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Fort Napier

A Garrison among Garrisons

The social history of the imperial garrison in Natal provides an opportunity to examine the reproduction, adaptation, and modification of Victorian British society on southern African soil. Although historians have treated colonizers as a “homogeneous class—in and for itself,” this was not a monolithic process.¹ A military garrison, according to Jeff Hearn, provides a model of masculinity that is harmful and threatening and that structures “relations of state violence.”² Analysis of a military garrison, ostensibly a homogeneous group, can reveal class, racial, and gender divisions that differentiate its impact on a divided society, thus giving the colonized indigenous inhabitants opportunities for self-assertion, adaptation, and confrontation. Internal divisions in colonial power structures provide the colonized with opportunities to “insert their own definitions of themselves into the colonial situation.”³ It is therefore, the divisions in colonial society and the influence of the garrison in shaping those divisions that are, in large measure, the subject of this investigation.

The term “garrison” will be used to refer to the elements of the regular British army—infantry, cavalry, artillery, engineers, and support troops, the Ordnance and Commissariat sections providing administrative, logistical, transport, provisioning, and medical services—stationed in Natal between 1842 and 1914. Their headquarters was at Fort Napier in the colonial capital Pietermaritzburg, or Maritzburg, as it is often abbreviated. The garrison occupied the fort for seventy-one years, more than a biblical lifetime, and it outlasted the Colony of Natal by four years.

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Over these seventy-one years of its existence, the garrison took part in active wartime campaigning on four occasions, totaling less than four years. The occupation began with the conflict between Capt. Thomas Smith and the Trekkers under Andries Pretorius (May to June 1842). The Anglo-Zulu War lasted seven months in 1879, and the First Anglo-Boer War (or Anglo-Transvaal War) was a brief campaign of about three months between December 1880 and February 1881. Detachments from Fort Napier also served in the campaigns against the Mashona and Ndebele in 1896 in what is now Zimbabwe. The main (or second) Anglo-Boer War was the most protracted, beginning in October 1899 and ending in May 1902.⁴ The imperial forces were not involved in the Bambatha Rebellion in 1906. The main focus of this study is what happened to the garrison for the sixty-seven years when it was not at war.

It is a truism that the role of military force, in securing control over a country and its inhabitants, is normally considered in the context of battles, campaigns, and overt oppression. It is a somewhat inaccurate cliché that, in Africa, colonial conquest and occupation was completed thanks to the Maxim gun,⁵ but it makes the point that, in a broader context, imperialism itself was possible because of the technical superiority of European armies over Asian and African societies. However, there are many other subtle and enduring ways in which the presence of a military force can be used to achieve political objectives and mold social, caste, and class transformations.

As the nineteenth-century wars in southeastern Africa have generated their own extensive, even voluminous, literature, this work will not focus on the well-studied battles and campaigns but on the behind-the-lines work that expanded out of Fort Napier. The extended patrolling and deployments, such as those that took place in Zululand in the 1880s, will be considered as part of the role of the garrison because they had a profound effect on events at Fort Napier and in Pietermaritzburg itself. These will illuminate the subtle and sometimes hidden social pressures resulting from the long-term presence of the garrison.

The imperial garrison arrived in Natal when the southern African frontier was “open,” the situation was fluid, and the garrison was a major agent in the processes of conflict, development, and conquest.⁶ By the time the garrison left, the frontier was well and truly colonized, so the garrison’s impact on an industrializing South Africa, fraught with racial and class conflicts, differed from its influence in the early Victorian era.⁷ The functions of the garrison may have remained defense and policing, but these functions were no longer undertaken in a frontier zone but in a well-embedded conquest state.

In considering the nonwarlike impact of the imperial garrison on an emerging colony, several issues need to be examined. The first is the nature of the society

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from which the troops came, and how the garrison was structured and organized. This necessitates examining the Victorian army as a social organization, with its hierarchical divisions between officers and other ranks, and how this influenced Natal society. The influence was largely ideological, as the class-based Victorian society replicated itself on southern African soil through cultural productions and rituals, political pageantry, sport, hunting, and the contracting of marriage alliances.

Furthermore, the garrison had a long-term stabilizing effect on the colonial economy. It providing technical support and labor and a market for farmers and traders. This also had an impact across color lines. The emerging state structures were bolstered by the garrison through the reliance on military officers for administrative and technical services. As the colony developed, the garrison provided more psychological than material support. The material and the psychological factors weighed heavily upon settler minds and led to conflict between colonial and imperial authorities over threats to withdraw the garrison.

