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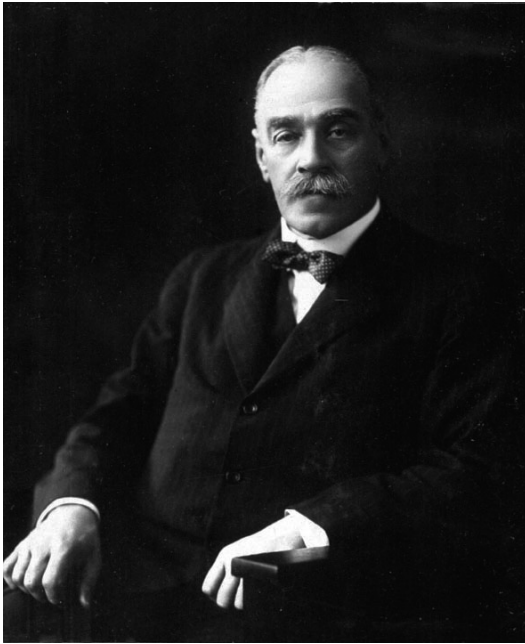
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Sir Matthew Nathan, Governor of Queensland, 1925. Courtesy of the Queensland State Archives, Digital Image ID 3769

The first Jewish governor in the British Empire, Sir Matthew Nathan: An “outsider” in Africa and Ireland

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Lieutenant Colonel Sir Matthew Nathan was an unusual figure in the British colonial services: governor of the colonies of Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, Hong Kong, and Natal and later Permanent Under-Secretary at the Irish Office in Dublin Castle between 1914 and 1916, Nathan was the first Jewish governor in the British Empire. In his important survey of the role of Jews in the heyday of the empire, David Feldman asks, “what bearing did the British Empire have on the Jews, or Jews on the British Empire? The silence of scholarship might lead us to answer ‘not very much’”.¹ Stephanie Chasin, writing a year later, also claims that

1 David Feldman, “Jews and the British Empire c. 1900”, *History Workshop Journal* 63, no. 1 (2007): 70–89.

historians have paid little attention to Jews in imperial affairs.² The intention of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of the role of Jews in imperial service through focusing on the career of a specific individual.³

Matthew Nathan came to Africa as a member of the ruling class of the British Empire, but his effectiveness as a governor was constrained both by the constitutional limitations of the responsible government system and by the reactions of elected settler ministers and appointed colonial officials to his faith and politics. Those Jews who were British imperial servants during the heyday of empire, manifested “diverse” forms of Jewish identity, ranging from virtually non-existent, to nationalist and religious. Matthew Nathan stood between the two poles.⁴

Nathan’s unusual individual career straddled military, colonial, and home civil services, including the top administrative spot in the hotbed of Ireland. He was not the only family member to enter imperial service: one of his brothers, Sir Nathaniel Nathan, became Attorney General and Chief Justice of Trinidad, while another, Sir Robert Nathan, became Private Secretary to the Viceroy of India.⁵ Nevertheless, it was Africa that loomed large in Matthew’s personal development, from military service in Sierra Leone and Egypt, to colonial service in West Africa and Southern Africa. These were spliced together by his years as Secretary of the Colonial Defence Committee (the CDC), where significant attention was given to African matters.

Nathan governed Natal at a time when there was no deep-rooted local sense of identity; Edgar Brookes described the colony as being “much less part of the wider South Africa than it is today. With its great sugar plantations along the coast and its very British atmosphere it was

2 Stephanie Chasin, “Citizens of Empire” (Ph.D. diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2008), 1.

3 My thanks are due to the Helen Suzman Foundation, Johannesburg, and its director, Francis Antonie, and to the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, University of Cape Town, for sponsoring my travel and attendance at the “Jews in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa” conference, held in Cape Town, 22–24 August 2016, at which this paper was presented. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the “Globalizing the Rising: 1916 in International Context” conference, held at University College Dublin, Ireland, 5–6 February 2016, and has been published in the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* in a revised form.

4 Chasin, “Citizens of Empire”, 4.

5 Feldman, “Jews and the British Empire”, 72.

more like a large West Indian island than a part of Africa”.⁶ By contrast, Nathan administered Ireland at a time when there was an increasing, even tumultuous, sense of Irish identity. In both situations his Jewish roots had an influence on events, despite the extent to which he manufactured an identity as an English gentleman, as he was an outsider to that caste. It is also important to explore how he finessed the two personae. I would argue that there are, in fact, five facets (none of them mutually exclusive), to Sir Matthew Nathan: Nathan as Soldier; Nathan as Governor; Nathan as Bureaucrat (or apparatchik); Nathan as Gentleman and Nathan as Jew.

Contemporaries such as John Redmond, the leading parliamentary Irish nationalist, among many others, regarded Nathan as “admirably” efficient, while Herbert Samuel (the first professing Jew in the British cabinet and later the High Commissioner of the British-mandated territory of Palestine) described him as a “very able administrator”.⁷ How he lived up to this praise in Pietermaritzburg and in Dublin Castle remains to be seen.

Historians have echoed Redmond and Samuel. In the Natal context, Shula Marks described Nathan as a man of “considerable tact and experience”; and in the Irish context, Leon O’Broin described him as having “unlimited initiative and drive and an unequalled capacity for working hard over long stretches. In fact, he was a model public official”. Anthony Haydon, Nathan’s biographer, is more ambivalent, describing him as being “among the last and most esteemed of Britain’s ‘amateur’ administrators”, but Haydon characterises Nathan’s “careerist” mentality as one of his limitations.⁸

I will argue that, by 1916, the battering and insults that Nathan had received from racist and antisemitic settlers and ministers in Natal had sapped his sense of initiative and enhanced his careerist mentality. This influenced events in Dublin at a critical time: without Nathan’s cautious “bureaucrat-ism”, the Easter Rising might have been nipped in the bud and

6 Edgar Brookes, *South African Pilgrimage* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1977), 2, quoted in Karel Schoeman, *Imperiale Somer: Suid Afrika tussen Oorlog en Unie, 1902–1910* (Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2015), 332.

7 Herbert Samuel, *Memoirs* (London: Cresset Press, 1945), 78. For Redmond’s remark see Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013), 131.

8 Shula Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion: The 1906–1908 Disturbances in Natal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 250; Leon O’Broin, *Dublin Castle and the 1916 Rising* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1966), 13; Anthony P. Haydon, *Sir Matthew Nathan: British Colonial Governor and Civil Servant* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1976), 3.

