

Putting the reasons for the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 in context.

By Dr Adrian Greaves

At the beginning of the war when news of the first setbacks reached Parliament the Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, made the comment, 'A very remarkable people, the Zulu'.(1) Following the 1879 defeat of her army in South Africa, Queen Victoria asked '*who are these Zulus?*'(2) It was one question being asked across Britain that could not readily be answered and it is still difficult to answer today. Modern perception of the Zulus is of a warlike nation, as indeed they were for fifty years - a relatively short span of time in the history of any country. The complexity of the Zulu people, their culture and their many wars remain little understood by those outside the field of Zulu culture and history. Yet the history of these people is as remarkable as it is poignant. From the very founding of the Zulu nation, its effect on British and colonial history could never have been imagined by those first white traders bravely venturing into unexplored Zululand in the 1820s. From then on, the history of the Zulu people is as short as it is tragic; their development was as savage as its warriors were brave in battle. Their history carries us from the 1820s, when they existed as disparate clans living together in relative peace, to the formation of a powerful and warmongering nation. Inevitably, its very success led it to confrontation with the British who were busy developing their own commercial interests around the Cape. Worldwide interest in the Zulus progressively developed following the appalling and mournful events of the crushing British invasion of Zululand in 1879. It was an unnecessary and brutal war which resulted in the Zulus' defeat and subsequent humiliation. They were then powerless to stop their country being divided into thirteen kingdoms by the victorious British administrators in South Africa; the Zulus thereafter lived their lives in abject despair. 1906 saw their despair turn to an over-flowing anger when they unsuccessfully rebelled against British rule, their defeat resulting in their country being further weakened by partitioning.

A brief review of the past will, perhaps, make order and sense of these dramatic events but at no point do I pretend this piece can more than scratch the surface of the subject. Examining Zulu history has been a difficult journey for every researcher and the 1920s observation by the noted South African historian, Dr A.T. Bryant, who produced one of the very first sociological works on the Zulus, soon rang in my ears. He wrote;

So far as we know, no public fund or South African government, be it of the Union or of Natal, has ever considered the systematic collection and preservation of Zulu history as worth the outlay of one brass farthing or the expenditure of one hour's labour – a grim reflection of the white man's consistent and deliberate neglect of Native interests. (3)

Notwithstanding these difficulties, I will attempt to unravel the complexities of Zulu history by considering the origins and culture of the Zulu people, by analysing their leaders and the many campaigns they fought and, equally importantly, by considering the influence and effect on the Zulus of white settlement and its political power, often supported by crushing military force. This examination of events will be, as far as is possible, from the Zulu perspective – for which I am indebted to my Zulu friend of over 25 years, Xolani Mkhize, the manager of the Zulu Village at Rorke's Drift in Zululand. His family roots at Rorke's Drift can be traced to before the infamous British invasion of Zululand in 1879. His ancestors were of the Mkhize tribe who lived to the north of Rorke's Drift, thereby making him well placed to provide a Zulu perspective to this account. His and other Zulus' explanations of so many aspects of the various Zulu military campaigns have been faithfully handed down, according to Zulu custom, across the generations through the art of story telling, and these renditions, invariably consistent even in small detail, are frequently at variance with accepted British accounts. These differences will be examined. Even

with a strong Zulu contribution and 25 years of personal research I acknowledge that I have understated the Zulu case.

It is worth remembering that Zululand had suffered many upheavals before the British invaded. They had suffered epidemic tribal wars but the scale of death and disruption caused by the British invasion dwarfed anything that had happened earlier. It left the Zulu nation bereft and bewildered.

