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'In Every Way His Own King'
The Life of Chief John Dunn

By Ian Knight

In 1880, while languishing in exile at the Castle in Cape Town as a prisoner of the British, the Zulu king, Cetshwayo kaMpande, summed up one of the most significant and enigmatic relationships of his political life; One very cold and stormy night in winter I was seated before a large fire in my hut when there was a noise without as if someone was arriving. I asked the cause from my attendants and they told me a white man in a miserable state of destitution had just arrived and claimed my hospitality. I ordered the servants to bring him in, and a tall, splendidly made man appeared. He was dressed in rags, for his clothes had been torn to pieces in fighting through the bush, and he was shivering from fever and ague. I drew my cloak aside and asked him to sit by the fire, and told the servants to bring food and clothing. I loved this white man as a brother, and made him one of my head indunas, giving him land and wives, daughters of my chiefs. Now my sun has gone down, and John Dunn is sitting by the fire, but he does not draw his cloak aside.

King Cetshwayo's poignant analogy strikes at the heart of the mystery of John Dunn's life. How was it that an *umlungu*, a white man, with no previous history, power, wealth or influence within the Zulu kingdom, rose to such a position of prominence that he ruled hundreds of square miles in Cetshwayo's name, and with the power of life or death? And why was it that, at a time of national crisis, Dunn chose to forsake his Zulu patron, and fight instead for a colonial system which he despised, and which in due course would destroy the very way of life which had made him what he was?

Dunn's origins were certainly humble enough. His father, Robert Newton Dunn, was born in Inverness, Scotland, in 1795. In 1820 he left home – and perhaps a broken marriage – and joined nearly 4000 other immigrants in a government-sponsored scheme to settle the Eastern Cape of South Africa. The '1820 settlers' were established as a buffer between the existing colony and the independent chiefdoms of the amaXhosa. Many settlers found that the land allocated to them was insufficient to sustain them, but Robert Dunn seems to have prospered, and in 1824 he married Anne Biggar, the daughter of a prominent settler, Alexander Biggar. Biggar himself was a colourful character, destined to leave his mark, too, on the early white settlement of Natal; a one-time paymaster of the 85th Regiment, he had fought in the Napoleonic Wars and War of 1812 but had been cashiered following a row over missing regimental funds. A restless, charismatic character with little respect for authority, Biggar had railed against the British administration on the Cape Frontier, particularly in the aftermath of the 6th Frontier War (1834-35). Many settlers, both English-speaking and Afrikaners, lost property in the Xhosa attacks, and blamed the British for failing to protect them, and this conflict was important in shaping the attitudes which led to the Great Trek. Biggar, too, decided to leave the Cape, but not with one of the Boer trek groups; in 1834, together with a small group of family and associates, including Robert and Anne Dunn, Alexander Biggar sailed to Port Natal.

Port Natal at that time was an adventurous spot. It supported a small group of white hunters and traders, who had landed there a decade before, and who lived by the sufferance of the Zulu kings. Their lifestyle reflected their circumstances; most of them lived in wattle and daub huts, had married African wives, and reckoned their wealth and status in cattle and adherents, after the Zulu manner. Their principal economic activity was trading with the Zulu king, augmented by hunting for ivory and hides. Tough, individualistic and self-reliant, they acknowledged little authority beyond that of the Zulu kings – and that reluctantly - and the atmosphere at the settlement was relaxed to the point of anarchy.

The move to Port Natal was a turning point in the lives of both Biggar and the Dunns. Biggar enjoyed the freedom the settlement afforded him, and his natural air of authority and military background soon asserted itself. He formed the settlers into a ramshackle defence force, known as the Port Natal Volunteers, a unit that can lay claim to being the first white military unit to be founded in the region. The Dunns established themselves on the Berea ridge, overlooking the bay of Port Natal, and in 1834 Anne Dunn gave birth to a son, John; whether he was born before they left the Cape or after the couple arrived in Natal has never been satisfactorily determined.

