RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Running for Their Lives

Mark Whitaker

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About the Book

In 1928 two extraordinary Englishmen competed in an unprecedented and fearsome event – a transcontinental road race across America that required them to run an average of 40 miles for 80 consecutive days. They were to become the most famous long-distance runners in the world: yet history has forgotten them.

Peter Gavuzzi was a young working-class ship's steward, while Arthur Newton was a middle-aged intellectual who had taken up running to make a political point. Though separated by class, education and age, they became close friends and formed a successful business partnership as endurance athletes. They raced in 500-mile relays, in 24-hour events, in snowshoes and against horses; and they became the stars of a craze for endurance events that swept across depression-era North America. But as professional runners they were eschewed by the amateur running elite.

Set against a turbulent backdrop of 1920s South Africa, 1930s Canada, war-torn France and 1950s Britain, *Running for Their Lives* is a story peopled with remarkable characters, unimaginable feats and tragic twists of fate. More importantly it is a homage to two inspirational and eccentric men who only now receive the recognition they so richly deserve.

About the Author

Mark Whitaker is a broadcaster and historian. After a first career as an academic, during which he taught in both London and Tunis, he joined the BBC in 1990. He was a reporter for BBC2's sports documentary series *On the Line*, and from 1994 to 2002 was a regular presenter of *File on 4* on Radio 4. He then became a founding partner of the independent production company Square Dog Radio, which is named after a beloved Bernese Mountain dog. To his great regret he recently had to give up playing cricket. He lives in the West Yorkshire hills with his family and their animals.

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for Lynn and for Gabriel, Jonah and Leah

Running for Their Lives

The Extraordinary Story of Britain's Greatest Distance Runners

Mark Whitaker

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Prologue: Los Angeles, 1928

IT IS MID-FEBRUARY 1928, at an Art Deco speedway stadium on the eastern edge of Los Angeles, and it is raining. In the centre of the track are several large marquees. The flags of various countries and of different US states fly over them. From early in the morning groups of men – mostly in their twenties and thirties, though some are middle-aged and a handful are still in their teens – run slowly and relentlessly around the cinder track, lap after lap after lap. A casual visitor observing the daily routine of these men might have thought they were the inmates of some kind of punitive camp. They all got up at 6 a.m. They ran until lunch was provided at noon. Then they ran again. Dinner was at six. Lights out at nine.

But if these men were prisoners, it was only of their own obsessions or their desperate need. They had come from every corner of the United States and Canada. They had come from Australia, England, South Africa, France, Russia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Estonia … all responding to an advertisement that had appeared in newspapers across the world the previous autumn. This is what it offered: 'International Transcontinental Foot Race. Open to any physically fit male athlete in the world. Route of the race will be over US Highway 66 between Los Angeles and Chicago. Route between Chicago and New York will be announced later.' The winner, the advertisement specified, would get $25,000; second place would be worth $10,000, and considerably smaller prizes

were on offer to runners who finished in the first fifteen. For the rest, nothing.

The men who responded to this bizarre and unprecedented offer had to pay a $25 entry fee, and they had to agree to arrive in Los Angeles three weeks before the race was due to start on 4th March – so that a medical team could assess whether they were up to what the event's promoters fetchingly called 'the long grind'. What was facing these men, once they crossed the starting line in LA, was the prospect of running an average of more than forty miles a day, *every* day, for nearly three months. They would have to cross mountains and deserts, to run in snow, in rain, in sandstorms and in blistering heat. Those who made it to New York would have covered nearly 3,500 miles.

The medics on hand at the speedway stadium were not optimistic that many would. After the race was over, they went public with the assessment they had made of the 199 competitors before it began:

> In the entire group not over forty appeared capable of withstanding strenuous athletic competition. Six runners were found to be suffering from acute respiratory infections, nine had gastrointestinal symptoms. One runner had signs of active pleurisy, four had chronic bronchitis, eleven had moderate emphysema. Approximately 50% of all competitors were underdeveloped physically and could scarcely be compared with long distance runners usually seen in universities or athletic clubs.

They could not be compared, that is, with the gilded amateur elite who ran for Harvard, Yale or Stanford – the sort of men who had represented the USA at the Paris Olympics of 1924 and who were, in the early spring of

1928, preparing to do so again at the forthcoming Amsterdam Games.

