

Dick King: A Modest Hero

A unique family collection of cuttings, recently unearthed, bring Dick King from the shadows of settler mythology and vividly recall a Natal of yesterday. Of Kentish yeoman stock, Dick King was born in Chatham in 1813, and brought to South Africa as a boy of eight by his parents. They travelled from England aboard the *Kennersley Castle* as members of a group of 1820 settlers, led by Samuel Bradshaw, settling north-east of Bathurst. Little is known of Dick King's early childhood prior to his becoming a trader and big game hunter, and his eventual move to Natal in 1831. The little British settlement was barely a few years old when the life of Dick King became inextricably linked with early Natal history.

As early as 1834, he reputedly attempted to visit King Dingane to ask for land on behalf of a commission, led by Petrus Lafras Uys, seeking land for farmers of Uitenhage and Grahamstown who wished to move. The commission apparently did not see Dingane, but they returned with the impression that he seemed favourably disposed towards them, and was prepared to discuss the granting of land.

In the following year, he was at the meeting of fifteen men called by Captain Allen Gardiner to discuss the formation of the new township of D'Urban. He was a signatory to the unsuccessful petition requesting Natal's incorporation as a British colony, and present in Durban when Piet Retief led the first wave of the Great Trek over the Drakensberg mountains into Natal. This Voortrekker leader, whilst seeking a grant of land from Dingane, was later killed by his impis.

The death of Retief and his followers prompted one of Dick King's little known deeds of bravery. Alexander Biggar, Commander of the Fort in Durban, on learning of the massacre, called for a volunteer to warn other trekkers camped near Weenen. Dick King elected to walk the 120 miles rather than risk detection on horseback. Four days and nights later, he arrived, too late, and so walked an additional ten miles to alert Gert Maritz's camp on the banks of the Bushman's River. He thereupon fought alongside the trekkers, assisting them in repulsing the Zulu attack.¹

He fought again three weeks later, in the Battle of the Tugela, being one of the four settlers out of seventeen to escape with their lives. The Zulus followed up their victory at the Tugela by ransacking D'Urban. Dick King was amongst those settlers who took refuge on the brig, the *Comet*, which lay anchored in the Bay. He did not however, join in the general exodus from Natal.

A surprise attack by a lion, whilst he was walking in the bush near what was then known as the Umkomaas Township, nearly cost Dick King his life.

Severely mauled, he managed to draw his small Malay kris with its wavy blade and struck the animal. A photograph of the dagger, now housed in the Durban Museum, depicts the original piece of riempie with which Dick King used to tie it to his bedpost.²

Little is known of these feats, simply because Dick King refused to talk about them. Appropriately named by the Zulu as Mlamulankunzi, the peacemaker, the man who separates the fighting bulls, King was similarly loth to discuss his now historic ten day ride from Durban to Grahamstown. Assistance was needed by the beleaguered British troops, and in obtaining help against the Dutch trekkers, Dick King altered the course of Natal's history, leading to its annexation in 1843. The preponderance of English-speaking Natalians and the Victorian colonial architecture, especially prevalent in Pietermaritzburg, are but superficial evidence of British annexation. Attitudes and life styles were irreversibly shaped into an English colonial pattern. Had the Republic of Natalia flourished, one wonders how its policies would have affected the Natal of today.

Dick King discounted this epic ride, two days of which were spent suffering from illness, with the words:

. . . what is there to tell? I did no more than any Englishman would do for his country. I said I would get the message through, and I did it, and that's all there is to say.³

