in an attempt to deconstruct the dominant historical mythology. (Forsyth, 1992:74-92). Stuart's portrayal of Fynn in the preface of the *Diary* as the person who 'was by far the best informed as to the conditions of the country (Natal) and its inhabitants', (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:xii) had also served to perpetuate the image or myth of Fynn as a reliable source on early Natal. This has led to a reliance on Fynn's *Diary* by historians into the 1990s and Fynn as an author has become a myth in itself, so that even film-directors like Bill Faure have drawn on Fynn and Fynn's *Diary* despite the assertion that *Shaka Zulu* was to be a version of history that avoided or rectified the distortions provided by 'bigoted white historians'. (Faure, 1986:3). On another level, Fynn is still viewed as a vital source as a recorder of oral tradition and oral poetry. (Fridmore, 1991; Opland, 1992:132-3). These images of Fynn as a single all-important author have persisted despite the evidence which points to at least one individual assisting Fynn in his writing<sup>4</sup>. Stuart had also pointed out in the *Diary* preface that Fynn's manuscripts were constructed by more than one person. (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:xi).

However, it is the context within which the myths about Fynn were and are produced that is equally relevant to the myths themselves. Fynn's writing has in this sense generated a whole mythology on early Natal which Barthes would define as a kind of relationship between context and 'knowledge'. (Barthes, 1970:247). Martin has also compared the set of images generated by British writers on 'the Zulus' with the whole framework of ideas about the nature of 'orientalism' as illustrated in Said's seminal work *Orientalism*. Martin has pointed out that such images have a whole 'history and dynamic of their own' while 'at the same time, images are themselves the product of history, of the society in which they occur'. (Martin, 1982:333-6).

### 3. The Fynn Text as Fiction

A significant image interpolated in the text of the Fynn *Diary* by Malcolm was that of Fynn as Robinson Crusoe. Malcolm used this analogy noting that Fynn was 'equally affable, ... courageous and large-hearted'. (Stuart and Malcolm, 1950:117). This can be viewed on two different levels. Firstly, there is the obvious use of Robinson Crusoe as a model to illustrate the contrast between civilisation (in the form of imperial expansion) and barbarism, a context used here to provide a framework for Fynn's 'pioneering' actions. On another level is the image of Robinson Crusoe as author or narrator. In 1910 the historian I.D. Colvin had commented that Fynn's text 'rivalled' Defoe's in its 'adventure-book' quality. Is it possible then to see Fynn's *Diary* as a novel rather than history or 'mythistory'? Should Fynn's 'historical' account not be read as literature and thus, as La Capra has suggested, be analysed in terms of literary and not historical theory? (LaCapra, 1985:18-19).

Providing a context for the production of 'history' has to some extent grown out of the concern in recent decades to provide contexts for literary texts. (Brantlinger, 1990:15-33). Central to the debate generated by structuralists and post-structuralists has been the issue of the relationship between texts as discourses and the ideological framework in which these are produced and formed. (Macherey, 1978:94; Young, 1981:80-93; Hampton, 1990:153-70). Clearly, the overall context for Fynn's writing was that of colonial domination and his portrayal of himself in a medical and diplomatic role was a deliberate attempt to create the feeling of contrast between the Europeans (Fynn) and the indigenous people (Shaka). Such a use of contrasts and differences was a central theme in what can be termed 'colonial discourse'. (Bhabha, 1983: 195-7). There can be no doubt that Fynn's text, like Isaacs' 1836 publication, was a fictional production written with specific political and ideological motives, and in a sense as an autobiographical account. (Wylie, 1991). Isaacs had written to Fynn in 1832 urging him to 'make them (the Zulu) as bloodthirsty as you can' as this would make Fynn's publication 'more popular' <sup>5</sup>. Isaacs did not hesitate to stress that his own 1836 publication *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* was written with the specific purpose of 'inducing the British government to colonise Natal' <sup>6</sup>. Pratt has suggested that the ideological context for a given text can be discerned in what she calls its 'conventions of representation'. Such forms, of which the eighteenth century novel *Robinson Crusoe* is an example, can be evident in fiction or non-fiction and are a 'relatively independent' genre distinction. (Pratt, 1989:16-9). The kinds of representation used in the *Robinson Crusoe* text

have been used in nineteenth century literature and in this context it is useful to compare Fynn's text with these representations. Two themes in the *Robinson Crusoe* narrative are relevant here - the abandonment of family and community and the life of supposed misery and misfortune which results. Both of these are evident in Fynn's writing. He described his early 'wanderlust' life in the Cape Colony after leaving England in 1818 and his trips to Delagoa Bay and Port Natal in 1823 and 1824 are suggestive of a severing of links between Fynn and the 'civilised' world - a point also emphasised in *Robinson Crusoe*. A point to note here is that Fynn's references to the misery and financial need which he experienced later in life as a result of these hasty decisions are described, not in his *Diary* text but in verse<sup>7</sup>. The 'conventions of representation' which Pratt describes are evident in Fynn's writing and it is probable that he was modelling his form on eighteenth and early nineteenth century 'travel' accounts, either fiction or non-fiction. (Gray, 1979:83-4).