Since their foundation, even as a tribe but especially as a nation, the Zulus have been a challenge to the white man, be he the most highly educated administrator, an Army General or the British red-coated soldier tasked with fighting a formidable foe, usually in impossible conditions, somewhere in the far flung fringes of the British Empire. Such was the challenge because early Zulu victories in the war of 1879 brought failure to Britain's generals and politicians in South Africa by out-smarting them. Due to a powerful succession of Zulu kings, the Zulu nation had grown and prospered, but by their very success they inevitably faced ultimate defeat at the hands of Britain, a nation itself well honed to the cult of war and used to the delights and profit of conquest and domination. Yet the Zulus survived, just. Their glory and place in history is founded on their spirit of resistance to the overwhelming force used against them when the British invaded in 1879, and by the bloody nose they inflicted on the imperial invaders. Thereafter, the Zulus have willingly fulfilled the expectations of the 'first world' for a number of reasons; by being fierce warriors, ruthless savages, a people in dire need of missionaries or for being subject to their witchdoctors' skill at evoking the 'spirits' of their forefathers. Their reputation is deserved; fighting is in their blood. Even in modern times, local 'faction fighting' at weekends is widespread and commonplace. Statistics are difficult to find although research conducted during my brief spell with the Durban Police revealed that seven out of every nine murders in their city could be attributed to Zulus fighting each other; and these same statistics would probably still apply today. Medical statistics are impossible to collate as most Zulu wounded treat their own injuries, especially in rural areas. I have seen very unpleasant machete and bullet wounds, and broken bones that have remained untreated either due to the lack of medical facilities or a wish to avoid 'trouble' with the authorities. Perhaps it is a legacy from Shaka that requires them to fight each other. When asked if the Zulu nation had any regrets for fighting the British in 1879, Xolani Mkhize commented; 'we know how to fight – we could do it again if the need ever arose' but he added, reassuringly, that modern Zulus see the British as their friends.

To answer Queen Victoria's question, one must first consider the origin of the Zulu tribe, which is well documented thanks to a number of early explorers' accounts recorded in the early 1820s, such as that written by Reverend Kay and by the work of 1920s historians such as A.T. Bryant, and James Stuart. Zulus know that their power had waxed until 1879 when every vestige of their nation's military and civil administration was then crushed by the military might of the British Empire, the greatest empire the world had ever seen. The Zulus had been a most formidable nation for a relatively short period of time, a mere 100 years. Their ancestry is not disputed; they originated as a break-away group from the largest migrating black Bantu tribe whose absolute anthropological origins are conversely relatively unknown. The term 'Bantu' is the European adoption of the ancient black native *abaNtu*, which means 'people'. Modern archaeological discoveries and reasoned supposition suggest that, over several thousand years, the progressively migrating native Bantus' lives were exclusively centered on cattle, making them adept at nomadic life. They had departed from the equatorial west coast of Africa, perhaps via the Congo, and then gradually spread laterally across central Africa. They then headed south and east around the wastes of the Kalahari Desert towards the area known as the Transvaal and Natal, until eventually reaching the east coast, probably in the early 16th century.(4) The main Bantu migration did not reach the far south of the African continent for another 200 years but the eventual arrival of this cattle-owning society had an inevitably destructive impact on the original people living in the area. The sparsely populated indigenous people made up of the hunting and food gathering Bushmen, and the pastoralist Khoikhoi who subsisted on their sheep and cattle.

These two ancient groups, with their own distinctive language and culture, had peacefully shared possession of the most southern reaches of the African continent. They were remarkably different from the forceful Bantu approaching from the north, and were therefore highly vulnerable. (5)

This spreading pattern of overland human settlement to the northwest of the Cape was already well established by 1486. It was at this crucial point in time that the first Europeans, led by the Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Diaz, landed at the Cape while searching for a southerly route to the East Indies. For the emerging European empires of Holland, Spain and Portugal, it was the newly discovered Americas and the East Indies that were the lands of opportunity and commercial development. Ten years later, Vasco da Gama landed at the Cape but only to replenish his water supplies. He then sailed further north along the lush coastline, far beyond the point previously reached by Diaz and on Christmas Day he named the spray-swept coast *Terra Natalis* before sailing on to cross the Indian Ocean.

