Prologue

FRIDAY, JUNE 30, 1854

A brightly colored boat built for coastal fishing cut through the still waters of the bay, heading towards King's Yard in the inky predawn. The boat's pilot sang to himself while he perched in the wooden bow. Behind him, men with powerful shoulders rowed for the wharf. The boat's clandestine cargo—two women and one man—huddled together at the rear of the narrow, deep-hulled vessel. Their eyes could not yet make out the waterfront, but they knew Freetown was awake. Voices echoed from the shoreline. Here and there a human shape formed out of the haze that shrouded the coast. Barracah strained to bring the docks into clear view. His wife, Langoh, cast an anxious glance back across the depths they had traversed. Bangah tilted her head heavenward and prayed by the pale light of the crescent moon to reach solid ground. Her empty stomach churned with nausea, and she shivered from the damp chill spreading through her wet clothes.

When the boat bumped against the stone quay, Black hands reached down to lift the bewildered trio up to safety. They were told in English and then again in Mende that they were now free. But no matter the language, what could freedom mean to Barracah, Langoh, and Bangah? They had been taken captive as children during regional wars, sold as slaves in their youth, and then sent to labor in the fortress and fields ruled by a white man and his African mistress. One thing that freedom meant, they would soon learn, was that their stories, their testimony, might deny their former captor his own liberty. The words of an African could damn as surely as the words of an Englishman. And the voice of the king of Matakong held no dominion in Freetown.[1]

Introduction

Matakong Island rises above the rocky shallows of the coastline of Guinea about fifty-two miles northwest of Freetown, Sierra Leone. To the extent that Americans and Europeans think about West Africa at all, Matakong lies in an imagined torrid zone marked by blood diamonds, child soldiers, and limbs lopped off by machetes. The truth is more mundane, and far more peaceful. Sierra Leone's civil war (1991–2002) spilled north across Guinea's borders, but the fighting did not leave its mark on Matakong. Even for Guineans, the place remains remote. My visit to this outpost required weeks of preparations and a fraught border crossing, then bouncing over dirt roads for hours, changing punctured tires, crossing makeshift log bridges, and racing along a muddy beach against an incoming tide. Most of the island, three miles or so in circumference, is uninhabited and covered by palm forest dotted with patches of waist-high brush. A few hundred villagers live on Matakong much as they have done since the mid-nineteenth century, when Nathaniel Isaacs, the merchant adventurer whose trail I followed here, built his home on Matakong's elevated bluffs.

The men fish from boats painted in riotous colors. They launch these handcrafted pirogues before sunrise. In the heat of the afternoon, they land and untangle their nets while their wives and daughters crouch over piles of reeking fish innards, gutting and sorting the day's catch. The women smoke the silvery fish over open flames on the shoreline at night. From this crowded bank, footpaths branch uphill. Other pathways wind past tumbledown homes, skirting wooded areas. One of these tracks leads from the mosque—Matakong's largest building by far—to a cinder-block school. Children's singsong voices carry from the structure to the fringe of the forest twenty yards beyond.

This isolated patch of ground is an improbable site for modern Jewish history. Yet here, rising from the damp leaf litter, stands a solitary headstone, carved in Hebrew and decorated with a banana plant motif, still intact and legible after more than 165 years. The gravestone marks the final resting place of Benson Isaacs. He was the elder brother of Nathaniel Isaacs, who once ruled Matakong as his personal fiefdom before being brought low by the enslaved people who escaped his grasp, hostile British authorities, and his own overweening ambitions.

Nathaniel Isaacs wanted a crown of his own. From pauper to prince to king, his fate intertwined with those of the imprisoned Napoleon Bonaparte on St. Helena, King Shaka Zulu in South Africa, and royalty in West Africa who fought against—or profited from—the slave trade. His pursuit of wealth and influence propelled him to represent Her Majesty's Government along the serpentine waterways of Sierra Leone and Guinea. But when it suited him, he allied himself with those who opposed Great Britain's interests. As much as Isaacs' story reveals how European forces conspired against Indigenous Africans, his tale presents a case history of the limits of colonial power and demonstrates how Europeans and Africans cooperated for mutual gain, and often at great cost.

