



Br Theodore Nigg, S.J.
(1848-1991. In Zambia 1879-1984)
10 August 1891

Theodore Nigg was born in Trieson, Liechtenstein on 16 February 1848 and was of German extraction, He was less than five feet in height and so, in a sense, was a fitting representative of his country which is only 62 sq miles in area, situated between Austria and Switzerland. He entered the Society in October 1869 at the age of 21 and took his final vows at Tati, near Bulawayo, in May 1880 during the great Jesuit trek north. His small stature was an asset in the cramped oxcarts which inspired Fr Law to write of him:

‘In this poor and narrow nook
Lies the little brother cook.
Were he not so very small,
He could not get in here at all’.

Despite his size, he was a good shot and the same Law had to reprimand the Sisters in Grahamstown for not believing that their ‘little brother’ had shot a crocodile! He was a most useful brother for he was extremely versatile, being able to put his hand to anything. Depelchin wrote: ‘Br Nigg, our Jack of all trades, is really doing wonders! He is now a first rate tailor, a first rate shoemaker and a first rate cook, in fact he knows every trade’. One of his talents was caring for the sick and he was the first person asked for, when someone went down with fever.

Self composed, but too childlike to be self-conscious, with limpid blue eyes and a scanty beard which seemed reluctant to conceal a complexion so extraordinary fair that on first seeing him, the Matabele women had held their breath and exclaimed: ‘Now we have seen a white man’. He was a handyman at various trades and had astonished King Lobengula and his court by his skill on the concertina (accordion) and the sewing machine. His instrument can still be seen today in the Museum of St George’s College.

He was in the first group to head to Bulawayo, setting out from Grahamstown in April 1879. In May 1880 he went further north with Depelchin and companions to set up a base at Pandamatenga just south of the Falls from where it was hoped that the missions to both to the Lozi (upstream on the Zambezi) and to the Tonga (over the river in the Valley), would be launched. Depelchin and his guide, Mr Blockley, escorted Terorde and Vervenne to Mweemba’s kraal. After a few days Depelchin and Blockley returned but they came down with fever on crossing the river. Depelchin sent an urgent message to Weisskoph and Nigg at Pandamatenga to come to his aid but by the time they covered the 200 km or so, they were informed that desperate messages had come from from Terorde saying that both of them in Mweemba’s kraal were in a bad shape and to send Br Nigg with all possible haste. Nigg therefore continued alone with four carriers, but by the time he got over the river Terorde had been dead for two days and Vervenne was dangerously ill. The diminutive Nigg faced the wrath of the towering Chief when he made him admit he had plundered the missionaries’ house and he forced him to display what he had removed. The Chief threatened to kill Nigg and throw Br Vervenne to the crocodiles. Nigg beat a hasty retreat and with great effort got Vervenne back to base and cared for him there.

In December 1880 he went down to Tati to recover but was back again in early 1882 to accompany Engels on a second attempt to re-establish a mission at Mweemba's. Both men fell suddenly ill, after consuming some local beer, and were quite convinced they were poisoned. They retreated in haste to Pandamatenga. Nigg went back down to Bulawayo to try to get over his chronic dysentery but in 1884 it was decided to send him south where he spent the last seven years of his short life. He went first to Grahamstown, then to Dunbrody and finally, for his last two years, to Keilands. Yet in spite of much suffering, he was the cheeriest soul alive, jesting about his own troubles, and from an inexhaustible fund bringing forth stories so droll that they drew tears of irrepressible laughter from old Bishop Ricards. At Keilands he soon won the affection, not only of the Fathers, but of the local people, who were always eager to work with him and enjoyed listening to his merry flow of talk in the Sindabele tongue. He passed away on 10 August 1891 at only 44 years of age.