The Wives of Henry Fynn: 'Unwritten but Potentially Transfiguring Texts'? The Untold Biographies of Vundhlazi of the Zelemu and Christina Brown [1]

Julie Pridmore

Introduction

In his novel *Foe*, J.M. Coetzee provides the mute character Friday with the ultimate narrative power. The actual narrator, Sue Barton, struggles with her own function as author, as well as with Foe as a superior white male and Friday as a subordinate black male (Coetzee 1986). For Coetzee, the power of silence marks the limit of Susan's self-knowledge but at the same time provides the means for Friday's potentially transfiguring mute statements (Coetzee & Attwell 1992: 247). At the same time, Susan herself represents the female voice which underlies a story which on the surface is an imperial narrative, based on one of the earliest European male focused adventure texts, *Robinson Crusoe*. As Ridley (1983:5f) has noted, Defoe's novel marks the beginning of colonial discourse in fiction and as such underpins further empire-based fiction. Susan's narrative voice in *Foe*, Di Michele (1996:157) has pointed out, addresses questions not only of colonial, but of post-colonial female identity.

Foucault has suggested that the agency of a text has an innate power: 'the author's name is not simply an element in a discourse ... it assumes a classifactory function' (Rabinow 1986:107). There are problems however, in applying Foucault to specific colonial situations. Edward Said (1983:221) has used Foucault's discourse analysis on crime and punishment to demonstrate the opposed social forces of the empowered and disempowered, and South African historian Crais (1992:44) has similarly illustrated these power relationships in the mechanics of colonial discourse in the Cape Colony. Third world historians have, however, noted that there are in fact older and

[1] This article was presented as a seminar at the University of South Africa in June 1996. I would like to thank my colleagues in the Department of History at Unisa who commented on it.

more dominant forms of power present in colonial societies (Guha 1984:348f) and Foucault's relevance to colonial discourse is still largely under investigation (Thomas 1994: 20f).

Gender historians in particular, have pointed out that Foucault's analysis cannot be used to address the colonial situation, as power is clearly present in the coloniser's person. It is not, as Foucault would argue, inherent in language and discourse (Sharpe 1993:89). Successive reconstructions of the colonial record have either left women out or presented them in a negative role (Callaway 1987:3). As Spivak (1998:15-18) argues, women have shared with the colonised races an intimate experience of oppression. There is also an inherent danger in using post-modernist theory where 'woman' becomes the nodal point for the post-modern project of reconceptualising Man, Subject, Truth, History, and Meaning. The result of this is that 'woman' exists neither as a person nor a thing, she 'lacks stability and the permanence of historical identity' (Donaldson 1992:119). For instance, white women are given composite iconographic identities in colonial discourse (Frankenberg 1993:16f). In this paper I aim to identify specific individual women who lived within the colonial discourse of nineteenth century Natal, and attempt to discover their respective roles as authors and their own life experiences.

Vundhlase, Daughter of Zelemu: Senior Wife to H. Fynn, c. 1824-1834

'Bovungana's mother was the daughter of a white man when the Europeans visited the Bay' (Webb & Wright 1982:54). This statement by Mcotoyi kaMnini, an informant to James Stuart in the early twentieth century, is an expression of indigenous views on the European presence at Port Natal. Of Vundhlase, the woman who entered into a relationship with Henry Fynn in the 1820s, we know virtually nothing, except that, as a result of their union, an entire community of mixed-race descendants occupies southern Natal to this day[2]. Vundhlase, according to another of Stuart's informants, was a member of the Zelemu clan (Webb & Wright 1982:146). A.T. Bryant identified the Zelemu as a group who had wandered about the KwaZulu-Natal region, having moved south from the Nkandla district during the reign of Senzangakhona kaJama in the years from about 1810 to 1816. They clashed with the Bomvu and then with Shaka's followers, eventually moving south into the mPondo region. At the time of European arrival at Port Natal in 1824, the Zelemu were living in southern Natal (Bryant 1929: 373).

[2] It should be noted that Henry Fynn had no less than four indigenous 'wives', of whom Vundhlase was his first and senior wife. According to Frank Essery, a correspondent with Killie Campbell in the 1950s, Fynn had a total of twelve mixed race children.

Research on the lives of indigenous women in the Natal region has been limited. Jeff Guy (1990:33-47) has suggested that pre-colonial women were effectively the means of reproduction and production and as a result had little control over their lives. Without detailed evidence, it is difficult to reconstruct the kind of gender relations within which Vundhlase lived. The only nineteenth century text by a black woman from Natal is Paulina Dlamini's *Servant of Two Kings*. In this account she described her transition from black to white society:

> we undertook many things which since I now feel honestly ashamed, but which at the time we partook of with great pleasure.