Nathaniel Isaacs can be seen as a cross between an orphaned hero from a Charles Dickens novel of Victorian London and a character from an H. Rider Haggard African adventure. In a strange twist, Isaacs' published volumes left their mark on the work of both these famed authors. Yet Isaacs himself may most resemble the protagonists of Rudyard Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" (1888). In that story, two brothers-in-arms hatch a scheme to establish themselves as sovereigns of an inaccessible territory. Like Isaacs, Kipling's adventurers seek to transcend their class and abandon their past by lording it over supposedly savage peoples. Also like Isaacs, they sign their names to a dubious contract, train the local inhabitants to use European weapons, and despoil the land they appropriate. Their avarice ultimately proves their undoing. Isaacs also resembles real-life adventure capitalists of the nineteenth century who established themselves as sham monarchs the world over: men like Sir James Brooke (sultan of Sarawak, Borneo), Gregor MacGregor (cazique of Poyais, Honduras), William Walker (president of Baja and later Nicaragua), and Josiah Harlan (the prince of Ghor, in today's Afghanistan), who likely served as the inspiration for Kipling's story. Isaacs' career offers far more nuance, but no less drama, than the lives of these men, or Kipling's fable of imperial overreach.

Isaacs possessed many of the traits of the heroes of the imperial romance genre Kipling mastered. He was an intrepid, resourceful, and ambitious Englishman who kept his head about him when all around him were losing theirs. In this way, Isaacs adheres to the imperialist mythology. But he was also duplicitous, exploitative, self-promoting, and casually violent. He emerges as a real-life kinsman to Harry Flashman, the scoundrel-hero of George MacDonald Fraser's long-running series of novels set in the Victorian era. Moreover, Isaacs was Jewish, and therefore only grudgingly acknowledged as white. This narrative history thus treats Isaacs as an imperial antihero. His chameleon-like ability to adapt to varied circumstances, canny pursuit of profit, and multiple loyalties sit uncomfortably close to the fact of his Jewish heritage and to familiar anti-Semitic slights. Just as my recovery of Isaacs' story complicates efforts to read his life in the context of the imperial romance genre, it challenges the construction of a romanticized Jewish history.

The romance of imperialism has waned, thanks in part to postcolonial historiography, though a stubborn tendency to sentimentalize Africa and its inhabitants persists. In "How to Write about Africa," the Kenyan poet and critic Binyavanga Wainaina charges Western authors with employing a host of demeaning clichés in their work.[1] I have taken Wainaina's words to heart and tried to avoid the worst of the blind spots he identifies. This book features no warm-hearted conservationists, no saintly white saviors, no confident interventionist program, no sotto voce moralism, and no glad tidings from a simpler or more "authentic" world.

Nor do the following chapters condescend to the past by imposing contemporary values on it. Nathaniel Isaacs' life yields little in the way of a redemptive message. Instead, his career reveals equal parts benevolence and malevolence. It is the story of one man who acted with others, European and African, to negotiate sometimes opposed and sometimes parallel interests through the transfer of technologies, goods and resources, information, and systems of control that set the stage for the late-nineteenth-century "scramble for Africa." Isaacs was a man living at the cusp of empire and at its geographic limits. My exploration of his life and times illuminates the origins of many of the issues that continue to divide Europe from Africa: classism, ethnocentrism, racism, military adventurism, and economic imperialism. This microhistory of Nathaniel Isaacs opens a window onto the macrohistory of his world and its relevance today.

My book details the odyssey of a Jewish merchant, mercenary, and would-be monarch, of an explorer and author, a lover and fighter, and a nineteenth-century dreamer who played the role of Joseph in Zululand and of Pharaoh in West Africa. It demonstrates how formal and informal British colonialism in Africa intersected with the rise of global capitalism and the creation of what Hannah Arendt referred to as a "phantom world of race," in which the figure of the Jew participates as a secret sharer.[2] That is, Great Britain's encounter with Africa's Indigenous peoples in the nineteenth century was consistently mediated by the image of the Jew, and it was from this encounter with Black Africans that Jews within British society first emerged as white. Ironically, it was the white Jewish Isaacs who promoted the myth of Shaka Zulu, the king who remains a Black African icon.