While the landmass of southern Africa was being progressively settled by the creeping occupation of the southerly migrating Bantu, one group of these people detached themselves from the Bantu and entered the previously unexplored coastal area on the eastern side of the Drakensberg mountains bordering the Indian Ocean. This area measured a mere forty by one hundred miles and became settled by this group consisting of some 200 clan groups, one of which would later become the Zulus. This relatively insignificant area was beyond the main migration path southwards but very attractive to these cattle orientated people who discovered its well watered and lush pastures were much to their liking. This independent tribe became known as the Nguni people, differentiating them from the onward migrating peoples who became known as the Xhosa. Most of the Nguni settled in small clans to the north of the Tugela River and, as the land was virtually uninhabited, they quickly prospered being isolated from the outside world. Their lives were unaffected by the fierce inter-clan or settler conflicts developing to the south.

The Xhosa were well established to the north, along the banks of the Great Kei River, by around 1670-5. Even though the on-going Xhosa migration had consisted of one homogenous mass of like minded tribes, its rapidly growing population soon began suffering the relentless pressure of a population faced with decreasing resources, a typical Malthusian philosophy.(6) This pressure was worsened by marauding clans seeking their own survival; clans that had themselves suffered the process of defeat and assimilation. These displaced people, usually starving and homeless, then fell upon their neighbours. The on-going process became known as the *Mfecane* or 'crushing', an explosive pattern which was to wreak havoc and cause misery across southern Africa, later to be made worse during the period dominated by the Zulu king, Shaka. (See Appendix A for additional material relating to the *Mfecane*.)

Problems abound dating the Bantu migration and *Mfecane* with any accuracy. There are no documents and so this history was not properly formalised until after the publication of *African Researches* in 1834 by Dr Stephen Kay, based in part on his own experiences and partly on the diaries of Captain B. Stout following the loss of his ship *Hercules* 'on the coast of Caffraria', the south west Cape in 1796. Curiously, Stout recommended that the whole area be colonised by the Americans but his proposal was rejected by the President of the United States, John Adams. The most extensive research work followed in the early 1920s by Bryant and Stuart. Prior to these historians' definitive works, African history was based on their oral tradition which has to be respected and treated with care, especially where there is no empirical evidence. When questioning Zulus about historical events, any question from a European itself raises further complexities with the inevitable unspoken question 'What does he want me to answer?' When trying to get to the bottom of a matter, especially where inconsistencies abound or beliefs differ, many historians of the Zulu wars have discovered that out of cultural politeness, Zulus have tended to offer pleasing answers, which can skew history. (7)

It was not until 1769 that the Cape whites explored to the north east and made their first contact with the advancing Xhosa people approaching from the Eastern Cape area. To the Boers' surprise, their own large migration from the Cape had progressed only five hundred miles to the

north east when they unexpectedly came face to face with the Xhosa spearhead moving in even greater numbers southwest. Both sides met on opposing banks of the Great Fish River in 1769. It is ironical and a coincidence that a migration of such magnitude and over such a long span of time, should have failed to reach the nearby Cape and that Europeans should fill that vacuum at exactly the same point in time. But for a few years, the Xhosa could have been the first people to have reached the Cape, and had they done so it is reasonable to hypothesise that African history would now be very different.

This initial contact with the cattle owning white settlers and the Xhosa, whose propensity to take others' cattle, would soon result in tumult and conflict. To the white explorers, these people had features more Arabic than Negroid. They were cattle people with ancient traditions, intricate clan systems and fine adornments. To the Khoza, gold, silver and precious stones were meaningless, 'mere dross' was Kay's description although colourful beads and brass wire were common and popular. The people's wealth was measured solely in cattle, in which the encroaching Boers were abundant. The personal possession of property was not an issue except where, traditionally, tribal clashes invariably occurred and would involve the seizure of a defeated clan's cattle. Kay wrote that the colonists,

came upon and drove them out in a manner the most barbarous... being armed and mounted they found no difficulty in making themselves sole lords of the manor.