In 1838, however, disaster struck the Port Natal settlement. The exodus of Afrikaner farmers from the Cape frontier, known to history as the Great Trek, reached Natal, and a party under the command of Pet Retief crossed the Kahlamba (Drakensberg) mountains from the interior. They were searching for good farming land free of the authority of the British, but they blundered badly in their negotiations with the Zulu king Dingane, and a brutal war broke which began with the slaughter of Retief and many of his party. The community at Port Natal, who had been chafing at the restrictions imposed upon them by the king, made the mistake of allying themselves with the Boers. In April 1838 the settlers mounted a foray into southern Zululand, supported by an army of their African retainers; they were surprised by the Zulu on the north bank of the Thukela river (not far from the 1879 site of Fort Tenedos), and wiped out. The triumphant Zulu army then followed up its success by raiding the Port Natal settlement. The settlers had just enough warning of the attack to flee to the safety of ships anchored in the bay; one of John Dunn's earliest memories was of watching with his parents from the deck while the Zulu set fire to the abandoned shacks on the shore.

In due course, the combined settler/Voortrekkers fortunes recovered, but not without a further tragedy to the Dunn family. Alexander Biggar had committed himself wholeheartedly to the Boer cause, and had fought at the battle of Ncome (Blood) River on 16 December 1838. A fortnight later, however, when the Boers pushed on into the Zulu heartland, they were ambushed while raiding cattle in the vicinity of modern Ulundi. In the scramble to get away that followed, Alexander Biggar lingered to cover the retreat of his African retainers, and was overtaken and killed. John Dunn's grandfather has the dubious distinction of being the first man to have held a command on the British army to be killed by Zulu warriors: in his honour, the Boers named the high ridge on the Natal bank of the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) River – where Helpmekaar stands – after him; the *Biggarsberg.*

The fighting of 1838 ended largely in a stalemate, with neither side able to subdue effectively the other. The Dunns returned to Port Natal, rebuilt their home, and

prospered by selling imported ammunition to the Boers. In 1840 the conflict resolved itself when King Dingane's brother, Mpande, defeated Dingane with the Boers' support; as a reward the Boers claimed the rights to settle the country west of the Thukela river, the area now known as modern Natal. This conspicuous success attracted British official interest, and in 1842 British troops were marched into Natal to isolate the Port and deny it to the Boers. Fighting broke out – the Dunns tried to stay neutral, and incurred the suspicion of both sides as a result – and the British were ultimately victorious. In 1843 Natal was annexed as a British colony.

The advent of British rule had a profound effect on the development of the Port Natal settlement. The imposition of British law, and a steady trickle of immigrants with more conservative aspirations, led within a decade to the end of the settlement's free and easy ways. Some of the original pioneers chose to put aside their African wives, take white wives instead, and adopt a new respectability; others moved further away, in search of the true frontier spirit that had characterised the Port. Among these was John Dunn.

Dunn had spent his formative years in the old settlement, and grew up assuming many of its multicultural characteristics. He had learned naturally to ride, shoot and fend for himself; he spoke Zulu as well as English, mixed with Africans as an equal, and accepted marriage between white men and African women as commonplace. In 1847 Robert Dunn died – trampled to death by an elephant – and after a while Anne Dunn returned to the Cape. John Dunn, who was fourteen when his father died, decided to remain in Natal. For a while he attempted to make a living as a hunter, hiring himself out as a guide to officers of the garrison at Port Natal, but this was too insecure an income, and in 1853 he took a position as a transport rider, taking goods to and from the Transvaal. The experience was to prove both disillusioning and decisive; On our return, when the time for my honorarium came, I was told I was not of age, and that by Roman-Dutch Law I could not claim the money. This so disgusted me that I determined to desert the haunts of civilization for the haunts of large game in Zululand.

