

The Story of the South African Flemmers

The economy of Europe was in a bad way in the middle of the 19th century, and many families gave up the comforts of all they knew for the chance of a better life. This book is about the Danish children of Christian August Flemmer and his wife Betty, and of their descendants – the South African Flemmers as I call them. In 1852 the family travelled from their home in Korsør via Copenhagen and London to Cradock in the Cape Colony where they arrived in 1853. The period the book covers is one of the most eventful in the long turbulent history of South Africa.

We start in the cold of a Danish September in 1852, when the Flemmers left their cosy home in Korsør and began the long, long trip to the Cape Colony. The family at that time was as follows –

Dr. Christian August Flemmer aged 40 and his wife Betty Camilla Augusta (born Abo), aged 37 with their seven children-

Christian Ludvig	13	Kirstine Cathinca	6
Camilla Henriette	12	Hans Christian	4
Toger Abo August	10	Andreas Salvator	2
Charlotte Marie Louise	8		

Although there was at least one servant with them, we can imagine the organizing and stresses and strains that went into packing up the house. Supplies had to be bought; the children organized and kept an eye on. As ever the biggest burden fell on the mother of the family, Betty, who was about four months pregnant with her eighth child.

Betty's brother, the children's' Uncle Töger von Abo, had filled them with stories of adventures in the Dark Continent. He had been in Cradock for years and had come back to Denmark for a brief trip and to assist the Flemmers with this huge step into the unknown. He had a successful business in Cradock, buying wild animals for export to Europe among other things. The young Flemmers were beside themselves with excitement at the thought of their uncle's cages full of wild animals and the stories of war and of the Black tribes he had visited on his travels.

Töger was in the party traveling to the Cape and was an invaluable source of support and advice. He had married Methea Kjeldberg a few months earlier. She may not have thought an ideal honeymoon was to be confined on a small ship with seven Flemmer children for the arduous trip to the Cape! The von Abos also took a servant woman and some workmen with them, as Töger was well aware that it was difficult to find good servants in Cradock.

Another family member traveling with the group was Hans Michael Naested aged 26, who was a half cousin to the Flemmer children. He had qualified as a chemist in 1848 and was said to be one of only three chemists permitted to practice in Copenhagen. He had also been persuaded by his cousin Töger to settle in the Cape Colony



The Flemmer party first traveled from their home in Korsør to Copenhagen. The children were caught up in the excitement of the big city and adventures to come while their parents were saying their farewells to friends and family. It was a wrenching business to leave on a voyage like this with little prospect of ever seeing loved ones again, but there was some comfort in traveling with so many relatives on the long voyage ahead of them.

Copenhagen from the painting of the same name by Heinrich Hansen (1821-1890)

They sailed from Copenhagen to London, then the centre of the British Empire and considered to be the epitome of civilisation. By the standards of the times it was an enormous bustling, noisy city. We are very fortunate to find an account of part of the family's stay in London in Eliza Butler's *Reminiscences of Cradock*, which has many references to the Flemmers including this piece about one of their servants:

' While staying in London before sailing one of these girls lost her way and was found by a policeman crying. She did not know where her mistress was staying only that it was in some square. Her troubles were at an end when she saw the children at one of the windows of a house in America Square.'

Imagine being lost in a strange city, not knowing your address, not being able to speak English, and the relief at finding your way 'home'! As we can see the family was staying in America Square very close to the Tower of London and at that time near the bustling London Docks. Probably not a very good area to get lost! The account continues-

'One of the children had a birthday while in London- so they were allowed to go and buy chocolate at a Chemist shop. It was their custom to have cakes and chocolates as these birthdays came around. The children not speaking English – the shopkeeper thought they were asking for poison sugar of lead as in their language sugar-lather is their word for chocolate.'

'Sugar of lead' is indeed a poison used in the dyeing trade – not something a chemist would hand over to children! It is easy to see how this misunderstanding came about as the Danish word *chokolade* is pronounced a lot like 'sugar-lather'. The two boys, Christian Ludvig and Töger Abo August had birthdays around this time but we have no way of knowing whose birthday was being celebrated. Eliza Butler, who was English, obviously thought it unusual that the children were allowed to have cakes and chocolates - *'It was their custom...'* Presumably English children were not so indulged!