The men at the speedway stadium were already, or were about to become, professional runners. They were doing it – as, ironically, the original Greek Olympians had done it – for the money; not for any privileged notion that sport was an ennobling human activity. There was a handful of serious, and seriously good, runners. Some had taken part in Olympic marathons, some held amateur or professional world road-running records at distances from 50 to 1,000 miles. But the very idea of a non-stop transcontinental run was so extraordinary, somehow so unconnected to the normal expectations of athletics, that no one seemed sure what qualities might be needed to succeed in it. Stamina certainly, but perhaps above all a capacity to withstand both pain and boredom. The official race programme provides a clue to the bizarre pool of experience and fantasy that was collected together during that uncommonly wet and cold Los Angeles February. There was Golden Calkin, 'a cowboy from Oklahoma who has received many hard knocks in "bronco-busting" and has a good past on the football and baseball fields; this is his first try at distance running'. There was Charles Gallena from Miami Beach in Florida, who 'possesses the remarkable feat of skipping 11,000 times standing in one place'. There was the German Fred Kamler, who 'has many great swimming records, and this will be his first start on land'. There was fifty-two-year-old William Nagel, 'a rural letter carrier from Alabama who thinks he knows how to cover the ground', while another German, George Rehayn, was introduced succinctly as 'a good bicycle rider and a vegetarian'. But alongside these were the likes of the Estonian Juri Lossman, the silver medallist from the 1924 Olympic marathon, and the Californian Eugene Estoppey, who held the world record over 1,000 miles.

The largest national group – other than Americans – came from Finland. Many of the contingent were resident in the US, and there was a thriving Finnish-American Running Association. One of its members on the starting line for the Transcontinental was Arne Souminen, a doctor based in Detroit; and he gave a disarming answer when asked by a journalist why so many of his countrymen were there. ‘We’re a queer lot, we Finns. We run because we don’t know any better. There’s nothing else to do in our country. If we ever started thinking, we’d quit running. A man with too much imagination can’t stand punishment.’ The Finns shared a tent with the Scandinavians. There were separate ones for the Germans, the French and the Italians. And it says much about the possible political significance of the race that there were also tents for what would now be called Native American and African American competitors. In 1928 terminology they were, of course, ‘Indians’ and ‘Negroes’. But while they slept and ate separately, they competed on equal terms. The ‘Indians’ had already established something of a national reputation for ultra-distance running, and Nick Quamawahu – from the Hopi tribe in Arizona – was one of the pre-race favourites. The ‘Negroes’ were largely an unknown quantity. They were to be lionised when the caravan passed through black neighbourhoods on the long road east; and they were to be spat at and physically threatened in Texas by Ku Klux Klan gangs, who awaited them on lonely stretches of highway.

The English entrants found themselves thrown in with the Canadians and Australians, and it was in this British imperial atmosphere that a fateful meeting took place between two of the Transcontinental competitors. One of them – both to himself and to everybody else – was the overwhelming favourite to collect the winner’s cheque, even though he was one of the oldest men there. He was of medium height, thin, straight-backed and sporting a neatly clipped moustache. With his round, thin-framed spectacles

and his ever-present pipe, he looked more like a bookish and rather strict schoolmaster than a long-distance runner. Arthur Newton had entered the race under the joint colours of Natal and Rhodesia, but these colonial territories were seemingly too obscure for the organisers, and the official programme had him down as representing South Africa. Otherwise it described him accurately enough: 'the holder of every amateur running record from 29 to 100 miles, he is 44 years old and was passed up for the last two Olympic Games because the 26 mile Marathon is too short for him'.

The extraordinary thing about Arthur Newton was that all his records, which he had set in South Africa, in Rhodesia and in England, had been achieved in the previous four years – that's to say, since his fortieth birthday. Before that he was unknown to the athletic world. He had been born in Weston-super-Mare, the fifth of eight children, and then brought up in Brighton. His father was a Nonconformist minister, and the family, though not rich, was sufficiently well off for Arthur and his brothers to be educated privately. He was sent, briefly, to Bedford and then to the smaller Banham School in Norfolk. He became a competent pianist and developed a taste for both literature and philosophy. He also enjoyed cross-country running, and had an obvious talent for it. But he was somehow unfocused and lacking in ambition, and when he left school he had no clear idea of what he wanted to do in life. His two elder brothers had both gone off to South Africa and in 1902, when the rootless Arthur was nineteen and the Second Boer War had just been concluded, his father arranged for him to follow them. By the time he left Africa in November 1927, less than three months before his arrival in Los Angeles, Arthur Newton had become both famous and infamous. Famous because of his running; infamous because of why he had taken it up and pursued it so single-mindedly. He was undoubtedly the only entrant in

the Transcontinental race who had started running to make a political point.