When John Dunn left Natal, he took with him Catherine Pierce, the daughter of his father's business associate, Frank Pierce, and a Cape Malay woman. Dunn entered Zululand at the Lower Drift on the Thukela, and for nearly two years lived a semi-nomadic life, subsisting by his hunting. Like some of the early adventurers in the Port Natal community, he abandoned European clothes and spoke only the language of the people among whom he lived. This might have been his lot for the rest of his life, but for a bizarre quirk of fate. In 1854, Joshua Walmsley, a retired army officer recently appointed Border Agent at the Lower Drift by the Natal government, was hunting in Zululand with some friends. While they were camped at the AmaTigulu River, Walmsley apparently spotted a white Zulu, and one of his companions recognised him as John Dunn. Walmsley decided to detain him, and despite Dunn's protests, offered him the alternative of returning with him to live at his border post, or of being sent back to Durban, as Port Natal had now been renamed. Dunn chose the latter.

His relationship with Walmsley was to prove a pivotal one for Dunn. Walmsley, an eccentric himself, assumed the role of a father figure to his protégé, and took it upon himself to improve Dunn's education. Dunn worked as Walmsley's assistant, and again augmented his income by guiding hunting parties into Zululand. He was by now utterly

familiar, not only with the language and customs of the Zulus, but with much of the country lying north of the lower reaches of the Thukela. His knowledge of the people and country, and his confidence in his own skill at arms, were to shape Dunn's crucial response to events that occurred, suddenly and dramatically, on his doorstep in 1856.

Unlike his predecessors, Kings Shaka and Dingane, King Mpande kaSenzangakhona had fathered a large number of sons. An astute political survivor, he had carefully refused to nominate his heir, preferring to play the claims of one candidate off against another. By the early 1850s two principal candidates had emerged, the princes Cetshwayo and Mbuyazi. As they grew to manhood, both men accrued large followings within Zululand, and by 1855 friction between them threatened to break into open violence. Mpande himself seemed unable or unwilling to intervene, merely remarking that 'two bulls cannot live in the same kraal'. By mid-1856 it had become apparent that Prince Cetshwayo's faction – known as the uSuthu – had grown more powerful than that of Prince Mbuyazi (whose followers were known as the iziGqoza). Mbuyazi took the precaution of moving his followers into southern Zululand, and attempted to open negotiations with the Natal authorities. The colonial administration was, not surprisingly, reluctant to intervene, and to force their hand Mbuyazi and his followers tried to cross en masse into Natal. The move alarmed Cetshwayo, who mustered the uSuthu, and gave chase. The iziGqoza reached the Thukela River, opposite the Lower Drift, at the end of November, only to find that the river was in spate, and they were unable to cross. Mbuyazi posted his men on a ridge known as 'Ndondakusuka, and hid his dependants and cattle in the folds between his warriors and the river. He then tried, once more, to appeal to the Natal authorities.

As Border Agent, Walmsley suddenly found himself in the front-line. He was aware of the government's official position, but he realised, too, that a human catastrophe was imminent; with Cetshwayo's uSuthu closing in, the iziGqoza were likely to be trapped on the river. The situation was complicated, too, by the presence on the Zulu bank of a group of white traders, who had been desperate to escape Zululand before the conflict, but were also trapped, along with their cattle and wagons, on the Zulu bank. When Dunn offered to intervene unofficially, Walmsley accepted his offer.

Officially, Dunn was authorised only to try to mediate the quarrel between the two parties, but as Dunn himself recalled, Walmsley's private instructions were explicit – 'Make peace if you can, Dunn, but if you cannot succeed, fight like the devils, and give a good account of yourselves'3. Since Dunn took with him 35 of Walmsley's African border policemen and 100 trained black hunters, it is clear he had very little hope of a peaceful outcome. He was not the only European to offer his services; several Boers had offered to fight for Mbuyazi, while a number of the traders stranded at the river were also prepared to fight. While their motives no doubt varied, all no doubt hoped to profit should Mbuyazi be victorious.

