The old waggon road from Grahamstown to Port Elizabeth

8

Wesleyville

Ann and William's main purpose in leaving England, their long-held desire to take 'the Great Word' to the AmaXhosa, proved a quandary for British and AmaXhosa alike.[1] After petitioning Governor Somerset for over a year with 'earnest letters', William was finally tasked to first ask permission from the Xhosa Chief Ngqika who, unwisely, was recognised by British Government as king over separate border groups.[2] With Ngqika's permission, only then would William be allowed to

1. Indigenous term for Bible.
2. Shaw, *My Mission*, p. 72.

approach Chief Phatho, under whose protection the Shaws desired to live. It is hard to know whether Somerset intended these permissions to be a timewaster. If so, he underestimated the Shaws. 'Alas,' Ann wrote to Bessy, while petitioning Somerset, 'many [Africans] are perishing for lack of knowledge and we ought not to count our lives dear to us if we can be made in the smallest degree useful'.[3]

For a white man to travel to Ngqika and Phatho's kraals was a high-risk enterprise. Robert West, a young man who accompanied William during his furlough in Leeds, recalled William's stories of Government warnings at that time. Particularly 'their inability to protect him beyond a certain line, further than which they neither exercised nor claimed jurisdiction' and 'it would be madness, amounting to criminal disregard of life, for any person to go alone, even ten miles beyond the border; much more so to attempt to penetrate into the interior, as he proposed, unarmed'.[4]

Furthermore, William placed Ann at the centre of these sermons, perhaps astonishing Yorkshire Wesleyans who strained to hear his words. 'Mrs. Shaw had scarcely less of the missionary spirit than her noble husband,' West wrote. She 'seconded [William's] resolves, and declared herself ready to endure any toil or hardship, and brave any danger, to which, in Mr. Shaw's absence, she might be exposed.' West waxed on. 'The [frontier] line was reached, the eventful crisis was upon them, the attendants and Mrs. Shaw prepared to take their leave', whereupon Mr Shaw 'turned to bid adieu to his devoted wife' who 'bade him go into the far country, into the wilderness, as God had commanded, and take with him her heart'.[5] In West's climax, Ann, 'if possible [the] nobler-hearted wife', returned to Grahamstown while William 'single-handed' (with Kay and Threlfall and Tzatzoe), 'without carnal weapons' (with fowling piece and musket), 'boldly entered the enemy's country' (Ngqika was technically an ally).[6] Regardless of violins, what struck William's 1830s audience was a female protagonist.

3. Ann Shaw letter to Bessy Morley, 1821.
4. West, *Sketches*, p. 381.
5. Ibid., p. 383.
6. Jan Tzatzoe (Dyani Tshatshu), Chief of the amaNtinde, was an early LMS convert and evangelist, interpreter, and preacher.

In August 1822, William and fellow missionaries Kay, Threlfall, and Tzatzoe (who also interpreted), pulled on sheepskin trousers and jackets as armour against the prickly bushes through which they skirted. The thorns 'like so many unbarbed fish-hooks' shredded skin and left wounds open to infection.[7] '*Vokam Betche*' (sic) or wait-a-little, was their Dutch name – extricate with care.[8]

The men pulled back long hair and wedged on straw hats, their beards protecting chins. Longcoats and sheepskins, ridiculous items in daytime, were secured for bedding on spare horses when hot air dissipated into a punctured night of stars. They were alert to sources of water. Even an elephant-churned puddle was blessed relief. Both missionaries and horses drank, swilling saliva of beasts, and savouring murky drops recently trickled from dangling undersides, though the men boiled theirs.

Four days later, Ngqika watched these young missionaries approach. Ngqika adjusted his panther cloak and leant back on the breast of one of his councillors. It was an intimate stance that said 'these men have my back, you devils'. Only after making them wait a sufficiently annoying time did Ngqika ask the expected questions as to their purpose and news. William was quick and direct. First, he requested permission to approach 'Congo' to base a mission by the sea.[9] Then he told Ngqika of the colony, verified the death of Xhosa prophet Makhanda (Christmas Day 1820), and described how the happy kings of Europe embraced Christianity. 'Yes,' Ngqika responded, 'when men receive the word of God and become Christians, I know it will make them happy and wars will cease.[10] But I am afraid that will never be the case with our people, for they are too slim' (cunning).[11]