Sailing day came at last and with it the excitement of boarding the 248-ton sailing bark Corsairs Bride, finding their cabins, unpacking and settling in for the long trip to Algoa Bay. They left the Thames on the high tide and set sail for the Bay of Biscay and the route south. Being November we can say with certainty that it would have been very cold, and the sea rough for the first few weeks before picking up the warmth of the tropics.

The voyage to Algoa Bay on the Corsairs Bride took two and half months. We have no family story of the trip but do have a contemporary account from the book *Letters from the Cape*, a collection of the letters of Lady Duff Gordon, who sailed in 1861. She was clearly a spirited woman and this gives a wonderful idea of what the Flemmers endured-

'It soon came on to blow and all night was squally and rough. Captain on deck all night. Monday I was on deck at 8. Lovely but ship was pitching as you never saw a ship pitch; bowsprit under water. Most of the passengers sick. I very hungry. Sally (her companion) sick, but full of pluck. By 2 o'clock a gale came on; all ordered below. Captain left dinner, and at about 6 a sea struck us on the weather side, and washed a good many unconsidered trifles overboard, stove in three windows on the Poop; nurse and four children in fits.

Mrs. Taylor and babies afloat, but good-humoured as usual. Army surgeon and I picked up the children and bullied the nurse and helped to bale. Cuddy window stove in, and we were well wetted. Went to bed at 9 and couldn't undress it pitched so, and had to call the doctor to help me to my cot. My cabin is water tight as to big splashes, but damp and dribbling. I am almost ashamed to like

such miseries so much. The forecastle is under water with every lurch, and the motion quite incredible.

*Life is thus: Avery, my cuddy boy, brings tea for Sally and milk for me at 6. Sally turns out; when she is dressed I turn out, and ring for Avery, who takes down my cot, and brings a bucket of salt water, in which I wash with infinite danger and difficulty: get dressed and go on deck at 8. Breakfast solidly at 9, meat, curry etc. Deck again; gossip, pretend to read; beer and biscuits at 12. Dinner at 4. The food on board here is good as to meat, bread and beer, everything else bad. Port and sherry of British manufacture, and the water with an incredible **boracic** essence of tar, so that tea and coffee are but derisive names.*

The children swarm on board and cry unceasingly, they are a horrid nuisance. Today the air is saturated with wet. I put on my clothes damp when I dressed and have felt so ever since. You would be dead by this time of the noise, which is beyond all belief; the creaking, trampling, shouting and clattering; it is an incessant storm.'

Obviously not a trip for the faint-hearted. You will notice that there is no fresh water for washing for the 75 day trip, and the breakfast of '*meat, curry etc.*' could take some getting used to. The difficulties for Betty in these conditions, pregnant and the mother of a brood of seven children are hard to imagine. I suppose there was some comfort in that fact that unusually for the time the Flemmer children had been taught to swim in Korsør. The methods were effective if a little unconventional:

'They did so many strange things in those days, but I think that Dr Flemmer's way of teaching his children to swim was the strangest of all. He would take them out in a boat and when well out, would tie a rope around the child's waist and let it over the side. That is how he taught all his children to swim, and he used to be very much amused when he overheard the fisher folk say, "There goes Dr Flemmer to drown his children " . '

Of course storms did not last all the way to the Cape, and there were many days when all were on deck, with a following wind, enjoying the warm tropical sunshine. The Flemmer party sailed into Algoa Bay on 1st February 1853, their arrival recorded in the Cape Town Mail a week later-

Feb 1- Corsairs Bride bk. 248 tons. W. Crawley from London Nov. 22 this port. Cargo general-Passengers Mr. & Mrs. Von Abo and servant; Dr. & Mrs. Palmer (sic) & seven children and servant; Messers. Holmes and Nastch and 6 in steerage.

The report having mangled Dr. Flemmer's name, I am fairly sure that "Mr. Nastch" is in fact Hans Michael Naested. White servants were a rarity at the time and Töger had persuaded the Flemmers of the wisdom of bringing their own servant with them. The alternative would have been to employ a Khoi or Fingo who were by then living in a 'squatter camp' on the edge of Cradock. The plan for

using Danish servants did not work out in any event as the Eliza Butler interview with Camilla Flemmer shows –

'Her mother brought two women servants; but the plan did not answer, for although one was particularly ugly yet both were very soon married.'

One wonders if she was selected because of her physical appearance as some sort of guarantee against marriage! I suppose with the shortage of women at the time the result was inevitable despite these precautions.