In fact, Dunn soon realised that Mbuyazi's position was hopeless. He advised the Prince to try to get his dependants, at least, across the river, but Mbuyazi refused, and Dunn realised that the iziGqoza were far too cramped to fight effectively. He was right; the following day, 1 December, the first of Cetshwayo's scouts arrived, and at dawn on the 2nd the uSuthu army could be seen arrayed for battle on a range of hills opposite. As he stood watching the spectacle with the iziGqoza commanders, Dunn noticed a puff of

wind lift a feather from Mbuyazi's headdress, and cast it on the ground; when he heard the sigh of despair which passed through the iziGqoza ranks at this omen, he knew the battle was lost. Nonetheless, determined to fight as best he could, he took his command off to the left of Mbuyazi's 'position, only to run into the uSuthu right, trying to cut round their flank.

In the battle that followed, Dunn acquitted himself creditably, but barely escaped with his life. He immediately opened fire on the uSuthu 'horn', and the warriors – who at that time had little experience of firearms – fell back, despite their superior numbers. Several times they regrouped and attacked, but Dunn, ably supported by the nearest iziGqoza regiments, drove them back repeatedly. Elsewhere on the field, however, the iziGqoza had collapsed in the face of a determined uSuthu attack. Most of Mbuyazi's newfound white allies had stayed only long enough to see which way the wind was blowing, before abandoning the warriors and riding towards the river. In danger of being cut off, Dunn reluctantly ordered his men to retire, while the uSuthu pursued them at a safe distance.

By the time they reached the river, all semblance of order had collapsed. Mbuyazi's routed warriors had streamed back through the women and children concealed in the bush behind them, and the victorious uSuthu had followed them, killing fighting men and civilians alike. A panic-stricken mob fled towards the river, the uSuthu attacking them on all sides. Dunn's own account captures the horror of the final stage of the battle; As soon as I got to the river I was at once rushed at by men, women, and children begging me to save them. Several poor mothers held out their babies to me offering them to me as my property if I would only save them. And now the Usutu were fairly amongst us, stabbing right and left without mercy, and regardless of sex, and as I saw that my only chance was to try and swim for it, I urged my horse into the water, but no sooner in than I was besieged from all sides by men clinging to me, so that my horse was, to say the least, completely rooted to the spot. I now jumped off, stripped myself, all but hat and shirt, and taking nothing but my gun which I held aloft, and swam with one hand.

Dunn and the other Europeans who had fought for Mbuyazi survived; most of the iziGqoza did not. Mbuyazi himself was killed, together with several of Mpande's other sons, who had supported him. As many as 20,000 iziGqoza perished; bodies carried away by the river washed up on beaches for miles along the coast for days later. In one blow, Prince Cetshwayo had effectively destroyed the main opposition to his succession.

In the aftermath of the battle, Dunn made a characteristically bold decision. Once they had recovered from their shocking experiences, the white traders realised that in the confusion the uSuthu had carried off the herds they had gathered at the river. As these amounted to several thousand head, they represented a considerable financial investment, and the traders offered a reward of £250 to anyone who could recover them. John Dunn accepted. He crossed back into Zululand, and sought an audience with King Mpande. The old king was deeply moved to hear a first-hand account of the battle which had killed so many of his sons, but he explained that the cattle had been kept among Cetshwayo's supporters, near the coast.

Dunn had little option but to confront Cetshwayo himself. Given that he had only recently – and very effectively – fought against him, this required a certain amount of nerve, but in fact Cetshwayo received him at the emaNgweni homestead politely enough. The heir apparent was reluctant to risk offending the Natal authorities, and could afford to be magnanimous. Dunn eventually emerged with 1000 head of cattle, and finally claimed his reward.

It was probably Dunn's courage at this time that prompted Cetshwayo's next move. Dunn had not long been back in Natal when a royal messenger arrived from Cetshwayo, bringing him an offer to move into Zululand, and act as his adviser on white affairs.

