The Life and Times of Frederick York St Leger

By David Hilton-Barber

Genealogy



Figure 1: Boyhood of Raleigh

The first known St Leger came from Normandy in 1066 with William the Conqueror and for the next 500 years the St Legers were sheriffs and Members of Parliament for the County of Kent. Ralph St Leger accompanied Richard 1 on the Third Crusade. Sir Anthony St Leger was granted Leeds Castle by Edward VI in 1550. His second son, Warham was knighted and became Governor of Munster. His grandson, who was a friend of Sir Walter Raleigh, was mentioned in Kingsley's "Westward Ho" and is one of the boys in John Millais' painting, *The Boyhood of Raleigh.*

An especially distinguished member of the family was Sir Thomas St Leger, Sheriff of Surrey and Ambassador to France. He married Anne, sister of Edward IV, but paid the penalty of the royal connection when he was executed in 1483 after Richard III came to the throne.



Figure 2: Major-General Anthony St Leger (https://www.doncaster-racecourse.co.uk/news/festivals/where-does-the-st-leger-stakes-get-its-name-from?)

The St Leger Stakes were founded in 1776, four years before the Derby, by Major-General Anthony St Leger and his portrait was painted by Thomas Gainsborough. The original painting currently resides in the United Kingdom's Royal Collection.

Early Life

Frederick York St Leger was born in Limerick in 1833 and was sent to live with his learned uncle, the Rev William Nassau St Leger, Vicar of St Mary-le-Tower in Ipswich. He was swathed in an atmosphere of learning which led to an enduring love of the classics. A scholarship provided him with the entry to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where he distinguished himself as the gold medallist in the Classical Tripos. After graduating, he took up a post as classics master at Oundle School where he met and married Christian Emma Muddle. I am sure Emma loved him deeply, but I have a suspicion that she jumped at the opportunity of changing her name from Muddle to St Leger!



Figure 3: Bishop Robert Gray (https://www.odunion.com/news/archives-history/657/657-The-Robert-Gray-Consecration-Memorial-in-Cape-Town)

Bishop Gray, head of the Anglican Church in Cape Town, visited England and made a passionate appeal for young missionaries to strengthen the Anglican Church. At that time there were only thirteen Anglican congregations, no church schools and no missions. He was determined that this should change, especially as the Methodist Church was in a far healthier position. I detect an element of competition in his clerical bosom!

Shortly after, Frederick York and his young wife were fired with the dream of starting a new life in the colonies. He must have harboured some religious zeal in his bosom as he sailed to the Cape in 1856 at the age of 24 with his young wife, responding to the urgent call from Bishop Gray for missionaries to strengthen the Anglican Church.

The Ministry

Frederick York was ordained in Claremont and thus joined the ministry. His first posting was to Grahamstown and in a letter to the Reverend E Hawkins, at the end of which he signed himself John Grahamstown; he recorded:

> *… the laying of the foundation-stone of our infant college, which I dedicated to St. Andrew, as on St. Andrew's Day that I received consecration. It was altogether a bright day in our annals. The clergy in their surplices, with Archdeacon Merriman at their head, moved in procession, with a large body of lay people, to the site of the chapel, where the Lieutenant-Governor and his staff were waiting. There, joining the clergy, I accompanied them to the place prepared. The service was a very solemn one; a large concourse of people appeared to take a lively interest in the undertaking, and when the stone was laid, we all proceeded in due order to the cathedral for evening prayer, which a large congregation attended. The college is now rapidly rising, and, if all is well, will be open in a few months.*

Frederick York is credited with introducing the English system of education at St Andrews which is followed to this day.



Figure 4: The young Frederick York St Leger (Hilton-Barber D. (2024), Frederick York St Leger. Familia. 61(2).)

Frederick York, after a tenure of five years in Grahamstown, was appointed Rector of St Michael's and Headmaster of St Michael's School in Queenstown. This followed the shifting of the frontier between the two opposing communities to the Kei River.