Coming ashore at Algoa Bay or 'Elizabeth Town' as it was then called was a huge adventure as a contemporary account makes clear-

'...the boat anchored in the open roadstead and boats came out at once to take passengers through the surf. There was excitement when the boat reached the breakers. Urged on by the helmsman the boatmen pulled tremendously; then, at a signal, shipped the oars instantaneously, and on we swept, carried a great distance by a wave. This was repeated, the men showing wonderful dexterity, till the last wave which brought us almost ashore, when, with a simultaneous yell, in rushed a host of black children and boys, clothed and unclothed. The boat was surrounded by a crowd of young natives jabbering and snatching at our things, till I thought we would never keep them.'

Again from the Reminiscences of Cradock we are lucky to have description of Dr. Flemmer as told by his daughter Charlotte –

'On arriving at Port Elizabeth, they were carried from the boat to the shore by Kaffir boys, and she remembers seeing her father, a stout man, with his legs across the shoulders of a small Kaffir. Tents were pitched and here they lived for a while. One night they were alarmed by hearing footsteps, and the next morning they found a Kaffir thief had been and stolen a cheese.'

It must have been such a relief to be on firm and dry land again, and so much to see, so many new sights and sounds-

'..... they found a most animated scene with Kaffirs, resplendent in greatcoats, Hottentots with their gaudily feathered hats, and "gentleman-colonists" riding their horses through the soft sand. Ivory, skins, horns and curios brought down from the interior crowded the open market.'

Betty's brother Töger was a big help to the family as he had lived in the Colony for about 16 years by then. He arranged the hiring of ox wagons, their packing and the buying of supplies to see them through the three-week trek to Cradock. On landing they were met by Betty's father Christian Johannes von Abo, then aged about 65 and the father of 10 von Abo half brothers and sisters from his second marriage in the Cape. At last a reunion with his 37 year old daughter,

whom he had not seen her since he left her as a six-month old baby in Denmark, and a meeting with his seven grandchildren.

Betty as the matriarch played a major part in getting the family safely to Cradock, never mind she was in a strange, dry, hot country and seven months pregnant. Fifty years later her daughter Charlotte remembered some of the difficulties of the trek very well –

'On their long journey up from the Bay to Cradock in the ox wagon it is remembered still the cooking difficulties. They were a very large company who were coming up to settle in these parts for they brought out servants, carpenters and other workmen. Her Mother often had the inconvenience of finding the oxen were to be inspanned before the soup was ready; and the baking of the bread in the three legged pots were all new experiences.'

This fragment can only give a hint of how hard the trip was for Betty. Used to having three servants in her own kitchen in Korsør, it was so difficult to learn the trek skills. Cooking over open fires, the timing of inspanning and moving on, and all the while surrounded by a hungry brood of seven children plus all the other members of the party of about 20 people.

Late in February 1853, more than five months after leaving their home in Korsør, the Flemmer party crossed the drift near Cradock to the sound of whips cracking, the shouts of the *voorlopers* and the ox wagons creaking and groaning. They had asked Töger endless questions about Cradock, but from their wagons they were pleasantly surprised to see the village

I will take some time now to try to give a picture of the sort of place and life they had come to. With all of our modern conveniences it is hard to imagine how difficult things were. By modern standards life was very tough indeed. It was only made bearable by strong family bonds and an unshakeable belief in God and one's church and community.



An early photo of Cradock taken from the upper corner of the Town Square. It shows the present Victoria hotel.

Cradock had a population of about 1 500 whites at that time and a contemporary account describes it as follows

' a pretty little village on the Eastern bank of the Great Fish River, by which it is supplied with water and the gardens irrigated; it is inhabited by Dutch and English, and a good sprinkling of Hottentots, Mozambiques and Fingoes. The principal street is wide, and adorned with shady trees on every side. The houses are large and well built, generally of brick, some in the Dutch and some in the old English style, and each has a comfortable garden attached to it. These are tastefully laid out and contain all the vegetables used in an English kitchen, Apples, pears, quinces and grapes abound. The view is bounded on every side by barren, arid, rocky hills and mountains.'

Water was fed from a canal that led off the Fish River, so that each house had a *sluit* that provided all water whether for drinking, washing or watering the garden

'I could not agree with one old man who had seen his three score years and ten, when he said he preferred the furrow water they used to drink to our town water.