His fateful encounter in that Los Angeles marquee was with a small, slight, dark-haired man who moved with the grace of a dancer. He was, at just twenty-two, half Newton's age, and his surname suggested that he should really be bedding down with the Italians. But Peter Gavuzzi was as English as the south London twang to his speech. He'd been born in Folkestone to an immigrant Italian father and a French mother. The former was a sought-after chef, and he'd met his chambermaid wife while cooking at an upmarket Mayfair hotel. The surname is rare even in Italy. The country's telephone directories list only forty-one Gavuzzis, with twenty-five of them being found in Turin, the capital of Piedmont. The name originated in the early Middle Ages in a small cluster of villages to the south-east of Turin – Monticello, Alba and Santa Vittoria. The villages are in the valley of the River Tanaro, where the low hills are covered in vines and groves of hazelnut. The vermouth Cinzano is a local product. That there are virtually no Gavuzzis now living in the valley says much about the hardships of nineteenth-century life on the land and the consequent flight to the city.

Peter Gavuzzi's father, Battista, grew up in Monticello and it was from there, in the late 1890s, that he and his brother Pietro took the brave and (within the extended family) unprecedented step of emigrating to England. Whether they had contacts there we do not know, but they certainly had a skill that was in demand and they had little difficulty in establishing themselves in London. Pietro set up his own West End restaurant, and it is indicative of the nature of its clientele that in 1904 he was asked to become the chef at one of the Empire's most prestigious hotels: the Grand in Bulawayo. When he returned to London he found that his brother Battista had married and had become the chef at a famous Folkestone hotel. It was there in 1905 that

Battista's second son, also called Pietro, was born. Not long afterwards the family moved back to London, where there was a vibrant Italian community of more than 10,000 centred on Clerkenwell. It was soon to spill over into Soho, where it continued its domination of the West End's restaurant trade. At some stage in his childhood the young Pietro anglicised his name, and it was as a teenaged Peter Gavuzzi that he pursued his first ambition of becoming a jockey. But he grew too tall and followed his parents into the hospitality industry, getting a job as a steward on transatlantic liners. It was in killing his boredom on the seas by running round and round the decks of grand White Star boats that Gavuzzi first discovered his remarkable skill; and his love of the solitude of running.

When Newton and Gavuzzi were first introduced to each other in Los Angeles in February 1928 the older man addressed the younger by his first name. This was natural enough; even in those more formal times there was a natural camaraderie among runners. But when Gavuzzi responded in kind, perhaps saying something like 'It's an honour to meet you, Arthur', he was firmly put in his place. As far as Newton was concerned, both his age and his class made such familiarity impossible. He told Gavuzzi in no uncertain terms that he must always address him as 'Mr Newton'. And throughout their long subsequent partnership, and a friendship that lasted until Newton's death, Peter Gavuzzi honoured this. For years his conversation, his letters and his diaries were to be full of references to 'my friend Mr Newton'.

Newton and Gavuzzi were to get to know and admire one another, as runners and as men, on that endless painful slog across America in the spring and early summer of 1928. They were to team up the following year when the Transcontinental was staged again, from east coast to west. They were then to establish a uniquely successful professional partnership in both the USA and Canada. They

were to run in ultra-distance relays, in twenty-four-hour and six-day events; they were to run against teams of horses in American arenas, and in snowshoes across the frozen wastes of Canada. They were to become briefly so famous that they were put on stage in both North America and Europe to run on treadmills and talk about their exploits. And years later – after the Second World War had separated them – they were to live not far from each other in suburban Middlesex, where ‘Mr Newton’s’ bachelor home became a mecca for anyone in the world who was serious about running over seriously long distances. Their advice was never sought by the upper-class amateurs who controlled British athletics. But runners themselves knew better.