Then Ngqika asked for gifts. From the missionaries' haversacks, they handed Ngqika bunches of beads, copper for rings, a pocket knife,

7. James Holman, *Voyage around the World,* Vol. 2 (Smith, Elder & Co., 1834), p. 271.
8. *Welkom beetje*, welcome (a) bit.
9. 'Congo' was family name of Chiefs Phatho, Kobe, and Kama, sons of Chief Chungwa.
10. Ngqika accepted the great hymn-writer, Ntsikana, as his Christian prophet. Ntsikana may have familiarised Ngqika with Psalm 46:9 which Ngqika quoted.
11. Stephen Kay, *Travels and Researches in [South Africa]* (London: John Mason, 1834), p. 44.

and a tinder box. Ngqika asked for a handkerchief and William gave him his.[12] One of Ngqika's wives also slipped Threlfall's handkerchief from his pocket. After this awkward transaction, William bought boiled corn from one of Ngqika's concubines and produced a packet of sugar to shake on it. But Ngqika asked for the sugar and swallowed it. Yet no gift was sweetener enough.

Ngqika was understandably hesitant to condone William settling on their lands, especially within five years of war with the British. But neither did Ngqika want to offend William or the power, spiritual and military, he represented, especially as the British had magnified Ngqika's importance. Come back tomorrow, he said, I need to discuss this with my advisers, then made preparations to move immediately.

It was women who changed the course of this story. Ngqika's twelve wives were a jury in agreement. Ngqika was not going anywhere. He must return to these men of beads and silk, and apologise, giving them full permission to visit the coastal chiefs. With Ngqika as with William, wives had the final word.

It was another year before William and his companions were allowed by the Government to visit Phatho's place.[13] When they arrived, like Ngqika, Phatho and his brothers wanted more time. In the meantime, visitors were given 'the stranger's hut, always the worst on the place'.[14] Just as they were leaning on their saddles for pillows, William recorded a stream of Xhosa 'rushed into the hut (and) crammed the remaining space quite full. Each man at once produced his pipe, begged some tobacco . . . and began to smoke away with such terrific energy'. The Xhosa began a 'brisk fire of questions' but 'smoke from the fire, increased by the incessant puffs from the smokers, [and] the want of fresh air . . . proved too much' for the missionaries who were 'obliged to scramble through' the mass of flesh and smoke, gasping for air.[15] This comic scene was no accident. Two years later, visiting Chief Vusani, William's interpreters revealed to him they smoked 'to protect them from any bewitching influence which' William's party 'might be disposed to exercise over them!'[16]

12. Shaw, *My Mission*, p. 79.
13. William Shepstone replaced Threlfall.
14. Shaw, *My Mission*, p. 87.
15. Ibid., pp. 87–88.
16. Ibid., p. 251.

Perhaps it was a surprise to the Governor that Phatho finally gave consent to the Shaws to live among them. Even so, Phatho and other chiefs' remained suspicious. Phatho's brother, Kama, confirmed their 'tribe had no friendship with the white man'. 'When Mr Shaw went among them,' Kama said, 'they showed him where to build his place – remote from their kraals, for they said, this word of God will bring sickness among us. Mr Shaw, however, refused to go so far away from them, and they at last consented for him to live near their kraals.'[17] In addition to fears of bewitchment linked with sickness, rumours circulated 'the ultimate design of the missionaries' was to seize Africans 'and make soldiers of them in the same manner as . . . the Dutch Boers', an accusation the Shaws strove to undo.[18]

When the Shaws were eventually packed and journeying on their way to Phatho's place, William wrote 'we were detained at Grahamstown by imperative family circumstances'.[19] This was his euphemism for Ann's labour. It was just as well they were delayed, as there followed a devastating twelve-day storm that flooded rivers for several weeks, swept away houses and bodies, and made their way temporarily impassable. Will and Elizabeth 'Annie' Shepstone accompanied the Shaws as assistants, together with their three children, two Khoi drivers and their families, and one interpreter, Youtize Noqwa, with his wife.[20] Will Shepstone had been trained by William as a local preacher but was also an able builder and mechanic – a comfort for Ann.[21]

While they waited for Ann to recover, the men bought two waggons with 24 oxen, then loaded these with horse gear, saddlery, cooking utensils, camp stools, tables, meal, and groceries. Ann discovered later the men had been a little too distracted by wheels and leather and vastly under-estimated food.

