An Ancient Watch Connecting Daniel Francis, Mandunyane and King Lubengula: A Note on Harry Tainton of Tonota

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On the bank of the river Shashe in Tonota, amidst carcases of old motor vehicles some of which last hit the road during the colonial [era], lives a bow-backed old man who is a living epitome of raw talent and natural genius. [He is a] Ndebele-Briton-Motswana who is also the founder of Mmandunyane, a sub-village of Tonota.

Harry Tainton is one of those rare species of mankind who never had to go through formal education for the acquisition of their skills. For Harry Mmandunyane, as he is popularly known to Tonota [residents], that would have been a waste of precious time. In fact [he says] he never refers to a book for anything.

'That's a waste of time', he retorts. 'Whoever would have written that book would have been created by God. And so was I'.

The old vehicles that meet the eye from a distance at Harry's not-too-well-off home tell only a part of his story. During his hey days he was, in addition to being a mechanic, a blacksmith, a gunsmith, a watch repairer, and a jeweller. A number of older women […] in Tonota still remember how efficiently Mmandunyane used to work on and repair their sewing machines.

'He could turn a mere coin into a beautiful wedding ring', one villager says.

Refraining from sparing his own trumpet, and with a twinkle in his eye, Harry himself says: 'Those who could beat me are not yet born. If I failed to repair anything, then no one on earth could'.

With his stable mate (the pipe in his mouth), trembling hands, and aged pride illuminating his wrinkled face, Harry goes around his generously populated home [moving] from one object to another, [and pointing at] remnants of his own creation. A 32-year old Chevrolet truck which is still going strong (when he bought it in 1947 it was almost a scrap, but he [expertly] repaired it). There is also a battery charger, a bicycle pump, and his personal 'waterworks' plant.

The waterworks plant is in the form of an engine which draws water through a pipe buried deep down [in the sands of] the Shashe River. Harry recollects how in the old days his waterworks plant used to help Tonota residents to draw clean water during flood periods. He used to charge the residents only 'a few pennies' or nothing for this service.

'But [now] the Government has robbed me of this job', he [laments] the [introduction of] the water reticulation system in the village.

A hater of Boers for their apartheid practices, Mmandunyane, though of British descent, and his best known language being Setswana; considers himself a Ndebele. Perhaps rightly so. The name Mmandunyane itself is a corruption and derivative of a Sindebele word. But before plunging into that aspect of his personal history, Harry would slip into his house and from a 'treasure box' he would bring out an ancient watch on whose lid is inscribed in fancy letters: WJT. At the back of the watch appears the inscription: 'WJ Tainton from his old friend D. Francis 1893'.

It is then that [his historical tale] would start. The starting point is the explanation behind the watch which went lifeless only in 1937. The watch is an ancient historical souvenir handed down to him by his grandfather, William Joseph Tainton. It was a present to William Joseph Tainton from Dan Francis after whom [the City of] Francistown was named.

William Joseph Tainton came to Africa from Britain in a party that participated in the construction

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of the rail line from the Cape to Bulawayo and Salisbury [present day Harare]. He came to learn isiSend-ebele in the then Rhodesia [present day Zimbabwe] and eventually became King Lubengula's interpreter. Due to his relationship with Lubengula, and because Lubengula had given him a number of people with whom he had established a ward (kgotla), Tainton earned himself the nickname *Ndunyana* which is the dimunitive of *Induna*, a Sindebele word for '*Chief*'.

Being close to each other as they were, Lubengula and Tainton used to exchange [pieces of] advice. One such advice from Lubengula was that Tainton should leave Rhodesia because there was too much war there and that his family's safety might be at stake.

'Lubengula told my grandfather to leave the country saying that he (Lubengula) was going to die and that no one would ever see his [dead] body', Harry says in well-knit Setswana [idiom].

Taking this piece of advice William Joseph Tainton, who was married to a Ndebele-captured Motswana woman who was distantly related to Bangwato royalty, had crossed into the then Bechuanaland Protectorate and settled at a place called Ramathekethe, now Lady Mary, in the Tate area where he later died. It was here that Harry was born to Tainton's daughter, Chilo, in 1909 shortly before the Taintons moved to an area north-west of Tonota. This place was to become Mmandunyane, a Setswana distortion of *Ndunyana*.

When Harry was [virtually] a baby, he discovered that he was the only man in the family and his mother was blind. All the family burden fell squarely on his shoulders. He found his grandfather's tools and with no one to guide, lead, or teach him [how to use them] he set out on his own. He had no time to go to school save for only a few months. Besides nursing his blind mother he devoted his time to experiment-ing with his grandfather's tools. One of the things he created as a small boy was a prototype gramophone. This [initial invention marked] the beginning of a long multi-faced career. Soon he was able to work on anything whether it a wagon, a motor vehicle, a gun, a sewing machine, anything and everything.

The crack in Harry's career came when in 1943 a group of Bangwato were moved from Serowe to Tonota to [found] Maboledi ward. Kgosi Tshekedi, [apparently] acknowledging Tainton's distant relation to Bangwato as well as well as Harry's talent, requested him to move from Mmandunyane to Tonota to help service and repair the wagons which had been used as a means of transport during the establishment of the Maboledi ward. This saw him very busy, working on wagon after wagon, and his fame grew.

When wagons became an obsolete mode of transportation in the village and the motor vehicle took over, Harry changed with the times and automatically became a formidable mechanic. Clients came from near and far [demanding] his services; and his place provided all the necessary benefits a modern [mechanical workshop] could offer. Tonota residents commend him as 'one hell of a mechanic' who could even assemble his own car. He, himself, tells how in 1944 he turned an Overland into a coal-drawn vehicle.

'Petrol had become too expensive by then', he says. "The price had risen from about two-and-six a gallon to about six shillings'.

[Harry created the new source of energy by] simply filling a can with mophane coal to which he set fire. Upon combustion the coal produced a gas that worked in the same way as petrol. He ran the vehicle for about a year.

An only child of his late mother, Harry married thrice and has a total of 11 children about whom he says: 'I have trained all my children and grandchildren. They are all good. But none of them can reach up to my standard. I'm just going to go into the grave with this God-given talent'.

Acknowledgement