At first glance, this seems a curious development, but in fact the succession crisis had brought home to Cetshwayo the extent to which European interests had penetrated all aspects of Zulu life. White hunters and traders operated widely in Zululand, and had become an important factor in the nation's economy, while mission societies constantly lobbied to be allowed to establish stations in the country. As the battle had proven, it was no longer possible to ignore the possibility of colonial intervention in domestic Zulu politics. Cetshwayo felt the need for a white man upon whom he could rely to serve as an intermediary with the Europeans. Dunn's familiarity with the Zulu lifestyle, and his undoubted courage, made him ideal for the role. After giving the matter some thought, Dunn agreed, despite Walmsley's reservations. Dunn parted from his patron with regret; 'notwithstanding all his eccentricities', he recalled fondly, 'he was one of the most generous-hearted men I ever had anything to do with'.

Dunn established himself in the Ngoye hills, in the south-east of the country. This was an area that had suffered a population exodus as a result of the recent civil war, and it gave him the opportunity to build up support in something of a power vacuum. The area was rich in game, which enabled him to develop his hunting concerns, whilst at the same time it lay across the main road from the Lower Thukela drift to the Mahlabatini plain, where both Mpande and Cetshwayo established their capitals. Dunn was therefore ideally placed to monitor all European movements into the country.

John Dunn had married Catherine Pierce in 1853, and soon after he moved to Zululand, he took his first Zulu wife, much to Catherine's outrage. In fact, however, the marriage merely confirmed the extent to which Dunn had adopted a cross-cultural lifestyle. Like the early settlers at Port Natal, among whom he grew up, he had assumed the role of a Zulu chief, and he accumulated power, prestige and adherents in the Zulu manner. In all, he would marry forty-nine Zulu wives, and by doing so carefully allied himself to important Zulu families along the coastal strip. As his influence grew, he established two homesteads – at Moyeni and Mangethe – and befriended important figures in the Zulu establishment who lived nearby, such as Prince Dabulamanzi kaMpande, who lived near Eshowe. From the late 1860s, he began to import firearms into the Zulu kingdom, on behalf of his patron, Prince Cetshwayo, a factor that materially strengthened Cetshwayo's position within the country, and later improved the firepower of the national army on the eve of the war with the British.

Dunn's lifestyle reflected his increased affluence. He dressed in the fashion of an English country squire, buying clothes, guns and books on trading trips across the border, and at each of his homes he maintained a European house for his own living area. His Zulu wives were established in traditional settlements nearby. His legendary

skill as a hunter attracted all manner of visiting European sportsmen, and he regularly entertained officers from the British garrison in Natal. As the traveller Bertram Mitford observed, however, there was nothing flamboyant about his manner;

John Dunn is a handsome, well-built man, about five feet eight in height, with good forehead, regular features, and keen grey eyes; a closely cut iron-grey beard hides the lower half of his bronzed weather-tanned countenance, and a look of determination and shrewdness is discernible in every lineament. So far from affecting native costume, the chief was, if anything, more neatly dressed than the average colonist, in plain tweed suit and wide-awake hat. In manner he is quiet and unassuming, and no trace of self-glorification or 'bounce' is there about him.

The extent to which Dunn had integrated himself into the political hierarchy within Zululand became apparent in 1872, when King Mpande died. All of Cetshwayo's insecurities about his succession re-emerged; as he feared new challenges might emerge at the last minute to prevent him becoming king. To bolster his position within the country, Cetshwayo invited colonial Natal to send representatives to attend the coronation ceremonies, as a tacit sign of support, and it was Dunn who mediated between the Natal representatives and the king. He also acted as a stabilising factor within the country, reassuring Cetshwayo during the tensions that surrounded the ceremonies, and ensuring that meetings with powerful groups from the outlying regions passed off peacefully. He provided a carriage for Cetshwayo's use on the long march to the valley of the ancestors, and he arranged for a photographer to record the extraordinary events.