Irish nationalism and its republican dynamic might have taken a different course. So the bigotry and antisemitism Nathan experienced in Natal contributed to the birth of the “terrible beauty” in Ireland so movingly described by W. B. Yeats in his poem “Easter 1916”.⁹

Multiple identities: class, caste, and faith

According to Donal Lowry, the redefinition of Englishness and Britishness in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was very much the product of two “non-British” politicians, Edmund Burke (Irish), and Benjamin Disraeli (Jewish).¹⁰ Outsiders, assimilated into an identity, often assert that identity more dogmatically than insiders who assume it more comfortably. A South African example is the extreme Afrikaner nationalism and “ideological certitude” espoused by the Dutch-born Hendrik Verwoerd, who had no ancestral links to the Great Trek or to the burghers who took on Great Britain in the Anglo-Boer War. Henry Kenney described Verwoerd as an outsider who “took the way typical of a convert: he set himself to be an Afrikaner of Afrikaners”.¹¹

Matthew Nathan’s sense of identity was profoundly influenced by growing up when the British Empire was at its height and its ideology and sense of mission were predominant and pervasive, even for those not born as imperialists. Nathan, one of nine children, was born in 1862, in west London, to a moderately wealthy Jewish couple, Jonah and Miriam Nathan, at a time when legal and social restrictions against Jews were crumbling, although education in the great public schools was still closed to them. The Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, led the way in the social integration of Jews in Great Britain at the time. This was reputedly because Jewish financiers, such as Sir Ernest Cassel and the Rothschilds, had repeatedly bailed him out when Queen Victoria kept the royal purse strings too tightly closed for the prince to be able to sustain his extravagant lifestyle.¹² Jonah Nathan was the great-grandson of a Jewish quill-maker

9 W. B. Yeats, “Easter 1916”, *W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: PaperMac, 1962), 93–5.

10 Donal Lowry, “The Crown, Empire Loyalty and the Assimilation of Non-British White Subjects in the British World: An Argument against ‘Ethnic Determinism’”, in *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity*, ed. Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 96–120.

11 Henry Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid: H. F. Verwoerd, an Appraisal* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1980), 20.

12 Jane Ridley, *Bertie: A Life of Edward VII* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), 271.

who migrated from Germany to Britain in the eighteenth century, so the family was remote from the late nineteenth-century wave of persecuted Jewish immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe who settled in the East End of London.¹³ This lineage made Matthew a fifth-generation Briton or Englishman. Miriam, Matthew's strong-willed and ambitious mother, had high hopes for her sons and particularly for Matthew, who was the apple of her eye. According to Haydon, she planted in her children "an attitude to their faith which was a careful compromise between the duty to avoid total apostasy and the social necessity of playing down their Jewish extraction."¹⁴

Matthew Nathan was privately tutored (along Anglican public-school lines) and sat the entry examinations for the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich (for engineers), rather than for Sandhurst, the academy for infantry and cavalry. He came second in the examinations and then excelled in every subject at the academy, being awarded the Sword of Honour for exemplary conduct and the Pollock Medal for scholarly proficiency. Nathan was commissioned as a Royal Engineer in 1880 and was thus, incontrovertibly, an officer and a gentleman.¹⁵

His nephew, Edward Nathan, described him as upright, square-shouldered, powerfully built with blue eyes that twinkled with intelligence and good humour. Both men and women were attracted by his personality and magnetic charm. Above all was his loyalty to the state, which "may perhaps be the reason he never married".¹⁶ These days one may speculate that Nathan was gay, although he had a variety of women friends including intellectuals and writers such as Mary Kingsley and Violet Asquith, the daughter of the Liberal Prime Minister at the outbreak of the First World War.¹⁷ Speculation aside, Nathan's personal life was scandal-free and he appears to have been a genuine loner.

The image of the Jew as outsider has become a common trope in Jewish history¹⁸ and it is echoed by Haydon in Nathan's case:

Denied by birth and lack of public school ties, the influential connections which opened the door to easy promotion in the public and military

13 Haydon, *Nathan*, 6–8.

14 *Ibid.*, 7.

15 *Ibid.*, 9–10.

16 Matthew Nathan, *Annals of West Coker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), preface by E. J. Nathan, xxii–xxiii.

17 Haydon, *Nathan*, 19.

18 Chasin, "Citizens of Empire", 15.

services, Matthew Nathan was obliged to make his own way in life. That he chose to do so within the conditions set down by a class to which he could not claim automatic entry is the key to his character and the goals he set for himself.¹⁹

However, this should not be overstated; much of Nathan's sense of isolation came from his personal situation as a bachelor which handicapped him in his various official positions, particularly his governorships as these almost necessitated the presence of a wife. That Nathan enjoyed a considerable measure of success, despite this handicap, is a tribute to his personal charm and his professional abilities, but this takes the story too far forward.

Despite his achievements at Woolwich, Nathan's early military career was humdrum: provincial duties in the garrison at York, planning and supervising harbour defences in Freetown in Sierra Leone, construction work far behind the lines in Egypt in the Nile delta, when the army was advancing far up the Nile on Khartoum in the Sudan. He participated in an obscure and minor campaign in north-east India when glory was to be found in the north-west on the borders of Afghanistan. This latter episode did, however, entitle him to a campaign medal to decorate his otherwise bare military tunic.

In 1892 Nathan joined the committee of the Anglo-Jewish Association and interested himself in the affairs of the Jewish community in Persia and the promotion of education for Jews in the Balkans and in parts of the Ottoman Empire. But this was a mild interest, a fulfilment of a community duty rather than a passion.²⁰ At this juncture in his career, most of his military service, outside Whitehall, had been on the African continent, in West Africa and Egypt. Most of his colonial service was also to be on the African continent, but to make the transition from soldier to imperial overlord meant that he had to be noticed by the decision-makers of the day.

His first big break came when he was appointed Secretary of the Colonial Defence Committee (CDC) in Whitehall in 1895. Here his analytical abilities, attention to detail, prodigious capacity for hard work, allied with his personality and charm, made a real impact on generals and politicians alike. He had learned the art of pulling strings from his mother and sought, assiduously, to ingratiate himself with his superiors and

¹⁹ Haydon, Nathan, 6.

²⁰ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Nathan 989: 147, Letters to Nathan from the Anglo-Jewish Association, 11, 15, 34.

with potential patrons. Haydon has aptly characterized his persona and his ambitions as “in part, natural, in part, cultivated, with a reputation for reliability and circumspection that grew from a military disposition to *seek directives from above* [my emphasis], but that was matched by an ambition to rise from below.” This was an ambition which he had acquired as a member of Britain’s aspiring Jewish minority. Despite his religious background, his bachelor status, and the speed of his rise to high office, Nathan remained a typical administrator with a zeal for “conserving the imperial *status quo*”.²¹

It was as secretary of the CDC that Nathan first came across the issue of Natal and reflected on the imperial perceptions of Zulu martial prowess. As a newly minted army major in 1898, he prepared a memorandum on the possibilities of using locally recruited troops in imperial military services and remarked, almost wistfully, that: “The Zulus from Natal and Zululand form perhaps the finest material in the Empire for military service, but it has recently been decided that political considerations do not permit of a force for Imperial service being raised from them.”²²

Imperial debut in West Africa

The CDC, facing problems in West African colonies, looked with favour on their secretary who had local knowledge and who was regarded as a safe pair of hands. Nathan was despatched as acting governor to Sierra Leone and then to a permanent appointment in the Gold Coast. He acknowledged his religious faith in Freetown by taking the oath of office wearing his helmet and with his hand on the Old Testament, and he used his faith to shield himself from involvement in competing Christian interests and controversies. He also favoured the “dignified” local Muslim community and encouraged the establishment of Muslim schools.²³

In Sierra Leone, as a young and enthusiastic acting governor, Nathan conducted himself decisively, courageously, and sensitively to quell local disturbances. He even walked the streets of Freetown remonstrating in person with rioters.²⁴ There was a Colonial Office dictum that the best governors were men who, while not necessarily exceptionally brilliant,

21 Haydon, *Nathan*, 3.

22 NA (National Archives, Kew), Cabinet papers: CAB 8/2, Colonial Defence Committee, Memoranda, 1898–1900, Secret No. 173M, “Colonial Garrisons: Utilization of native troops”, memorandum drafted by M. Nathan, 17 March 1899.