Isaacs ably narrated his own life in black and white on the printed page, but his character reveals complex shadings of gray. He was sure of his purpose yet uncertain of the methods to achieve it, curious about the peoples and places he encountered while bound by his era's prejudices, proud of his successes yet embarrassed by his origins. His life was replete with innocence and bloodlust, drama on the high seas, bravery and villainy, freedom and slavery, fortune and calamity, and survival against all odds. Yet his story also emerges from the stubborn materiality of the distant past: leather shoes and cotton cloth, hair dye and ivory, beads and bangles, gunpowder and groundnuts, books and maps, the copper-hulled sailing vessels that facilitated global trade, and the red sandstone walls that once held men and women prisoner on Matakong Island.

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I have endeavored to use the words of Nathaniel Isaacs and his contemporaries—African and European—wherever appropriate. The language of distant eras often sounds dated today and may offend sensitive ears. At times the documents and sources consulted—many gathered from archives in England, St. Helena, South Africa, and Sierra Leone—support one another; at times they contradict one another. In the latter cases, I have either selected the most plausible account of events or let the contradictions in the evidentiary record speak for themselves. European writers, Zulu informants, and West African witnesses all provide their perspectives. Those who prefer not to hear the voices of European colonial actors and the African men and women who abetted conquest, or those who suffered from its depredations, should turn elsewhere for more consoling visions of the past.

The primary materials I draw on include Isaacs' *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa*, the memoirs of others, Indigenous oral histories, government records, personal correspondence, medical and anthropological texts, grammar school primers, guidebooks, shipping registers and account ledgers, newspaper articles and long-form journalism, missionaries' reports, encyclopedia and dictionary entries, poetry and prose, maps and images, and works of political economy, as well as legal briefs and sworn testimonies. I have had to immerse myself in unexpected minutiae: the tactics of Zulu warfare and nineteenth-century elephant hunting, the economics of West African peanut farming, missionary activity in Sierra Leone, shipboard commerce, and government-backed piracy. My research has taken me to each of the locales I describe: Canterbury, England; the island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic; the lands of the Zulu Kingdom in present-day South Africa; Sierra Leone's bustling capital of Freetown; and Matakong Island. The notes typically offer citations rather than further explanation or commentary. Most readers can avoid becoming entangled in the academic rigging and instead take their bearings from the narrative. Specialists will ideally read this work as the biography of a man and a history of his times, and I hope they will benefit from my references to archival documents and published sources.

Part 1 of the book deals with Isaacs' trajectory from England to St. Helena and on to South Africa. Part 2 focuses on his time in West Africa and his return to England. The first chapter, "Jews and Other Savages," traces Isaacs' family history, his peregrinations from Canterbury to St. Helena, and to his shipwreck at Port Natal, today's city of Durban. This chapter also situates the precariousness of Isaacs' social position in the context of Georgian-era anti-Semitism. Chapter 2, "Strange Surprising Adventures," follows the castaway Isaacs as he encounters the Zulu people and King Shaka and attempts to survive amid uncertainty and upheaval. This chapter explains Isaacs' decision to bear arms for Shaka and how his bravery in battle was rewarded with a controversial land grant and honorific title. Chapter 3 centers on Isaacs' relationship with the Zulu king, his ivory-hunting forays, and the assassination of Shaka. It also examines Isaacs' influence on later Zulu and European representations of the legendary king. Chapter 4 details Isaacs' escort of a Zulu diplomatic mission to British authorities in the Cape Colony, the chaos following Shaka's assassination, and the rule of King Dingane. It also outlines the networks of African and transatlantic trade in which Isaacs participated.

Chapter 5 describes Isaacs' paternal relationship with his teenage Jewish apprentice, Ben Moss, and their voyages along the West African coast, principally to hazardous ports in today's Mauritania. In addition, it examines the reception of Isaacs' *Travels and Adventures* in England and its connection to various schemes promoting the colonization of South Africa. Chapter 6 chronicles Isaacs' activities in Sierra Leone as a merchant and a colonial commissioner dispatched to local rulers to negotiate an end to persistent slave dealing. Sierra Leone's origins in abolitionist activity are the background against which Isaacs consolidated his hold on Matakong Island. Chapter 7 details accusations against Isaacs for slaveholding and subsequent efforts to prosecute him. This chapter draws on transcripts of the recently discovered testimony of men and women held captive by Isaacs. Chapter 8 recounts Isaacs' final years on Matakong and in England and describes the indirect influence of his *Travels and Adventures* on Charles Dickens and H. Rider Haggard. A postscript explores Isaacs' surprising afterlife in early-twentieth-century Jewish nationalist discourse and offers considerations of what his checkered career may mean for readers today.