Once Cetshwayo was safely installed, Dunn's position became if anything more secure. Cetshwayo constantly sought his advice in his dealings with the white world, and Dunn always erred on the side of caution, providing a wider perspective in the claustrophobic inner circles of the king.

He was, however, unable to prevent the tragedy of war with the British. As tension mounted throughout 1877 and 1878, Dunn urged Cetshwayo to meet British demands wherever possible. Feeling within Zululand ran high against the aggressive stance adopted by the British, to the extent that by the end of 1878 many important councillors regarded Dunn with open suspicion and hostility. Despite the fact that Zulu society had proved quite capable of absorbing a white chief – it was more open in that respect than colonial society in Natal – the threat of a direct confrontation between these two different aspects of Dunn's lifestyle inevitably left him isolated. In the run up to war, Dunn continued to provide guns for the Zulu army, and it was to his Mangethe residence that the King's representatives first reported with the terms of the British ultimatum of 11 December. Yet the ultimatum made Dunn's position impossible; if he stayed in Zululand, he risked being a scapegoat for Zulu anger against the whites, and if he chose to fight for Cetshwayo, the British would regard him as a traitor. Cetshwayo recognised this, and advised him that 'if it came to fighting I was to stand on one side'.9

At the very end of December 1878, Dunn crossed into Natal with his dependants. He had entered Zululand twenty years before, accompanied by a young wife and a handful of African retainers; his following now numbered 2,000 people, and 3,000 cattle. The Natal authorities made land available to him south of the Thukela as a temporary

settlement, but cattle promised by Lord Chelmsford to feed them failed to materialise – an omission that did little to restore Dunn's faith in colonial morality.

Dunn managed to stay aloof during the first phase of the war, preoccupied instead with the care of his followers. Following the disaster at Isandlwana, however, he came under increasing pressure from Lord Chelmsford to take an active part in the war. In particular, Dunn's knowledge of the coastal sector – his old fiefdom – became increasingly useful once it became clear that Chelmsford would have to mount an expedition to relieve Col. Pearson's beleaguered garrison at Eshowe. Chelmsford would have to advance through country that Dunn knew intimately, while many of the local Zulu commanders were former friends of Dunn. Towards the end of March, therefore, Chelmsford formally requested Dunn to join his staff as an adviser on the Eshowe relief expedition. Dunn's reaction reflected the pragmatism that had characterised his entire career; I began to think earnestly of the situation. I could see that I could be of service in pointing out the means of averting another disaster, and besides, I knew that in the fighting between the Boers and the English at the Bay (D'Urban) my father had suffered by remaining neutral, so I made up my mind to go with Lord Chelmsford to the relief of the Eshowe garrison.

This was, of course, a decision that the Zulus would regard as a betrayal, yet it is hard not to have some sympathy for Dunn's predicament. He knew that the odds of the Zulus ultimately winning the war were negligible; his only hope of regaining any of his former authority was to join the winning side. The alternative was to abandon everything he had built up; when Lord Chelmsford crossed the Lower Drift at the end of March, Dunn was with him. He took with him 200 of his trained hunters, who, as Dunn's scouts, were to prove among the most useful African auxiliaries attached to the force.

Having made his decision, Dunn played an active part in the expedition. The night before the battle of kwaGingindlovu (1 April) he personally scouted out the Zulu dispositions, accompanied by one of Chelmsford's ADCs, Captain Molyneux. The following day, during the Zulu attack, Dunn stood on top of a wagon, picking off warriors at a range of 300 yards; 'I know I fired over thirty shots', he recalled, 'and missed very few'.

From kwaGingindlovu, Chelmsford advanced and relieved Eshowe. He had already decided not to hold the post, which was too advanced, and he ordered the garrison to retire. As a last gesture of defiance, Chelmsford himself personally commanded a sortie to attack eZulwini, the homestead of Prince Dabulamanzi, which was situated nearby. Dunn was persuaded to accompany the expedition. The troops found the homestead deserted and set it on fire, but as they did so shots struck among them from a group of Zulus watching from a nearby hill. Dunn recognised his old friend Prince Dabulamanzi among the marksmen, and the pair traded shots at long range. Neither man was struck, but Chelmsford's staff noted that the Zulus ducked several times during the exchange.

