

Durban as a Portal of Globalization: Mines, Railways, Docks and Steamships in the Empire of Otto Siedle's Natal Direct Line, c. 1879–1929

Jonathan Hyslop

RESÜMEE

Zwischen den 1880er und frühen 1920er Jahren hat Durban sich vom unbedeutenden Hafen der britischen Kolonie Natal zum Haupthafen des neuen südafrikanischen Staates gewandelt. Dieser Artikel untersucht die Schlüsselrolle, die Otto Siedle, der in Deutschland geborene, aber in London aufgewachsene Agent des Schifffahrtsunternehmens Natal Direct Line, in diesem Prozess gespielt hat. Durch die Entwicklung von Hafenanlagen, Kohlebergwerken und Eisenbahnen hat der Konzern bei der Umwandlung von Durban in die maritime Verbindung zwischen den wirtschaftlich wichtigen Goldminen in Witwatersrand und der Weltwirtschaft eine führende Rolle gespielt. Der Beitrag untersucht diese Veränderungen mithilfe des Konzeptes der ‚Portale der Globalisierung‘. Er findet den Begriff für die Analyse der Einbindung von Natal in globale Netzwerke hilfreich, plädiert aber gleichzeitig dafür, Portale hierarchisch zu verstehen und die Bedeutung von Imperien im Gegensatz zu Nationalstaaten im Auge zu behalten. Die Fallstudie stützt die Ansicht, dass die Rolle lokaler Siedlerkapitalisten für die Gestaltung globaler Verbindungen innerhalb des britischen Empire erheblich war und dass es deshalb ein Fehler wäre, sich bei der Analyse des Aufbaus der imperialen Wirtschaft übermäßig auf *the City of London* zu konzentrieren.

In the half century between the mid 1870s and the mid 1920s, Durban was transformed from the marginal port of the very minor British settler colony of Natal, to the most important harbour of an increasingly powerful, industrializing, South African state. This article seeks to understand how that transition, which was premised on the connection of coal, gold and ocean via rail, came about. It explores the case of Durban's development through a biographical focus on the career of one individual, Otto Siedle, who stood at

a confluence of the macro-institutions of our period, as a central figure in shipping, the transformation of Durban harbour, rail connections to the hinterland, the Natal coal industry, Indian indentured labour and imperial politics.

The analysis that follows draws (although not uncritically) on the theoretical framework associated with the notion of ‘portals of globalization’. Middell and Naumann¹ define these as “places which have been centres of world trade or global communication, have served as entrance points for cultural transfer, and where institutions and practices for dealing with global connectedness have developed”. There, “a whole range of symbolic and cultural constructions challenge national affiliation in communities of migrants, merchants and travellers ...” In Middell and Naumann’s view the portal idea enables us to analyze how “global connectedness challenges a seemingly stable territorial order ... and invites us to look at the various means by which elites try to channel and therefore control the effects of global connectivity ...”

In Middell and Naumann’s article, the portal concept is related to two other key theoretical terms: ‘critical junctures of globalization’ and ‘de-territorialization’/ ‘re-territorialization’. There are global moments of crisis – ‘junctures’ – in which actors struggle to reconfigure global territorial arrangements. World orders always emerge in a context of competition: there are rival aspirations amongst intellectuals, politicians and others to reduce the complexity of global flows and forms to a single pattern. Such struggles give birth to new ‘regimes of territorialization’. Middell and Naumann appear to see the late nineteenth century as the moment at which a nation-state version of territorialization was established.²

Durban certainly developed many of the features associated with a ‘portal of globalization’ in this late nineteenth-century period. The city played a crucial role in connecting the explosive industrialization of southern Africa to the world. In the middle of the 1870s Natal was a colony ruled from London, with a tiny British population and thin economic links into the interior. Ox-wagons were required for all inland transport. The powerful Zulu kingdom to the north remained autonomous until its defeat by the British Army in 1879. But with the start of the Rand gold-rush in 1886 the orientation of Durban shifted toward the Transvaal, leading to a dynamic new role for the port. Durban’s economic elite was highly active in shaping this connection – especially in three, inter-related ways; their development of a regional coal industry; their support for the colonial state’s activity as a railway builder, and their promotion of the reconstruction of Durban harbour. With the completion of the Durban-Johannesburg railway line in 1895, Durban became an important conduit of trade for the most vital economic centre of sub-Saharan Africa. This laid the foundation for future development of Durban as the region’s greatest port, which it remains today.

1 Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, “Global History and the Spatial Turn: from the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization”, in: *Journal of Global History*, 5 (2010), pp. 149-170.

2 As does Michael Geyer, “Portals of Globalization”, in Winifred Eberhard and Christian Lübke (eds.), *The Plurality of Europe: Identities and Spaces*, Leipzig 2010, pp. 509-521.