In 1867, only 34 years of age, he was appointed canon and accompanied Bishop Cotterill, Bishop of Grahamstown, as his chaplain on a visit to England. On his departure, St Leger was presented with a purse of 150 guineas by his congregation. He brought back with him the following year a fine set of stained glass windows which can today be viewed in the apse of the new St Michael's in Queenstown.

In 1870 Frederick York represented the Grahamstown diocese at the first provincial synod of the Church of the Province of South Africa. At this historic gathering at which the constitution of the Church was drawn up, Frederick York was appointed Secretary of the Synod. Many thought the young man was a potential candidate for the bishopric himself.

Renegade Diamond Digger

In 1871, at the age of 38, in an extraordinary change of course, he resigned his position with the church and took his family to the newly opened diamond fields in Kimberley. There is no written record of his resignation in the archives at Bishop court but it is assumed that he found it impossible to provide for his family on the small stipend that the church paid. His decision to leave might also have been due to his wife converting to the Roman Catholic faith. I often wonder at the courage and conviction of Emma to take this bold step, which would appear to be, crudely expressed, thumbing her nose at her husband. However, this did not affect his own religious convictions, and he remained a committed Anglican until his death. Another possible reason for Frederick York's leaving the church was the Bishop Colenso crisis. The Right Reverend Dr John William Colenso was the first bishop of the English Church in Natal and was distinguished almost from his arrival by "*a very warm attachment to the Bantu, combined with an untiring zeal for their improvement and an eloquent advocacy for what he regarded as their rights*".

Colenso incensed his more orthodox peers by publishing a work condoning the practice of polygamy among the Zulus, citing evidence thereof in the Bible. Called upon to retract his opinions, he declined to do so and was summoned to appear before a court, which he refused to do. That led to the Colenso crisis.



Figure 5: The diamond diggings at New Rush

According to Jean, their youngest granddaughter, Frederick York and his family moved into quarters in New Rush Camp - one small wooden hut and a large tent. They slept in hammocks. The kitchen was a hole in the ground, in the centre of which stood a three-legged black pot in which all meals were cooked. Water, at 8s/6d a bucket, had to be fetched from the wells. Kimberley, being at that time, of course, a town of pioneers, there was not a single brick building; if a dwelling was sold, a gang of natives would pick it up and carry it to its new site - it was a common occurrence for the excited little St. Legers to see a house walking down the street. Little help being available in the event of sickness, my grandmother very wisely kept a medicine chest well-stocked with pills, and so on for every emergency. One day a runaway cart and horse charged down the Main Street and through the St Leger home, parting the hut from the tent and scattering the contents of the medicine chest upon the ground. As if this new, rough life were not enough to contend with, Mrs St Leger gave birth before the year was out to her eighth child, Anthony - a delicate boy who had to be fed upon asses' milk.

In 1873, Frederick York was offered the editorship of *The Diamond Fields*. For the next two years, he was one of the most knowledgeable and accomplished journalists in Kimberley and his articles were published in newspapers across the country and overseas.

Founding Editor of the Cape Times


THE CAPE TIMES
AND DAILY ADVERTISER
IMPORTANT SALE
KLEIN WESTERFORD.
C. G. AKERBER
A. L. SNELL'S
WINTER GOOD
IRONMONGERY
WILSON & GLYN
NOTICE.
SOLOMON BROS & CO.
OILMAN'S STORES, &c

Figure 6: The first edition of the Cape Times

Thus emboldened, he decided it was time to enjoy the fruits of a more civilised life and in an ambitious - some might say foolhardy - venture, he took his family to Cape Town to establish his own newspaper, The *Cape Times*. The first edition, a modest four- pager of small format, was published on 27 March 1876. Strong in idealism and scholarship but singularly lacking in capital and financial acumen, Frederick York was surely embarking on a risky venture.

For the day beforehand, the big event had been heralded with variegated posters stuck up over the town, and in honour of the occasion each vendor was given a new straw hat to wear, with *Cape Times* printed on the ribbon. This is another facet of Frederick York that caught my attention, a PR stunt well ahead of its time!

