



## The Natal Government Railways and Their Productions of 'the Zulu'

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The photograph 'At the Summit – Drakensberg' (Figure 1) is one of many contained in uncatalogued albums in the Transnet Heritage Library.<sup>1</sup> This library boasts an archive of images collected, bought and commissioned by various railway companies throughout the history of rail in South Africa from around 1860 to the present.

From the 1870s both the Natal Government Railways (NGR) and the Cape Government Railways (CGR) used images like these for the purposes of attracting settlers and promoting tourism. Reproductions can be found in railway guides, magazines and tourist publications directly associated with the railways. They were also distributed throughout the British Empire in a multitude of forms, including postcards, collectable prints, calendars, stereoscopes, lantern slide shows and exhibitions. Images of 'natives' and 'Zulus', especially the iconic warrior and bare-breasted maiden, featured prominently.

From the Union of South Africa in 1910 until the creation of the state-run South African Tourist Corporation (SATOUR) in 1947, it was the South African Railways and Harbours (SAR&H) that controlled the production of media associated with tourism. This essay makes a contribution to the larger discussion of how nineteenth-century photographic images created the conventions that were used to promote tourism and shape the imagination of people across the British Empire. I explore these conventions and the attitudes they reflected with specific reference to photographs I found in the Transnet Heritage Library in albums and in Natal railway guides.

### Natal Government Railways

In June 1860, the Natal Railway Company opened a short line from the centre of Durban to the Point. This was the first railway operation undertaken in southern Africa. From this moment onwards railways became an integral part of South Africa's history.<sup>2</sup> By 1867 another Natal railway line stretched as far as Umgeni.<sup>3</sup> In 1876, this privately owned railway company became Natal Government Railways (NGR). The NGR reached

Figure 1 (opposite).  
'At the Summit - Drakensberg'.  
Photograph 44368 in an album  
from the Transnet Heritage Library

Figure 2 (opposite).  
'Fig Trees at the Tugela' [sic].  
Unnumbered photograph in an  
album from the Transnet Heritage  
Library

1 I first encountered the Transnet Heritage Library in 2011 when Eric Conradie, its ex-head, approached me in my capacity as an educational media developer to discuss the possibilities of a digital archive project. He was convinced that the Transnet Heritage Library was a national asset and a forgotten and neglected part of South Africa's heritage. In his view it needed to be digitised if it was to survive and offer value to researchers, media developers, educators, train enthusiasts and the general public. Together with Yolanda Meyer, information specialist at the Transnet Freight Rail Knowledge Centre, and the exhibition company, Totem Media, we began an informal discussion about the possibility of a developing a digital archive and exhibitions based on it.

2 Cape Town followed with its first railway in 1862.

3 Umgeni was then a stone quarry supplying the Durban port.