The politics of Durban was centrally concerned with the regulation of global flows – and especially of flows of population. The social composition of the colony was being transformed by the large scale importation of Indian indentured labour. Begun in 1860, this process was intensified at the turn of the century, and was accompanied by the voluntary migration of large numbers of Indian merchants, especially from Gujarat. This demographic change was accompanied by the consolidation of dense connections to Indian ports, especially Bombay. However, British settlers both needed Indian workers and were afraid of their economic competition. So Natal acquired one of the fiercest and most bureaucratic regimes of immigration regulation in the world, excluding not only many would-be Asian settlers, but also, to a remarkable extent, white sailors and casual labourers. This institutional apparatus became an internationally influential model for other white Anglophone polities resisting Asian immigration.³ In the later part of our period, regulation of population flows into Durban became focused on African migrant labour from Zululand and elsewhere in the interior. Up to the first decade of the twentieth century, although some African people had come to work in the city, the colonists had struggled to procure adequate supplies of labour. Only with the collapse of African subsistence agriculture did white Natal business and agriculture obtain a plentiful flow of workers from within the region. But white Natalians, driven by racial ideology, resisted permanent African urbanization. No family housing was provided for African workers, confining them to ‘compounds’ – labour barracks – and slum accommodation, and to a life of permanent migrancy. A rigid pass system enforced their status.

Natal underwent drastic forms of re-territorialization at frequent intervals. In 1893 the crown colony became a self-governing settler colony with an exclusively white electorate. This political system was temporarily disrupted as Natal came under British military rule during the Boer War, but then restored. In 1906 southern Africa entered a period of severe economic crisis. Subsequent economic pressures propelled the reluctant Natal colonists into political combination with the other major settler states of the region, to form the Union of South Africa in 1910.

And there certainly were crucial ‘global moments’ in the city’s evolution, meaning that there was a synchronicity and interrelatedness of events in different places across the world, though they may not quite fit with the notion of ‘critical junctures of globalization’. The social and political order was constantly affected by Durban’s connection to broader, global patterns. The Zulu War was a key point in the commencement of the ‘Scramble for Africa’ and the socio-political re-configuration of the continent under European dominance. The political crises around the Transvaal in the 1890s, which constantly destabilized the region, were undoubtedly related to the crucial role of the gold supply, in a world financial system based on the Gold Standard. The Boer War devastated the region economically and socially damaged Britain’s credibility as an imperial power, but ultimately permitted the full incorporation of southern Africa under British

3 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*, Cambridge 2008.

hegemony and enabled the Union to take place. The First World War briefly divided white South Africans over whether to ally with Britain or Germany, but with this matter resolved in favour of British allegiance, boosted South African inward industrialization and improved the political standing of the country within the imperial polity.

To this extent, combining the dynamics in town and country with the broader historical context of the time, Durban could be understood to be an example of a portal of globalization. However, there are two problems in a straightforward application of the 'portal' perspective.

Firstly, as a portal, Durban had a distinctly subordinate role to southern Transvaal in the globalization of southern Africa. Durban certainly played a part, but it was one that was primarily supportive of the real powerhouse of this process, centred around Johannesburg.⁴ As a portal of globalization Durban simply was not in the same league as Johannesburg. It was not nearly as important in the world economy, was far less of a centre of global and regional migration, did not have anything like as advanced a financial and commercial apparatus, and was relatively marginal to the administrative and political links of the South African state to London. But on the other hand, Durban did become absolutely crucial to the functioning of the Johannesburg region. The gold mining, and later industrial, centre of the country became reliant on Durban's port and rail facilities. In a sense then, Durban became a portal of globalization, but only in relation to Johannesburg, to which it was an indispensable supportive instance. What this suggests then is the need for both a differentiated treatment of the regional centres in terms of their role in globalization, and for a kind of hierarchical relatedness of portals.

The second problem in applying the portal framework is to do with the apparent insistence of Middell and Naumann that an international nation-state regime of territorialization was fully established by the end of the nineteenth century.

This view obviously works very well for Europe, and to a large extent for the Americas. But I would suggest that it sits somewhat uncomfortably in the context of the European empires. And this is especially the case for the British settler colonies. The settler elite of Durban, for example, occupied a very ambiguous position towards the idea of the nation-state. They were fervently 'British' in their self-definition, and had no interest in breaking away from the empire, yet in the period of colonial self-rule from 1893 to 1910, they sometimes clashed bitterly with Whitehall over policy, especially in relation to their management of Indian immigration and their treatment of African people. Forced into the Union of South Africa, they longed to re-assert their British connection. It was far from clear then, that the nation-state principle had triumphed in Natal politics.

I would suggest therefore that the 'portal of globalization' approach needs to take greater cognizance of the complexities posed for an understanding of regimes of territorialization by the political dynamics of empire. Globalization did not flow like a liquid over an even surface, but was channelled into specific grooves by political and cultural con-

4 Charles van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914*, Johannesburg 2001, is the outstanding account of Johannesburg in this period.

nections. The British state and its imperial extensions were a significant force in guiding the paths of global economic linkages.⁵ British migration and political and social commonalities linked the settler societies with Britain and with each other. British immigrant actors saw themselves as part of a global 'British' polity, and this reinforced both British linkages and connections to other Dominions (in Durban's case, especially Australia). This recognition of how membership in a particular worldwide political constellation may have modified the actions of local actors, is important for our understanding of how globalization played out in British colonies. We also need to take into account that there was a quality of contingency and conflict in the imperial connections: the ways they operated were constantly being remade and could be undone. Global links were made, but those were inhabited by elite rivalries and social and political conflicts.⁶