Yet Dunn was not able to escape entirely the consequences of his participation in the war. On the way back from Eshowe, Chelmsford's force halted for the night by the deserted German mission station at eMvutsheni. The British troops bivouacked in a protective laager, with European picquets thrown out, and a screen of Dunn's scouts

beyond. During the night, a shot fired by a nervous picquet caused a mad scramble for the safety of the laager, and some of the troops mistook Dunn's Scouts for the enemy. The result was an appalling tragedy; I was roused from a sound sleep by hearing firing and shouts. I seized my rifle and jumped up, but what was then my horror when I recognised the voices of some of my unfortunate native scouts calling out 'Friend! Friend!' which they had been taught to respond to the challenge of the sentries. I called out 'Good God! They are shooting my men down!' and ran out, calling out to the soldiers to stop firing. On passing the line of fire I came upon one of my men lying dead in the trench with a bayonet wound in his chest. On examining the lot, I found ten more wounded, two of whom died the next day.

There was more to come. Passing his deserted homesteads on the way back to the border, Dunn found that the incensed Zulus had ransacked them and put them to the torch.

The relief of Eshowe marked a consolidation of the British revival that had begun a few days earlier at the battle of Khambula, in the northern sector. Defeated on two fronts, the Zulu army disbanded in order to recover, giving Chelmsford time to complete his preparations for a new invasion. Dunn was attached to the 1st Division, Chelmsford's new column that operated in the coastal sector. Although this column was not involved in any further fighting, Dunn was fully involved in the negotiations to persuade the chiefs of the coastal sector to surrender.

At the end of the war, Dunn not unnaturally hoped for his reward. Lord Chelmsford resigned his command soon after his victory at Ulundi (oNdini) on 4 July, and it was left to his successor, Sir Garnet Wolseley, to impose a peace settlement. Wolseley was constrained by a political brief that required him to reduce the threat posed by an independent Zululand, whilst at the same time avoiding the expense of outright annexation. At the end of August, his patrols captured King Cetshwayo, and the defeated monarch was sent to exile in Cape Town. Advised by colonial administrators in Natal, Wolseley had decided to divide Zululand out among thirteen client rulers, who were not only loyal to the British, but whose personal circumstances had made them opponents of the Royal House. Dunn fitted both categories. Wolseley, who on the whole had a snobbish aversion to settler society, shared the admiration with which many officers had come to regard Dunn; I have never met a man who was more of a puzzle to me than Dunn. He has never been in England & most of his life he has passed in Zululand without any English or civilised society, and yet in his manner he is in every way the Gentleman. He is quiet, self-possessed and respectful without any servility whatever, and his voice is soft and pleasant. He is much more of the Gentlemen than any of the self-opinionated & stuck-up people who profess to be 'our leading citizens' in Natal ... He leads a curiously solitary life, but says he enjoys it thoroughly, being in every way his own king, without any policemen in his dominions to serve him with a writ or lay rough hands upon him for taking the law into his own hands ... He has as many wives & concubines as he wishes to keep & he has a clan about him who are all ready to obey his slightest nod. He pays periodical visits to Natal & has his books & letters & newspapers sent to him regularly. I wish I dared make [him] King of Zululand, for he [would] make an admirable ruler.