A “respectable” colonial society was the intended outcome of these activities, but paradoxically, the garrison, with its problems of boredom, indiscipline, lust, and drunkenness, added to social tensions through involvement in crime, random violence, and the encouragement of prostitution. These “rough” activities undermined and even subverted the official racial, class, and gender barriers.

And there were always women with the army, in legally recognized and in less formal relationships across all racial, class, and gender barriers. Some feminist writers argue, with validity, that the military’s preoccupation with concepts of masculinity makes it impossible to consider the role of women in isolation from men.⁸ This argument will be explored in chapter 10. In the case of the Natal garrison, women marched up from the Cape in 1842 with Captain Smith and were still at Fort Napier when the South Staffordshire Regiment left in 1914. The army defined their roles, but sometimes women challenged these roles, and sometimes men would challenge the military hierarchy because of women—or, to put matters more sentimentally, for love. Gender issues, in the sense of male-female relationships and in the development and maintenance of male bonding or comradeship, were not only intrinsic to the social functioning of the garrison; these values were transmitted to and reinforced in the wider colonial society over a sustained period.

Nevertheless, the themes are interlinked: class and gender, hierarchy and discipline, race and labor, pageantry and government all intersect at many points and in various ways. There is also the major issue of the economic impact of garrisons and their costs. So that these themes can be properly contextualized and the particular and distinctive role of Fort Napier as a garrison center understood, the Natal garrison will be first considered in relation to other garrisons.

Garrisons across the Globe

Hannah Weiss Muller has described British imperial garrisons as dotting the landscape, where they were “intended to stake claims or to protect fledgling encampments of pioneers,” similar to outposts of the Roman Empire or Portuguese coastal forts in India.⁹ She describes their purpose as practical and symbolic: they were intended to “protect the soldiers and settlers of empire from peril” and were conceived of as “bulwarks of state strength,” separating those “who did not belong from those who did.”¹⁰

Fortresses such as Gibraltar and Halifax were indeed “bulwarks of state strength,” but they were also naval bases, and as the security of the empire depended primarily on the Royal Navy, they were critical posts for imperial defense. Fort Napier, which was an inland garrison, depended on bluff to project the image of a bulwark of strength in an unsettled but strategically important region. The Australian garrisons guarded convict settlements and acted as frontier police, but they did not have a strategic military purpose. While the Fort Napier troops did not guard any convicts, they did act as a frontier police force and had a strategic military purpose.

In New Zealand the situation was more complex, as New Zealand began as an unruly oceanic settlement with a large indigenous Maori population. The garrison initially attempted to police both settler and Maori communities and provide security against a perceived threat of French expansion into the southwestern Pacific; it ended up fighting the Maori.¹¹ In the case of Fort Napier, there was an equally unruly but more diverse settler population to be policed, and a large indigenous population of considerable military potential to be deterred. Furthermore, the Natal garrison could project imperial influence into areas occupied by the Boers and other transfrontier societies at the time of the scramble for mineral resources.

Scrambles for mineral resources and land grabs are two points of the same pick, and the westward expansion of the United States is perhaps the prime example of this. During and after the American Civil War, the U.S. Army wielded enormous authority in the defeated southern states and in western territories. For many, freed slaves and western Indians included, the army was their first experience of government authority.¹² Early colonial Natal was a far smaller political theater than the United States, but the same dynamic operated: expanding civil authority relied on military personnel and processes to begin operating.

There are also other parallels between military garrisons in the American West and British garrisons in Australia and South Africa. Adam Davis quotes Zachary Taylor, later the president of the United States, as stating that “the ax, pick, saw

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and trowel, has become more the implement of the American soldier than the cannon, musket or sword.” Davis uses Taylor’s remarks to highlight the critical role of the army in constructing infrastructure as the frontier moved westward.¹³ Robert M. Utley describes a complaint to Congress by disenchanted troops, disgruntled at having to perform “fatigues” including logging trees, brickwork, repairing wagons, and hay-making.¹⁴ Perhaps the men of the Forty-fifth Regiment at Fort Napier would have agreed!

A detailed history of the garrisons in Canada, Gibraltar, Australia, and New Zealand is beyond the scope of this work. The purpose here is explore the differences and similarities between them and Fort Napier as examples of that strange and often emotive entity known as a “garrison” and why the differences and similarities make Fort Napier unique.