A Case Study

Taking up this modified understanding of the concept, I now turn to consider the career of Otto Siedle and the part he played in initiating Durban's transformation into a portal of globalization. Why focus on the role of one individual, and a locally based one at that, rather than on organizations at the centre of imperial power? Too often, the effectivity of 'peripherally' based capitalists in the imperial world has been denied. For example, in the influential work of Cain and Hopkins, the importance of industrialism in driving imperialism is played down and there is an overwhelming emphasis on the power of the City of London with its banking, financial, insurance and shipping houses.⁷ But in fact, in some cases, expatriate British merchants used their role in colonial port development as a base from which to become crucial initiators of empire-shaping economic activity.⁸ In Durban, Siedle had a major part in the creation of a port development-mining-rail-shiping nexus which remodelled Natal's position in the global economy. This is not of course to say that Siedle and his Durban cohorts could act as they wished. There were, as we will see, some decisions for which they remained reliant on the metropolis. But to a great extent they were active in forming their own environment, as a link in the imperial chain. Otto Siedle came out of London's high Victorian middle class. He was born there in 1856 to German parents who had emigrated to Britain and lived in Woolwich. His father, who came from a small village in the Black Forest region, had established a successful business as a watchmaker and jeweller. Contrary to stereotypes of 19th century British and German parents, Otto's family seemed to have instilled into him an overweening self-confidence that is apparent in both his business communications and his inadvertently

5 A point well understood by the 'British World' school of historians. See for example, Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorovich (eds.), *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* London 2003.

6 Tamson Pietsch, "Rethinking the British World", in: *Journal of British Studies*, 52 (2013), pp. 441-463.

7 P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914*, Harlow 1993.

8 Sandip Harazeesingh, "Interconnected Synchronicities: the Production of Bombay and Glasgow as Modern Global Ports c. 1850-1880", in: *Journal of Global History* 4 (2009), pp. 7-31.

revealing autobiography. In 1871, at 14, Otto was sent as an apprentice to a watchmaker in Stuttgart, and saw something of the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. The boy returned to London in 1874 and worked for a watchmaker in Camberwell.⁹

This background immediately points to a complexity of identity. Otto never presented himself as anything but a loyal Briton and imperialist. But clearly there was a process of self-fashioning at work: at some stage the family name shifted from the German pronunciation to an Anglicised version (phonetically, 'Seedlee'). Otto's entry into the shipping business was at one level accidental, but at another reflected his father's successful integration into London's commercial world. Amongst the friends of the elder Siedle was Daniel King, son of the founder of Bullard King (BK), a shipping firm which had its head office at St. Mary Axe, a street in the City of London which was a hub of maritime businesses. By Otto's account, one day in 1882, King's son asked him "How would you like to go out to Natal? I understand Maydon needs a book-keeper".¹⁰ BK had been operating ships to Durban for many years. 'Maydon' was King junior's brother in law, J.G. Maydon, the company's agent in the port. In Maydon, BK had a formidably capable employee, who was to become a dominating figure in Durban politics, was ultimately to occupy the senior cabinet position in the government of the Natal Colony, and whose name to this day is still given to a major wharf in Durban harbour.¹¹ Otto was not the only member of the family whose trajectory was affected by globalizing processes. Both transatlantic connections and the empire offered opportunities to enterprising members of the British middle class. One of Otto's brothers, Edward, became the technical director of the Metropolitan Opera in New York,¹² while another brother, Louis, became a successful gem trader in Ceylon.¹³

The Natal in which Otto came in 1883 was undergoing crucial transformations in its articulation with the world economy, linked to the changing role of two crucial technologies – the steamship and the telegraph.

Up to the end of the 1870s, BK had exclusively used sailing ships in their Indian Ocean operations: now the company had begun the shift to coal power. Across the world, this was the decade when the change took place. After 50 years of inefficient design, advances in engineering and maritime architecture had at last made the steamer an attractive proposition, and the proportion of sail on the seas began a precipitous decline. In 1879, BK had begun to move their Indian Ocean operations from sail to steam, when they launched their first steamship, the *SS Pongola*. She was small enough to clear Durban harbour's notorious sandbar. She was followed by the *SS Limpopo* and the *SS Congella*. The new steamers were by now being billed as the Natal Direct Line (NDL). Over the next three decades the company's selling point was that it offered a service that went di-

9 Otto Siedle, *Siedle Saga: Reminiscences and Reflections*, Durban 1940, pp. 9-19.

10 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 40.

11 Siedle, *Saga*, pp. 82-3.

12 Perla Gibson Siedle, *Durban's Lady in White: An Autobiography*, Ridgeway 1991, p. 29.

13 Siedle, *Lady in White*, 29; Anonymous, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*, New Delhi [1907] 1999, p. 472.

rectly from the East India Dock in London to Durban and back, avoiding the 'vexatious delays' associated with other services, which usually went first to Cape Town.¹⁴

In 1881 Maydon created the new firm of King and Sons as a new structure for representing the parent firm's interest in Durban.¹⁵ One has a strong impression that this apparently innocuous move actually represented a move to shift the balance within the Natal Direct Line away from the London headquarters and toward its southern African 'agents'. Sixty years later, though BK was by then no longer much of a factor in the maritime world, King and Sons had the agency of 16 different shipping lines in the port – a shipping empire of its own.¹⁶ Portals of globalization were not just places along which power flowed from the imperial metropolis, but also places where local forces could contend for power.