The story of Newton and Gavuzzi is one of an unlikely partnership set against the obsessions of an interwar culture that found endless fascination in things to do with distance and endurance. It is also the story of two very remarkable athletes – perhaps the greatest long-distance runners Britain has ever produced – whose professionalism at a time when amateurism ruled the roost has condemned them to an unjust obscurity. Their partnership and friendship crossed barriers of age, class and education: Arthur Newton was rarely without a dog-eared volume of Shakespeare, while Peter Gavuzzi’s favourite reading was the racing press. Newton never married or had other close emotional ties with women, while Gavuzzi did marry (unhappily) and had other, if brief, sexual relationships. Yet for thirty years they expressed a deep affection and respect for each other, which was rooted in their shared experience of ultra-long-distance running. It was as though they both recognised in the other something that very few people had – an ability to feel fully alive only when they were running, and running, and running.

1
‘A Chap Called Newton’

Running and Politics in South Africa

I

ON 20TH MAY 1956 a frail, almost blind Arthur Newton was the guest of honour at a small civic ceremony in the town of Harding in the South African province of Natal. It was his seventy-third birthday, and he had been asked to plant a tree in the Town Gardens. When he died just over three years later a commemorative stone was placed next to the tree. It carried the following inscription: ‘This tree was planted by Mr Arthur F.H. Newton (Montabeni) on 20/5/56. He was a resident farmer of the District from 1910 to 1925.’

‘Montabeni’ was the name local Zulus had given to Newton. It translates roughly as ‘Master of the Mountains’. The old runner, who had long been settled in the London suburbs, had dreamed for decades of an eventual return to South Africa. Yet, when the country’s Marathon Runners’ Club formally asked him to come out, entirely at their expense, Newton was reluctant to accept. By then he thought the time for South Africa had passed. He felt old and tired, and in any case he had never been entirely comfortable when he was the centre of attention. He had liked winning races, but had disliked the fuss made of him when he did. South Africa, though, was where he had made

his closest friends, and where for a time he had got as near as he ever did to putting down some roots. So eventually he replied to the invitation to say that yes, he would go.

Newton's old friend Bill Payne had written to him spelling out what was being planned for his visit:

> You will be welcomed at the Harding Town Hall by the Chairman of the reception committee and many other residents of your acquaintance, after which we would like you to say a few words to the gathering of school children, who will be awaiting you in the Town Hall. A Luncheon will be held at the Southern Cross Hotel, where you will be the guest of the Harding Town Board, and possibly a few of your intimate Harding friends will be present. In the afternoon we hope to take you on a tour of the various sporting bodies, and in the evening there will be a social gathering at the Harding Town Hall. On Sunday we feel that you would prefer to be with your old acquaintances when you could perhaps visit farmer friends in the district.

No wonder Arthur Newton had been nervous about the trip. This was just the sort of hullabaloo he dreaded. It seemed that the whole of Harding's population, both old and young, was involved in welcoming him back; but just in case there were residents for whom the name Arthur Newton meant little or nothing, a local weekly, *Outspan*, had asked the elderly runner to write a piece for them explaining how he had first come to live in the area.

He explained that he had left school at eighteen and had had no particular career in mind, though teaching seemed a possibility. But this, for some reason, was not accepted by his clergyman father, who decided his son needed a taste of the Empire. 'He sent me out in January 1902 to South Africa to join my two elder brothers in Durban. On their

advice I stuck to clerical work for a year or two but finally got fed up with it and turned to teaching, first at Hilton College and then at a school on Town Hill, Maritzburg.' This was Blenheim College, which – along with Hilton in Durban – was one of a handful of establishments in Natal that were attempting to replicate a British public-school education for the sons of the colonial elite. Whether Newton was employed on anything other than a temporary or part-time basis is unclear, but in any case his father was still intent on persuading him away from the classroom. 'In 1909 my father sent for me, saying that he could find me a good opening as an assistant tea planter in Ceylon. So back to England I went. But while on the water the offer fell through and on my arrival my father said that if I would wait a month or so he would get me a similar position.' Newton was now twenty-six years old, and any prospect of financial security must have been tempting, even if it meant accepting what his father wanted for him. But the attractions of Kingston-upon-Thames soon palled. 'Several weeks at home just idling around proved too much, and I told my father that I wanted to get back to South Africa. He said he had guessed as much, and perhaps I had better go. So back to Natal I was sent, and accepted a position as tutor on a farm near Harding.'