Then, in 1806 the Cape Colony was seized by Britain. To keep the peace, an attempt was made to drive a wedge between the Boer settlers and the encroaching Xhosa. Twenty thousand Xhosa were forcibly moved from their territory northwards. It was a policy doomed to failure and a number of chiefs were later permitted to return their clans to the neutral buffer zone, subject to their 'good behaviour'.

Two hundred miles to the north the Nguni tribe was unaffected by these early disturbances. They were best known for tobacco trading; they controlled their own territories, which were known to the first white adventurers and traders as the 'Territory of the Zoola' or 'Vatwa Nation', later known as Zululand. With the inevitability of passing time, their clans also began to experience a growing lack of economic resources. As populations increased, the pressure of limited resources already being experienced across great swathes of southern Africa now crept into the previously unaffected area controlled by the Nguni. Disputes inevitably led to violence which, in turn, led to inter-clan war.

These pressures left the survivors of this creeping warfare, and those seeking to avoid conflict, no choice. Where such fighting occurred, survivors of a defeated people had no option but to be slaughtered out of hand or flee. When the effects of the *Mfecane* reached the Nguni, the process of expansion by force accelerated when one group, the Ndwandwe clan under Chief Zwide, forcibly and violently drove the Ngwane clan, under Chief Sobhuza, from their tribal area forcing them to flee west and then north to Swaziland. In their flight, they in turn fell upon their neighbours. The process involved killing the male warriors of the vanquished and, in the process, the victors would absorb any surviving women and children into their own tribes. In a relatively short space of time, the *Mfecane*, with its multiple causes, forced uncountable thousands of refugees, especially from Natal, southwards into the unknown area of Pondoland between the Umzimkulu and Umzimvubu rivers. This area was originally named *No-Man's-Land* by the first white explorers - who were horrified by what they saw, describing the countryside as populated by 'starving and despairing skeletal people'. (8)

Within Zululand, the on-going destructive conflicts eventually left just two notable protagonist chiefs, Zwide and Dingiswayo. The one significant difference between the two tribes was that Dingiswayo had influence over the much smaller Zulu clan, ruled by Chief Senzangakhona, whose warrior son was known as Shaka, soon to be given command of the fledgling Zulu army. When Senzangakhona died in 1816, Shaka assumed the mantle of chief with virtual total control of a kingdom ever increasing in size and strength - and with no viable opposition. In 1818 the two

armies of Zwide and Dingiswayo, with Shaka in support of Dingiswayo, went to war finally meeting at Gqokoli Hill. The battle resulted in defeat for Zwide and the subsequent merciless slaughter of many of his civil population. Zwide escaped but within days his followers captured and executed Dingiswayo leaving Shaka as the only viable opposition to Zwide. It is still believed by the Zulus that Shaka deliberately held back while Dingiswayo led his army into battle, only for Dingiswayo to be captured and beheaded and, in so doing, created the vacancy for Shaka.

Over the following decades the Zulus came to dominate their neighbours and, as their sphere of influence increased, they exerted total control over vast tracts of country south of the Tugela River formally known as Natal, today as KwaZulu Natal. Before the emergence of the Zulu nation, the area was populated by a patchwork of independent but minor Nguni chiefdoms who broadly spoke the same Nguni language and who followed the same cultural practices. The growing success of the developing Zulu clan was due to a powerful combination of astute diplomacy, ruthless military force and a willingness of the Zulu population to participate and share in the spoils of war.

