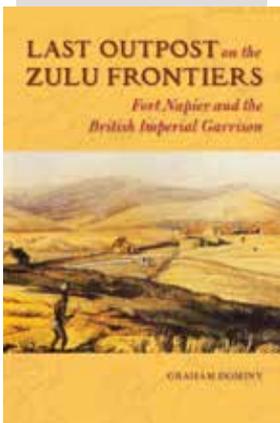


## BOOK REVIEW

Stephen Coan is an award-winning writer-director in film and theatre and former feature writer on Pietermaritzburg's daily newspaper *The Witness*, known for his articles dealing with local history, film and literature. For the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press he edited and introduced H. Rider Haggard's previously unpublished *Diary of An African Journey* and, with Alfred Tella, *Mameena and other plays* – The dramatic works of H. Rider Haggard. He currently lives and works in Johannesburg.

# *Last Outpost on the Zulu Frontiers – Fort Napier and the Imperial Garrison* by Graham Dominy

*If you want to disentangle one of the DNA strands of gender bias in South Africa's political and social structures, together with the homo-social nature of many of its sporting and educational institutions, you couldn't find a better place to start than Graham Dominy's ground-breaking study of the British army's "occupation" of Pietermaritzburg, *The Last Outpost on the Zulu Frontiers – Fort Napier and the Imperial Garrison*.*



**LAST OUTPOST ON THE ZULU FRONTIERS – FORT NAPIER AND THE IMPERIAL GARRISON**  
by Graham Dominy  
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The Victorian red-brick buildings of Fort Napier rest upon the heights to the west of Pietermaritzburg, the provincial capital of KwaZulu-Natal. Below flows the Mzunduzi River, on the other bank of its sluggish waters stand the Victorian red-brick buildings of Maritzburg College, a leading boy's public school founded in 1863. The college crest sported on blazer breast pockets depicts a carbine crossed over an assegai above a Latin scroll bearing the words *Pro Aris et Focis* (For Hearth and Home). Though still a matter of debate the school colours of red, black, and white are thought to represent settlers and Zulus and the blood they shed.

Fort Napier casts a long shadow over Pietermaritzburg and beyond, and the impact of its garrison on nineteenth century society lies at the heart of Dominy's masterful one-of-a-kind book.

The British military arrived on 31 August 1843 planting the Union Jack on the aforementioned heights, pitching camp on what would become Fort Napier named after Cape Colony governor of the day, Sir George Napier. Their arrival signalled the end of the short-lived Trekker republic of Natalia and constituted the first step towards Natal becoming a colony of the British Empire.

The British army occupied Fort Napier for 71 years, finally leaving in 1914 at the outbreak of World War One. During this stretch of time the garrison exercised a powerful influence on the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the colony; even regulating the working hours of Pietermaritzburg with a time-gun fired from Fort Napier. Durban had to make do with church bells.

Though no shot was ever fired in anger from the walls of Fort Napier imperial troops marched off through its gates to take part in the Anglo-Zulu War (1879), the First

Anglo-Boer War (1880-1881) and in 1896 the campaigns against the Mashona and Ndebele in what became Rhodesia and subsequently Zimbabwe. Their longest military involvement was during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902); their final foray, to Johannesburg in 1913 to assist in suppressing the Rand miners' strike.

The garrison, though never large in terms of numbers, was a potent symbol of British imperial might projected, in the main, at the Zulus the Boers. A brick-built warning that if stirred from sleep the British lion was ready to respond with a deadly paw-flick.

*It is uncertain whether the incident in 1887 involving the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in which two soldiers died at the hands of fellow soldiers was a drunken brawl or a genuine mutiny.*

Active campaigning (and the odd punitive expedition) accounted for only four of the 71 years of military occupation at Fort Napier and it is the peacetime day-to-day interaction between garrison and city that is Dominy's prime interest: an intimate relationship which saw the presence of the garrison underpin and entrench the imperial idea in all sectors of the local population while permeating all their activities.

The presence of the garrison, particularly the officer class, bestowed a level of respectability on Pietermaritzburg but, as Dominy points out, a largely inactive soldiery "with its problems of boredom, indiscipline, lust and drunkenness, added to social tensions through involvement in crime, random violence, and the encouragement of prostitution."

Prostitution made simple economic sense: prostitutes, unlike wives and children, did not require the provision of food, education, transport and lodgings and consequently did not represent a drain on the military budget. "Victorian morality demanded that prostitution be condemned, while military efficiency demanded that it be allowed and controlled." Omit "Victorian" and the double standard still applies.