23 Haydon, *Nathan*, 49–50.

24 *Ibid.*, 46.

combined fair administrative ability with common sense, tact, decision, worldly knowledge, and “above all, the power of exercising personal influence”.²⁵ The early promise that Nathan was showing appeared to demonstrate that he had these qualities in abundance.

Nathan was sent from Sierra Leone to the Gold Coast in 1900 to calm a rebellion and served there until 1903, thus avoiding the Anglo-Boer War raging in South Africa. Sir Frederick Hodgson, Nathan’s predecessor, had provoked a war with the powerful Asante Kingdom (more commonly known in colonial times as the Ashanti Kingdom), by deposing their king, the Asantehene, and by demanding to seat himself on the Golden Stool, the sacred symbol of the unity of the kingdom.²⁶

The “War of the Golden Stool” embarrassed the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, who faced searching questions in the House of Commons on the topic. He prevaricated and denied that the uprising had been directly related to the Golden Stool and generally conducted a withdrawal behind a smokescreen of Colonial Office evasions.²⁷ Before the year was out, young Major Matthew Nathan (aged thirty-seven) had replaced Hodgson as the governor.

Nathan’s first task was to bring an end to the War of the Golden Stool and save the British government from further embarrassment. He resolutely rejected the advice of the elderly King of Bekwai, who suggested that half a dozen Asante rebel leaders should be hanged in front of the residency in Kumasi.²⁸ Instead, Nathan ordered that the rebels be exiled to the Seychelles and his report to the Colonial Office demonstrated a clear grasp of the factors underlying the uprising: “A complicated system of administration, hallowed by antiquity and historic precedents, which our ignorance and policy have alike tended to break down, and a deep rooted superstition which we are unable to understand and from which our presence in the country has further detached a proportion of the people, further help to make our rule distasteful to the Ashanti.”²⁹ This remark could sum up British overlordship in any number of colonial situations,

25 Ibid., 30.

26 David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana: The Rise of Gold Coast Nationalism, 1950–1928* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 318.

27 NA, Colonial Office papers, CO 96/366: Parliamentary Questions, 17 May and 3 Aug. 1900, Mr Hedderwick MP, note to Mr Antrobus.

28 CO 96/378: Confidential Dispatch, 25 March 1901, Nathan to Chamberlain. See also Kimble, *Political History of Ghana*, 320.

29 CO 96/378: Confidential Dispatch, 19 March 1901, Nathan to Chamberlain. See also Kimble, *Political History of Ghana*, 322.

including Ireland. Nathan moved swiftly to calm the situation in the Gold Coast, balancing imperial control with concessions, lightening taxes, and dropping the demand for the Golden Stool. Strangely enough, after he was posted to Natal, he presented what purported to be the Golden Stool to the new museum in Pietermaritzburg.³⁰

With one rebellion behind him, Sir Matthew Nathan (knighted in 1902, but still with the modest army rank of major), left West Africa in 1904 for the prestigious post of Governor of Hong Kong with plaudits from his superiors raining down on him. Sir Bernard Holland, the private secretary to Lord Elgin, the new Liberal Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote to him stating: "You are one of the Governors from whom we do not hear very much, a sign of merit".³¹

Regrettably for the unmarried Nathan, his term in Hong Kong was to be curtailed. A governorship was needed for the newly married and high-flying Sir Frederick Lugard: thus Nathan was moved sideways to Natal.³² Whitehall believed that the emollient Nathan was better placed than the pushy Lugard to pacify the Zulu, placate the self-ruling settlers and shepherd suspicious Natal through the negotiation process into a new and united South Africa. Some seven years after he arrived in Pietermaritzburg, Nathan was sent to Dublin to pacify Irish nationalists, placate Protestant Unionists, and shepherd in Home Rule. The complexities he faced in Natal foreshadowed the difficulties he would face in Ireland.

Natal post-Zulu rising:
gentleman governor versus antisemitic ministers

In the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War, the Colony of Natal (which had received responsible government in 1893) was preoccupied with internal political and economic problems and the imposition of a new poll tax provoked an African rebellion in 1906. The popular name applied to the revolt was the Bambatha Rebellion, after Chief Bambatha Zondi, but the suspicious settler rulers in Pietermaritzburg quickly convinced themselves that the guiding spirit was Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo, the son of the late Cetshwayo kaMpande, the last independent Zulu king. Back in Britain, the newly elected Liberal Government was exasperated by the

30 Bill Guest, *The Natal Museum in a Changing South Africa: 1904–2004* (Pietermaritzburg: National Museum, 2006), 32.

31 Ms. Nathan 989: 333, Holland to Nathan, 1 March 1905.

32 Haydon, Nathan, 120–21.

brutal conduct of the Natal settler ministry in suppressing the rebellion and Lord Elgin personally selected Matthew Nathan to govern the unruly colony. Shula Marks is of the opinion that one possible reason for Nathan's appointment as Governor of Natal was as a deliberate "snub" to the colonial leadership. Not only was he Jewish but he was also a Liberal who shook hands with Africans!³³

Nathan (now a lieutenant colonel despite deep War Office reservations over his lack of actual military experience) succeeded Sir Henry McCallum as the governor in September 1907. McCallum had been caught between settler ministers ruthlessly attempting to suppress the rebellion and Whitehall officials attempting to encourage more humane treatment of the rebels. Some five thousand rebels were tried in the field by drumhead courts-martial and an initial batch of twelve rebels were sentenced to be executed by firing squad.³⁴

After the first two rebels were shot, Elgin (supported by his junior minister, none other than Winston Churchill) ordered the suspension of the executions, telegraphing that:

Continued executions under martial law certain to excite strong criticism here [in Britain], and as His Majesty's Government are retaining troops in Colony and will be asked to assent to Act of Indemnity, necessary to regularize the actions taken, trial of these murder cases by civil court greatly to be preferred. I must impress upon you necessity of utmost caution in this matter, and you should suspend executions until I have had the opportunity of considering your further observations.³⁵

The local ministry, headed by Charles Smythe, refused the Secretary of State's appeal and McCallum was forced to suspend the executions using prerogative powers. Smythe and his ministers resigned and a constitutional crisis blew up. Telegrams flew, not just between South Africa and London but across the empire, as other colonies with responsible government supported Natal and Elgin was forced to back down.³⁶

33 Emeritus Professor Shula Marks (SOAS, University of London), personal communication, 15 Jan. 2016.

34 John Lambert, "From Independence to Rebellion: African Society in Crisis, c. 1880–1910", in *Natal and Zululand from Earliest Times to 1910*, ed. Andrew Duminy and Bill Guest (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1989), 373–401.

35 James Stuart, *A History of the Zulu Rebellion 1906 and of Dinuzulu's Arrest, Trial and Expatriation* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1913), 151–2.

36 *Ibid.*, 153.

