

Is this the Grave of Surgeon Peter Shepherd? Pondering a mystery of the 'Fugitives' Trail'

By Ian Knight

In 1879 *The Lancet*, the British medical journal, took a professional interest in the progress of the Anglo-Zulu War. Not merely did it ponder the medical implications of the campaign, offering suggestions as to how to treat the type of wounds produced by the fighting or how to mitigate the perennial threat of disease, but it followed the progress of medical personnel, noting the names of those sent out to southern Africa - and the sad fate which befell some of them. In this vein the issue of 8 March reported a particularly tragic loss;

The following is the history of the sad death of Surgeon-Major Shepherd, as related by an eye-witness, Mr Muirhead, Natal Carbineers – ‘As Kelly and I were riding for our lives, the Zulus pursuing us, my companion – almost a boy, Trooper Kelly – staggered in his saddle, evidently hit. I stopped my horse to see what was the matter, and tried to support him, but I couldn’t, and had to lift him off onto the ground. At that moment Dr. Shepherd came galloping past. I called out to him, and he dismounted to examine poor Kelly. After carefully examining him he called out, ‘Ah! Poor fellow; too late, too late.’ I had just mounted my horse, and Dr. Shepherd was in the act of putting his foot into the stirrup, when some instinct warned me to look round. As I did so I saw an assegai coming straight towards me. I turned to the left in the saddle; at the same moment it passed close to my head, and, unfortunately, struck Dr. Shepherd in the side. He immediately fell, and I put spurs to my horse, and galloped off as hard as the horse could go.

In Shepherd the British medical profession had lost a promising practitioner. The son of a farmer, Peter Shepherd was born on 25 August 1841 at Craigmill, Leochel Cushnie, Aberdeenshire. He was educated locally and then at Aberdeen University from whence he graduated in April, 1863, and entered the Army Medical Service in September 1864. His first overseas service, curiously enough, was in Natal, where he joined the 99th Regiment at Durban. He went on to serve with them in Pietermaritzburg and then at Graham’s Town on the Eastern Cape frontier. He saw no active service in that time and returned with the regiment to the UK in 1869. He was keen to see more of the world and exchanged into the 4th Hussars, who were then in India, and later to the 5th Lancers. In 1872 poor health forced him to return to the UK where he was assigned to the Royal Herbert Military Hospital in Woolwich. In September 1876 he was promoted Surgeon-Major and in early 1878 the War Office appointed him Examiner to the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. At Woolwich Shepherd became particularly interested in providing immediate care to the injured, a concept for which he coined the phrase ‘first aid’. Together with Colonel Francis Duncan RA – a fellow graduate of Aberdeen university and a fellow Presbyterian – Shepherd developed a programme of lectures for the public on the concept of ‘first aid to the injured’ and developed a pocket-manual on behalf of the ‘Order of St. John of Jerusalem in England, Ambulance Division’ which was the first of its type and was published after his death.

Shepherd was ordered to Natal again in November 1878 and was attached to the 24th Regiment and as such found himself the Senior Medical Officer with the Centre Column. It was Shepherd who had organised the base military hospital for the Column in the Rev. Otto Witt’s house at Rorke’s Drift but Shepherd had not stayed there but rather had crossed with the Column into Zululand. On 22 January he had been in the camp at iSandlwana when it was attacked and there are glimpses of him early in the fight, tending to the wounded as they were brought in by stretcher from the firing line. It was probably Shepherd who attempted, as the British position collapsed, to evacuate the wounded by ambulance, although the ambulance was intercepted and over-run, and the wounded men it contained dragged out and killed. Shepherd himself had not left with them – one of the survivors, Lt. Horace Smith-Dorrien, had spotted Shepherd, tending wounded in a hollow, as he rode out of the camp during the final stages of the British collapse. Soon even Shepherd must have realised that the position was hopeless, and tried to escape; like most of the survivors, he had found that the

Zulus had already cut the road to Rorke's Drift, and he had been forced across country, down the valley of the Manzimnyama stream, instead. He had not long passed across the head of a deep donga which bisects the line of retreat when he came across Troopers Muirhead and 'Kelly' of the Natal Carbineers.