Two years later Newton became a farmer himself. The decision was an extraordinary gamble. He had no experience; he was on his own; and purchasing the land put him deeply in debt. His aim, he says in *Running in Three Continents*, the memoir he published in 1940, was simply 'to settle down for good and all'. 'I took up 1,350 acres of Crown Lands from the Union Government in 1911 and set to work to learn something entirely new to me. Farming is anything but an easy game for the recruit and I had a desperate struggle to make both ends meet. Assistance from home helped me to tide over the worst and at last there came a time when I had learnt enough to be

able to get along on my own, with every prospect of complete success.'

Arthur Newton had a definite gift for friendship, but it could never match his passion for solitude. Someone who did not have what amounted to an addiction to being on his own could not have devoted so much of his life to ultra-distance running. So the isolation of his farm at Ihluku, near Harding, would have suited him down to the ground. The work was back-breaking, but he still found time, somewhat surprisingly, for playing the piano – particularly Beethoven's Sonatas – and reading deeply in philosophy. We know this from his neighbour and close friend, Bill Payne, with whom Newton also fought in the First World War. In May 1956, during the athlete's final valedictory tour of South Africa, Payne gave a speech in his honour before an audience of their old military comrades. 'I met Arthur Newton in 1910 when he was teaching in the Harding district … At our first meeting I realised that he was a man of my own peculiar wave-length, for not only was he an avid reader of books, a useful musician and a philosopher, but he was a cross-country runner and was possessed of a crisp and brittle sense of humour.' When Newton acquired his own farm, Payne mentioned, he also revealed that he was no mean hand at imaginative DIY. 'He had made himself a windmill from four gum-tree poles, a lot of sheets of corrugated iron, lengths of fencing wire and odds and ends of ironmongery.' But home-grown feats of engineering were not the most important reason why Bill Payne went to considerable trouble to seek out Arthur Newton's company: 'When Tom was Laird of Lovat, his farm in that wild but beautiful area on the southern heights of the Umzimkulu River, I used to visit him. In those far-off days there was no nonsense about visits: there was no getting into a car and being driven there. No Sir! I used to pack a rucksack, put it on my shoulders and walk from our farm, Burnside, and slog along the 25 miles that lay

between us. And how well worth was the effort! For at the end of the trek there was always Arthur Newton with his kindness and hospitality and philosophic talk.' Payne was the only person outside Newton's immediate family to be allowed to use the nickname 'Tom'.

But then, in September 1914, Newton was obliged to put his farm work on indefinite hold. 'Germany saw fit to interrupt my designs' was how he described the outbreak of the First World War, and his immediate decision to join up:

> I turned up at Pietermaritzburg and signed on as a trouper in the Natal Light Horse. I offered to take my motorcycle at my own expense, as I realised I was far more likely to be useful as a despatch rider than anything else, being a competent and experienced motorcyclist. As there was no corps of this description yet formed, I had to engage for the ordinary three shillings a day and take my chance of being transferred to the proper department later on. Six months afterwards, when we returned from the Orange River, I joined the Motor Despatch Riders.

That is all his memoir says about his experience of the war. But his mention of the Orange River is significant in relation to his later political troubles in Natal – because it means that he was involved in the suppression of the 'Maritz Rebellion', in which South African troops from the Boer community sided with Germany in their desire to rid their country of British rule. Their rebellion took place near the border with German South-West Africa (present-day Namibia) and was quickly suppressed in October 1914. A decisive battle the following March at a ford over the Orange River led to the rapid conquest of all German-occupied territory in the southwest. Newton and his colleagues in the Natal Light Horse would then have

headed north and east, in what was to turn out to be a long and ultimately futile attempt to defeat the German East African army.[1]

II

Newton's return to his land in 1918 did not mean the end of fighting for the thirty-five-year-old farmer. It just meant the exchange of one enemy for another, as he returned to a situation that was tailor-made for misunderstanding and conflict. Like the majority of white settlers in Natal, Newton shared his land with a certain number of indigenous Zulus. The latter traditionally kept cattle, which of course required land on which to graze; and by the time Newton arrived in the Harding area it had been established in law that while Zulu cattle herders could not be expelled from the land, they *were* required to pay an annual rent. We know nothing about Newton's dealings with his resident Zulus before 1914, but it is important to recognise that he had only been on the land for three years at the most before going off to war, and he returned determined to convert a large part of his acreage from grazing to arable. He had become convinced that the best way for him to make money reasonably quickly was by cultivating cotton and tobacco; and for this he needed a labour force. No problem, he thought, for he had a resident one. But it did not seem to cross his mind that his Zulu tenants might object to changing the lifestyle of centuries, to substituting wage-labour in the fields for the age-old rhythms of cattle herding.