At least a dozen rebels were then publicly executed by firing squad, with the commander of the Natal Colonial forces, Colonel Duncan Mackenzie, regretting that women were not shot as well.³⁷ When Nathan arrived, he described Mackenzie as a man dedicated to “governing the natives through fear” and as a “dangerous counsellor” for the ministers.³⁸ Matthew Nathan left for Natal in September 1907 determined to find a compromise between the settler government’s obsession with security and Whitehall’s more enlightened views, but he ended up temporizing and bowing to the views of his settler ministers as he subordinated “principle to expediency”.³⁹ He had no illusions about the difficulties he faced and told Churchill: “what we know to be theoretically right we know also to be practically impossible and all we can hope for is to impress on a convenient opportunism some permanent if slight tendency towards a better state of things”⁴⁰ – certainly not the ringing declaration that an enthusiastic new governor might be expected to make.

Natal was where Nathan encountered the fiercest antisemitism in his career. It began before he arrived when Mrs Cook, who had been recommended as housekeeper at Government House, firmly declined the post.⁴¹ It ended two years later with a boycott of his farewell function by the senior civil servants of the colony. Sir Matthew Nathan was received on his arrival in Durban with full ceremonial: a guard of honour and a band from the Norfolk Regiment paraded; the colonial premier, ministers, and mayors doffed top hats and made speeches. The *South African Jewish Chronicle* gave comprehensive coverage of the event, although the Jewish community of Durban strategically decided to participate in the general official welcoming ceremonies rather than hold a special one of their own.⁴²

The Jewish community in Natal had its origins in the period prior to the large-scale migrations from Eastern Europe and even before Natal became

37 Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, 189–90.

38 Ms. Nathan 989: 368, Nathan to High Commissioner (Lord Selborne), 3 and 21 Jan. 1908. See also Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, 189.

39 Haydon, *Nathan*, 128.

40 Ms. Nathan 989: 368, Nathan to Churchill, 25 Aug. 1907.

41 PAR (Pietermaritzburg Archival Repository), KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Archives Service, Colonial Secretary’s Office papers: CSO 4929/1907, telegram, 5 July 1907, Agent General Natal to Sir Matthew Nathan.

42 PAR, Prime Minister’s papers, PM 64, Minute Papers 389–605, 1907: PM 480/1907, Arrival of Sir Matthew Nathan – “Natal’s New Jewish Governor”, extract from *South African Jewish Chronicle*, n.d., p. 201.

a British colony in the 1840s. The first Jewish person recorded to have set foot at Port Natal (as early as 1825) was a teenage boy, Nathaniel Isaacs, a cousin of Saul Solomon, later a prominent liberal figure in Cape colonial politics.⁴³ In the 1840s, Jonas Bergthiel, a German Jew, established the Natal Cotton Company and arranged for German immigrants (largely Lutheran) from Hanover to settle in Natal.⁴⁴ By 1874 Durban had an established Jewish community, with a synagogue in 1884.⁴⁵ The immigration of Eastern European, particularly Lithuanian, Jews to South Africa, arranged in part by the charitable Poor Jews Temporary Shelter in the East End of London, had been increasing steadily by the time Nathan arrived to govern Natal.⁴⁶ However, the local community's institutions were still governed by Anglo-Jewry.

Why did the prime minister's office carefully file away the reports of the *South African Jewish Chronicle*, rather than the reports from the mainstream colonial newspapers such as the *Natal Witness* or the *Natal Mercury*? This may have been an early indication of the antisemitic views of the premier, Sir Frederic Moor. In nervous Natal, where the white settlers ruled over a large African majority, Jews, particularly those of Eastern European origins, were accused of harming labour and race relations because they supplied alcohol to black workers. The colonial legislature was determined to prevent the debauchery of Johannesburg from spreading to Durban, which was where the colony's Jewish population was largely concentrated.⁴⁷ Small wonder that the Jews of Durban did not wish to stand out by giving a special welcome to Sir Matthew Nathan. However, as was rapidly demonstrated, the Jewish show of respect was more genuine than the official pleasantries mouthed by settler notables when the new governor arrived. In November 1907, Nathan, attended by Frederick Moor, met messengers from Prince Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo and that staunch friend of the Zulu royal house, Miss Harriette Colenso, and offered them assurances of good will. Nathan reported to Elgin: "I sent a message to him [Dinuzulu] that my desire was for the peace of Zululand and the

43 Louis Herrman, "Nathaniel Isaacs", *Natalia*, 4 (1974): 19–21.

44 Bill Guest, "The New Economy", in Duminy and Guest, *Natal and Zululand*, 302. Bergthiel is also claimed by the South African German community as one of their most important early pioneers.

45 Louis Herrman, *A History of the Jews in South Africa* (Johannesburg: SA Jewish Board of Deputies, 1935), 271.

46 Feldman, "Jews and the British Empire", 73.

47 Milton Shain, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1994), 53.

happiness of its people, and that if he gave me active support in securing these, I would protect him.”⁴⁸

Barely a month or so later, Nathan was confronted by a demand from Moor that he sign a proclamation of martial law over Zululand so that the government could safely arrest Dinuzulu. This flew in the face of the governor’s promises of protection and placed Nathan in a real dilemma: as governor, constitutional convention required that he act in accordance with ministerial advice, but he was also required to uphold imperial policy and Whitehall did not approve of the aggressive and repressive measures taken by the Natal government. This ministry included men who systematically sought to undermine Nathan and to negate the promises he had given as the king’s representative and as a gentleman, to the messengers of the Zulu royal house. Nathan temporized: he signed the martial law proclamation but submitted a formal written protest. The Colonial Office thought that this would prove “awkward” if and when it became public knowledge. Nathan then tried to mend relations between London and Pietermaritzburg by suggesting that Elgin send a note to Moor expressing satisfaction that Natal was attempting to put native policy on a “more satisfactory footing”. This effort was brusquely rebuffed by both Elgin and his Permanent Under-Secretary, Sir Francis Hopwood, who remarked that he saw no reason “to bridge by platitude” the real differences of opinion between London and Natal.⁴⁹

Sir Matthew also tried to soften the martial law proclamation by getting the Natal ministers to agree to release the two thousand or so rebel prisoners still in custody. He firmly believed that Moor had given him such an undertaking, but Mr Thomas F. Carter, the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, refused to sanction the release. While Moor was vaguely sympathetic to African concerns, half his ministers, led by Carter (an irascible man not noted for his knowledge of the law),⁵⁰ took a hard line and forced a confrontation with the governor.⁵¹

The governor grew increasingly frustrated with the Natal “settler regime” and threatened to resign over other issues which, while they may

48 PAR, Government House (GH) Papers: GH 1283, Copies of Secret Dispatches to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 11 Nov. 1904–5 Feb. 1909, Natal Secret, Nathan to Elgin, 15 Nov. 1907, 131–2.

49 CO 179/242: telegrams, Nathan to Elgin, 3 Dec. and 6 Dec. 1907. See also minutes by Hopwood, 7 Dec., and Elgin, 8 Dec., on telegram of 6 Dec. 1907. See also Haydon, Nathan, 132.

50 Stephen Girvin, “An Evaluation of the Judge Presidency of John Dove Wilson of Natal (1910–1930)” (LLM thesis, University of Natal, 1987), 17.