In the years immediately preceding Siedle's arrival in Durban, a major step in constructing Durban as a portal had taken place with the city's linking to the global telegraph network. The telegraph was the most advanced – and expensive – form of global communication of the late nineteenth century. No local economic or political force in Natal had the power to initiate the vast expenditures that were required to connect to the empire's emerging cable networks. As of the 1870s, Durban was far too unimportant economically and too geographically remote to justify the laying of a cable. But during that decade, the British Army and Navy gained a major degree of influence on state policy on telegraphs, influencing decisions in this field on the basis of claims of strategic necessity. It was in this context of an increasingly military-driven telegraph policy, that the decision was taken during the Zulu War to lay a cable connecting Durban with the Eastern Telegraph Company's station at Aden. This was a crucial moment in Durban's evolution as a portal of globalization. And strategic as the motivation for the cable may have been, it conferred on Durban's bourgeoisie the huge economic advantages of near-instantaneous direct communication with the United Kingdom, India and the wider world.¹⁷ Both the City and Durban's merchant houses were able to benefit from this development. In particular it enabled British shipping companies and local traders to incorporate Durban as part of the new world transport network provided by tramp steamers. This sector of the British merchant fleet was growing explosively, by 1914 comprising half of British shipping tonnage.¹⁸ In order to utilize their ships effectively, masters needed to know where cargoes were available, and plan to keep the time spent in port to a minimum, and the telegraph provided them with a solution to that problem. For the local agents of shipping companies in Durban, the new technological tool changed their organizational relationship to their head offices dramatically, as the speed of communications was reduced from

14 A. Forsyth Ingram, *The Story of an African Seaport, Durban 1899*, p. 164.

15 Siedle, *Saga*, pp. 82-3.

16 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 84.

17 P.M. Kennedy, 'Imperial Cable Communications and Strategy', in: *The English Historical Review*, 86 (1971) 431, pp. 728-752.

18 Byron Lew and Bruce Cater, 'The Telegraph, Co-ordination of Tramp Shipping, and the Growth in World Trade, 1870-1910', in: *European Review of Economic History*, 10 (2006), p. 149.

weeks to hours. Local agents could now communicate the availability of shipping capacity and cargo in port to their London offices and make scheduling arrangements in a way that was previously impossible.¹⁹ The telegraph provided a crucial instrument for the local shipping agents and harbour merchants who were flourishing on Durban's Point by the turn of the century – Wm. H. Savory, Chiazzari & Co., Geo. Mann and Stainbank, W. Dunn and Co., and the African Boating Company.²⁰

At the time of Otto's arrival in Durban, the obstacles to the city fulfilling its potential as a portal of globalization were still considerable. They centred on three inter-related problems – harbour facilities, coal and overland transport. Large ships could not enter Durban harbour because of the sandbar at its mouth, which meant that they had to be moored offshore and their cargoes loaded into lighters. This was a time-consuming and expensive process, and one that exposed the vessels to danger in stormy conditions. Steamers calling at Durban needed coal. But coal was not available locally and had to be shipped in from abroad, making it very expensive. These factors continued to restrict the attractiveness of Durban as a port. Natal railway development had just begun. The lack of local coal supplies was a problem here as well. The absence of adequate rail lines into the interior meant that the potential markets of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal had to be supplied by ox-wagon – delivery was very slow and the cost of shipments was high.

The solution of the problems of fuel, rail and harbour facilities did require local initiative, even though this usually had to be backed by capital raised in the City of London. Over the next few decades Maydon and Siedle were to be central in dealing with these questions. Like much of the Durban bourgeoisie, they were strongly emotionally invested in the imperial project. Through the crises of the 1890s and the Boer War, Maydon and Siedle made conspicuous displays of loyalism (Maydon was wounded while serving as a war correspondent). Sometimes patriotism was nicely combined with self-interest, as when, during the war, Siedle secured an exclusive berth for NDL ships in the harbour on the basis that NDL had been contracted to carry the mail from Cape Town and thus the spot on the quay was necessary for the company to play its part in the war effort.²¹

After his arrival in Durban, Otto became Maydon's indispensable lieutenant. Colonial society replicated, to a remarkable extent, the social practices of contemporary Britain. For elites, this was an important source of their social cohesion. Siedle was popular amongst the younger members of Durban's British immigrant and settler-born elite. His enthusiasm for sport and for music (an 'amateur basso' in Gilbert and Sullivan performances) and his companionability on picnics were appreciated. He became part of a social and commercial circle which included members of Durban families with money from agriculture, retail, land and commerce – G.M. Sutton, Joseph Baynes, Charles Hitchins, Benjamin Greenacre, Robert Jameson and Sam Campbell.²² This was a politically influ-

19 Lew and Cater, "The Telegraph", p. 150.

20 Ingram, *African Port*, pp. 183-184.

21 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 81.

22 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 28.

ential group – a number were active in Durban politics and Sutton was Prime Minister of the Colony from 1903 to 1905.

Colonial Durban's wealthy were able to enact fantasies of pseudo-aristocratic grandeur which would have been hard to achieve in the metropolis. One might speculate that this feudal tinge to colonial culture was fed by the glorification of rural life and of an imagined organic social order presided over by a squirearchy, which was such a feature of mid to late nineteenth century English culture. In later years Otto lived in a mansion on South Ridge Road, along the Berea, which overlooked the city, and where sea breezes mitigated the semi-tropical heat. He prided himself on continuing the somewhat recent 'traditions' of the so-called 'Old Natal families'. Eight Zulu workers (whom Otto referred to as his 'loyal servitors') and (when the automobile arrived), a white chauffeur, kept the family in the condition to which they had become accustomed.²³

It is striking quite how mobile the Siedles were across the world. The Natal, Ceylonese and British branches of the family had a reunion in London in around 1901. Oscar, with his wife Amelia, and family, went on to visit the New York brother. Oscar's daughter Perla trained as an opera singer in Berlin. Amelia and Perla visited the Ceylon relatives in 1911. The family's upward mobility was reflected in Perla's delight at getting invited to the wedding of one of the Kaiser's sons and to the Members' enclosure at Sandown Park Race Course, presided over by Edward VII.²⁴ The perhaps surprising extent to which these members of the Durban elite were integrated into the metropolitan upper classes, suggests how the organization of the city as portal of globalization was deeply connected to the larger world patterns of social power.

