

*Born unto trouble as the sparks fly upwards*

F.R. Stratham, journalist and author in the aftermath of the Zulu War

By Dr Charles Swaisland

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If the afflictions of Job were undeservedly visited upon a wholly worthy man, the same claim cannot be advanced for Francis Reginald Streatham, for some nine years between 1877 and 1888, editor of South Africa's oldest newspaper, *The Natal Witness*. Possessed of a keen intellect, marked political courage and combative nature, he also had a talent for alienating those who otherwise agreed with him.

Born in Liverpool in 1844, the son of a solicitor and grandson and great-grandson of Town Clerks of the city, Statham was educated at Liverpool College and later at Windermere College. It is not known how tranquil or otherwise his schooldays were but, if they lacked brushes with authority, his first two decades were calmer than his adult years were to be.

He first came to public notice in 1865, when he stood in the dock at Liverpool Assizes, side by side with Caroline Tait, a ballet dancer, charged with stealing £2,500 of his employer's money. Absconding first to Paris, they booked into – a quaint touch this – the Hotel Liverpool as Lord and Lady Hastings. They were finally caught up with by British law at Lugano in the person of Inspector Carlisle of the Liverpool Constabulary disguised as a Catholic priest and accompanied by the chief cashier of Rylands, the cotton brokers who had employed Statham. There being no extradition treaty between the United Kingdom and Switzerland at the time, the pursuers had to rely upon persuasion to get the couple to return to Britain. They succeeded after employing arguments of dubious moral quality and, on arrival at Dover, Statham and Miss Tait were arrested.

At the trial he tried to clear his companion of involvement, claiming that she knew nothing of the money, most of which was recovered from her muff and the lining of his coat. But his efforts availed her not because evidence was led to show that he could not sew. That, and the fact that they were abed together when the inspector entered their room, caused much laughter in court.(1) Statham was given 18 months hard labour and his accomplice five months in prison. Her fate must have seared his conscience for, in his novel *The Fiery Furnace, a Tale of Two Acts* (1896) there is a plea for a second chance for woman who fall from grace. It was not only for women he sought such a chance, for in several of his books he makes a similar appeal for all those who show contrition. What happened to Caroline Tait after she left gaol is not known, but the crime and its punishment were to return in bizarre fashion some years later to damage him.

Having had a religious experience in prison, Statham became a pastor of a liberal nonconformist church in Edinburgh in 1871, but left eighteen months later to make a precarious living as a writer. He produced two volumes of poetry and books on religion and sociology. In 1886 he found his true vocation when appointed assistant editor of the *Liverpool Albion*. Then, recruited personally by the proprietor of *The Natal Witness*, he arrived in Pietermaritzburg in May of the following year to edit the paper. Lord Carnarvon's attempt at federating the four 'white' territories was the Imperial Government's South African policy and Statham was soon writing in vigorous opposition, which brought him into conflict with his employers. In December 1879 he resigned to edit *The Cape Post*, a paper owned by John Xavier Merriman and others in Cape Colony who favoured a local, organic process of amalgamation rather than one engineered from outside. Politically, he was more at home with his new employers but when the paper was closed after six months, leaving him in financial difficulties, there were recriminations. Statham blamed them for enticing him away from *The Natal Witness*. Thus within three years he had fallen out with the owners of newspapers, as well as politicians, in both colonies and the second occasion was to have unexpected and disagreeable consequences for him. He set off for England where for a year he wrote for *The Daily News* and *The Pall Mall Gazette*. In July 1881 he was back in the editorial chair of *The Natal Witness*, with the added job of South African special correspondent of *The Daily News*.