She particularly remembered being 'extolled as heroines ... our girls excelled the men!' (Bourqin 1986:28). That women attached to the Zulu royal household did have prominent roles is clearly demonstrated by the career of Mnkabayi kaJama. As Senzangakhona's sister she acted as regent until Shaka took over the Zulu leadership, and was later in charge of Shaka's *ebaQulusini ikhanda* in the mid-1820s. This provided her with political power but, as Laband (1995:18,28) notes, she retained her independence by not marrying. James Stuart's informants listed her grave among those of prominent male leaders, and 'there was no "king" (including Mnkabayi) whose praises were omitted when the cattle of the spirits were sacrificed' (Webb & Wright 1987:117). During the twentieth century, the careers of Solomon kaDinuzulu's sister Magogo and his highest-ranking wife, Matatele (Christina) Sibiya further demonstrate the considerable political power wielded by Zulu royal women (Reyher 1948)[3].

Paulina Dlamini, although she later converted to a European lifestyle on a Christian mission station, found nothing unacceptable about mixed-race relationships. She noted that John Dunn

> became a polygamist .... Cetshwayo held him in high esteem and gave him Zulu girls in marriage .... he ruled over his domain and raised a countless progeny of mixed blood (Bourqin 1986:42f).

European recorders of early Port Natal are more apologetic. Bryant described the white traders seeking 'the black-skinned hands of Native damsels as the next best substitute' to white women (Bryant 1929:373). Bryant's account, however, was the first European text to openly acknowledge Fynn's union with Vundhlase. Earlier writers had avoided the topic since the 1830s as it was socially unacceptable for colonial Natalians to condone mixed-race unions. In British colonies during the course of the

[3] This was highlighted by Marcia Wright in her presentation of the *Zulu Woman* text at the University of Durban-Westville, June 1995.

nineteenth century, 'going native' became increasingly criticised (Hyam 1990:75-78) and European men who persisted in their liaisons with indigenous women were excluded from colonial society (Spurr 1993:84). The early white literature on Natal largely reflected these attitudes (Pridmore 1996a:57f) although there were obvious instances of white men like Henry Fynn and John Dunn who had indigenous wives and half-caste progeny.

However, if the Natal historical narrative was decidedly blank on the subject of mixed unions, African informants had no qualms about telling James Stuart that Fynn, together with Henry Ogle, had 'the largest number' of black wives. Physical contact occurred

> on the Zulu plan; that is, any woman required would be specially sent for. She would at nightfall come to the man's house' (Webb & Wright 1976:111f).

An early map of Port Natal illustrates the scattered nature of the white settlement and the way in which individual European men set up their own separate *imizi*[4]. Fynn gradually moved his household, headed by Vundhlase, further away from the white settlement. By the time he left the region in 1834, he had established his *imizi* to the south of the Mzimkhulu river.

Apart from the sketchy accounts provided by Stuart's informants, there is no evidence on the actual nature of Fynn's relationship with Vundhlase or any of his other wives. Later colonial commentators described Fynn's attitude towards Africans as extremely harsh (Pridmore 1994:192f). Neither did the presence of indigenous wives and mixed-race children prevent white men from returning to colonial society, and in September 1834, Fynn left Natal for the Cape Colony. Frank, Fynn's younger brother, had moved to Natal in 1830 and remained in the region until his death in 1840. In accordance with Zulu custom, Frank married Vundhlase as if his elder brother had died. The Fynn *ensimbini* household south of the Mzimkhulu was headed by Frank during the 1830s, and the beginning of a Fynn 'clan' emerged, including in the extended family, several Cele refugees from Zululand[5]. This group was described as 'the *izinkumbi* people (who) are of the Nhlangwini, the people of Vundhlase' (Webb & Wright 1982:185). Bryant (1929:561) called these the *izinkumbi* or 'wanderers'. As the Zelemu were originally a clan which had moved about considerably, this definition seems more applicable than Cobbing's (1992:19-21) explanation of the *izinkumbi* as 'locusts' who, led by Fynn, assisted white slavers.

[4] Killie Campbell Africana Library, Fynn Papers, File 26031, Extract 2.

[5] Natal Archives, Bird Papers, vol. 5, evidence of Tom Fynn, pp 15-17. Tom was Frank and Vundhlase's son.

Ann Brown: Fynn's Return to Colonial Society, 1837-1839

In 1976, Gilbert Fynn, a mixed race descendant of Fynn's told a researcher that 'when Fynn married a white woman he became part of the white people again'. To Vundhlase, Fynn's return to the Cape meant that he was dead, as was demonstrated by her marriage to Frank. Fynn's move marked a complete break with his life amongst indigenous people in Natal. As a newly-appointed colonial official in the Cape government, he was once more a member of European society - a social framework he had left in 1823. His rapid assimilation back into this framework was illustrated by his marriage, within three years of his return, to Ann Brown (Pridmore 1996b:42f). Ann's family were English people from Grahamstown where she was born in 1817 (Davies 1974:16). There is scant evidence on her life either before or after her marriage to Fynn, though it is likely that her parents were English settlers who had emigrated to the Cape during the 1800s.