A second and perhaps more important consideration here is the similarity between the ideology underlying the *Robinson Crusoe* text and that framing the production of Fynn's *Diary*. Green has described the evolution of what he calls the 'Robinson Crusoe Story' over the two hundred and fifty years following the publication of Defoe's novel. Until the 1950s the story underwent different forms of the same theme - imperial expansion. (Green, 1988:51). In the historical colonial context of Fynn's writing this was the major ideology of the society in which Fynn functioned to produce the text which eventually became the *Diary*. Thus, however 'fictional' Fynn's account actually was, his writing still reflected the reality of the world in which he operated. Colvin had referred to Fynn as a kind of Defoe in the early twentieth century when a romanticised Victorian imperialism was still dominant in South African literature. By the time that Malcolm was inserting the image of Fynn as Robinson Crusoe into the *Diary* text, the 'Robinson Crusoe Story' had in a sense 'become' William Golding's novel, *Lord of the Flies*. (Green, 1988:55).

Malcolm's imagery was taken up by later writers who used Fynn in their own fiction, but within the changing themes of South African English literature. An example here is Jenny Seed's publication *The Prince of the Bay* which, although published in 1970, was still being recommended for 'young readers' into the 1980s. Seed concentrated on the notion of Fynn's assimilation into indigenous society which was in contrast to the traditional images of Fynn as a 'pioneer' battling against numerous 'hardships'. Coetzee has pointed to the changing ideas in English South African literature since the 1960s where Europeans have to

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increasingly come to terms with indigenous people rather than the (to the European) alien South African landscape. (Coetzee, 1988:8). In the case of Seed's novel, however, Fynn's introduction to indigenous society is through the medium of his adopted refugee Bongisani and the parallels with the Robinson Crusoe/Man Friday relationship are evident in this context. (Seed, 1970:95). The imagery suggested by the *Diary* was used in a number of fictional accounts from the 1950s and despite new trends (for example in examining the relationship between white and black in South East Africa) these established images of Fynn remained largely unchanging, with writers drawing directly on the *Diary* as a source for their own texts on Fynn. Michael Kirkwood's poem 'Henry Fynn and the Blacksmith of the Grosvenor' was, for example, based on the descriptions given by Fynn in the published *Diary*. (Kirkwood, 1971:70-72). Is it possible to view this kind of writing as, what Alex Hailey calls, 'faction'? Certainly it is a combination of what we 'know' (or think we know) of 'history' and a fictional embellishment.

### Conclusion

Coetzee has made the point that 'history is not reality, it is a kind of discourse'. (Coetzee, 1987). In the case of the Fynn texts, the material that is read is a discourse between ideology on the one hand and the need to create a past which justifies European actions at Port Natal from the early nineteenth century on the other. The kinds of images that result from this discourse can be defined neither as 'history', nor as 'myth', nor as 'mythistory' nor as 'fiction'. There is a need for an ongoing redefinition of the blending of these forms which emerge from Fynn and also of Fynn. Such a blending can be identified most clearly in the praise-poetry created around Fynn and around Shaka. Fynn's praise-poem has an unidentifiable source but it is possible that it was in fact written by James Stuart. In this poem Fynn is described as the 'tamer of the evil-tempered elephant', possibly referring to his 'influence' over Shaka - a theme, as shown above, which was dominant at the time that James Stuart was writing. An alternative description is given in Kunene's poem *Emperor Shaka the Great* where Fynn is portrayed as being 'like a monkey ... ever peering into forbidden places ... He is no man, nor is he like King who respected the customs and laws'. (Kunene, 1979:390).



While it is important to note that praise-poetry is not 'representative' (Vail and White, 1991:84), it is somewhere between these two opposing views that the 'real' Fynn exists, although it is doubtful if such a personality can ever really escape from the continuing discourse which surrounds it. In the same way, it is impossible to arrive at clear definitions of what constitutes 'history', 'myth' or 'fiction' in the Fynn texts. Certainly it is no longer possible to make the distinction, as Stephen Gray did in the 1970s, between 'imaginary voyages' as fiction and the 'real diary' of Fynn. (Gray, 1979:83-4).

### Notes

1. Fynn was a surgeon's assistant from 1816-1818 (i.e. from age 13 to 15). For details on Zulu medicine see A.T. Bryant, *Zulu Medicine and Medicine-Men*, Cape Town, 1970, p.77.
2. Killie Campbell Africana Library, Stuart Papers, File 61, Interview with Dinya Ka Zokozwayo, 27 February 1905.
3. Natal Archives, Colonial Secretary's Office, File 120, No. 65: Fynn to Napier, 10 August 1843; File 103, No. 171: Fynn to Allen, 15 February 1858; File 120 No. 25: Fynn to Allen, 29 February 1860.
4. Killie Campbell Africana Library, Fynn Family Papers, File 300104, Folder 4, p.8: Interview between James Stuart and H. Fynn Junior, 27 December 1906.
5. Natal Archives, Fynn Papers, Vol. 1, No. 6: Isaacs to Fynn, 10 December 1832.
6. Natal Archives, Fynn Papers, Vol. 1, No. 26: Isaacs to Fynn, 7 September 1840.
7. See *Young Africa Booklist*, 1985.

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