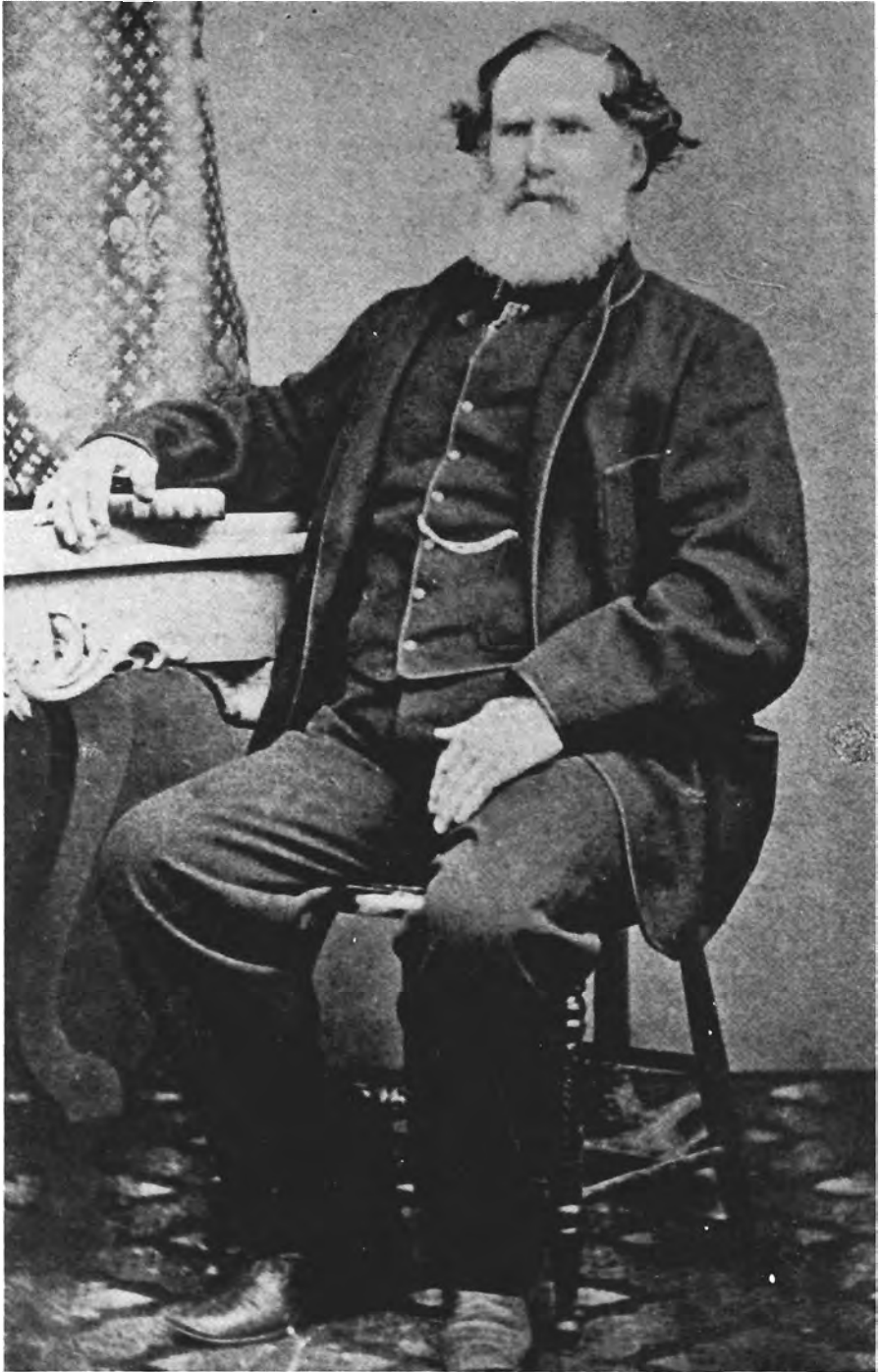
He described the ride in a laconic manner when requesting a farm from the authorities in 1846:

Memorialist was particularly active for the succour of the troops during the insurrection, that amongst other acts, it is well-known I stole at the risk of my life through the enemy's lines and succeeded in rapidly gaining Grahamstown with Major Smith's demand for assistance.⁴

Despite Dick King's sentiments, that is not all there is to say. For because King omitted to chronicle this ride, on which he reputedly avoided hostile local chiefdoms and traversed between 180 and 200 rivers, often swimming them from bank to bank, it has provoked endless speculation and controversy. An unparalleled opportunity of describing prevailing conditions was lost, and the strategy, route and question as to whether he was accompanied or not, still appear open to conjecture.

Several popularly held beliefs are refuted by Elizabeth Paris Watt nee Godderham.⁵ According to a letter in the Public Record Office, London dated 5 July 1842, from the Reverend James Archbell to the Reverend William Shaw, the escape from Durban was devised by a law agent, Sam Beningfield. [His] ' . . . stratagem and forethought were of great service on that occasion'. In many accounts, planning was attributed to George Cato. George Cato said he organized King and with his brother, J.C. Cato, rowed him across the bay — in fact the two Catos in later years were each given 2 000 acres and King 3 000 acres as a reward. Mrs Watt, by studying reports of low water conditions in Durban Bay, disproves the idea that Dick King left from Addington Beach. Instead, she confirms the theory that he was rowed from a schooner, the *Mazeppa*, via a channel to the beach of an island connected by a sandbar to the Bluff, with his two horses swimming behind.