Yet Wolseley shied away from replacing Cetshwayo entirely with Dunn. Much as a 'white Zulu' might have been a solution to his political problems, Dunn's unconventional lifestyle made such extensive support impossible. In particular, the Church community in Natal despised Dunn, not only for the way in which he had abandoned Christian morality in favour of traditional Zulu beliefs, but also for the autocratic way he ruled his territory. Dunn had little sympathy for missionaries, whose work, he believed, degraded the Zulu, and whose part-time economic activities competed with his own. Moreover, many officials in the Natal government regarded Dunn with suspicion because of his former association with the king. In the event, the best that Wolseley could do was make Dunn one of the thirteen 'kinglets', whom he set up to rule in Zululand. Dunn was confirmed in possession of his old lands, and his authority was extended further westwards, along the banks of the Thukela. In the west, his property bordered that awarded to the Sotho chief, Hlubi, another outsider who was rewarded with territory by the British. In effect, Wolseley had created a buffer zone along the entire Natal/Zululand boundary, which he had given to the two men who could most be relied upon to support British policy.

Dunn accepted the award 'on condition that Cetywayo should never hold any position in the country again'. He returned with his followers, and set about rebuilding his ruined homesteads, and in many ways those first post-war years were his most prosperous. His territory was the largest it had ever been, and there were now no checks to his hunting and trading activities. Typically, he was astute enough to realise that his elevation was likely to make him a lasting enemy of Zulu loyalists, and he ruled his chiefdom with the firmness of a Zulu autocrat. He formed an alliance with the powerful anti-royalist groups who now ruled the northern districts – Prince Hamu and Chief Zibhebhu – and between them they continually harassed ardent royalists in their districts. In particular, this earned Dunn the hatred of his former friend, Prince Dabulamanzi, who was steadfastly loyal to Cetshwayo, and who was now placed under Dunn's authority. Dunn's position, however, was a powerful one; when, in July 1881, a man named Sitimela claimed to be a descendant of the famous Mthethwa chief Dingiswayo, and threatened the stability of the entire coastal sector, Dunn simply attacked him and dispersed his followers.

Yet Wolseley's settlement, if it succeeded in one regard – dividing the Zulus against themselves – it failed in another, that of securing the broader stability of the region. The tensions it unleashed threatened to spill over into colonial Natal. In northern Zululand, in particular, the activities of the British appointees resulted in a stream of protests from royalist supporters, claiming they were oppressed. As early as 1882, the British government began to consider the possibility of restoring Cetshwayo to Zululand to re-establish order. Dunn was bitter at the prospect;

Let self-considered wiser heads than mine say what they like, I am confident that if my services had been more utilised, even after the restoration of Cetywayo, I could greatly have assisted in bringing about a more peaceful settlement of affairs in Zululand, from my actual knowledge and feelings of the people. But no; I was set up by a certain faction, to suit their end, as a rival to Cetywayo, hence the consequences.

The restoration of Cetshwayo in 1883 meant the end of Dunn's tenure as an independent chief. The British government realised only too clearly that it could not set the king to rule over men who had been his bitter opponents in his absence, and it once more divided the country up. In the north, Prince Hamu and Zibhebhu were allowed to retain their districts, while the area previously given to John Dunn was to be taken over as a Reserve, under the administration of a British resident. Although there was no attempt to depose Dunn, his status was reduced to that of a regional chief, under British authority.

In the event, the king's restoration proved a disaster. Soon after he returned to Zululand, a civil war broke out between his supporters and those of Chief Zibhebhu. Cetshwayo was utterly defeated in a surprise attack on his reconstituted oNdini homestead in July 1883; he fled to the protection of the Reserve Territory, where he died a broken man.

Dunn continued to rule his following from Mangethe and Moyeni. He dabbled occasionally – and unsuccessfully – in the troubled politics of the following decade, but his personal lifestyle was undiminished. He died on 5 August 1895 from the effects of dropsy and heart failure at his Moyeni homestead. He was sixty-five; he was survived by twenty-three of his wives and 79 children. By Zulu standards he was a rich man, and his legacy included a fortune in cattle and personal effects.

Yet he left another bequest, too, which was more problematic. Today his descendants number over 3,000 and their mixed blood has ensured them a difficult history, despised and denied during the apartheid years, and more recently resented by Zulu nationalists. In many ways, the full implications of John Dunn's extraordinary life have yet to be resolved.