Notions of morality aside it was alcohol that presented the biggest problem faced by the Victorian army. "Drunkenness was almost all-pervasive at Fort Napier throughout its existence as a garrison centre" writes Dominy. Pietermaritzburg was full of public houses and taverns while military canteens within Fort Napier also served alcohol.

It is uncertain whether the incident in 1887 involving the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in which two soldiers died at the hands of fellow soldiers was a drunken brawl or a genuine mutiny. Fuelled by a heady mix of Irish politics and religious sectarianism, plus incompetent officers, alcohol likely provided the match. No mention of the "mutiny" appears in the regiment's official history. So all credit to Dominy for unpacking as much detail as possible regarding the matter.

If, as Dominy says, "Victorian British society was attempting to replicate itself on African soil" the garrison undoubtedly provided a handy reference point, embedded as it was in the city's social life along with dance balls, amateur theatricals, sporting events, and the ubiquitous brass band. Dominy rightly sees the military's involvement as crucial "in the development of the political and cultural consciousness of settler society, which lasted long beyond the formal collapse of the colony into the Union of South Africa in 1910".

But the British society replicated in Natal did not boast an upper-class of titled landed gentry. The colonial elite were mainly occupied in trade. This was Victorian

England-lite, populated by a Victorian “middling” class. Matters became more respectable with the diamond discoveries at Kimberley in the late 1860s: prospecting and transport riding promised wealth thus becoming “acceptable activities for gentlemen”.

That first planting of a British flag above Pietermaritzburg in 1843 had changed everything. Though the flag represented formal annexation to the Crown the exact status and form of government remained uncertain until the 1890s. However the Union Jack and the presence of the military had effectively settled the matter. “While bureaucrats and ministers dithered, soldiers built. The fort grew along with the city, and a colony became a fait accompli.”

The army also provided the fledgling colony with its main source of technical and administrative skills. The M13’s 45th Cutting on the Comrades Marathon route near Durban bears witness to its construction by the 45th Regiment, incidentally at 16 years the longest serving regiment at Fort Napier, and from which many soldiers, service over, remained in the colony.

According to Dominy so vital was the garrison to the colony’s continued existence had it been withdrawn during its first twenty years Natal would have collapsed, “not simply because of lack of security but because it wouldn’t have had the personnel to function as a rudimentary government.”

*White Natalians felt adrift in a largely Afrikaner-dominated South Africa while Pietermaritzburg suffered a loss in political status and economic influence.*

The army also ensured economic stability, serving as “the cornerstone of the local colonial economy, as it provided an assured market for produce, transport, and services at a time when the settlers were carving out their economic niches within the hunting and trading economies of the Boers and Africans.”

These economic benefits saw the city fathers resistant to the idea of the garrison ever leaving. In 1897 local officials calculated that the garrison consisted of over 5000 men, women, and children and that “to lose so large a population would be a social and economic disaster for the city”.

The granting of responsible government to Natal in 1893 set the clock ticking for the continued presence of the imperial garrison. Colonial autonomy was directly dependent on the colonists being able to defend themselves against internal threats, i.e. the Zulus. This they did with appallingly ruthless efficiency in the 1906 Bambatha Rebellion, drawing strong criticism from the British government including under-Secretary for the Colonies, Winston Churchill.

With the coming of Union in 1910 Natal lost its status as a separate colony within the British Empire. White Natalians felt adrift in a largely Afrikaner-dominated South Africa while Pietermaritzburg suffered a loss in political status and economic influence. For a while the garrison remained and the band played on as the imperial past segued into a new dispensation.

The end came suddenly in 1914. The last regiment, of nearly 50 that had been stationed at Fort Napier, was the South Staffordshire. The girls of nearby Wykeham School waved them goodbye as they left in August. Before the end of the year, Dominy records, “almost all the officers and the majority of the men who had marched out of Fort Napier had been killed in action.”

Following the departure of the troops the fort was used as an internment camp for German nationals living in South Africa during World War One. After the war returning ex-soldiers and their families found temporary accommodation there but in 1925 they had to leave as the buildings of the fort were to house a psychiatric hospital, which it remains today.

Down in the centre of Pietermaritzburg the old time-gun stands silent at the foot of the Anglo-Zulu War memorial. It is a loud silence emblematic of the oppression and dispossession that the Fort Napier garrison effectively wrought on the indigenous population; emblematic also of the military and imperial ethos that same army bequeathed to South Africa. Dominy deserves a salute for giving voice to that silence.

And that Maritzburg College crest? Over a hundred years after the garrison's departure hasn't the time come to stand those weapons down?