In terms of the overlying discourse of colonial politics in which he lived after 1834, Fynn could not have made a clearer indication of his move back to white society. European women were generally seen as a civilising influence in British colonies, enforcing the segregation process and the appropriate behaviour of white men (Ware 1992:37f). The arrival of white women in a colonial territory often marked the onset of a deterioration in race relations, or at least a widening of the social distance between colonisers and colonised. The presence of white women replaced the early relationships between white men and indigenous concubines (Strobel 1991:3-6). As Callan (1984:5) has noted,

> the mythology of the British Empire ... seems to contain the idea that colonists and 'natives' were able to live happily together until *memsahibs* appeared and insisted upon racial and social separation (Callan 1984:5).

While some Cape historians have suggested a degree of interaction between black and white women in 'frontier' society, it is debatable as to how far this process went in actually breaking down racial stereotypes (Bradford 1996). It has also been suggested that race, although a dominant signifier in Cape society, was not in fact as important as gender in determining the nature of the colonial presence (Ross 1994:111).

Fynn's marriage to Ann lasted only two years, as she died in 1839 and there is practically no evidence to indicate her experiences as the wife of a colonial official on the Cape 'frontier'. What is clear is that Fynn had married Ann not only to demonstrate his return to colonial society, but also through a genuine need for a white companion in an isolated position. His reaction to her death is illustrated by the fact that he neglected his regular correspondence with the Cape government (Pridmore 1996b:42-44).

Christina Brown: 'Actively Engaged as a Government Officer', 1841-1862

In 1841, just two years after Ann's death, Fynn married again, this time to Christina Brown. Christina was not related to Ann, and her family were from Zwartkop in Algoa Bay, where she was born in 1821. Her father, John Brown had later moved to Grahamstown, where she met and married Fynn. Like Ann, Christina's parents were also English settlers (Davies 1974:16). Little is known of Christina's life prior to her marriage, though it is possible to assume that she was brought up in an English settler household. Her education was probably similar to that of other young girls in the Cape Colony, with an emphasis on her role in the home and as a potential companion for a future husband. Probable marriage to a colonial employee would involve specific responsibilities for a white woman in the Cape. Although, by the mid-nineteenth century, the home emerged as the moral sphere where women's labour could be valued (Grewal 1996:24f), women also had particular roles of service to the wider empire. As MacDonald has noted, the discourse of gender echoes the imperial plot where 'men command, women serve' (MacDonald 1994:37f). In this 'imperialist project', notes Grewal (1996:67), women accepted and reinforced the positive-negative dichotomy of masculine and feminine function.

Whilst researching Fynn, I examined both his literary background as well as his writing as *colonial* literature (Pridmore 1995). I suggest that an assessment of Christina's contribution to colonial representation, albeit in restricted form, requires a similar approach. While she operated within the clearly developing imperial discourse discussed above, she also had a specific literary background in the type of literature written for girls and young women. During the early nineteenth century, in the period when Christina's generation was becoming literate, narratives written for girls were changing. These moved gradually from the romantic images of female uselessness which focused on chivalry (Brantlinger 1988:141-143) towards more clearly defined Victorian ideas on respectability and submissiveness (Cadogan & Craig 1976:16f). These notions of gender roles were, as Callaway (1987:32-35) has shown, disclosed through and reflected in writing on colonial female themes.

The literature generated by colonial women writers is crucial as a source of evidence on these women's experiences in a masculine-dominated, white ruled empire. Writing as white women they were

> attempting to give meaning and connection to their lives in a foreign world where they often felt themselves to be doubly alien (Callaway 1987:3).

Unlike male travel writers, they also felt their accounts to be more accurate and less confused by exaggeration or romance (Blake 1992:9). Christina Fynn's diary,

which covers the years from 1841 to 1868[6], was not written with publication in mind and there is no evidence to suggest that she intended this journal to be anything more than a detailed account of her husband's career. Like contemporary accounts, Christina records her experiences as a colonial wife, first in the Cape and later in Natal[7]. She recorded how, as the traditional 'helpmeet' to her husband she uncomplainingly followed Fynn to his various duty posts. Christina continued to travel vast distances to be with her husband, even following the birth of their only child, Henry Francis junior, in 1846. In 1857, accompanied by the child, then aged eleven, she undertook the hazardous journey into Zululand in order to accompany Fynn on his visit to King Mpande's envoys. A year later she left her household and child under the care of a Mr. and Mrs. Clarkson while she joined her husband on a tax collection trip in the Mkhomanzi district.