In 1886 the economic opportunities for Durban were revolutionized by the Rand gold-rush and the subsequent establishment of the world's greatest gold mining centre on the Transvaal Highveld. In a curious way the Durban bourgeoisie did not make the strides they could have in this moment, as they did not get in on the ground floor of investment in the Transvaal mines. Siedle attributed this to their having earlier burned their fingers in the delusionary, earlier Barberton gold rush.²⁵ However Durban did a competent job of benefiting from its position as transport route to the gold fields. The Kimberley diamond magnates and new European incomers were able to seize the economic initiative on the Rand, and the Durban business class, with lesser resources at their disposal and less acute financial judgement, did not. This was to have enormous long-term consequences in consigning the Durbanites to a permanently subordinate position amongst South African capitalists. Yet, a subordinate position does not preclude a role as portal of globalization; or put otherwise: as a link in the construction of global connectivity.

The Natal colonial government developed a successful strategy of railway building, which enabled the next step in globalizing the Natal economy. The crucial break-through in the unleashing of a new energy economy in Natal came in the late 1880s, when the Natal

23 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 48.

24 Siedle, *Lady in White*, pp. 15-35.

25 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 110.

Government Railways (NGR) connected Durban to the northern Natal coalfield. The tracks reached the southern edge of the coalfield at Ladysmith in 1886 and its heart at Dundee in 1889. This provided the rail system itself with access to coal, dropping prices massively compared with existing imported coal supplies. But it also opened an uninterrupted flow of cheap coal to the Durban dockside. Another vital rail breakthrough was the completion of the rail line to Johannesburg in 1895. While the Transvaal made greater use of the shorter rail line to Delagoa Bay in Portuguese East Africa for many years thereafter, the new connection gave Durban its first real chance to take a big share of the Rand transportation market. During 1896, Natal's railway revenue more than doubled as a result of the new Transvaal trade.²⁶ This was the real beginning of a long struggle by Durban to capture the flow of goods to and from the Rand.

The expansion of coal mining enabled by this new rail configuration was phenomenal. In 1889, total annual production was at an unimpressive 25 609 tons; by 1901 it stood at half a million tons, and by the end of the first decade of the new century it had risen to a staggering 1 786 583 tons.²⁷ With the railways providing cheap coal, Durban could become an important steamship port. By 1899 bunkering (ships taking on coal as fuel) at Durban had risen from a minimal amount at the start of the decade to 156 267 tons. In 1905 Durban supplied ships with over 800 000 tons of bunker coal. There was a successful breakthrough into large scale exporting of coal, both a very large one abroad by sea and a more modest one to other territories in southern Africa. In addition Natalians themselves were burning vast amounts of coal. In 1908 over 250 000 tons was used by the NGR and over 150 000 tons by other businesses and consumers in the province.²⁸ In 1897, with Maydon's retirement, Siedle took over the leadership of King and Sons in partnership with a King family grandson; but one has the strong impression that Oscar called the shots.²⁹ By the time of the Boer War, NDL was to have seven steamers providing fortnightly service in each direction between London's East India Dock and Durban.³⁰ None of the ships was bigger than 2 500 tons, which enabled them to come in to the Durban quayside. The company's publicists were able to boast that all passenger accommodation had access to the deck, that the ships were lit with electricity, and that they offered 'viands' of 'the best quality'.³¹ Rennie's Aberdeen Line did offer a similarly direct route as well, but a cosy agreement with BK allowed both to profit.³² The German East Africa Line was making a bold challenge with its service via the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal and the East African ports. But it did not have access to the crucial British

26 Hein Heydenrych, "Rail Development in Natal to 1895", in: Bill Guest and John M. Sellers (eds.), *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony: Aspects of the Economic and Social History of Colonial Natal*, Pietermaritzburg 1985, pp. 47-69.

27 Ruth Edgecombe and Bill Guest, "An Introduction to the Pre-Union Natal Coal Industry", in: Guest and Sellers, *Enterprise and Exploitation*, p. 337.

28 Edgecombe and Guest, "Introduction", p. 338.

29 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 84.

30 Ingram, *African Port*, p. 187.

31 Ingram, *African Port*, p. 164.

32 *Natal Almanac and Directory and Yearly Registry 1900*, Cape Town 1900, p. xvii.

market, and after 1914 was politically shut out. More ominous was the formation in 1900 of the Union Castle Line, which was to develop greater financial muscle than its competitors, and ultimately to triumph over them.