The *Cape Times* never looked back. Frederick York's leading articles were forceful, to say the least, and the journal caught the imagination of the citizens of Cape Town from the start. His paper prospered and soon the young editor and his family moved out to make their home at Rosebank.

It was a hand-to-mouth existence and for many years the enterprise was chronically under-capitalised. But St Leger was no slouch as a worker. He would normally spend the mornings in his office in St George's Street, reading and writing letters and preparing articles for publication. After lunch, he would take his place in the Press Gallery of Parliament promptly at 2.30 and would spend the afternoon there listening to the debates and writing his notes in the House (a feature continued by subsequent editors and columnists of the likes of Victor Norton, Angus McKenzie, Anthony Delius and John Scott). What distinguished Frederick York from his successors, of course, was that he dashed off his notes ready for the printer while the debate continued. On a quiet afternoon, he would write reviews of books he had previously read at home. After an early dinner with his wife and children, he would return to Parliament by 8pm if there was a night sitting, or he would write his editorials in his office until it was time to read the proofs that were sent round from Thomas Delahunt's printing works where every letter of type was set by hand and illustrations were confined to line engravings.

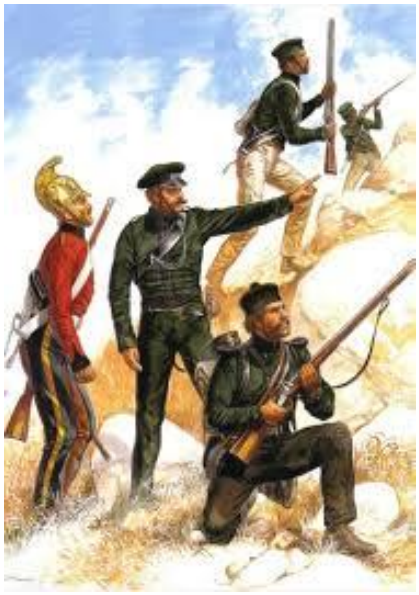
The popularity of the newspaper grew rapidly. It was the first in the country to make use of the telegraph to gather news, until then carried by mail steamer or post cart. The policy to which Frederick York adhered faithfully throughout his career was based on his conviction that 'liberty indeed is so far a law of nature to us, individually and nationally, that once the state of dependence is passed, there can be no moral or political health without it.' From the outset he aimed at making the newspaper an honest record of public opinion, 'not the journal of a particular party, but of colonists as a whole.'

Gerald Shaw, in his book (*Early Beginnings: Cape Times 1876-1910*), described the man who was to be editor for the next 20 years as:

> "… *aloof and reserved, with little taste for general society. As a rule, he shunned close contact with politicians. However, he enjoyed club life and was a founder member of the City Club. Over the years, he was to become a well-known figure, immaculate in spats and topper and sporting a silver-headed cane. He wore Victorian side-whiskers and carried himself with military bearing. He was ever gentle in speech and his grey-blue eyes were often sparked with humour. His knowledge of the Bible and the classics were more than three decades old, but he was still able to quote whole passages, which he frequently did in his editorial columns, entirely from memory*."

James Rose-Innes, a close friend who was to become Attorney General, said that Frederick York's opinions, his scholarship and delicate fancy impersonally permeated his paper. He wrote for cultivated men and although his style might appear ornate by contemporary standards, it reflected his oblique and ironic personality.

His family continued to enjoy the comfort and security of their beautiful home. They attended the best schools, mixed with the other children of the best families and generally made the best of marriages, with the church, the professions and the regiments figuring prominently.



A little-known chapter of his life was his service as a major in the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Volunteer Rifles, the first volunteer unit in the Cape, founded in 1855 as the Cape Rifle Corps. In 1867 Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh accorded it the title 'Duke of Edinburgh's Own', after it had formed a guard of honour for him during a visit to Cape Town. According to Jean St Leger Lawrence, St Leger served with the regiment in the Basuto War in 1880 although no details have been recorded. (Basutoland was under the nominal control of the Cape but the chiefs rebelled in 1880 when part of their territory was surveyed for white settlement and at the same time they were called upon to surrender their firearms.)