It is probably anachronistic to condemn Arthur Newton as a racist – after all, one of his closest friends and most admired rivals in later life was the black Canadian runner Philip Granville. But he simply could not comprehend that his Zulu tenants had no culture of 'work'; and he fell all too easily into using the white-settler cliché of condemning the South African black as 'lazy'. The cultural gulf between

them was immense, and it was expressed most starkly in the way the two communities regarded land. For the Zulus, land was to be lived on; for white farmers like Arthur Newton it was to be grappled with and transformed. ‘Only kafirs [Kaffirs, or black Africans] are content to live on a place without improving it, and I happened to be a white man,’ he insisted in his 1940 memoir. He went on, ‘If the white man wanted to be useful to the country he lived in, that was his concern, not theirs: his mere presence enabled them to live securely and indulge in an unending series of beer-drinks, and they asked for no more. The white man’s work could go to Timbuktu before they would turn out and help.’

Nothing expressed the land’s transformation as sharply and as noisily as the building of roads; and from Newton’s descriptions, one can easily understand how his Zulu neighbours would have experienced it as an act of violence against them. The farm Newton bought outside Harding was ten miles from the nearest road, its only link to the outside world a handful of what he called ‘dangerous’ footpaths. But not for long:

> Soon there were ten miles of good motor road to the main highway, and another four on the farm itself. This had been made with a road machine and gelignite, for many long escarpments had to be cut out of the sides of mountains. There had been the usual trouble of course: the kafirs objected to the road where it touched their farms and could not be made to realise that it enhanced the value of their land. Consequently the work was stopped more than once and it was only with the authority of the court that I was able to continue.

But it was over the question of cattle that the incompatibility between Arthur Newton and his Zulu

tenants became most clear. It led to a crisis in relations between them that was in turn to lead to a stand-off between Newton – the English colonial – and the Union government in Pretoria, a government led by the Afrikaner descendants of Dutch settlers. The irony is inescapable in post-apartheid times, but Newton came to be convinced that a government of Boers put the interest of South African blacks before those of English settlers; and it was to publicise this that he decided, not far short of his fortieth year, to become an athlete. It was for reasons of politics that an obscure, if philosophically minded farmer in southern Natal transformed himself into the world's greatest distance runner.

East Coast Cattle Fever, known as 'Tick', was endemic in Natal, and a particularly bad epidemic of the disease was ravaging herds around Harding at the time that Newton began his farming adventure. The fever, potentially the most disastrous cattle disease in Central and East Africa, is caused by a parasite that is transmitted to cattle by three different varieties of tick; and it is estimated that even today one million cattle die from the disease each year in Africa. Nothing can be done to eradicate the ticks, so the question is how to protect the cattle. Vaccines are now undergoing trials, but until they become available – and affordable – the best method of control is, as it was in the 1910s, immersing the cattle in a chemical dip. Newton wrote that when he first took over the farm there were 123 head of 'kafir cattle' on his land, but that at the end of his first year there the number had been reduced by East Coast Fever to no more than a dozen. He decided to invest in a dipping tank: 'and therewith started trouble with the kafirs, trouble that would go on for all the rest of my time in the district'. The Zulus initially refused point-blank to bring their cattle for dipping, believing, according to Newton, 'that the white man was only trying to kill what stock they had left'. Then it struck him that he could use

his ability to keep their cattle alive as a way of persuading his Zulu tenants to provide him with the thing he needed more than anything else – labour. Without people to work in the fields his ambitious plans for cotton and tobacco production would never get off the ground. He had tried the obvious route, offering to forgo any rent in exchange for the Zulus working for him for six months of the year, a strategy he thought would 'educate them to the value of decent labour'; but, hardly surprisingly, the Zulu herdsmen mistrusted anything that would change their relationship with the land, and they refused to become wage-labourers. Newton's next offer was more successful. 'There was one way to make sure of regular dipping that would at the same time supply the labour I required: I would cleanse their cattle only on a basis of labour in exchange. On this basis things now worked in very much better style and there wasn't half the trouble … each week I had about thirty women and children turning out for a day's work in the fields.' The men, needless to say, while accepting the benefits of having their cattle dipped, still regarded manual labour as beneath their dignity.