Gibraltar, the “Impregnable” Fortress

Gibraltar is the first example to be considered for two main reasons: It is not only the earliest example of a colonial garrison; it is the longest lasting, as it is still British territory with a garrison and a strategic purpose. It also has a place in the popular imagination, as Hannah Weiss Muller points out: “Gibraltar was arguably the most famous of the British garrisons, so much so that the word itself has come to connote an invincible, impregnable stronghold.”¹⁵ She continues: “In folklore and literature, men who died protecting their garrisons from attack became heroes, and fortresses appealed to romantic notions of national strength and of dying for one’s country. Gibraltar, then, was merely one of many British garrisons that figured centrally in imperial history and captured the popular imagination.”¹⁶

Described in a Victorian tome on heroic deeds of empire as undoubtedly the “greatest” fortress in the world, Gibraltar was captured by the British in 1704, legally transferred by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, and defended ever since against all comers.¹⁷ Known as “the Rock,” its strategic value to a maritime empire was immense, as it controlled the western entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. Fort Napier, in contrast, was an inland garrison and only had an indirect strategic value in relation to the Indian Ocean.

Gibraltar (with a surface area of less than two and a half square miles) also faced a hostile Spain across a narrow isthmus and needed to remain alert in case of a surprise attack or a general conflict. The governor was an active military figure with defense issues as his priority, and civil issues were subordinated thereto.¹⁸ Gibraltar developed the quintessential “siege” or “garrison” mentality, complete with “wariness” for those deemed suspicious or “other.”¹⁹

The regiments in the Gibraltar garrison rotated on tours of duty across the empire, accompanied by their wives and families. One effect of this was that the families of the soldiers in the garrison had limited interaction with the civilian population of Gibraltar.²⁰ The Gibraltar garrison ruled the social, cultural, and sporting life of the Rock even more intensely than the Fort Napier garrison dominated Natal colonial life.

The legal position underpinned some of the differences. Gibraltar was an imperial “fortress,” and the title commander-in-chief that went with that of governor had meaning and substance. Gibraltar was ruled by military edict until late in the nineteenth century.²¹ Natal was a colony, and although the lieutenant governors and governors were styled “commanders-in-chief,” it was in form rather than in substance. Conversely, when the Fort Napier garrison commanders acted as lieutenant governors and governors from time to time, they acted quite consciously in a civil capacity in terms of civil law.

Garrisoning the Open Spaces of North America, 1749–1906

The contrasts between the geographical sizes of Gibraltar and of Canada could not be greater. Gibraltar was seized from Spain, but France was Britain’s initial enemy in North America. Halifax was founded in 1749 and provided a secure base for the British forces that besieged and forced the reduction of the French fortress of Louisbourg a decade later. Halifax’s strategic importance derived from its role as a crucial naval base in conflicts against the French and the Americans. In the strategic sense, Halifax rivaled Gibraltar, although it was never attacked. The Halifax garrison contributed significantly to the economy of the city and of Nova Scotia, but it also contributed to the social problems in the city.²²

The garrison served to protect the harbor, the settlers of Nova Scotia, and, critically, access to the St. Lawrence River. It was therefore of great strategic significance. The citadel, Fort George, was completed in 1856, and the British handed it over to Canadian forces in 1906. During World War I, it housed German internees, as did Fort Napier. In World War II it was a major command and communications center for the Royal Canadian Navy during the Battle of the Atlantic. Socially and culturally, the Halifax garrison imposed its influence on the city, as did the Fort Napier garrison in Pietermaritzburg. As with Gibraltar, the military influence in Halifax was partially diluted by the maritime influences emanating from the presence of the Royal Navy and a large-scale fishing and merchantile fleet.

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The British Army seized Montreal from the French during the French and Indian War, which ended in 1763. Montreal became a critical garrison center, as it was strategically placed on the St. Lawrence River, near the Great Lakes and the American frontier. There was an actual war between Britain and the United States between 1812 and 1815, and Montreal became the British headquarters for Upper and Lower Canada in 1814. The threat of war continued into the 1840s, which led the British to retain a substantial garrison in Canada and to build a number of fortifications. However, the British garrison in Montreal spent more time putting down local insurrections and violent disturbances than it did seriously contemplating battles with the Americans. The Natal garrison was never deployed against rioting local mobs during its long service at Fort Napier. However, in 1913, the last garrison regiment was part of a force that acted against rioting miners on the Witwatersrand. Garrison troops in Montreal faced rioters far more frequently, which led the garrison commanders themselves to urge and support the formation of an effective local and provincial police force.²³

As the likelihood of war between Britain and the United States receded, the necessity for retaining a garrison in Canada diminished accordingly. The Montreal garrison was a drain on military resources, not only financial but human as well. The garrison was close to the open, unguarded American border, and there was no greater enticement for troops to desert than knowing that there were economic opportunities close by and that the chance of recapture was nonexistent once across the St. Lawrence. Desertion was also a problem at Fort Napier, but troops had to put a little more effort into it than they needed to in Canada.