Siedle's network was able to parlay its business influence into a leading role in the coal industry. J.G. Maydon was in at the start of the Natal coal boom, with fingers in more than one mine, and Siedle was right behind him. BK claimed to have championed the use of local coal well before other shipping companies. Siedle ultimately became Chairman of the Dundee Colliery, the biggest of the Natal mines during the 1890s. Three of Siedle's personal social circle were directors of Dundee – Greenacre (the first chairman), Sutton and Hitchens – as were the sugar baron Marshall Campbell and other leading lights of the Durban bourgeoisie.³³ The Dundee company had a close relationship with NGR, and there were a number of allegations by rival companies in the decade after the Boer War, that the company had been favoured in the award of railway contracts, had charged excessive prices for their coal and had been given preference in the allocation of railway trucks. By the early 1900s each of the major Durban shipping agencies had a close connection with a particular mine. In 1909 a Coal Owners Association was established, largely at Siedle's initiative, and he was chosen as its chairman.³⁴

In 1889 NDL secured the government contract to become the sole carrier of Indian indentured labour to Natal.³⁵ This provided the company with a guaranteed source of profit, from then until 1911, when the Government of India prohibited this trade. By 1899, NDL had six steamers running on its three-weekly India services, which also called at Ceylon and East African ports.³⁶ Whereas the NDL services to the United Kingdom employed mainly British and north European crews, the ships on the eastern routes used much cheaper Indian labour, under British officers.³⁷

Although the Indian indentured workers were initially intended for agriculture, they were increasingly siphoned off into the mines. The expansion of Natal coal mining was achieved with a small workforce; there were only about 600 workers in 1890 and about 9000 workers in 1910. There was a fourfold increase in output per worker in this period, a tribute to mechanization and a lesson in the extremities of exploitation. Mechanization of coal cutting was pioneered by Dundee and Elandslaagte mines. Up until 1895, there were less than a thousand workers on the mines in all, the vast majority of them black. By then, the demand for unskilled labour was going up sharply. But for African workers, subsistence agriculture was still a viable option and the dangerous nature of colliery work was well known. Moreover, many of those were willing to take the risks of mine work preferred the better-paying Transvaal mines. Africans, then, were not flocking into the coalfields. Indian indentured workers on the other hand did not have the option of

33 Siedle, *Saga*, pp 88-92.

34 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 135.

35 Siedle, p. 79.

36 Ingram, *African Port*, 187; *Natal Almanac*, p. 364.

37 This assertion is based on a reading of crew lists in the National Maritime Museum, London and the Memorial University of Newfoundland.

going elsewhere. Their unfree status meant that their wages were lower than those needed to attract Africans, and they were in an effectively captive position. These factors made indentured labourers the mine owners' preferred option. Between 1895 and the next year, the percentage of Indians employed by the mines jumped from 8.72% to 20.39% and then to 30.26% the year after, peaking at 44.5% in 1902.³⁸

With a largely rightless workforce, Natal was able to introduce levels of colliery mechanization far in advance of those prevalent in Britain, where strong unions, which feared job losses, resisted new equipment. Colliery conditions were appalling, and, at least until after Union, enforcement of safety procedures was quite inadequate. Between 1897 and 1909 there were 33 major explosions on Natal coal mines, resulting in 146 deaths, and there were 197 other accidental fatalities.³⁹ Housing conditions were squalid, and food and medical attention poor. Consequently, there were high death rates from tuberculosis and gastro-intestinal diseases, especially amongst Indian workers. The coal industry was a crucial part of the 'portal' that entered on British Durban. But such portals did not come into being without a very unevenly-paid cost.

Marketing Natal coal to shipping companies was somewhat difficult. Metropolitan companies distrusted southern hemisphere coal varieties, which had indeed been demonstrated by researchers to burn less efficiently than the product of the Welsh collieries. Moreover it was widely claimed that Natal coal was more prone to the serious danger of spontaneous combustion in the ships holds than other varieties; and certainly fires in the coal bunkers of tramp steamers were common.⁴⁰ Many ship's engineers were deeply opposed to using the Natal product. However, in the end cheapness and convenience won out, and the engineers had to make do with the coal they took on at Durban.

Durban shipping and commercial interests had long been agitating for the development of the harbour, and by the 1890s, steady improvements were being achieved in the depth of the draft of the ships which could be accommodated. After the death of the major proponent of this project, Harry Escombe, Maydon became the most important political leader in driving the harbour works. In 1904, Durban harbour was finally opened up to the largest vessels operating in the southern hemisphere, when it became deep enough for Union Castle's 13 000 ton liners to enter. Subsequently, Maydon, now Colonial Secretary in the Natal government, pushed through an expansion of the port facilities on the western side of the harbour. Sophisticated dredgers were brought in to create the necessary channel through the thick clay soil across the lagoon. This deepening, however, meant that in order for the full potentialities of the port as a refuelling stop to be exploited, coaling facilities had to be expanded. Using dredging and land reclamation techniques, a platform was constructed on the Bluff, near the harbour mouth, for

38 Edgecombe and Guest, "Introduction", p. 340.

39 Edgecombe and Guest, "Introduction", p. 342.

40 Richard Woodman, *Fiddler's Green: The Great Squandering 1921–2010*, Stroud 2010, p. 75.

a mechanical coaling appliance with a 10 000 ton capacity. Later a conveyer belt and a 700 foot quay were added.⁴¹

What needs to be noted here is the success of the shipping-coal nexus, resting on the benefits of the overland rail connection, in getting the colonial state to pursue the policies that they wanted. And the extensive size of the harbour works and the equipment necessary to maintain and service the port is also significant. Public works on the harbour created local economic demand and stimulated the business of harbour-based entrepreneurs. There was a constant interlocking of the shipping and coal interests in the process. John Leuchars, for example, was both one of the Directors of the Dundee Company and a major investor in the land used to build a new wharf.⁴²