By 1824 the first British traders had arrived at the coast on the periphery of Zululand. It was a land described by the explorer Rev. Kay as,

beautiful beyond description, the meadows being carpeted with luxuriant herbage, and watered every few hundred yards by copious rivulets, whose banks are level with the prairies through which they meander; rivers abounding with fish, hippopotami, and alligators; plains and hills there covered with woods of gigantic forest trees, attaining the height of seventy or eighty feet; and enlivened with herds of elephants. Vegetation was rich beyond anything seen; the coast was abundantly supplied with oysters. (9)

Within months these traders made contact with Shaka who granted them land around the bay of Port Natal – the region's only viable landing point. It was from this embryonic settlement that all future British claims in the region would stem. Within a few years the Zulus abandoned their claims to Natal as it was too far beyond their main sphere of influence, as was the Cape district where the British colony was slowly developing. When in 1838 the first Boer settlers crossed the Drakensberg Mountains into the Zulu area of northern Natal, a particularly brutal war broke out between them and Shaka's successor, King Dingane. In the ensuing campaigns, the Zulu army swept into Natal twice, once massacring Boer civilians in the foothills of the inland mountains, and once sacking the settlement at Port Natal itself. Although there were no further significant clashes between Natal and the Zulu kingdom between the years 1840 and 1878, Zulu history was about to change.

Matters finally came to a head during early 1878, when a number of Boer and displaced native settlers joined those settlers already illicitly farming the 'disputed territory' directly to the north of Rorke's Drift. The Zulus prized this well-watered area for its winter grazing, especially after the serious droughts of 1877 and 1878, and were not prepared to share with aggressive Boer farmers. Cetshwayo was now beset with serious problems. He faced an antagonistic Natal and, to the north, a steady stream of Boer farmers were encroaching onto Zulu farmland. It was clear that Cetshwayo would not accept these unwelcome settlers and time was running out for the British. Urgent action was required.

For the Boers, the matter was simple: they considered they had the right to settle the best grazing land in Zululand. Since the Boers first crossed the Drakensberg Mountains in 1836, their settlements had continued to spread progressively towards the heartland of Zululand, itself protected by a natural boundary, the Tugela River. This temporarily deterred further encroachment by the Boers. In the British tradition of apparent compromise, Frere sought a fresh solution. He believed that war against the Zulus was the sole solution to a number of problems he faced before South Africa was united. Defeating the Zulus, Frere reasoned, would be an easy task for the British. After all, a small British force under Chelmsford had just defeated Chief Sandili's clan to the south of Zululand although a recent punitive strike against King Sekhukhuni had

ignominiously failed. A quick victory against the Zulus would have the added benefit of intimidating the black populations of southern Africa, including Sekhukhuni's Pedi people, into accepting white domination, and remind the Boers that British military rule was not to be challenged. It would also reassure both Boer and settler communities that they would be secure and become prosperous under British rule.

But Frere needed time to allow Chelmsford to concentrate his troops around Zululand. Frere's civilian administrator and Governor of Natal, Sir Henry Bulwer, was greatly alarmed by Frere's quest for war. He argued that military action would severely damage Britain's reputation, antagonize the neighbouring black nations and damage the colony's economic foundation. Bulwer proposed an independent commission to examine the border issue. Frere concurred in the belief that such a boundary commission would neatly defer the settler problem by adjudicating, once and for all, the settlers' title to the disputed territory.

The proposal was submitted to Cetshwayo, who immediately agreed. His reply shows his grasp of the subtleties of British diplomacy:

Before sending for people across the sea for the settlement of the boundary, Cetywayo [*sic*] would be glad if the Governor of Natal would send his representatives to see what the claims of Cetywayo [*sic*] are, and to hear what he says, and to hear what others say, and if these cannot come to an understanding on the matter, then a letter can be sent across the sea for other people to see what can be done. (10)

