

**- JOHN DUNN -**

**A POWER BEHIND THE ZULU THRONE**

**A Brief Personal History.**

**by**

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## **AFRICA 4th September 1847**

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

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

Too late the young British boy screamed a warning! Gasping in horror he watched the angry beast throw his father to the parched ground . . .

Fear rose in John Robert Dunn's throat as the sound of a million breaking bones stole any hope that his father would live through the attack. He sank to the ground, engulfed in grief. And in that quiet moment of lonely despair, the child became a man - a man destined to change history as he became a forceful power behind the Zulu throne.

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

John's father, Robert Newton Dunn, was born 26 February 1795 at Ware in Hertfordshire, England. He was baptised on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1795 at Old Meeting, Dead Lane-Independent, Ware. His parents were Hannibal<sup>1</sup> and Elizabeth Dunn née Plaw.

Robert was initiated as a Freemason of the United Grand Lodge of England, at Bedford Lodge on 12th January 1820. His profession is stated as: Gent.

A fierce battle on the beaches of Cape Town in January 1806, led to Britain defeating the Dutch, taking control of the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa. That control was formalised in 1814 when, under the treaty of Versailles, Britain paid six million pounds to the Dutch and the Cape became a colony of the British Empire.

Hoping to alleviate British political tensions and relieve unemployment, whilst at the same time, increase the English-speaking community and culture in the new British colony, the government instituted several schemes to encourage settlers to migrate to South Africa.

Lured by the promise of adventure and prosperity, 25 year old, Robert Newton Dunn signed up to a party of 41, led by self-financing, Lieutenant Richard Daniell of Sidbury, Devon, an officer of the Royal Navy, his brother, James, and Thomas Handfield, a farmer from Ulcombe, Kent to join the thousands seeking a new life in Britain's newest colony. On 30 March 1820, the Daniell party sailed from Portsmouth on the *Duke of Marlborough*, arriving in Table Bay, Cape Town on 18 June.

Upon arrival they were among the 3736 men, women and children allocated land in an area between the Sundays and Fish rivers known as Albany. The Daniell's farm was at Sweet Milk Fountain, Bushman's River Heights. Reminiscent their hometown, they named their new home, Sidbury Park, successfully introducing the Merino sheep to South Africa. In later years, Daniell established a village called Sidbury, where he built a church for the local community.

Unused to African climatic conditions, in a land teeming with dangerous wild animals, amid crop failures, sunstroke, severe droughts, crop and human diseases and, often completely lacking agricultural experience, the settlers fought to survive. By 1921, the number of Albany residents had drastically fallen and Government aid in the form of rice had to be supplied.

Major Jones, the Landdrost of Albany, encouraged settlers to grow potatoes which grew well and produced excellent crops, offering premiums for the greatest quantities of potatoes delivered via a long and arduous 100 miles journey to the fledgling towns of Bathurst and Port Elizabeth. Labourers were tied by contract to work for their ship's master for three to ten years for an annual salary. At the end of their tenure each family was promised a 100 acre grant of land of their own. However, realising their grant of a

100 acres was not enough farmland to make a living or graze cattle on, the settlers readily accepted the guidance of Boers – white people descended from predominantly Dutch settlers who arrived in the 17th and 18th centuries - and took to trading oxen and ivory with the native Xhosa people.

In September 1824, at Woodlands, Cape of Good Hope, Robert married Anne Harold Biggar, the daughter of British immigrant, Alexander Harvey Biggar. Anne's parents were married Brechin, Angus, Scotland on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1899. Anne was born on 18<sup>th</sup> August 1801 in Renfrewshire, Scotland. She was baptised, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1801 at Paisley Abbey in Renfrewshire.

The Biggar family had arrived at Algoa Bay (known today as Port Elizabeth), on 15th May 1820, on the *Weymouth* with 450 settlers. The disgraced Biggar, a Captain of the 85th Regiment, had been found guilty of embezzling £1300 from War Office Funds but had been discharged after repaying the money.

Robert and Anne's union was to produce: Sarah Mary (1825), Charlotte Lousia (1827), Agnes Francis (1929), Matilda Jane (1829), Herbert Alexander (1831) and at Port Alfred in 1933, John Robert.