51 Haydon, Nathan, 134–5.

have been aggravating, were not as fundamental as the proclamation of martial law.⁵² Nathan summarized his views of his ministers in a letter to Lord Selborne (the High Commissioner): “Far too much of the time, energy and money of the small community of this colony seems to be taken up in governing themselves badly . . . and the native population worse.”⁵³ When Nathan used his prerogative powers and commuted the death sentences on two rebels, acknowledging to Whitehall that this was against local ministerial advice,⁵⁴ Carter took his revenge by sabotaging the governor’s planned visit to Zululand to observe the operation of martial law.⁵⁵

The Moor ministry also made strenuous efforts to limit and control contacts between the governor and the African population which provoked a protest petition from the AmaKholwa, the educated and westernized African Christian community, led by the Reverend John Dube, the newspaper editor and founder of what later became the African National Congress.⁵⁶ Nathan had the respect of the AmaKholwa and Dube’s newspaper, *Imvo*, praised him as the “most able and brilliant . . . enlightened and beneficent” governor. Nathan even visited the Ohlange Institute in Inanda at Dube’s invitation and opened a new building.⁵⁷

The Bambatha Rebellion emphasized Natal’s economic and political weakness and gave its white politicians little room to manoeuvre in the political currents flowing towards South African union. The Transvaal leaders, Louis Botha and Jan Smuts, were infinitely more intelligent and capable men than their Natal counterparts, described by Nicholas Mansergh as indolent and inept.⁵⁸ As a sop to the federalists in Natal, the convention met in Durban which meant that Nathan, as Governor of Natal, presided over the opening ceremony, delivering an appropriately optimistic speech. He became acquainted with all the white leaders of South Africa in the years leading up to Union and attended more sittings of the convention than any other imperial official, with the exception of Selborne, himself.

52 Ibid.

53 Cited in Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, 19.

54 GH 1274, Memoranda, copies of Annexures to Dispatches to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sept.–Dec. 1907, 23 Dec. 1907, Nathan to Elgin, 69–70, 82.

55 GH 1288, copies of Annexures to Secret Dispatches to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 110–19, Minute, PM to Gov., 31 Dec. 1907. See also Haydon, *Nathan*, 135.

56 GH 1276, copies of Annexures to Dispatches to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sept.–Nov. 1908, Petition of undersigned natives of the Colony of Natal.

57 Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, 341–2. Quotation from *Imvo*, 17 Nov. 1908. See also Haydon, *Nathan*, 152.

58 Nicholas Mansergh, *South Africa, 1906–1961: The Price of Magnanimity* (London, 1962), 51, cited in Schoeman, *Imperiale Somer*, 333.

Nathan liked and respected the Natal-born Botha, but feared that his charm masked the reality of the Transvaal's economic dominance of South Africa.⁵⁹ With Union in 1910, Botha became the first Prime Minister of South Africa and Smuts was just about Minister of Almost Everything Else: at least he garnered most major portfolios to himself.

As the date for union approached, Nathan resigned as governor and returned to London in December 1909. However, before he left Natal, he was subjected to one last humiliation. Mr Christopher Bird, the Permanent Secretary in the Colonial Secretary's Office and Natal's top civil servant, invited all the senior officials and "their ladies" to attend a farewell function for Sir Matthew Nathan, hosted by the Chief Justice, Sir Henry Bale. Only one copy of the invitation has survived, in the archives of the Natal Harbour Department.⁶⁰ What is astonishing is that, although Bird was as firm as he could be (he politely ordered every senior official to attend and pay four shillings), he was met with open defiance. Every single invited official in the Natal Harbour Department declined the invitation with varying degrees of rudeness. A breathtaking insult of this nature must have been unheard of in Edwardian times as the governor was the representative of the Crown and therefore, through snubbing Sir Matthew Nathan, the officials insulted His Majesty King Edward VII himself. The insult is unlikely to have been prompted by Nathan's views on Dinuzulu, or his visit to the prince in prison, or to the fact that he shook hands with John Dube, or even to his cautious opposition to the more egregious racism in Natal. In fact, by the end of his term of office, he was echoing similar opinions to those of his ministers, so overt differences had been papered over. The only conclusion to be drawn is that the boycott of his farewell function was a manifestation of the crudest form of antisemitism.

*Nathan in Ireland: the "most difficult post
in the Civil Service"*⁶¹

Not surprisingly, Matthew Nathan was happy to see the shores of Natal recede behind the wake of his departing ship. His reputation for discretion and decisiveness had suffered in Natal, but he was still regarded as a

59 Haydon, *Nathan*, 155.

60 PAR, Natal Harbour Department papers, NHD II/1/137: Minute NDE 848/09, Circular from Permanent Secretary to Heads of Department, 1 Dec. 1909.

61 Ms. Nathan 989: 141, Letters of Congratulation, Vol. 4 (fols 139–177), M. C. Seton (India Office) to Nathan, 9 Oct. 1914: "Congratulations on selection for about the most difficult post in the Civil Service".

formidably efficient administrator.⁶² His route to Dublin Castle took him through two patronage appointments in London. The first, as Secretary to the Post Office, was roundly criticized as “anachronistic jobbery” and even Selborne, his former colleague in South Africa, publicly disapproved in the House of Lords, although he had congratulated Nathan privately: “So you are going to change your sphere of work. A very good thing for the G.P.O. & the civil service, but I wonder whether you will like it as well as governing a Crown Colony!”⁶³ There were also rumours that Nathan was being considered for the major imperial post of British Resident in Egypt, leading the *African Weekly* to remark that he would become “the first Jew to take a prominent part in the government of that country since the administration of Joseph there, a matter of 4,000 years ago”.⁶⁴ The London interlude brought Nathan into close association with Herbert Samuel and entrée into the gilded circles of the Bloomsbury Group and those around the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, his wife Margot and their daughter Violet. Although Nathan cut an ungainly figure in that intensely intellectual and hedonistic social milieu, he earned their approval and was rewarded with the chairmanship of the Board of Inland Revenue in 1911. This made him responsible to David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, at a time when the tax-gathering policies of the Liberal Government were arousing heated controversy. It was in this post that Nathan became adept at turning blows with “his shield of public service impartiality” and referring angry deputations to his minister.⁶⁵ During this interlude, Nathan, now a more prominent figure than he had been in the 1890s, took up the case of anti-Jewish pogroms in the Russian Empire at the behest of the Anglo-Jewish Association. He was able to obtain the support of many of the most prominent people in the kingdom, including Lord Lyttelton and Field Marshal Lord Roberts. However, one equally prominent refusal came from Admiral Prince Louis Alexander of Battenberg (a close relative of the Russian Tsar, Nicolas II, and also the father of Lord Louis Mountbatten and great-uncle of Prince Philip).⁶⁶

The instruction to go to Ireland came as the war clouds gathered over

62 Haydon, Nathan, 167.

63 Ms. Nathan 989: 141, Letters of Congratulation, Vol. 3 (fols 95–138), Selborne to Nathan, 20 Aug. 1909, 70–71.

64 Haydon, Nathan, 166.

65 *Ibid.*, 180–81.

