

LEGACY OF PIONEER ARTIST JOHN THOMAS BAINES

Researched and written by Udo Richard AVERWEG



The City of Durban has a historical calendar landscape brush-stroked with many anniversary dates. 8th May remains one in its artistic history. This day marks the anniversary date on which **John Thomas Baines** (1820-1875), a renowned English artist and intrepid explorer who travelled through southern Africa and Australia, died on Durban's Berea.

Thomas Baines, as he is widely known and remembered, should not be confused with both Andrew Geddes Bain (1794-1864) who earned the tag of 'Father of South African Geology' and his acclaimed road engineer son, Thomas Charles John Bain (1830-1893). It should be noted the spelling of the geologist/road engineer and artist surnames is different. Thomas Bain, the artist, is most famous for his intricate colonial and wildlife paintings. Here we recall some aspects of his well-travelled and artistic life and glimpse at his few last years spent in Durban.

John Thomas Baines was born on 27th November 1820 in King's Lynn, a market town and seaport of the county of Norfolk, England approximately 158km north of London. He was the eldest son of John and Mary Baines (née Watson). In growing up in this English environment and being inspired by both the vast expanse of the Fens and the nearby sea, the young Thomas Baines could easily have been inspired by a wanderlust for adventure.

His mother, Mary Ann, was instrumental in having her teenage son apprenticed in October 1836 to an ornamental carriage builder but he soon turned to painting and studied under the heraldic painter William Carr. This apprenticeship, lasted some five years. But the 21-year old Baines wished to see more of the world. He was inspired by explorer artists like George French Angas (1822-1886) and William Cornwallis Harris (1807-1848) and decided to emigrate to the Cape of Good Hope. In 1842, he as a steerage passenger, set sail from London on the schooner *Olivia*.

The *Olivia* anchored in Table Bay on 23rd November 1842. At that time in South African history, Durban was under colonial rule. (Precisely six months' earlier, the famous Battle of Congella had just taken place in Durban. The 24th June 1842 had seen the arrival of the schooner *Conch* and trailing long-boats of British Redcoats into the Bay of Natal. This mini-flotilla was instrumental in raising the month-long siege of the British garrison at Fort Port Natal, now known as The Old Fort, Durban).

On his arrival at the Cape of Good Hope, Thomas Baines sought work. He was employed by a cabinet-maker in Cape Town who manufactured wagons and coaches. Baines decorated coaches with much of the 'picturesque scenery' of the Cape Bay and the mountains he witnessed on a daily basis. In 1846 Thomas Baines appeared in the *Cape of Good Hope Almanac* as a 'marine portrait painter'. But he had a desire for further travel and so in February 1848 he sailed on the *Amazon* to Algoa Bay (now known as Port Elizabeth).

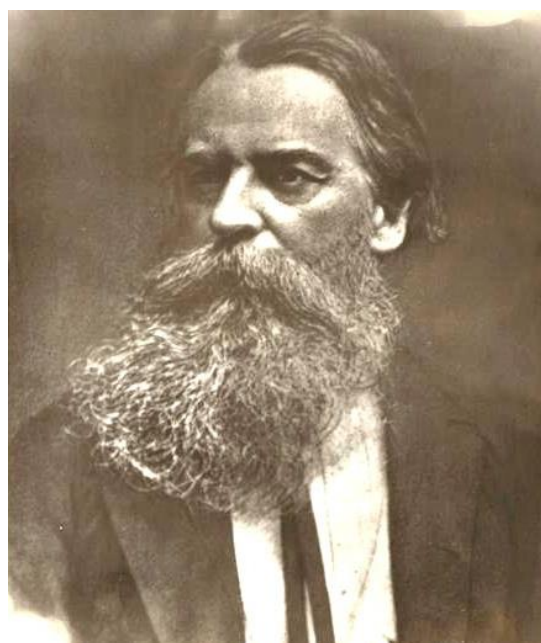
Shortly after his arrival in Algoa Bay, Thomas Baines met William Liddle (aged 25 years) who invited him to join him and his brother George on a three-month journey to the Orange River. On his return from the expedition Thomas Baines (aged 27 years) commenced painting from the sketches taken during that journey.