Newton began to speculate that the Harding area would soon see a vibrant and expanding economy based on both cotton and tobacco; and he suggested publicly that former soldiers who had fought for the Empire in southern Africa during the war should be given preferential access to government loans, so that they too could start clearing and planting on the Crown Lands that surrounded Ihluku. But larger political forces were at work in the Union of South Africa, and they would quickly put an end to any such optimism that Newton might have had – forces that had decided that the land surrounding his farm was to become home to an increasing number of blacks rather than whites. The first inkling Newton himself had of this, he insisted, was when a new tank for dipping cattle suddenly appeared not far from his boundary fence. It had been put there and

paid for, he soon found out, by the Department of Native Affairs; and its impact on Newton's hard-won deal with his Zulu tenants was, it seems, immediate and disastrous. If he wasn't going to dip their cattle any longer they were not going to provide him with any labour:

> Work on the farm had been going on as usual when I got pulled up with a sudden jolt: dipping day arrived and not a single animal turned up. From enquiries I learned that all cattle, private farms and Crown Lands alike (kafirs only, of course) were now supposed to be using the new tank, the charge being five shillings per kraal per annum whether they sent one beast or a hundred. So without a moment's notice the whole of my labour negotiations were wrecked.

It did not take Newton long to realise that the expense of a new dipping tank could not be justified if it were only to be used for the handful of cattle that his own Zulu tenants possessed. There was only one conclusion that he could come to: 'All the way through I seem to have been kept as much in the dark as possible lest I should give an untimely exposure to the designs of the officials who, without authority from Parliament, were going to make a "black area", a place where only kafirs might own land or reside.'

One can date the first beginnings of what soon became known in much of South Africa as 'the Newton Case' to a letter that the owner of Ihluku farm sent to the *Times of Natal* at the end of September 1922. It was published under the heading 'Native Areas'. Newton said he was going to use the example of a particular 'improved' freehold farm of some 1,400 acres to expose why the 'proposed Native Areas' were 'responsible for a very sorry state of affairs'. 'A few years ago 50 acres of cotton were

grown annually on this farm: today there is not one acre. Kraals from Cape Colony and elsewhere are arriving and settling on the surrounding Crown Lands, and all kafir stock are allowed free grazing all the year round. These kafirs consequently have no need to work for a living, and labour is as a result almost unobtainable. So cotton culture, which is dependent on labour, has ceased.' He said that as a result his farm, despite all the work he had put into it, had become worthless, 'as no European wishes to live with a belt of five miles of "black area" all around him'.

Two months later, the *Natal Witness* reported on a meeting of the Dundee District Farmers' Association, where a discussion had been triggered by its receipt of a letter from Arthur Newton, 'pointing out the ruination of his farm'. A Mr Stein complained that 'natives from other provinces were steadily being squeezed in, and Natal was being made a black province'. This is quite clearly what Newton himself believed. He was convinced there was a larger politics in the new Union of South Africa that was intentionally undermining his attempt to become a successful cotton farmer in the deep south of Natal. It was this conviction that led to his bizarre decision to become an athlete.

III

In July 1915 General Jan Smuts was in command of imperial forces that conquered German South-West Africa. He described it as 'the first achievement of a united South African nation, in which the races have combined all their best and most virile characteristics.' By 'the races' he did not mean white and black; he meant English and Boer. The two decades that Arthur Newton spent trying to establish himself in South Africa were decades in which an Afrikaner-dominated country tried to come to terms with the fact that Britain had won the Boer War of 1899–1902. The formerly independent Afrikaner republics had become