17. William Taylor, *Christian Adventures in South Africa* (1867; New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1877), p. 113.
18. Hildegarde Fast, *The Journal and Selected Letters of Rev. William J. Shrewsbury, 1826–1835* (Johannesburg; Witwatersrand University Press, 1996), p. 34. Used with kind permission.
19. Shaw, *My Mission*, p. 93.
20. Young, *Triumphs of Grace*, p. 86.
21. Taylor, *Christian Adventures*, p. 108.

On 13 November, Ann climbed into an overcrowded waggon for the three-week journey, holding the most fragile offering to be brought under protection of a people considered 'the most audacious' in the nation.[22] What William did not record was the gender, name, or joy in safe delivery of their 'babe'.[23] This absence was the beginning of a blank that soundlessly wove through William's memoirs. A son who promised Ann a second chance but brought something else entirely. Combining grandfathers' names, this second boy was Matthew Ben Shaw.

There are two stories William wrote about how he nearly abandoned the mission. The first was published in the 1824 *Wesleyan Magazine*, which printed a letter from William dated a month after this journey. It began with Shaws and Shepstones sardined in waggons, fretting over safety. In this first version, friends thought they were 'rashly throwing away' their 'lives in going among a people, who, they seemed to fear, would certainly murder' them.

In this tale, William was the rational man who saved the day. 'But it occurred to me,' he wrote, 'the mission has long been determined on; considerable expense has been incurred in waggons, oxen, tools, etc. etc. for our outfit; and we are going on the Lord's errand; we have the prayers of all our Albany friends and [quoting Wesley's famous last words] the best of all is, God is with us; therefore, we must go forward.' William reiterated, 'Such were the reasonings of my mind', with the afterthought, 'I believe my companions were indulging similar reflections.'[24] Not quite the truth.

His second account of this pivotal decision was written 50 years later when composing *My Mission* (1872) and Ann was dead. Unlike many contemporaries, William never bought into the Victorian notion women were biologically unsuited for rational thought, risk-taking, or roughing it. Perhaps he remembered Ann's surprised response when she read his first version. Or maybe he realised facts protected him from being 'censured for imprudence and charged with exposing families

22. Shaw, *My Mission*, p. 94.
23. Ibid., p. 96.
24. William Shaw, 'Missions in Southern Africa', 26 December 1823, *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, Vol. 3 (1824), pp. 487–88.

to great danger'.[25] In this later account, William confessed his fear of robbery and murder which 'burdened and oppressed with a load of care and anxiety' and 'acknowledge[d] how much benefit I derived from the self-sacrificing spirit and noble bearing of my wife at this trying crisis'.

It was the only time, bar eulogy, William published his opinion of Ann. 'Happy is the Missionary who has a good and faithful wife' like Ann, he wrote. In retrospect, William could see clearly the extraordinary extent to which Ann sympathised 'in his objects and aims'. How much Ann 'who, in addition to an affectionate heart that affords solace in sorrow', possessed 'a sound judgement qualifying her to offer counsel', could enter 'whole case with calmness and clearness' and respond with 'several pertinent remarks'. It is what any human would value in a partner on whom their life depends. William wrote, 'When I . . . asked what she thought we ought to do', she said 'nearly in the following words':

> You have long sought and prayed for this opening. Divine Providence has now evidently set the door open before us. Expenses have been incurred in the purchase of outfit. You stand pledged to the chiefs. And the character and conduct of the [Africans] only show how much they need the Gospel. We shall be under Divine protection. Let us go in the name of the Lord.

These short direct sentences leave us in no doubt of Ann's mood. I haven't left my son, mother, friends, profession, ease, health, and country, to stop on the cusp of achieving my intent. Get on with it, said Ann. 'With a full heart and streaming eyes', William answered, 'that reply has settled the matter'.[26] 24-year-old William looked to 35-year-old Ann for guidance and co-leadership. It had been a habit since courtship. If Ann had not insisted, if William had not listened, they may have not gone.