I asked him "Was it so muddy then" Oh Yes! "And was it always running?" he replied "Yes! We had it certain hours every day and each took what they wanted. We had large brandy barrels & filled & sometimes we would throw in a handful of lime or alum on top and very quickly the water was clear. We used the clear and cleaned out the barrel for another day.'"

As a town Cradock was one of the main centres of wool farming and commerce in the Eastern Cape. There were at least thirty general stores stocking groceries, medicines, clothing, buttons, candles and even catapults and bulls–eyes! With our modern hustle and bustle it is hard to picture how quiet it must have been at night compared to the bigger towns. The streets were only lit by the candles in people's homes and for special celebrations tar barrels were set alight in the streets.

Töger von Abo had built a house for the Flemmer family facing on to Market Square, on the site of the Annex of the present Victoria Hotel. The Square was the centre of the town and its activities, with all wagons and coaches arriving here and farmers bringing their produce for sale.



Oxwagons on Market Square. The Victoria hotel can be seen in the background, left.

Edward Gilfillan gives a rather unflattering picture in *Reminiscences of Cradock*

'We think the dust in our streets a nuisance today; but all tell me, the dust in by-gone days was infinitely more terrible. The Market square was very different to what it is now, without exaggeration one sank ankle deep in the sand, it was really a wading not walking and the streets were in the same plight. There was no Park to shelter the town as it does, for where the Park stands was only a waste sandy soil.

The Municipality did not commence carting away the dust until about 1880. Each householder sent his servant to throw out the waste just outside the town, and all around the town and on the river bank were rubbish heaps.'

Despite this the square was 'well filled with negotie winkels, where a considerable variety of goods could be bought or hired, including even wedding apparel for a rental over the weekend of no more than 3 rix-dollars (4/6d). The Town House, a small building of unplastered brick, with an old beam-balance facing the square, had been barricaded during the Kaffir troubles with lofty wall and loopoled against native assault.'

As a matter of interest costs of this fortification had been guaranteed by Töger von Abo at the outbreak of the 8th Border War in 1850. On an old map was a building facing on to the northern side of the square marked 'von Abo's lions'. It was here that he had cages to keep the wild animals that he bought and sent to zoos in Europe. How exciting this all must have been for the Flemmer children!

The houses themselves were of simple design and mainly built of brick which was often of dubious quality. The roof could be of thatch but more usually it would be corrugated iron, blazing hot in summer and cold in winter. There was very little timber in the area and only the very wealthy would have wooden floors in their homes. Taking a tip from local tribes, most houses had floors made of a mixture of cow dung and mud. A bit different from their home in Korsør! Many a newly arrived wife complained that if water was spilt the floor turned to mud. The floors were difficult to keep clean and had to be smeared with a fresh mixture of mud and dung every two weeks.



Austen's Chemist, typical of early shops

Local schools were also a novelty for the Danish children. They had benefited from the excellent schooling and a social system that saw little difference between boys and girls. The Danish education system was recognized as superior to the one in place in England, where the majority of girls were not formally educated at all. An English writer visiting Denmark at the time commented favourably *'the equality that exists between what used to be called the weaker and the stronger sex has to a great extent sprung from education, which has been brought to the same degree of perfection for both.'* In their new home the whole family would have had to 'fit in' to a school and social system was quite different and was essentially English.

Being so small and new, Cradock had only one government school in 1853 catering for both boys and girls, although the Anglican Minister, Rev. Samuel

Gray, ran a small private school for about 15 boys. The Flemmers who were Lutheran, joined the Anglican Church in Cradock, and the Rev. Gray may well have educated the Flemmer boys for the few years he was in Cradock. There are some stories about schools and the teachers of the time in Reminiscences of Cradock. It seems to me that life was about getting on with it. There was no time for trauma counselling! Spare the rod and spoil the child led to far fewer social problems than we face at the start of the 21st Century:

'Mr Walker the eccentric schoolmaster is still remembered by others. His salary was £140 a year and house free. He was the only teacher this school had from 1844 to 1856. The hours were nine 'till 12 o'clock, and two 'till four o'clock. Seldom any holiday because one remarked, "he is too fond of us." With Solomon he believed in the rod; and did not spare the rod to spoil the child. His punishment was severe, almost cruel. One boy was so severely chastised, that he bolted out of the window after, and ran home. The father and mother came back to the schoolmaster with their son with his shirt pulled up over his head to show the result of the whipping. There was a terrible scene in that schoolroom. The room was not large and a low roof and small windows and about 100 boys and girls.'