The original proposal for a boundary commission came from Sir Henry Bulwer, a long-time friend of the Zulu people. The commission was specifically to adjudicate on title to the disputed territory and all parties generally agreed the notion of a commission. The principal members consisted of Michael Gallwey, a barrister who had become the Attorney General of Natal at the age of thirty-one, and Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Durnford RE, a distinguished and experienced army officer who had served in South Africa for many years, who represented the military. The local Boers were represented by Piet Uys, a farmer who had lost several relatives in skirmishes with the Zulus, Adrian Rudolph, the Boer Landdrost of Utrecht, and J.W. Shepstone, who had taken over from his older brother, Sir Theophilus Shepstone, as the new Secretary for Native Affairs. King Cetshwayo was fully consulted. He was invited to send some of his advisors to attend the commission and local Zulu chiefs would be permitted to submit evidence. Confident of his people's case and in the appointed officials – led by Cetshwayo's chief minister, Mnyamana, chief of the Buthelezi tribe, together with Cetshwayo's personal attendant, Bhejane – Cetshwayo readily agreed to abide by the commission's decision. The actual terms of the commission were laid down in a letter of instruction to the commissioners, who were to report on the matter of the disputed border and make recommendations, as they deemed advisable, to settle the dispute.

Sub-Inspector Campbell and a troop of the Natal Mounted Police escorted the members of the commission to the nominated venue at Rorke's Drift. The location was ideal, being situated on one of the few crossing points on the Buffalo River, which formed the largely unmapped border of Natal with Zululand. It was also just within the disputed territory, making the venue easily accessible to witnesses from both sides. The commission was provided with eighteen marquees and accommodation tents, together with the necessary staff of cooks, servants, scribes and guards, over which the Union flag was flown.

Deliberations commenced on 7 March 1878: Shepstone was, as usual, full of his own importance, to the point that Mnyamana felt that his king had been maligned. There followed an uncomfortable exchange, with Shepstone stating:

I have only come to talk about the boundary of the country; but the English nation will come and settle matters for you. Go and tell my child [King Cetshwayo] these words, because I know he will understand me.(11)

The Zulu delegation was incensed by this discourtesy and their folklore holds that Mnyamana rose to his feet and struck his shield with his *assegai*. Alarmed, Shepstone left the meeting as he knew had been made to look a fool. On 2 January 1878, he attempted to recover his position by writing a vicious report to Sir Bartle Frere to the effect that he had discovered the most incontrovertible, overwhelming and clear evidence supporting Boer claims to Zulu territory. This was followed by a report warning of the danger presented by the Zulus to the peace of southern Africa. Whatever decision the Boundary Commission came to, this report sealed the Zulus' fate, with Frere having decided to go to war with the Zulus and commenting that Zulu history under Cetshwayo was now 'written in blood'. (12)

References.

1. Quoted by British Prime Minister Disraeli in *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, London 1920. His full quote reads;
A very remarkable people the Zulu. They defeat our generals; they convert our bishops; they have settled the fate of a great European Dynasty.
As a direct consequence of the defeat, Queen Victoria was about to preside over the inexorable process of degeneration of both her government and the furthest fringes of her Empire. For example, on hearing news of Isandlwana, the King of Burma 'wanted to order a march on Rangoon forthwith' quoted in *The Lords of Human Kind* by V. Kiernan, London, 1972.
2. Ibid.
3. Bryant, A.T. *Olden times in Zululand and Natal*. London. 1929
4. Rattray & Greaves. *David Rattray's Guidebook to the Anglo-Zulu War Battlefields* Pen & Sword 2002.
5. Stringer, Prof. 'African Exodus' (1998).
6. Malthus (1766-1834). Every species will expand exponentially until it exhausts its food supply.
7. At the time of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 the Zulu language was oral and not written. Written accounts by Zulus of military action do not therefore exist. Zulu accounts would have been recorded post-event by British officials who would not note anything that discredited British interests. Furthermore, based on their bitter experience of white people, such Zulus would have been either appreciative of a reward or apprehensive for their safety (while under questioning) and match their answers accordingly. See *Zulu Thought-patterns* by Axel Ivar
8. Omer-Cooper, J. *The Zulu Aftermath* Longmans 1966.
9. Wilson & Thompson *The Oxford History of South Africa* Oxford 1971.
10. Droogleever. *The Road to Isandlwana* Greenhill 1992.
11. BPP C2000 1879
12. BPP C2252 1879