66 Ms. Nathan 989: 147, Letters, Anglo-Jewish Association, Vol. 14 (fols 81–117), 109, 2 May 1912.

Europe and was put to Nathan at a dinner in Downing Street on 29 July 1914. Asquith and Lloyd George urged him to go to Ireland as Under-Secretary in the place of the retiring Sir James Dougherty.⁶⁷ Nathan's new minister, the Chief Secretary, was Augustine Birrell, more of a dilettante and writer than a serious statesman, and there was speculation that Nathan's appointment was to act as a buttress for Birrell's absentee style of government and "absent-mindedness" about Ireland.⁶⁸ Ireland was the burning issue in British politics after the Liberals came to power in 1905 and it was in this febrile atmosphere that the outbreak of the First World War came as something of a political relief. Even with the fleet mobilizing and the king reviewing the ships in mid-July 1914, it was, according to Winston Churchill, probable that the uppermost thought in the minds of both the Sovereign and those of his Ministers there present, was not the imposing spectacle of British majesty and might defiling before their eyes, not the oppressive and even sultry atmosphere of Continental politics, but the haggard, squalid, tragic Irish squabble which threatened to divide the British nation into two hostile camps.⁶⁹

Why, in this atmosphere of crisis that had split the kingdom, cracked the constitutional consensus and shaken the loyalty of the army, had Asquith and Lloyd George chosen Matthew Nathan to administer Ireland? The Irish Home Rule Bill had eventually passed through both houses of Parliament but was to be put in abeyance for the duration of the war. An able administrator was needed to maintain the status quo and do what could be done in practical terms to prepare for the eventual implementation of home rule. Nathan still had a reputation as a good administrator and had experience in dealing with the intractable politicians of Natal. If anybody could succeed in implementing home rule it was somebody with experience of intractability. With a war on, Ireland was a serious distraction; by sending in a superb administrator who could be relied on to keep tempers cool and the administration running smoothly, perhaps Ireland would diminish into a manageable regional issue.

Nathan's appointment was not universally welcomed in Ireland. The *Irish Times*, although it acknowledged his achievements in other fields, asked why an Irishman had not been given the task. The Irish parliamentary party's press organ, the *Freeman's Journal*, stressed on the one hand that Nathan was the personal choice of the Prime Minister. On the

67 Haydon, *Nathan*, 181.

68 *Ibid.*, 183.

69 Winston Churchill, *The Great War*, vol. 1 (London: Home Library Book Co., 1933), 64.

other hand, the nationalist and republican periodicals were highly critical and *The Leader* declared “Sir Matt’s . . . amazement and stupefaction”, and accused Nathan of being a Mason as well as a Jew. Furthermore the paper declaimed: “the only experience he could claim as a qualification to rule the Irish was that he had earlier been a governor of yellow and black-skinned races”.⁷⁰ On arriving in Dublin in August 1914, Nathan sought to project an image of non-partisanship, declining to join the Kildare Street Club, which had a staunchly Unionist reputation but whose membership included a number of the senior civil servants, army officers, and other officials whose services were essential for the running the government. Many of them thought he regarded them “with a fine Semitic scorn” and that he was too much a politician, meaning of course, that he was a Liberal, not a Tory, as they were.⁷¹

The main difficulty facing Nathan was that for “all shades of political opinion the Castle symbolised everything that was wrong with Irish government”.⁷² The Royal Commission into the Rising (the Harding Commission) condemned the creaking government system, fraught with exceptions and inconsistencies, as “anomalous in quiet times and almost unworkable in times of crisis”.⁷³ The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (the viceregal but ceremonial post) was Lord Wimborne (Ivor Churchill Guest, a cousin of Winston Churchill). The Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell, spent most of his time in London attending Cabinet meetings, answering parliamentary questions and leaving Nathan to manage day-to-day affairs in Ireland. His argument for his limpet-like adhesion to London had some validity; he told the post-rebellion Royal Commission that the cabinet “forget all about it [Ireland] if there is not the Chief Secretary sitting at the table”.⁷⁴

It is important to reiterate that Nathan was the top *civil servant* in Ireland; he was no longer acting as a governor with prerogative powers, or as a soldier. In adapting to this new role he clashed with Birrell on two occasions and lost, Haydon remarking that thereafter, “Nathan made no effort to override his chief’s convictions about the necessity to appease

70 *The Leader*, n.d., quoted in O’Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 14.

71 *Ibid.*, 15–16.

72 Martin Maguire, *The Civil Service and the Revolution in Ireland 1912–1938*: “Shaking the blood-stained hand of Mr Collins” (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 3.

73 *Ibid.*, 38.

74 NA, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland, 1916*, Cd. 8279 (report), XI (1916); Cd. 8311 (evidence and appendices), XI (1916); evidence of Augustine Birrell, 19 May 1916.

Ireland during the war. Birrell was his superior officer, however little he resembled those he had obeyed in the army and the colonial service, and his will was absolute, even when it seemed timid or irrational.”⁷⁵ O’Broin, quoting Arthur Norway, the Head of the Irish Post Office, also depicted Nathan as acting as a soldier “rather than as a civil servant occupying an important post”, in that he executed policy “without remonstrance”, rather than keeping his minister informed of his own views.⁷⁶ This is debatable since while Nathan was governing Natal, he provided the Colonial Office with his views on its affairs in copious detail.⁷⁷

The second key figure, after Birrell, for Nathan, was John Dillon, Deputy Leader of the Parliamentary Irish Nationalist Party. Nathan was tasked with keeping up the momentum on home rule and his main partners were in the Irish Nationalist Party. Their leader, John Redmond, operated in Westminster and Dillon, his deputy, operated largely from Dublin and was therefore Nathan’s main contact. In a sense Nathan was in a similar position to the one he had been in as Governor of Natal. He was appointed by the government in London, but was politically dependent on local elected politicians. According to Haydon, Nathan’s relationship with Dillon was similar to his relationship with Frederick Moor: neither of them was a “gentleman” but each was indispensable to him.⁷⁸

The main issues Nathan had to deal with were home rule and wartime recruitment. While attention at Westminster turned away from Irish constitutional issues, it remained focused on getting young Irishmen into the army and onto the battlefield.⁷⁹ Birrell and Nathan tried to promote loyalty in Ireland by “action and inaction”, admitting that loyalty in Ireland is a slow growth on “uncongenial” soil.⁸⁰ As late as February 1916, Nathan stated that he was averse to any action likely to lead to “general measures of coercion” against the extremists of the so-called Sinn Féin movement.⁸¹ It was clear that Ireland was in a disturbed state. The Royal

75 Haydon, *Nathan*, 185.

76 O’Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 15.

77 See e.g. PAR, GH 1236, Dispatch No. 121, 15 July 1909, 263–5. This is a long dispatch containing Nathan’s summary of the “somewhat desultory” debates in the Natal Legislative Assembly.

78 Haydon, *Nathan*, 191.

79 *Royal Commission on the Rebellion*, Evidence of 19 May 1916, evidence of Augustine Birrell and comments of Matthew Nathan.