In February 1850 Joseph McCabe (1816-1865), the explorer, trader, hunter and botanical collector, asked Thomas Baines to join him on a journey of exploration to Lake Ngami (an endorheic lake in Botswana). He agreed. Baines was never simply an artist, but a talented scientific observer who was fascinated by all natural phenomena. This inherent characteristic continued with him during his extensive travels in southern Africa and Australia.

In 1855 Baines then left for Sydney on the *Blue Jacket*. He joined Augustus Charles Gregory's 1855-1857 Royal Geographical Society (RGS) sponsored expedition across Northern Australia as official artist and storekeeper. Baines discovered a tributary of the Victoria River (in the northwest of the Northern Territory) and it was aptly named *Baines River*.

In 1861 Thomas Baines travelled with James Chapman (1831-1872) to north of the Okavango River, crossing Damaraland (now incorporated into present-day Namibia) and reached Walvis Bay. Later they explored the Zambezi River and on 23rd July 1862 they reached the Victoria Falls. It was on this trip that Baines painted some of his famous scenes. By using a stereoscopic camera for the first time, coupled with painting and text, Baines outlined the journey and intricacies of this relatively unexplored territory.

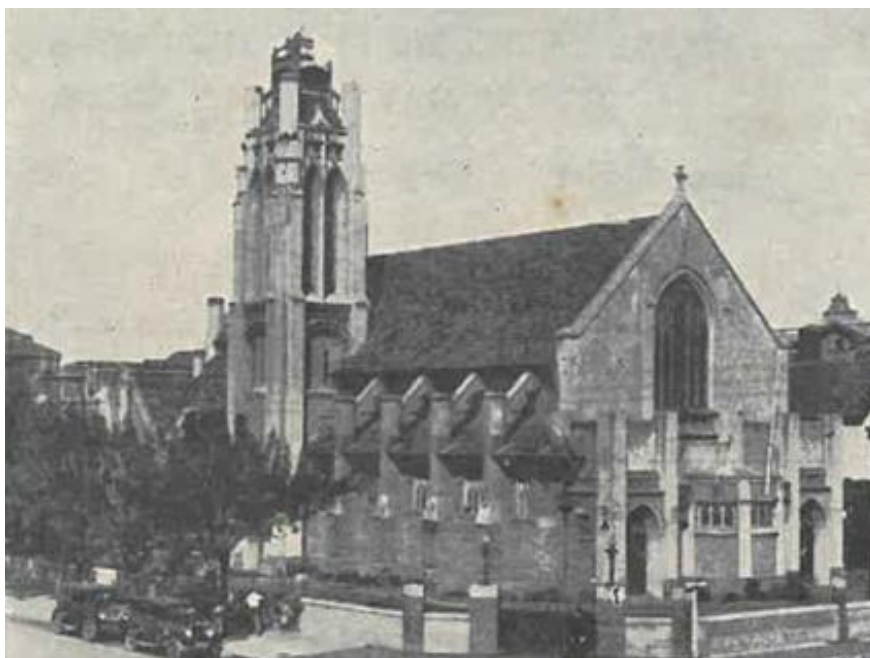
In 1873 Baines attended the coronation of the Zulu king Cetshwayo kaMpande (1826-1884). He compiled a map of the route to Zululand and made sketches of the ceremony. Even though he sent a detailed account of the coronation journey to the Natal Government, Baines received no recognition for his services. Sadly, he had a persistent lack of money (even in death) and the sale of his pictures 'barely kept him from destruction'. Furthermore, his strenuous years of artistry and intrepid exploring activity were now beginning to tell on the 54-year old.