The Jailer Garrisons, 1778–1870

The garrisons in Australia acted as prison guards. Whereas the garrisons in Halifax and Montreal were located strategically, as was the Cape garrison, including Fort Napier, the garrisons in Australia had significantly less of a strategic role. British interests in the South Pacific were better served by the Royal Navy. Desertion was a major problem, given the open landscape and the ability of military deserters to mingle with and vanish into the ex-convict population. Boredom, drink, and isolation were severe problems in the regiments garrisoning the convict settlements, and these problems greatly encouraged desertion.

The first garrison troops arrived in New South Wales in 1788 as guards on the convict ships of the First Fleet. They were naval marines who, “prey to starvation, lethargy, and despair, departed without regret in December 1791.”²⁴ They were succeeded by the British-raised but station-specific New South Wales Corps, the

notorious “Rum Corps” that mutinied and overthrew Governor Bligh in 1808. Constitutional order was eventually restored, the Rum Corps was disbanded, and in 1810 the first regular regiment of the British Army arrived in garrison. Regiments rotated in garrison until the last one was withdrawn in 1870.

During the 1880s, the Natal garrison was broken up into small detachments to garrison forts and outposts in Zululand, which had a deleterious effect on discipline. The problem was even more acute in Australia, owing to the vast distances between colonial ports and outposts, which necessitated the garrison being broken up into tiny detachments, difficult to coordinate and even more difficult to discipline. Bathurst, inland from Sydney, was garrisoned by a detachment commanded by Lt. William Seymour, Ninety-ninth Regiment. He found his duties as commander of the miniscule garrison of twenty-five men to be far from demanding and completely lacking in any opportunity for excitement and action. In theory, the troops were there in support of the civil power, but by the 1840s the Bathurst district had little to fear from either Aborigine attack or convict uprising. In truth, there was little reason to continue maintaining a garrison in Bathurst.²⁵

Not surprisingly, Lieutenant Seymour went off the rails and was sent back to England.

One of the larger garrisons was Port Arthur on the Tasman Peninsula in Van Diemens Land. In the 1830s, just over a hundred soldiers guarded 1,200 convicts, and in 1846 the number of troops increased to over 260 for approximately the same number of convicts.²⁶

In Australia, as elsewhere in the empire and particularly in Natal, the military were in the “dominant” position in the social hierarchy, and the Victorian class and gender systems were replicated in large part through the social influence of the military.²⁷

Maori Wars in New Zealand (1845–70)

One of the reasons given for the increase in the number of troops at Port Arthur in Van Diemens Land in the 1840s is that this garrison was seen as a reserve from which troops could be sent to New Zealand.²⁸ New Zealand was garrisoned for less than half the time that Natal was; however, it was the only other garrison of those in this comparative study to fight a major war against an indigenous foe. There are several similarities between the establishment of a garrison in New Zealand and the establishment of a garrison in Natal.

Both territories were remote from their regional headquarters; the Cape in the case of Natal, and New South Wales in the case of New Zealand. There was

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the anarchic encroachment of settlers in both cases on lands where there were strong and well-organized indigenous societies, Maori in New Zealand and Zulu in Natal. The commanders of the troops were initially instructed keep the peace and prevent settlers from attacking the local inhabitants. In both cases, although with different time frames, war was waged on the indigenous inhabitants. Ironically, the same person headed the colonial governments at the time of the conflicts: Sir George Grey served as high commissioner and governor of the Cape Colony and also as governor of New Zealand when conflicts loomed in each region.²⁹ It is also significant that the British themselves particularly admired the Zulu and the Maori. Disraeli's remark on the Zulu being a remarkable people has already been cited, while Sir John Fortescue, the magisterial historian of the British Army, describes the British soldier as finding the Maori "the greatest native enemy that he had ever encountered."³⁰

The major difference between Natal in southern Africa and New Zealand in the South Pacific is between oceanic and continental conditions. The garrison in New Zealand could be withdrawn as soon as the conflicts with the Maori were over, as there were no other potential enemies, except far across the waters. Because the garrison in Natal faced Boer and Zulu enemies close at hand and was also dispatched to serve in conflicts deeper in Africa, it needed to stay.

What Makes Fort Napier Unique?

All the garrisons discussed show similar characteristics and also degrees of variance. The question to be answered in this work is, Why was Fort Napier unique? This work will show that it is unique for a combination of reasons: the longevity of the garrison is a major factor, as is the stability (real or imagined) that the garrison provided in a volatile area and the cultural and economic influences it exerted. However, the principal issue is that of the legacy: Fort Napier and its garrison influenced not only a settler society but a major African society as well, thus justifying the sobriquet "The Last Outpost."

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