80 NA, PRO 30/67, Birrell to Lord Midleton, 25 Feb. 1916.

81 Ms. Nathan 989: N 469, Nathan, notes of interview with Lord Midleton, 29 Feb. 1916. See also Haydon, *Nathan*, 193. The British tended to conflate various trends in the Irish

Irish Constabulary (RIC), the Dublin Metropolitan Police and John Dillon provided Birrell and Nathan with many warnings of attempted risings between 1914 and 1916.⁸² Despite the warnings, Birrell, in particular, saw the threat of Sinn Féin as laughable.⁸³ Although there were thousands of armed Volunteers drilling around the country, the government continued to hope that inaction would keep Ireland passive, but others had different ideas. On St Patrick's Day in 1916, the republican Volunteers paraded on College Green and Nathan in Dublin Castle ordered the seizing of a printing press and the deportation of two of the lesser leaders to Britain.⁸⁴ The army commander in Ireland, Major-General Sir Lovick Friend, advised that the Volunteers should be proscribed and prevented from holding meetings, but by this time it would have taken more troops than were available in Ireland to carry out such a strategy across the whole island.⁸⁵ It should be remembered that in spring 1916 virtually the whole British army (including a South African brigade being sent into Delville Wood) was preparing for the Battle of the Somme. Ireland was a sideshow, albeit a highly volatile one, and Dillon warned Nathan again at the end of March that a rising was being planned.⁸⁶

Demonstrations held in Dublin on 7 April, against the deportation of the two St Patrick's Day parade Volunteer leaders, resulted in shots being fired. Nathan worried over the possibility of calling troops in from England to stabilize Ireland, while every effort was being made in Ireland to raise troops to fight for England against Germany. Matters came to a head as the Easter weekend approached. Sir Roger Casement (the pioneering human rights activist and fiery Irish nationalist, who had been soliciting German support for an Irish Rising) landed in County Kerry from a German submarine on 21 April (to warn the rebels that German support was not forthcoming, rather than to lead a rebellion), where he was promptly arrested by the authorities. The *Aud*, a ship laden with German-supplied weapons, had been intercepted by the British on the 20th and scuttled by its German crew as it was being escorted into Cork Harbour. Buoyed by this information, Nathan informed Birrell that

nationalist and republican movements under the broad rubric "Sinn Féin".

82 See e.g. CO 904/21 (Part 3), Minutes Irish League Meetings, etc, 1916–20, RIC returns and reports on United Irish League meetings, reports sent to Chief Secretary.

83 NA/PRO 30/67, Middleton to Birrell, 23 May 1916, pp. 1608–9.

84 O'Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 71.

85 Dermot Meleady, *John Redmond: The National Leader* (Sallins, Co. Kildare: Merrion, 2014), 367.

86 O'Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 71.

there was no longer any indication of an imminent rising, an assessment that would come back to haunt him.⁸⁷ Such was his confidence in the tranquillity of the situation that Nathan invited his sister-in-law and her children to spend the Easter weekend with him at Dublin Castle. On the other side of the political divide, the plans for the Rising were in disarray, with the republican leader, Eoin MacNeill, attempting to cancel the Volunteer manoeuvres, scheduled for Monday 24 April, which were the cover for the actual Rising. Confusion was the order of the day.

That fateful 1916 Easter weekend, Redmond, Birrell, and General Friend were all in London. On Easter Saturday, 22 April, Nathan and Wimborne met and the Lord Lieutenant pressed for immediate action, arguing that the appearance of a German ship with arms for Irish rebels was sufficient evidence of treason to permit the arrest and the detention of Volunteer leaders under the Defence of the Realm Act.⁸⁸ Nathan demurred and insisted that the authority of the Crown Law Officers, the military authorities, and the Home Office in London must be obtained first.⁸⁹ Dorothy Stopford, a young medical student, who was spending the Easter weekend with Nathan and his sister-in-law and family in Phoenix Park, records Nathan's mood over the weekend as being "grave".⁹⁰ Sir Matthew was not, however, seized of a sense of urgency but consulted exhaustively with Lord Wimborne and the military and the police. Wimborne's view was that if you stir up a hornets' nest and leave the hornets, there would be serious trouble. Nathan's case was legalistic: whatever charges were preferred must be sustained and the Home Secretary's authority was necessary if charges of hostile association with the enemy was to be used.⁹¹ A fired-up Wimborne offered to sign the arrest warrants himself and take full responsibility for the legal consequences. The question of resources also played a part: it would not be possible to disarm six or seven hundred volunteers that night but, urged Wimborne, a hundred known men could be arrested. However, as Easter Monday was a holiday with the Irish Grand National horse races under way at the Fairyhouse racecourse, the making

87 Ms. Nathan 989: 466, Nathan to Birrell, 22 April 1916.

88 Haydon, *Nathan*, 198.

89 O'Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 83.

90 "The 1916 Diary of Dorothy Stopford Price", entry Monday 24 April 1916 (online digital version dh.tcd.ie/pricediary, accessed 27 March 2016). I thank Susan Schreibman (National University of Ireland, Maynooth) for her interest, comments and assistance.

91 Michael T. Foy and Brian Barton, *The Easter Rising* (Stroud: History Press, 1999, 2011), 71.

of mass arrests would be difficult.⁹² The list of persons to be detained was eventually dispatched to London on Easter Sunday, but Birrell was not available and it only reached his desk on Easter Monday morning. By then it was too late for the British.⁹³

Why the delay? How had Nathan misread the situation? Both Nathan and Wimborne (and their military advisers) believed that Casement was the leader of the rebels and that his capture had rendered any rising leaderless. Furthermore, the loss of the arms shipment in the *Aud* also reduced the risk of armed action. Birrell was cheerful: "All this (particularly if R.C. is the prisoner) is most encouraging. The march of the Irish volunteers will not be conducted in high spirits".⁹⁴ Nathan believed that the matter was no longer urgent; Wimborne in contrast urged that the opportunity should be urgently taken to seize the known leadership of the Volunteers. Wimborne was the ceremonial figurehead, Nathan was the official with the standing to act, but he chose to wait for instructions.⁹⁵ Although O'Broin and Haydon see this as a good soldier waiting for orders, I believe that Nathan's actions, or inaction, were far more typical of a cautious bureaucrat covering himself. Birrell told the Harding Commission that in the absence of the Chief Secretary, the Under-Secretary had a delegated authority to take urgent action.⁹⁶ A soldier would have acted, a bureaucrat would have consulted, referred, and covered himself, which is what Nathan did.

From the rising to the resignation: Dublin, 24 April–3 May 1916

On the morning of Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, Nathan met Lord Wimborne at the Viceregal Lodge, then with his officials at Dublin Castle. The authority to effect the arrests had still not come through from London when Nathan's meeting was interrupted by shots ringing out. Nathan cried out that it was probably the "long promised attack on the Castle". Nathan and Major Ivor Price managed to close the gates to the Upper Castle Yard and as the insurgents did not press home their attack, the small number of police and soldiers on the premises were able to hold out until reinforcements arrived.⁹⁷ Nathan remained in the Castle

92 *Ibid.*, 72.

93 MeLeady, *Redmond*, 368.

94 Foy and Barton, *Easter Rising*, 70–71.

95 *Ibid.*

96 *Royal Commission on the Rebellion*, evidence of Augustine Birrell, 19 May 1916.

97 O'Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 90–92.

supplying London with information and endeavouring to keep the shaky administration running where possible and to get it restarted where it had collapsed. Arthur Norway of the Post Office described Nathan as being rather bewildered and he blamed Nathan for neglecting to suppress the dangerous associations and for giving his confidence to an unworthy man such as John Dillon.⁹⁸ The day after the Rising broke out, 25 April, martial law was declared and the following day a heavy crackdown on rebel-held buildings began, with artillery and naval gunfire being used against civilian targets in a major city of the United Kingdom, probably for the first time since the Civil War in the seventeenth century. Birrell and the new military commander, General Sir John Maxwell, arrived together by warship on the 27th. On the 29th, the leaders of the rising, James Connolly and Patrick Pearse, surrendered unconditionally. Four hundred and fifty people had been killed – civilians, rebels, and British soldiers – while more than a thousand had been wounded.⁹⁹

Maxwell acted swiftly with the full powers of martial law at his disposal. On 3 May, he ordered that captured rebels were to be tried by Field General Court Martial and that sentences of death or penal servitude would be “reserved for confirmation by him”.¹⁰⁰ There is little mention of the activities of the civil government in the series of martial law reports in the War Office files, so what was happening to Matthew Nathan? And did he have, or could he have had, any influence on the decisions to execute the Irish rebels?