The journey was a rough lullaby for a newborn; the jerkiness of waggons, nickering of horses, and bleats of goats and sheep. Not to mention six squabbling children under 7, squirming on a mattress and shouting

25. Shaw, *Anne Hodgson*, p. 170.
26. Shaw, *My Mission*, pp. 94–95.

over drumming rain on canvas.[27] They outspanned every few hours, freeing oxen to fill up on grass. Ann did not avoid peril with this son, but she would have been a fool not to have been frightened.

Two months previous, rains had streaked the land with vibrant bush flowers, swirled in hundreds of coloured heathers. Then, like an over-mixed paint box, it returned to variations of brown. The Fish River fought their attempts to cross and their driver nearly drowned. British soldiers, rebuilding the ford, cut a path to the water for their waggons. Even so, it took three hours to get across.[28] Ann would have seen small cairns of white stones, *isivivana* at the river's edge, each one a Xhosa prayer.[29] God look upon me! Spirits take care of me! Solid pleas, bleached like bones, in exchange for the safety of their own. The river bank was studded with mimosa, speck boom, and luxuriant euphorbia raising succulent arms in thorny untangled arcs. For several miles it seemed an endless forest before their waggons jarred up into hills and offered views of the expanses below.[30]

As leaders, Ann and William offered the one waggon not crammed with tools to the Shepstones for sleeping quarters. The Shaws were relying on protection from built-in canvas tents, attached to waggons, which extended over the side to create an extra room. Unfortunately, like army tents used at Reed Fountain, they had not been sufficiently weatherproofed and rain dripped through, creating cold and sodden cells beneath. Ann opened 'a large umbrella' and pulled children under, on top, and beside her. The only dry aspect was William's commentary. 'We did not enjoy any very luxurious accommodation,' he wrote.[31]

When they reached the Government's mission, Tyhume, a planned courtesy stop (Governor Somerset was pressing a resistant William under its oversight), they stayed with Mr and Mrs Thomson and Mr Bennie for ten days, likely in quarters prepared for the Rosses,

27. 'When children have been confined to the waggon . . . this is wearisome, not only to children.' Anonymous, 'Letters from a Returned Missionary, No. II', *Wesleyan Juvenile Offering* (London: John Mason, 1853), p. 91.
28. Shaw, *My Mission*, p. 99.
29. Fast, *William Shrewsbury*, pp. 72, 143, and 187.
30. Snowdall, *Journal*.
31. Shaw, *My Mission*, p. 98.

expected any day. One benefit the Shaws gained from this hiatus was hire of 30 Africans to clear the new road between Tyhume and Phatho's country – including felling trees, removing rocks, and uprooting scrub – all for beads. William wrote, though they tried, 'we could purchase nothing from the natives with money' as beads' 'relative value at the time and for many years afterwards was very great'. In one month, after food, a man could purchase an ox with a payment of beads and very rapidly became an African gentleman. Glass beads and brass buttons had become an essential part of daily ornamental dress, women wearing 'an appendage to their skin cloak called the *isibaxa*' studded from neck to ankles with brass buttons, displaying the generosity of her husband. 'No marriage could be celebrated in the country without the interchange of large quantities of these commodities,' William noted.[32]

Their outward stay in Tyhume likely allowed Ann to launder clothes and bedding, children to burn off energy, and William to hear from his messenger as to whether Phatho was 'still friendly'.[33] Phatho's response was an urgent entreaty to come immediately, sending seven armed men to protect and assist their journey.

> We were received on our arrival here by Pato [sic] and his brothers, Kobi [sic] and Kama, with a great number of their people, as though we had been making a triumphal entry: all was bustle; and, as is usual where many wild, untutored people are assembled all together, all was noise and clamour; everything about us was wonderful, and excited the greatest astonishment; our waggons, our wives, our children, all were examined with attention and appeared to make the spectators wonderfully loquacious.[34]

It can't be underestimated just how much Ann's presence amazed the Xhosa. Though soldiers and traders ventured so far, Ann was one of the first white women who went with children. News of her arrival was borne on running feet from kraal to kraal, well beyond people who agreed to claim them. Soon after, William recorded visits of chiefs,

32. Shaw, *My Mission*, pp. 105–6.
33. Ibid., p. 100.
34. Ibid., p. 101.