What of his supposed companion, Ndongeni? In his own right, he has become a well-known figure in folk lore and has been immortalized in bas-



Dick King in later years
(Photograph: Killie Campbell Africana Library)

relief on the plinth of Dick King's statue in Durban. Conflicting reports exist on his role in the ride, many based on three differing versions of his statements before a magistrate, R.H. Beachcroft in 1897, to J.J. Jackson and James Stuart in 1905, between fifty-five and sixty-three years after the ride. He claimed to have accompanied Dick King as far as Buntingville, where fatigue and severe chafing forced him to abandon the ride.

Mrs Watt however, refutes Ndongeni's tale point by point.⁶ She lays emphasis on the evidence of William Palmer (of the Dick King Memorial Committee) who wrote to his friend, J.H. Russell, former manager of the Natal Railway Company, in retirement in England and married to Dick King's widow, Clara. Clara asserted that Ndongeni's tale was fabrication, remembering him clearly as a leader of oxen and employee in the cane fields on their Isipingo farm. Although Mrs Watt discredits Ndongeni's tale, she excuses Ndongeni as following the black tradition of praise singing. He was present at the unveiling of the statue in 1915. Dick King's granddaughter, Doris Camp, noted in her copy of Cyril Eyre's biography of King, 'Ndongeni was there in a bath chair. I spoke to him'. He apparently died soon after the unveiling.

The route which Dick King followed has been variously described. Ten granite pylons were erected a century later to commemorate the ride. They were sited at the following points: Isipingo Beach, Port Shepstone, Umzimvubu River, Old Bunting Mission, Mancam Store, Butterworth, Komgha, King William's Town, Peddie and Bathurst. A marble plaque on the City Hall at Grahamstown records Dick King's arrival there on 4 June 1842. Ethel Campbell⁷ collected much information on King, and interestingly describes oral evidence from Mrs L.H. Mason, daughter of the well-known trader George Whitehead of Butterworth. Dick King spent a night on the sofa in their diningroom, at Butterworth, en route to Grahamstown and obtained a fresh horse from her father. In repayment of this hospitality, Dick King gave him his silver watch. Mrs Mason ultimately presented it to the 'Old Durban Room' from where it was unfortunately stolen.

Ethel Campbell continues with information obtained from Mrs Mary Ann McHattie (née Wade), Dick King's niece, then a child, staying at her grandfather, Phillip King's house in Grahamstown when Dick King arrived there:

The next time Uncle Dick came to Grahamstown was in 1842. He came as 'express' from Captain Smith to tell of the disaster at Port Natal. The night he entered Grahamstown weary, sleepless, and covered with mud and dust from the journey, he came straight to his father's house to brush up hurriedly before he took the dispatch to Colonel Hare. I was in Grahamstown at my grandfather's at the time. Uncle Dick then went immediately to Colonel Hare. He would not even wait to eat anything although in a famished condition. He delivered the dispatch to Colonel Hare and gave him much verbal information. But overcome with fatigue and sleeplessness, he went off to sleep before the Colonel had finished questioning him. When an attendant was about to awaken him, Colonel Hare said, 'Let the man sleep'.⁸

In recognition of his ride, Dick King was rewarded by the Government with £15, to which the inhabitants of the Port added a further £70.

Ten years later, in 1852, he married Clara Jane Noon, a young girl of seventeen. She met him after her voyage out from England in a sailing vessel and although opposites in many ways, they married. The service was conducted by Archdeacon Lloyd, the Colonial Chaplain.

An extract from the diary of a well-know Durban lady, Mrs Eliza W. Fielden describes the wedding:

We have been to a wedding in Durban! We rode in early, dressed at our house, and rode out again in the evening. The bride was a good-looking girl of seventeen, dressed in white muslin, as were also most of the ladies. The bridegroom, a powerful dark man, double her age, who has been long in the colony, and has received a grant of land from Government in acknowledgement of a special service he rendered once by riding over the coast to give information of an outbreak.