Meanwhile Robert became a successful hunter and trader. In 1834, his brother, Hannibal, informed Saffron Walden museum in England that, at an expense of £400, Robert had been collecting South African specimens on their behalf. At first the museum were dubious however, when the specimens arrived they were all gratefully received and Robert was reimbursed to the sum of £150. Collected largely as a result of Robert's exceptional hunting prowess, the specimens included the skeleton and skin of an elephant, hippo, rhino, wildebeast, anteater and many other African animals. Many of which stayed on display in the museum until the 1950s.

Ever eager to meet new challenges, in 1836, Robert moved to the British settlement of Port Natal (known today as Durban), where Biggar was a important figure in the fledgling settler community. In 1938, a now prosperous, Robert, purchased *Sea View* from the estate of the late, James Collis. He built his family an impressive homestead

overlooking the Indian ocean where, nestled snugly in the undulating, verdant hills of British controlled Natal, the Dunn family enjoyed a privileged colonial lifestyle, eventually laying claim to five 3000 acres farms in areas known today as Bellair and Rosburgh.

As he grew up, John did not allow his father's wealth to separate him from the indigenous people of the area. He spoke Zulu fluently, his personality displaying an unique coalescence of European and Zulu cultures. Handsome, intelligent and quick-witted, his given Zulu name was *Jantoni*.

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

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

Financial disaster followed and Anne Dunn was forced to sell *Sea View* in order to pay the families debts. Anne and her daughters returned to Algoa Bay (Port Elizabeth), where she died in 1851, leaving 17 year old John, alone and penniless.

For a while John worked as a transport rider, until his unscrupulous employer duped him of his salary. Totally disillusioned by "civilized" society, John retreated to the bush, taking with him fifteen year old Catherine Pierce; the daughter of Robert Dunn's English assistant, Richard (Dick) Pierce Jr whose family had arrived from England on the *La Belle Alliance* in May 1820, and a Cape-Malay woman whose mother is believed to be Minna (aka Mary Wilmot), the seven year old survivor of the wreck of the *East Indiaman*, the *Grosvenor* in 1782. *The Grosvenor*, sailing from Madras, Ceylon to England, was carrying a cargo of fine silks, indigo and a number of wealthy passengers when it hit a "hard gale" and went aground on the shores of the Eastern Cape. The captain, William Coxon, was accused of abandoning the women and children.

In 1907 William Bazley describes how, "*after the women and children were abandoned by Capt. Cox<sup>2</sup> and his officers, one little girl, who he calls Minna, was carried*

*across the Mzimvubu River by a Lascar man".* Minna is believed to have been raised by *amaMolo*, a clan whose whose ancestors were Indian slave castaways.

In the early 1850s; still only teenagers, John and Catherine led a nomadic existence on the borders of British controlled Natal and Zululand. Living by their wits and John's skill with a rifle, the couple were soon initiated into the untamed lifestyle of renegades and transfrontiersmen. In 1853, they married.

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

Meanwhile, tension was mounting in Zululand as Mbuyasi and Cetshwayo, sons of the ruling Zulu king, Mpande, vied for the right of succession. On one occasion when the half-brothers were fighting, John took part against Cetshwayo, armed with a six-chambered revolver. Mounted on a grey horse, John and his party was outnumbered. They were pursued to the banks of the Thukela river whose fast flowing waters were impassable. Plunging into the foam, beneath a rain of assegais, John urged his horse into the rapid current. They safely reached the other side.

John's courage so impress Cetshwayo, he sent messengers to him, seeking his friendship.

In 1856, the bitter rivalry between Mbuyasi and Cetshwayo, culminated in a civil war and, in a land already copiously fertilized with the blood of a million dead warriors, John Dunn strove to bring peace to a tortured nation.

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

On 2nd December 1856, Mbuyazi's hopelessly out-numbered impi was massacred on the banks of the swollen river. Six of Mpande's sons, including Mbuyazi were killed as Cetshwayo claimed his bloody inheritance.

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

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

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

The differences that had divided John and Cetshwayo before the war, now became the catalyst for mutual respect. A strong friendship developed between the two equally ambitious and far-sighted men. Recognizing John's extraordinary talents, Cetshwayo invited him to become his secretary and diplomatic advisor, he rarely made a decision without first consulting John.