part of the British Empire – and this was something that many an Afrikaans-speaker found hard to stomach. But British rule was problematic in that there were precious few Britons actually living in South Africa, and it was only in the relatively small Cape Colony and in the province of Natal that English-speaking white immigrants outnumbered the Dutch. So for the British government in London there was an urgent need to try and populate the vast spaces of the veldt with as many settlers as possible. Sir Alfred Milner had been High Commissioner in South Africa at the end of the Boer War, and he had regarded the encouragement of British immigration there as one of his most urgent responsibilities. Milner, according to the historian Leonard Thompson, 'planned to rule the former republics autocratically, without popular participation, until he had denationalised the Afrikaner and swamped them with British settlers … He planned the anglicised former republics should join the Cape Colony and Natal in a self-governing dominion that would be a source of economic as well as political strength to Britain.' Immediately after the end of the war a scheme was announced that offered generous subsidies to British people who wanted to settle in South Africa. The uptake was paltry, but – though he never mentioned it – it seems likely that one of those who did accept the financial help was nineteen-year-old Arthur Newton.

The Natal that Newton arrived in was a complex and uneasy place. The single most important thing that distinguished it as a province – and set it apart from its majority-Afrikaner neighbours – was the ratio of white to black in the population. Whereas in South Africa as a whole there were approximately four blacks to each white, in Natal the ratio was ten to one. This led to a distinct atmosphere of white paranoia. There was also, especially in Durban, a steadily growing Indian community – but the whites tended to regard them more with disdain than fear.

Natal's English population felt vulnerable, and isolated: and they knew they could not bank on help from the Boers of the Orange Free State or the Transvaal. Shula Marks, Britain's leading expert on the province in the early twentieth century, believes that 'the tightly knit nature of white Natal, the free mingling of officials and settlers, of farmers, shopkeepers and artisans led to a high degree of uniformity and conformity of opinion on most issues; and to stereotypes being formed of the other racial groups'. The stereotype of the black African was of his violence. Marks has also written of the 'pathetically small white population of Natal [whose] psychological security depended on the unquestioning acceptance of their superiority by the Africans'. But a sure sign that they felt they could not depend on that came in 1903, the year after Newton's arrival in Durban, when Natal's government passed a new Militia Act, introducing compulsory conscription for white males. And it was not long before the Militia Act was put to the test. In September 1905 a new Poll Tax was introduced, and it was as rigorously collected as it was deeply resented by Natal's Africans. Rumours of possible black uprisings intensified; so too did white paranoia.

Then on 9th February the next year a party of around thirty armed Africans attacked and killed two policemen near the town of Richmond. The response from the provincial capital of Maritzburg was immediate and brutal. Martial law was declared, and the Natal Militia was deployed in central and southern districts of the province. This is how Shula Marks describes the militia's behaviour: 'For the next six weeks the troops marched through the lands of Africans reported to be defiant or restless, burning crops and kraals, confiscating cattle, and deposing chiefs. On March 31 twelve of the participants in the Richmond affray with the police were shot by drumhead court martial.' It was, it seems fair to say, a questionably appropriate or wise response; and the Colonial Office in

London communicated its unease at the severity of the crackdown. They were probably right to do so, for during the spring and early summer of 1906 the conflict in Natal spread and escalated. In the western hills a force raised by the prominent Zulu leader Chief Bambatha continually exposed the white militiamen's lack of expertise in that difficult terrain – so much so that in June their commanding officer, Colonel Duncan MacKenzie, mounted a full-frontal assault on Bambatha's stronghold. The chief was killed and beheaded. The rebellion, it seemed, had been crushed – at an estimated cost of twenty-four white lives and more than 3,500 African ones. Although he never specifically mentions the events of 1906, it is clear that Arthur Newton was actively involved in them. Looking back, years later, on his dispute with the South African government, he says he had expected better treatment as someone who had 'on two occasions' fought for his country. Obviously one was the First World War; the other can only have been in the suppression of the Natal uprising of 1906.[2]

However, the death of Chief Bambatha, and the subsequent lifting of martial law in September, did not stop the violence. African anger went too deep; so did a white desire for retribution and revenge. It became clear during 1907 – when another important chief, Dinizulu, was accused of fermenting rebellion – that Natal's minority white population had come to the conclusion that their militia was inadequate in itself to protect their interests and, most importantly, their land. What can only be called a systematic attempt to terrorise Natal's Africans into quiescent deference was embarked upon. Its most important weapon was the whip – that everyday tool of racial degradation in so many parts of the British Empire. While in all the other South African provinces any sentences handed down that involved flogging had to be referred to a Supreme Court judge, that was not the case in Natal: and even the white press in the province was