At one stage a Mr. Jeffrey opened a school which didn't last long for obvious reasons-

'Mr. Jeffrey then started a Private School and many of the Scholars were removed from the Government School. But Mr. Jeffrey was not so popular. His punishment for boys and girls was a dose of Epsom Salts as well as the flogging. Our informant as a boy was made to kneel in prayer on the platform before the whole school, and ask God's forgiveness, for making marks on a book, which crime he had never committed, so he knew God would not hear his prayer

When punished for some other offence, he had to receive 19 cuts, and the lad counted the strokes as they were administered. He could not help laughing at the end of the dose. On being questioned why he laughed he confessed he had only received 18 cuts instead of 19, at which Mr. Jeffreys laughed himself and asked "if he wished for the other?"'

It was not until the 1870's, long after the first Flemmer children left school that public subscriptions were taken up and better schooling brought to Cradock.

The Flemmers, von Abos and Naesteds were all prominent people and were very much part of the little town's social life, as we have seen in Part 1 of this History. Dr. Flemmer was a well respected GP who worked selflessly for his patients. As I mentioned in Part 1 he made a medicine for babies that he said 'was as necessary for baby as the Lord's Prayer was to grown up people'. This remedy we were told had been handed down from generation to generation and used with great success. In 2005 I was very pleased to find a copy of this elixir as the recipe seemed to have disappeared for about 100 years. I quote it in full:

DR CHRISTIAN AUGUST
FLEMMER'S "*KINDER POEIER*"

1 OZ EACH OF

LOAF SUGAR

RHUBARB

MAGNESIA

ADD FOUR DROPS OF FOENICULI [OIL OF FENNEL]

*1/4 OF THESE QUANTITIES IS ENOUGH [PER DOSE]
FOR YOUNG BABY USE AS MUCH AS WILL GO ON 3D PIECE*

I researched these ingredients and found them all to be regarded as beneficial for stomach ache and colic.

Apart from his medical duties the Flemmers were involved in local horse racing. Dr. Flemmer owned at least one racehorse in 1858, Princess Royal, which won the Hack race that year. The racing season was a time of social whirl in the town. Although there was eventually a racecourse, early accounts report races being held down the main street, which must have added to the excitement. Lucy Gray in her book, *A Victorian Lady at the Cape* gives a good, if typically English upper class view of the period –

'We have been very gay here with the races,' she wrote in May-'the horses are so unlike English racers that we despise them, but some looked fine' The races were an occasion for much display of finery-' The style of dress here among the men has been a very pretty jacket, often quite a sailor's dark blue jacket and white trousers: some wear monkey jackets, few coats. The ladies are great pinchers and great bustlers: some of them can scarcely get through a sort of passage into the seats at church'.

Over the period covered by this History the Flemmer family changed as much as the country did. Family names familiar to many of us, Distin, Gilfillan, Hopley, Impey, Neylan, Philips, Rous and many others joined the family by marriage and became a part of it. There were inevitably births and deaths too. In some years several children were born; what celebrations there must have been. It seems to me that by and large the families of the 'settler' generation were much closer than is the case today. It was only in later generations that the inevitable distance grew.



Cradock in about 1885, had expanded since the 1853 arriva of the Flemmers.

And so to Dr. Christian August and his wife Betty's nine children. Seven children arrived from Denmark in 1853. Two more were born in Cradock. Six of these 'settler' Flemmers married

Christian Ludvig married 1869 Anna Distin	9 children
Camilla Henriette married 1860 Hans Michael Naested	8 children
Toger Abo August married 1873 Rosa Caroline Philps	10 children
Charlotte Marie Louise married 1864 Edward Gilfillan	6 children
Kirstine Cathinca died young	
Hans Christian married 1873 Aletta Alida Hopley	13 children
Andreas Salvator did not marry	
Marius married 1899 Aletta Alida Hopley	no children
Sophie Wilhelmine died aged 6	

The five children who married had at least 46 children between them. Many of these children did not reach adulthood, but those that did marry had **at least** 75 children.

The Danish seedling had grown to a mighty tree! This History is the story of that tree.