To oppose the unpopular policy of federation was one thing, but vehement criticism of Wolseley's so-called 'Kilkenny Cats' settlement of Zululand was quite another. Writing 'with vinegar in his ink' (2) Statham inevitable fell foul of Sir Henry Bulwer, the Governor of Natal, and the Shepstones as well as the Colonial Office. Association with the Colensos in a colony where many regarded the Bishop as a heretic while others deemed his political support of the Africans as treachery, was a further handicap to Statham's campaigning. Added to his problems was a libel action against the newspaper's owners over an allegation that Hozana, King Cetshwayo's uncle, had been assaulted by John Shepstone, Acting Secretary for Native Affairs. The truth, or otherwise, of the allegation was never tested as the unsuccessful defence was grounded on a point of law. The defendants called upon their editor to pay the £500 damages awarded, no small sum in 1883. The quality of his writing, with

the entertainment it gave the readership was, one suspects, a safety valve for some resentment in the colony against the powerful Shepstone family. His editorship survived for four more uneasy years. Later, for a few months, the same proprietors entrusted their Durban evening title, *The Natal Advertiser* to him and he was even offered a third term at *The Natal Witness* (3), an offer he did not take up.

As disagreement with his principal employers did not bring about Statham's eventual downfall; the cause must be sought elsewhere. In the Colonial Office, in fact. His attitude to that august body was made clear in 1881, when his *Blacks, Boers and British* was published.

Remember that of all rabbit warrens of official corruption – offices in which personal interest and personal intrigue govern whatever is said and done, to the exclusion of consideration for the public welfare – the Colonial Office is the worst. (p. 261)

Whether or not successful Secretaries of State and their senior officials had lain in wait for revenge as Statham assumed (4) is not revealed, but when the chance came of putting down the 'pestilential journalist' (5) the blow was severe and decisive. A freak of nature some years earlier was the trigger. When a violent storm tore off the roof of the old post office building in Pietermaritzburg, a pile of undelivered newspapers was scattered, among them one containing an account of his trial for theft. His past revealed, he made no further attempt at concealment; indeed in *My Life's Record* (1901) he implied benefit both to contrite offender and to society for frankly revealing his past.

Merriman and Sir Theophilus Shepstone knew the story and, shortly after they reached London in 1883, having taken passage on the same ship, it was soon circulating in government circles. In 1882, when Statham had come round to Colenso's view that the return of King Cetshwayo to Zululand was the only practicable solution to the disorder following Wolseley's settlement, he propagated the idea with characteristic vigour. It was one to which Sir Henry Bulwer was strongly opposed, and his dispatch cataloguing alleged inaccuracies in Statham's reporting had been published in Parliamentary Papers, but when the latter riposted, Lord Derby doubted whether 'correspondence (which relates in a great degree to personal questions) can properly be included among the papers to be presented to Parliament.(6) Evelyn Ashley, Parliamentary Under Secretary, then struck the fatal blow by informing the House of Commons that 'the correspondent in question is never well-informed'.(7) *The Daily News* sacked Statham as their South African correspondent and refused to publish his detailed refutation of Bulwer's charges. Thus was silenced perhaps the only journalist fearlessly critical of government. The Colonial Office was not yet finished with him. As late as February 1900, they asked the Post Office to keep an eye on his mail, even though the Assistant Commissioner of Police had said that 'his expressions of pro-Boer sentiments at anti-war meetings are quite legitimate'. (8)

Conflict with politicians and officialdom was the almost inevitable lot of one proclaiming, 'One man, with justice on his side, is a majority'. Colonial government, the Colonial Office and *The Daily News*, by denying him the opportunity of countering what he believed to be erroneous reporting of his political campaigning, were guilty of what would now be termed 'character assassination'. Someone in such a position needs friends and Statham certainly did, but he proceeded to fall out with those whose help he sought.