(Image of John Thomas Baines: Source unknown)

Thomas Baines had an aunt, Ann Maria Watson, who owned a boarding house in central Durban. Baines often stayed there free of charge. In April 1875 while Baines was preparing for a visit to Matabeleland (Zimbabwe), he fell ill with dysentery. On 30th April he was moved from his aunt's boarding house to his cousin, James Watson's home (*Lynnville* at 31 Currie Road on Durban's Berea). Baines' condition suddenly deteriorated and he passed away in the early hours of the morning on 8th May. He died intestate and his estate was insolvent.

Eight days after Baines' death, a memorial service was conducted by Rev WE Hunter (who was also from King's Lynn, England), in Durban's historic St Paul's Church (which turned 169 years old in January 2018).



(In 1909 the original St Paul's Church was burnt to the ground. This image was taken in 1934:
St Paul's Church archives)

According to the available records while “crowds thronged to hear the preacher, there was the meagrest response when Richard Vause [1822-1886], the ... Mayor of Durban, appealed for funds to establish some memorial to Baines ... and the few pounds contributed were returned to those who gave them. It was seven years [in 1882] before friends ... set up a stone, surmounted by a Latin cross, over his grave”. This stone was later renewed through efforts of the South Africa National Society and the City of Durban.

It is as a renowned artist that Thomas Baines is best remembered. There can be little doubt that the almost four thousand extant oils, watercolours and sketches by him are a significant contribution to South African art. He was hardly without his pencil and paper and can be considered a prolific South African artist of his time. He was one of the few South African artists who was able to understand and accurately portray the brilliant light and shade of the climate in which he so often found himself.

Baines' paintings, drawings and sketches are his legacy contribution to contemporary South Africa for both the historical record they present and their artistic value. Some of his works can be found in Durban's Killie Campbell Africana Museum (the Campbell Collection has an August 1872 sketch of ships wrecked off the Durban coast) and in the Old Court House Museum, the well-known watercolour of the entrance of the *Conch* and trailing long-boats of British Redcoats into the Bay of Natal in June 1842 can be viewed.



(From a sketch of an eye-witness account, the Thomas Baines painting of the *Conch* and trailing long-tail boats into the Bay of Natal: Local History Museums' Collection)

Baines' artistic works have given generations beyond him an insight into what life was really like in the early colonial settlements of southern Africa and in Australia.

For the centenary of Baines' death, on 18th June 1975 the South African Post Office (SAPO) issued a mint mini-sheet of four stamps to pay tribute to Thomas Baines. Also included in the SAPO issue were a mint set of stamps on an official cover and on a large pictorial cover.



(Paintings by Thomas Baines on a mint mini-sheet of four: Donated to author by Arthur Gammage)

But nowadays sadly, much of Baines' extraordinary life as the King Lynn's adventurous traveller and pictureman, is forgotten in the city of Durban. His gravestone with its Latin cross and dark-green lichen growing at its base, has the inscription 'To mark the resting place of Thomas Baines FRGS. Artist and traveller who was born at Lynn Norfolk 1822. Died 1875'. The gravesite stands in its own octagonal solitude in the Old West Street Cemetery, enveloped by the cacophony from the adjacent taxi rank and showered by Durban's seasonal brilliant sunlight and shade.



(Gravesite for Thomas Baines in the Old West Street Cemetery: Recent image by the author)

This weathered resting place is almost forgotten. However, on the anniversary of his death 143 years ago in the City Of Durban, John Thomas Baines' legacy is still remembered by some.

- Udo Richard AVERWEG an amateur historian. He has no claim to fame

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Rich legacy of a pioneer artist in SA



Udo Richard Averweg remembers the life, travels and work of Thomas Baines, and his Durban connection

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In growing up in this environment and being inspired by the vast expanse of the Fens and the nearby sea, the young Baines could easily have been inspired by a wanderlust for adventure.



ABOVE: Entrance of the Conch into Bay of Natal.



LEFT: John Thomas Baines.



RIGHT: St Paul's Church.



BELOW: Grave site in Old West Street Cemetery.

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