There was a striking increase in goods shipped after these changes to the harbour. Between 1904 and 1906, the value of exports leaving the port more than doubled.⁴³ By this time the harbour's equipment for handling goods had been greatly increased with over 50 cranes of various types, including a massive 50 ton hydraulic crane, a twenty ton 'shears', three ten ton steam cranes and a ten ton travelling hydraulic crane. There was now 100 000 tons of shed capacity, and the wharves were illuminated at night.⁴⁴ No less than 18 dredgers kept the harbour clear.⁴⁵ A particular sign of the ability of the harbour to handle bulk cargoes was the rise of maize exports, which grew from 116 228 bags in 1905 to 1 001 081 bags in 1909.⁴⁶

The town also reconfigured its inland linkages, in the aftermath of the Boer War, by making itself into a seaside tourist centre for the growing middle class of the Transvaal towns and cities. Between 1906 and 1909 the seafront was developed. This involved the construction of a giant, horseshoe-shaped 'safety-bathing enclosure' on the waters' edge. Publicists were able to reassure tourists that this structure presented "an impregnable barrier to sharks".⁴⁷ Thus the replication of European models of leisure consumption gave the city's elite new paths of accumulation.

This process of port development was not to stop. Later came other projects – including, in 1925, the Prince Edward Dock, one of the biggest ship repair docks in the world.

The ultimate dissolution of Natal Colony into the Union of South Africa in 1910 raised a number of very difficult problems for the Durban elite, which crucially problematized their relation to imperial political and economic structures and to the role of Durban as a portal of globalization. The very considerable success which they had had in shaping the relationship of Durban to globalization declined after Union. In a sense this was quite logical. In the days of the Natal Colony the Durban bourgeoisie were a relatively

41 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 117.

42 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 119.

43 Natal Province: *Descriptive Guide and Official Handbook*, Durban, South African Railways 1911, p. 45.

44 C.W. Francis Harrison, *Port Natal Illustrated: Handbook of General Information Relating to Durban Port Natal and Railways in Connection*, London 1905, p. 15.

45 Harrison, *Port Natal*, p. 16.

46 Natal Province: *Descriptive Guide and Official Handbook*, Durban 1911, p. 47.

47 *Descriptive Guide*, p. 73.

great economic power within a small polity. In the context of the Union, they were dwarfed financially by the Rand magnates and politically threatened by Afrikaner numbers. Moreover, both of those forces were less ideologically tied to the empire than they. Though much of the structure of Durban as a portal of globalization, which they had largely created, remained, their ability to shape it in the future declined.

Siedle and his circle had exercised really substantial political agency. But their room for movement was starting to close. White Natalians were great British loyalists. This was true across classes, and such jingoism was not incompatible with a lively white working class support for an emerging labour politics in the colony – working men demand their rights as Britons. But the Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith governments pushed the colony toward unity with the rest of South Africa. The more economically powerful Transvaal capitalists and the politically powerful Afrikaner leadership did as well. And the severe recession which hit the region from 1906, although affecting all parts of it, highlighted the relative economic weakness of Natal and its complete reliance on serving as a conduit for the trade of the Rand.

Grudgingly, the Durban bourgeoisie reconciled itself to getting the best deal it could within the new amalgamation. This began with attempts to push for a looser federation, rather than the more monolithic Union. Siedle and Maydon worked assiduously to position Natal economic interests for maximum political influence in the new state. The line up for the forthcoming 1910 elections was dominated by the South African Party of Jan Smuts and Louis Botha, Afrikaner-dominated although largely conciliatory toward the empire, and the Unionist Party, headed up by Leander Starr Jameson,⁴⁸ and suspected of being the agent of the Rand mine owners. The Natal elite feared being crushed between these two blocks. Maydon and Siedle were involved in a number of abortive attempts to establish a distinct Natal political party. Siedle played a part in setting up the Mercantile League, representing Durban business, which supported this regionalist approach. The other hope was that political leverage could be used to reduce the share of Rand trade going through to Delagoa Bay and Cape Town, in favour of Durban. An “Intercolonial Railway Agreement” as part of the constitutional negotiations allocated 30% of the Transvaal’s rail traffic to Durban. Natalians regarded this as inadequate, but were even more disappointed when the final agreement amounted to an even lower share.⁴⁹

In the end, Maydon and Siedle played something of a double game. They appeared on a platform with Botha in Durban shortly before the first Union election, endorsing the unity project, but at the same time a slate of independents ran for Natal seats. These candidates were remarkably successful, winning 10 out of 16 Natal constituencies, including Maydon’s victory in the largely working class Durban constituency of Greyville.⁵⁰ Even after Union, Maydon, together with Siedle’s friend Joseph Baynes, pursued the pos-

48 Jameson was Cecil Rhodes’ right-hand man during the conquest of Rhodesia in the 1890s, leader of the infamous 1895-6 Jameson Raid, and Prime Minister of the Cape Colony 1904-1908.