Military had superseded civil government in Dublin and Nathan seems to have limited himself to keeping the administrative wheels turning, while Maxwell crushed the Rising and set up the system of justice, or retribution. Birrell and Nathan were largely sidelined and Nathan had to abandon his own office and set up in the stables to allow the influx of military personnel in the castle to be accommodated.¹⁰¹ Nathan also corresponded with Dillon, whose main concern was to urge Redmond to advise the government of “the *extreme* unwisdom of any wholesale shooting of prisoners”.¹⁰² Nathan took Dillon to see General Maxwell but

98 *Ibid.*, 98–9.

99 Fanning, *Fatal Path*, 140.

100 NA, War Office papers, WO 32/9510: “Reports, Summary of events and communiques of the Rebellion in Ireland”, No. 21, Rebellion in Ireland, Summary of Events up to 11 a.m. 3 May 1916.

101 O’Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 99.

102 Foy and Barton, *Easter Rising*, 321 (original emphasis). A close reading of this text indicates that Dillon contacted Redmond on Sunday 7 May, after meeting Father Aloysius,

by then it was too late: the “blood sacrifice”¹⁰³ sought by Pearse was well under way.

Birrell told Asquith on 30 April that the Rising was not “an Irish Rebellion – it would be a pity if *ex post facto* it were to become one”. He offered his resignation and informed Asquith that he was “very sorry for Nathan the Unwise – who up to Ireland had always been successful *everywhere*”.¹⁰⁴ This is a debatable statement given Nathan’s experiences in Natal. On Monday morning, 1 May, Nathan held meetings with General Maxwell and various other officials. In the afternoon he visited Birrell in the Viceregal Lodge in Phoenix Park. It was while he was there that a telegram arrived from London accepting Birrell’s resignation.¹⁰⁵ Three days later it was Nathan’s turn to resign at Birrell’s request. Dillon wrote to Redmond stating, “much as I like Nathan in some respects, I feel that he can be of no further use in Ireland”.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

In Sierra Leone, Matthew Nathan walked the streets of Freetown remonstrating with rioters. In the Gold Coast, he rejected suggestions that he hang the leaders of the Asante Uprising, preferring to exile them instead. In Natal he strove, with limited success, to mitigate the harshness of the sentences imposed on Zulu rebels. Despite this “activist” track record, there is no evidence that he intervened in any way in Dublin. Nathan’s legal authority had been superseded by martial law, but he remained in post for a while. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing whether he relayed his experiences in Africa to Maxwell or to Birrell, or whether he advised them to spare the lives of the rebels during the days before he belatedly took Dillon to see the general. What is clear is that he failed to exhibit that so highly prized by the Colonial Office “power of exercising personal influence”.¹⁰⁷ Such a quality was also prized by the caste of English gentleman to which Nathan had aspired to belong and to which he seemed to have adapted himself with apparent success. However, in Dublin he signally failed to exercise his “personal influence”.

whereas O’Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 102–3, implies that it was as early as 30 April.

103 Foy and Barton, *Easter Rising*, 27.

104 Birrell to Asquith, 30 April 1916, quoted in O’Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 114–16 (original emphasis).

105 O’Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 103.

106 *Ibid.*, 118.

107 See above, Haydon, Nathan, 30.

What had changed in Matthew Nathan's character between the decisive figure in West Africa and the administrative cipher in Ireland? O'Broin and Haydon both argue that Nathan embodied soldierly virtues and followed orders, rather than acting as a leader, or as a civil servant who provided his informed views discreetly to his minister. O'Broin relies on Norway's description of Nathan acting as a soldier rather than as a civil servant occupying an important post.¹⁰⁸ Haydon also claims that Nathan obeyed Birrell as his superior officer, however little he resembled those officers and superiors he had obeyed in the army and in the colonial service.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, when in Pietermaritzburg, Nathan gave his views on the affairs of Natal extensively, in the best colonial and civil service tradition, making the home government well aware of his opinions.¹¹⁰

The evidence is ambiguous: was Nathan more of a soldier or more of a bureaucrat? He had been commissioned in 1880 and appointed as secretary of the CDC in 1895. This gave him a fifteen-year career as an active soldier. He spent five years in the politico-military atmosphere of the CDC in Whitehall and between 1900 and the end of 1909 he was a governor. From 1910 to 1916 he was a Whitehall bureaucrat. His promotion to lieutenant-colonel had been given reluctantly because of his lack of military experience. More than half his pre-1916 career, therefore, was spent as a mandarin rather than as a military officer.

We need to look more deeply for explanations. Nathan's experience in Natal, torn between a policy laid down in London and contradictory hard-line policies forced on him by the responsible government ministers in Pietermaritzburg, had a debilitating effect on him and he was unable to act as decisively as he had been able to in West Africa. Had the Nathan as Soldier view been true in Dublin in 1916, he would have followed both the arguments of the military and of Wimborne, the Lord Lieutenant, and acted quickly and decisively against the known leaders of the Rising. This, coupled with Eoin MacNeill's public cancellation of the Volunteers manoeuvres, could have pre-empted or at least, undermined, the Rising. But Nathan did not act decisively – he was in Dublin Castle as a civil servant not as a colonial governor. Instead, he demanded a consultative process that involved various other departments and agencies in Britain

108 O'Broin, *Dublin Castle*, 15.

109 Haydon, *Nathan*, 185.

110 See e.g. n. 76 above and PAR, Government House, GH 1283, copies of Secret Dispatches to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 11 Nov. 1904–5 Feb. 1909, Natal Secret 30 Nov. 1907, 133–7, containing Nathan's views on his settler ministers.

before he would authorize action. This was a bureaucratic act, the act of an official covering himself, Nathan as Apparatchik. Nathan's evidence before the Royal Commission was also bureaucratic, but he behaved with greater dignity than politicians such as Birrell and accepted the blame for many actions that were not of his making.¹¹¹ Nathan as Gentleman was clearly the face he showed giving evidence to the commission but by then, as General Maxwell had shown, ruling Ireland was no position for a gentleman. By delaying the arrests over the Easter Weekend, Nathan bore much of the responsibility for ensuring that the "alternative future" of Ireland, as Fearghal McGarry has called it, was stillborn. There would never be a devolved Home Rule Parliament and a constitutional settlement that could have kept all Ireland within the United Kingdom.¹¹²

This brings us to perhaps the fundamental facet of Sir Matthew Nathan's character, his Jewish heritage. There is a case to be made that Nathan's caution in Ireland was a result of his not wishing to be put in the "awkward" position in which he was placed in Natal when he signed the martial law proclamation under protest. That was a decision that triggered much of the antisemitism he faced from Frederick Moor, his ministers, the bureaucrats and even from the housekeeper. At the end of the day, the paralysing hostility he had faced in Natal came down to the persona of Nathan as Jew. And this paralysis still affected him in Ireland.

111 *Royal Commission on the Rebellion*, Cd. 8279, XI (1916); Cd. 8311, XI (1916).

112 Fearghal McGarry, *Rebels: Voices from the Easter Rising* (London: Penguin, 2012), x.