Muirhead's description of the death of Shepherd is apparently definitive, yet it is not without its mysteries. For one thing, Lt. Henry Charles Harford of the 99th (attached to the 3rd NNC), who had been away from iSandlwana with Lord Chelmsford's force at the time of the battle, claimed to have recognised Shepherd's body, stabbed in the neck, lying near an ambulance wagon in the camp area that night. Harford had known Shepherd from his association with the 99th years before and his account should not be dismissed out of hand; however, his description is clearly incompatible with Muirhead's account, and the most likely explanation is that in the darkness and confusion of that terrible night on the fresh battlefield Harford had simply confused one of the other medical personnel killed in the fight for Shepherd.

Equally curious is Muirhead's reference to his companion, 'Trooper Kelly'. There is in fact no 'Trooper Kelly' listed on the Natal Carbineers roll, although Terry Sole, in his book *'For God, Queen and Country'* (Token Publishing, 2011) is firmly of the opinion that 'Kelly' was in fact 23 year-old George Thomson Macleroy (Muirhead either having got the name wrong or, more likely, 'Kelly' was a nick-name, an abbreviation of his actual name), an idea supported by the fact that on 25 June 1879 a party of Carbineers who had visited the battlefield to identify and bury their dead found Macleroy's remains lying where Muirhead had described seeing 'Kelly' killed. Macleroy was at first buried where he fell but, being well connected in settler society in Natal – he was an Old Boy of Pietermaritzburg High School, and his father was General Manager of the Natal Bank – his body was later exhumed at the request of his parents and re-interred in Pietermaritzburg.

There is no reference to the burial of Surgeon-Major Shepherd, although his body must presumably have been lying close to Macleroy's, and no marked monument to identify his grave. The spot where Macleroy fell is, however, the only individually-identified monument along the length of the 'fugitives' trail' (excepting that of Major Smith RA at Fugitives' Drift, which was marked at the time but appears now to be lost) between the nek at iSandlwana and the graves of Melvill and Coghill on the Natal bank of the Mzinyathi. It is not easy to find since it lies off the main path used these days by those walking the 'trail', and it consists of no more than a cairn and a very low headstone, which is easy enough to miss in the grass. Until recently, I last saw it in 1991, when Ian Castle and I photographed the Macleroy stone for our *'Zulu War; Then and Now'*; several times in the years since I've made half-hearted attempts to find it again, only to be defeated by a considerable increase in the undergrowth which not only masks many of the cairns but also obscures the slopes of the surrounding hills and other points of reference. In March 2017 I had the chance again when a group I was accompanying down the trail stopped for a break in the shade. I had a rough idea from memory and from the Muirhead account, and I set off with a fellow-traveller, Gary Richardson. I had my photographs from 1991 with me, but it soon became obvious they would be of little help; at that time the peak of iSandlwana was visible from the Macleroy site but the bush now obscures much of the skyline, and Gary and I were simply pushing our way through thickets of thorn-bush, emerging now and then into a clearing. Suddenly, rather to my surprise, we came across a large whitewashed cairn, standing notably taller than most that mark the trail. It must have been there in 1991 but I had no recollection of seeing it then, although its unusual size, for that part of the battlefield, strongly suggested that it marked a significant grave. If Macleroy was close by, could this be the grave of Surgeon Shepherd? Gary push through a line of bush and, in a clearing on the other side, there was the Macleroy marker.

There are few other cairns directly in the vicinity, and if Muirhead's account was correct then Shepherd's body must have fallen just a few yards away, further down the line of retreat. Is it too much of a coincidence to suggest that a particularly large cairn, standing in relation to Macleroy's exactly as one might expect from Muirhead's description, covers the mortal remains of Surgeon-Major Peter Shepherd?

It's probably fair to say that an examination of any remains under the cairn - if indeed any have survived – would be the only way of confirming whether or not they are Shepherd's, and it seems unlikely that this or any other archaeological exploration of the iSandlwana battlefield will take place in the short term. Until it does, the identification of his grave can only remain tentative.

Yet Shepherd is certainly not forgotten in other respects. A marble tablet in his memory was erected at the church in Leochel Cushnie whilst a brass plaque was erected at the Royal Military Hospital in Netley. The University of Aberdeen instituted an annual 'Shepherd Gold Medal' awarded for surgical excellence; the medal continued to be awarded until 1970, almost a hundred years after Shepherd's death, but was then – due to the rising costs of producing the medal itself - replaced with a monetary award instead.

Surgeon-Major Peter Shepherd, killed at iSandlwana.





Ian Knight and Gary Richardson at the cairn which marks the point where Trooper George Macleroy – Muirhead's 'Trooper Kelly' – was killed.



This unusually large and significant cairn lies just a few yards from the Macleroy cairn – is it the last resting place of Surgeon-Major Shepherd?