Although these entries indicate that Christina made considerable efforts to travel with Fynn, it is also obvious from her diary that she was often alone. While Fynn was stationed with Maphasa on the Cape frontier, the couple were separated much of the time. Christina recorded these separations and often indicated the exact time - for instance in January 1844, she noted that Fynn had left her for eighteen days while attending to 'government business' at Fort Beaufort. In 1850, while the family resided with Faku in the mPondo territory, she recorded that her husband had been away for two months in Natal, and she also expressed her concern over Fynn's ill-health at this time. In July 1857, following the visit to Zululand, Christina travelled with her son to Algoa to visit her family. On her return six months later she found that her husband had once again been 'called away' by the Governor of Natal. In April 1859, she had to make the trip to Algoa again without Fynn who was occupied with his duties in southern Natal.

The woman who emerges from Christina's brief text is clearly an individual who was more than capable of coping with the demands of being a colonial wife. Isolation, loneliness and inconvenient travel are simply recorded as her responsibilities. At the same time, however, it is possible to identify some of her feelings. Her repeated point about her husband being 'away', might be construed as a negative comment on her husband's duties. Sometimes, there are gaps between events where Christina

[6] The MS of Christina's Diary is in the Natal Archives, Fynn Papers, File 14. A typescript copy is contained in Killie Campbell Africana Library, Stuart Papers. Stuart's typescript only covers the diary up to the death of Fynn in 1862. Unfortunately, space does not permit me to comment at length on this masculine editing.

[7] As the MS is only a few pages long, detailed page referencing is impractical here.

does not record her experiences. She noted that war had been declared on the Cape border in March 1846 and that Fynn junior was born in November of that year. She omitted entirely her move to Colesberg for the birth, and the worrying separation from Fynn at this time. She also does not mention any practical or financial difficulties though these are evident from Fynn's own correspondence.

Christina's motive in constructing her journal becomes clearer in the entries from March 1860 when Fynn resigned from colonial service. For the two years from this date until his death in 1862, Christina supported Fynn in his attempt to obtain a land grant from the Natal government. Part of her plan to obtain this grant lay in her recording, in diary form, a detailed account of Fynn's services to the Cape and Natal governments. She hoped to stress his loyalty to the Crown and thereby obtain a reward for his services. Although Christina was unsuccessful in obtaining a land grant prior to her husband's death, she eventually wrote directly to the Colonial Office and managed to secure a section of land in the Illovo district. Her inscription on her husband's gravestone is an indication of her belief in his long and dedicated service as a colonial official who had been 'for 37 years most actively engaged as a Government Officer' who had carried out his duties, 'much to the satisfaction of both governments' (Davies 1974:22).

Conclusion: Recording the Fynn Family

Fynn's white descendants from his marriage to Christina are well tabled in Davies' meticulously researched family history, *Twin Trails* (1974). At one level, this text is an instance of the white settler genealogies of Natal which were prominent from the 1970s. Such histories were in part an attempt by English-speaking Natalians to reaffirm their identity in the region, particularly following the 1970 commemoration of the arrival of the 1820 English settlers. Ruth Gordon's editing of *Dear Louisa*, published in 1970 is another instance of this kind of settler genre in Natal literature. However, there is a danger here, as Parle (1995:34,37) has noted, in dismissing such texts merely as examples of 'colonial nostalgia'. *Twin Trails*, although a settler family history, did provide detailed material on both Ann and Christina, thus giving researchers valuable glimpses into the lives of these women as the partners of a colonial official.

Vundhlase and her descendants are conspicuously absent from *Twin Trails* and recognition of Fynn's mixed race descendants has been restricted to fragments of oral material collected by Natal officials. I have indicated above the importance of early twentieth century accounts given by James Stuart's informants. John Bird, who edited and published the influential *Annals of Natal*, was also a collector of information on the Natal past and in 1896 interviewed Frank and Vundhlase's son Tom. Tom remem-

bered that Vundhlase had been a 'good wife' to Frank[8]. This evidence, although extremely sketchy, does give some indication of Vundhlase's status amongst her descendants. As a group, the 'coloured' Fynns have been aware of their heritage and Fynn's son Duka spoke with some pride when he talked to James Stuart about the extended nature of the Fynn 'clan' in the early 1900s[9].

In the historiography of Natal, and in the more detailed histories of the Fynn family, neither Vundhlase nor Christina were provided with opportunities to be heard. In writing this article I have attempted to break open this long silence and allow both women a voice on their own pasts. Given the nature of the evidence however, their identities seem, like Coetzee's Susan Barton, to be contained in their inability to narrate their stories, rather than in clearly spoken 'texts'.

Department of History
University of South Africa

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[8] Natal Archives, Bird Papers, vol. 5, evidence of Tom Fynn, 1896.

[9] Killie Campbell Africana Library, Fynn Family Papers, File 30104, Extract 9, evidence of Duka Fynn.

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