49 P.S. Thompson, *Natalians First: Separatism in South Africa*, Johannesburg 1990, pp. 1-14.

50 Thompson, *Natalians First*, p. 1-14.

sibility of finding a political vehicle for pursuing the federal model, but in the end were forced to admit defeat.⁵¹

For Durban, the First World War was a moment of dramatic shifts. Briefly the future of the region seemed up in the air, as in late 1914 and early 1915, Afrikaner rebels backed by the Germans in South West Africa fought government troops and German commerce raiders stalked British shipping in the Indian Ocean. It took some time for a sense of imperial stability to be restored, with the suppression of the rebellion, the South African military seizure of South West and the sinking of the German warships. Durban got a burst of inward industrialization from the war. Those local capitalists participating in this process included Otto Siedle. Siedle became centrally involved in the creation of a successful glass industry.⁵² In 1911, manufactures in Natal – most of which were produced within Durban itself – were worth £ 4 434 000; by 1918 they were up to £ 15 796 000 – allowing for inflation, more than double in real value.⁵³

The NDL though was doomed. It had already been weakened by the loss of the steady income provided by the Indian indentured labour contract. In the war, it lost a number of its commandeered ships to enemy action. But most importantly, it could not compete with the financial might of the Union Castle. The little ships of the NDL on the UK run were outmatched by the speed and luxury of the other company's big liners. In 1919, NDL became a subsidiary part of the shipping empire of Lord Kyslant, Union Castle's owner. In the post-war world, Union Castle would exercise a near-monopoly of the South African passenger traffic. The flow of British passenger traffic to Durban now came from Southampton, not London. The war thus catalysed a shift in the pattern of imperial networks.

Otto Siedle though survived the war well, as King and Sons was now the agent of multiple shipping companies. During the War Otto's wife, Amelia was to become a leader of charitable works in Durban, and an active city councillor in the 1920s. They were not spared tragedy however – a son, Karl, was killed in World War One. But Siedle later enjoyed the pride and prestige of his other son, Basil, becoming a member of the national 'Springbok' Cricket team.⁵⁴

In 1926-7, Durban experienced a remarkable reconfiguration of politics, pointing to the past and to the future. On the one hand, the British Natalians furiously protested the introduction by the Afrikaner Nationalist government of a new national flag. In mass meetings, the white Durbanites proclaimed their loyalty to the Union Jack and the Britishness for which it stood.⁵⁵ But it was by now clear that there was a gradual migration of political power from London to the governments of the settler states. And the British state was itself conceding this. In that sense the links to the centre were mutating

51 Thompson, *Natalians First*, pp. 15-28.

52 Killie Cambell Library, Durban, Siedle Family Papers, Anonymous (probably Otto Siedle), "Brief History of the Glass Industry in Natal".

53 Eric Rosenthal, *Schooners and Skyscrapers*, Cape Town 1963, p. 194.

54 Siedle, *Saga*, p. 50.

55 Thompson, *Natalians First*, pp. 15-48.

under the pressures of colonial nationalism, and indeed the settler colonies were increasingly formalizing lateral links between themselves. On the other hand, in a town where African workers had been largely quiescent, a young man called A.W.G. Champion was pushing forward the ideas of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), a radical black movement which had been sweeping the countryside in the immediately preceding period. The ICU was in some respects a home-grown movement, but recent research has demonstrated its links to both Garveyism and Syndicalism, ideas brought by American and Caribbean sailors.⁵⁶ Thus the Durban portal of globalization had brought a politics which destabilized imperial links. By the end of the 1920s the African working class of Durban had entered into a pattern of militancy with continuities which can be traced down to the present. Though the Natal British separatist cause did not entirely die out until the 1960s, it was clearly a politics the time of which had passed, while the incipient African nationalist radicalism of the ICU pointed to a future post-colonial state. Thus by the late 1920s – but not earlier – a nation-state regime of territorialization was establishing its hegemony in Durban. By the same token, Durban, and the Empire of Otto Siedle's Natal Direct Line within it, had primarily been a portal of globalization under the previous, British imperial, regime of territorialization.

Within South Africa, Durban's supremacy as a port was now unquestioned. By the end of the 1920s, about 60% of all cargo handled at South African ports went through it.⁵⁷ However, our attempt to apply the portal concept has thrown up two complications. Firstly, the subordination of Durban to the Johannesburg area in southern Africa's global connections implies that we need a more complicated typology or hierarchy of 'portals'. And secondly, Durban's embeddedness within a British Empire context implies a need for a more modulated account of how imperial frameworks inter-connected with nationalism and a questioning of the presumed triumph of a nation-state regime of territorialization.

Nevertheless, we can say that out of the complex political economy of Natal, Otto Siedle and his circle did create a nexus, building from shipping and rail connections to mining and port development which did play a part in transforming the region. They created new linkages between Durban, its Natal and Transvaal hinterland, the empire and the wider world. They inaugurated a structure, in which Durban served as a vital support to the Rand and its periphery, which persists to the present. After 1910 the power, although not necessarily the wealth, of the old Durban elite declined. But their trajectory makes clear that the patterns of globalization in the British empire were not just shaped in the City of London, but also by capitalists in port cities and railway towns around the colonial world.

56 Lucien van der Walt, "The First Globalization and Transnational Labour Activism in Southern Africa: White Labourism, the IWW, and the ICU 1904–1934", in: *African Studies*, 66 (2007) 2–3, pp. 223–251; Robert Trent Vinson, *The Americans are Coming!: Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa*, Athens OH 2012.

57 *Industrial Durban: Opportunities at Port Natal, Durban 1930*, p. 21.