The wedding breakfast, which was ample, was held under an awning in the garden. The only carriage in the place was hired for the day, and after taking the bridal party to and from church, was sent round the town to bring the guests. It was a light covered van and the white curtains on this occasion were tied with pink ribbons. ⁹

Seven¹⁰ children were born to Dick and Clara King. Their eldest son, Richard Philip Henry King, an early Rand figure, was present at the proclamation of Johannesburg as a township, and at the opening of the first gold mine on the reef. He was a founder member of the Rand Stock Exchange, a Justice of the Peace, and vice-president of the Rand Pioneers in the Transvaal. He described his parents thus:

My mother . . . was a gentle woman, artistic and a great reader. My father's dare-devil ways must have worried her at times, though she herself was by no means lacking in high physical courage. Well I remember how she said she used to ride with my father through Pondoland, swimming rivers on horseback with him, and never faltering through the most strenuous expeditions.¹¹

Her obituary describes her:

. . . though adventurous, Mrs King was always ready with openhearted sympathy, sound advice, and ready assistance, where it was needed, and her personal attractions earned for her the title of being the handsomest woman in Natal.¹²

And of his father, R.P.H. King states:

. . . I write of Dick King as I remember him, for thirteen years of my life he was just 'Father' to me; the man who taught me to swim and to ride, and whose 'follow me' in clear, ringing tones meant a ride through a river on horseback, a rescrambling on to a horse after a fall, or a long, arduous walk through thick bush, without any room for the word fear. We none of us felt fear when we were with Father . . . Farmer, transport rider, big game hunter, trader; a man of action rather than of learning, my father's dare-devil ways were natural to him . . .¹³

In the following years Dick King concerned himself with a butcher shop and the cultivation of sugar on his Isipingo farm, but his spirit of adventure was not quelled. In 1868 at the age of 55 and only three years before he died

of dropsy, he was still carrying out deeds of valour. Floods at Reunion marooned the families on Wentworth Hill. Dick King built a raft which he paddled across the flood waters to bring provisions to the stranded families.¹⁴

His obituary notice perhaps gives an accurate insight into his character:

Well, he is gone; and among them all, already passed away or still among us, there is not one, a truer, braver, simpler soul than Dick King. As such, as a pattern of an unassuming genuine man, let his name and memory be cherished among the worthies of Natal.¹⁵

Based as it is on secondary sources, this article perforce reiterates what has previously been said. By providing an overview however, one can attempt to cobble together glimpses of the personality within the legend. Perhaps one searches too deeply for the man behind the enigma. His deeds bear testimony to his character. It is ironical that Dick King's supreme indifference to fame still protects his privacy, but his bravery has ensured him a niche in South African history.

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- ¹ New light on walk to Weenen. *Natal Daily News*, 4 May 1955.
- ² Dick King fought lion with knife. *Natal Witness*, 29 November 1963.
- ³ King, Richard Philip. Memories of my father — Dick King. *The Outspan*, 5 September 1941.
- ⁴ Dick King's ride — a fascinating mystery. *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1967.
- ⁵ Michell, Jon. How a song of praise fooled the *fundis*. *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1983.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Campbell, Ethel. Dick King's famous ride. *Natal Mercury*, 25 March 1932.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, with acknowledgements to the Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban.
- ⁹ Source and date of cutting unknown. Also cited in Eyre, Cyril: Dick King, Saviour of Natal. Durban: Durban Municipal Library and Durban Publicity Association, 1932. Originally from E.W. Feilden: *My African home* . . . London, Sampson Low, 1887, p. 32.
- ¹⁰ The writer of this article is descended through her maternal grandmother, Audrey (King) Anderson, youngest daughter of Richard Philip Henry King. Other members of the family were Maria Recordonza; Clara Elvira; Francis Richard; Georgina Adelaide; Catherine Agnes; Charles Richard. Mrs Joyce Scallan of P.O. Box 15017, Port Elizabeth, 6011, has recently completed a genealogy of the King family for inclusion in her book.
- ¹¹ King, R., *op cit.*
- ¹² Source unknown, [1908].
- ¹³ King, R., *op cit.*
- ¹⁴ Dick King. *Daily News*, 10 November 1971.
- ¹⁵ *Natal Colonist*, 14 November 1871.

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