Figure 7: Volunteers in Action

Colonial Cape forces sent to put down the rebellion suffered heavy casualties, as the Basotho had obtained serviceable firearms from the Orange Free State and enjoyed a natural defensive advantage in their country's mountainous terrain. I wonder if Frederick York actually hoisted himself into the saddle and rode off with the posse.

He scorned the rival *Cape Argus* when it came out in mourning with black borders after the defeat of the British at Isandhlwana. He described the Boer victory at Majuba 'a salutary lesson in political wisdom for the Gladstone Ministry instilled into them by the sharp-shooting of a few rock-protected marksmen'.

He accepted with equanimity, if not with enthusiasm, the recognition of Dutch as a language in Parliament while noting that English was not accorded similar privileges in the Orange Free State.

When Cecil Rhodes became Prime Minister of the Cape Colony in 1890, with the support of the Afrikaner Bond, St Leger questioned the wisdom of the appointment of a man who wielded such immense power outside the House. Rhodes was Chairman of De Beers, Consolidated Goldfields and the British South Africa Company. While praising his remarkable achievements and his *noble ambition, far above a mere passion for gain,* St Leger nevertheless foresaw a potential conflict of interests. And here our President is being castigated for having only one outside interest -farming!

Retirement



Figure 8: Frederick York in his retirement

Frederick York, on his retirement, became a Town Councillor and joined Rose Innes' SA Political Association whose liberal views (including the abolition of protective duties on foodstuffs) were opposed by Rhodes in deference to his parliamentary ally, the Afrikaner Bond which had a strong farming constituency. (Shades of Donald Trump and his punitive tariffs!)

The Jameson Raid brought Rhodes down and Frederick York sought election to the Legislative Council (the Upper House). But he developed a painful affliction of the throat and was not successful. The following year he was elected the member for Cape Town in the Legislative Assembly, and he took his place in Parliament. However, he was hardly able to speak and travelled to England to consult a specialist who diagnosed cancer.

Frederick York St Leger was now slowly dying of cancer, but it was tragically prolonged. A tracheotomy was performed a year later which brought some respite but for the next five months as his condition deteriorated, he listened to sacred and classical music played by his wife. He died at his home, Clyst Hazel in Newlands, on 28 March 1901 at the age of 68.

His funeral was attended by many dignitaries, including the Prime Minister, Sir Gordon Sprigg. In his will, he left his shares to his children, only to be inherited after the death of his wife. Edmund Garrett paid the following tribute to his late comrade:

This is not the place to dwell on his political teachings - a high-minded Imperialism with a strong vein of Christian socialism - but of his public work let me say this: not a newspaper writer among us but is the better for it, the better able to rise above all that is tawdry or servile or unchivalrous. It means much for the broadening river of South Africa

Anthony York St Leger

Anthony York St Leger, the eighth and youngest son of Frederick York, who was born in the squalor of the diamond diggings, was my grandfather. He qualified as a doctor of medicine, and before starting in practice, he signed on as ship's doctor with the Union Castle Line. On his first voyage, it is rumoured that he took with him, on free passage, members of his family who exceeded the number of paying passengers!

At the outbreak of WW2, he joined the military and was posted to Roberts Heights with the rank of colonel, a title he preferred to that of doctor for the rest of his life.

At the end of the war, he was put in charge of demobilisation and, another family rumour was that he engaged in a romantic relationship with his secretary. When this came to the ears of his wife, she immediately left the family home with her two daughters and son, and took up residence in Grahamstown. Frederick York continued to support his family but they never re-united. My mother, Elle Mary St Leger, was

educated at the Diocesan School for Girls and Rhodes University. She majored in French and when the Head Department went on leave, she took over as acting professor. She was a member of the first National Association of University Students (NUSAS) to visit France. She married my father, who was educated at St Andrew's College but had to leave before matriculation, as he was called back to work on his father’s farm, Highlands, outside Grahamstown.

With 50 % of the St Leger bloodline, I am a proud member of the clan.