Cetshwayo granted John large tracts of land where 2,000 Zulus considered him their chief. Obtained large herds of cattle by bartering guns, John's wealth was estimated to be in excess of £40,000.

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

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

With an English father and a Scottish mother, John was a charming, handsome, athletic man who spoke with a Scottish lilt to his voice. He was an excellent rider and an accomplished marksman whose penetrating steel-grey eyes changed hue with his ever changing moods. A tawny-brown beard gave him him a leonine appearance that was tempered by his canniness and unmistakable intelligence. An excellent story teller, he'd entertain his European guests, with pipe and choicest brandy, regaling them with tales of his perilous adventures.

Rising early in the mornings, he'd sit on his verandah with his Indunas and headmen squatting in a circle before him, listening to the minutiae of their lives. Thus, not a blade of grass whispered in Dunnsland without John knowing about it, his finger was on the pulse of every breath his subjects took. Skilled in tact and native diplomacy, with a shrewd insight into Zulu psyche, John confidently strode towards becoming the second most powerful man in the Zulu political area.

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

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

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

Although of deeply Christian beliefs himself, John possessed an inherent dislike of missionaries, but in spite of this, he and Alfred Adams became friends and he offered Alfred and the Reverend Robert Robertson, who had founded the first Anglican mission in Zululand, land upon which to establish a mission station and school. John was anxious for his fifty plus, school-age children, to be educated to strict European standards, and for them to be schooled in the niceties of Victorian society.

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

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

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

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

Maximising on his success in the political and economic arenas, and taking advantage of his influence with both the British and the Zulus, John greatly enhanced the wealth and stability of Zululand. In 1874, he accepted the position of Protector of Immigrants, offered to him by the Natal Government at a salary of £300 a year plus a stipend for every man under his command. However, tensions once again intensified as Britain became more and more aggressive and Cetshwayo vowed to protect his Zulu sovereignty at all costs. John told Cetshwayo: "*The day you gather your men to wash their spears in English blood, that same day I will leave Zululand and be not a friend of*

*your nation."*

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

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

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

On 28th August 1879, after being defeated at the Battle of Ulundi, Cetshwayo was taken prisoner by Captain Lord Gifford and Major Marter, commanding a party of dragoons. Too incapacitated to walk, and refused the dignity of death, Cetshwayo was taken to the British camp by ambulance cart. From there he was transferred to the Cape Colony where he was to live in exile for the next four years.

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

On 6<sup>th</sup> December 1879, the *Glasgow Herald*, published a scathing personal attack on John Dunn referring to him as a "*man with two hearts*" and a "*mole of the British government*", for refusing to side with his adopted countrymen, spuriously claiming: "*When one of his wives offended him he did not scruple to induce Cetewayo to put her and two other people to death for her offences.*" The article condemned Sir Garnet Wolseley for actually conferring upon John Dunn the chief principality of Zululand, calling John a traitor.

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

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

Not unaware of the damaging influence of the Press, John wrote to the *Natal Mercury*. In a long, extremely articulated letter dated, 20 February 1882, John asks that the British public can know of the misstatements and misrepresentations that Bishop Colenso was making regarding his activities in Zululand. In the letter, as well as addressing other issues, John defends his decision to fight with the British, stating: "*It was only hard persuasion and not being allowed to remain neutral ... and at Lord Chelmsford's earnest entreaty, that I consented to join him after the Isandlwana disaster, knowing I could be of assistance and might be the means of saving some hundreds of lives on both sides from being sacrificed. This most assuredly would not have been the case if I had not, with my own people to act as scouts, done as I did.*"

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

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

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

On August 5th 1895, after taking little part in politics since the death of Cetshwayo, John Dunn passed peacefully away from fatty degeneration of the heart (dropsy). He was buried at Emoyeni, Zululand where his family have erected a memorial stone.

John Robert Dunn's life had been one of the most extraordinary lives of any European in Africa. During his 61 years, he married 49 wives and fathered 117 children, leaving his family a unique inheritance: an identity all of their own.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannibal died in Zululand in 1839, aged 69.

<sup>2</sup> Original spelling is maintained in all quotations.