When Bishop Colenso died in June 1883 Statham announced that he was assuming the mantle of champion of the Zulu cause. He certainly strove for an independent inquiry into the state of Zululand, but lacked the moral structure of the Bishop and had made too many powerful enemies to succeed. Despite referring to Colenso in an 1881 editorial in *The Natal Witness* as an 'unofficial and irresponsible person working in the dark' the two men seemed to have maintained an urbane relationship. The relationship with Harriet, the Bishop's oldest daughter and his successor as supporter of the Zulus, was one of civility without much warmth. (9) Frank, Colenso's barrister son, thought Statham a 'scamp' but nevertheless saw his pamphlet, *The Zulu Iniquity*, through the press in London. With his sister, the emotional and forthright Frances, it was quite different. In her view a major collision was only avoided whenever the met by not referring to potentially contentious issues. (10)

Frederick William, Chesson, Secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society in London, and Statham corresponded from November 1880 until November 1887, just a few months before Chesson's death, but like so many of Statham's relationships, it was an uneasy one. Influenced by the younger generation of Colensos, the Society mistrusted his judgement and he resented what he saw as their failure adequately to support him and his campaigning when he most needed it. In his support for King Cetshwayo's restoration they were at one, but his plea for understanding for Boers and colonists fell on the stony ground of APS conviction of Boer enslavement of black people and the supposed rapacity of the 'mob', as Chesson appears to have dubbed English-speaking colonists in a letter to Statham. And the latter's questioning of Bishop Colenso's objectivity as observer and reporter amounted to heresy in APS eyes.

Statham was unaware of much that the Society was doing in correspondence with the Colonial and War Offices and by briefing Members of Parliament and organs of the press, and accused them of being lukewarm in the cause. Similarly, their failure to respond substantially with money to help him visit Britain to pursue the campaign, and also in connection with the libel case when it came before the Privy Council raised his ire. It is a paradox that, while he so badly needed them when they did not need him, he could not refrain from shewing his bitterness in *The Natal Witness*. In 1886 he accused them of knowing as early as April or May 1884 of Boer intentions of moving into Zululand ostensibly to support Dinizulu against Zibhebhu. Despite the known antipathy of the APS towards the Boers he claimed that they had kept quiet about their movement; the records on the point are ambiguous. A year later, when seeking their influence in finding a job in England, he informed his readers that –

It is time that the British public had their eyes opened a little to the doings of this Society, whose guiding star appears to be ‘self’ and not the interests of their oppressed black brethren. (11)

Statham was a curious mixture. Brilliant and courageous, he was also unreliable. In modern jargon he would be described as a loose cannon on the deck, potentially a greater hazard to friend than foe. His analysis of policy in Zululand and prediction of what the consequences would be were deadly accurate. On a Colonial Office file, Leonard Courtney, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, minuted ‘...without disputing his rectitude, I distrust his judgement’. (12) Frances Colenso was both more generous and more damning; she thought Statham a ‘clever, imaginative man of some genius’ and ‘a keen knife, liable to shut upon the hand that used it’. (13) Chesson would have said a fervent ‘Amen’ to that.

## References.

1. *Liverpool Daily Post* 29Nov., 4,5, and 14 dec.1865. I am grateful to John Pinfold, Bodlian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies, Rhodes House, Oxford.
2. *South African Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol.1.
3. Details of Statham’s career at *The Natal Witness* are to be found in *Bearing Witness* by Simon Haw, written to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1996 of the paper.
4. Statham – *My Life’s Record; A Fight For justice*, 1901 p.93.
5. Colonial Office minute reported in SADNB.
6. See copy of letter from Statham to Lord Derby 3 Nov. 1883 in Rhodes house Anti-Slavery correspondence, Vol. 148/47.
7. Hansard 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, Vol. 278 p. 1058, 24 April 1883.
8. Parliamentary Papers CO 417/312
9. H. Colenso – Chesson, APS 16 June 1886. ‘We are just now threatened with a new danger – i.e. Mr Statham as an MLC!’ Anti-Slavery correspondence, Rhodes House, Vol. C 131/19
10. Frances Colenso – CO 179/144 14 Feb. 1882
11. Leader in *The Natal Witness* 22 Feb. 1887.
12. PRO –CO 179/144, 14 Feb. 1882.
13. Frances Colenso – Chesson 27 Nov. 1883, RH Vol. C. 138/38.