

‘Hapless Strangers, Done To Death,’
The Fate of Lieutenant Henry Scott-Douglas and Cpl. William Cotter

By Ian Knight

In 1882 the traveller, Bertram Mitford, visited the site of the KwaMagwaza mission station. Lying about twenty miles south of the site of King Cetshwayo’s principle homestead, oNdini, KwaMagwaza was one of the oldest Christian missions in Zululand, having been built with the permission of King Mpande in 1860 and run by one of the Anglican Church’s most famous missionaries in southern Africa, the Rev. Robert Robertson. Whilst he was there Mitford witnessed a mission service in progress and was impressed by the enthusiasm of the congregation’s singing, but by not much else around the site. On the eve of war in 1879 the Rev. Robertson had abandoned the mission, and had then accompanied one of the British columns in the capacity of chaplain; during his absence the Zulus had destroyed the mission complex, and Mitford, for one, thought it served Robertson right, ‘seeing that it would have been folly on their part to leave buildings which might be used against themselves, as was the case at Eshowe’(1). Three years later Mitford found the old mission still in ruins, and was its temporary replacements rather shoddy;

The huts are scattered about in clusters, with here and there an attempt at a square cottage, constructed of withies cemented with clay, and commonly known as ‘wattle and daub’; a window, perhaps, and a rudely hung door finishing off the concern. (2).

Yet it was not the mission itself that had brought Mitford to the site, however, but the presence nearby of...

a little cemetery – a square enclosure bounded by a sod wall, along whose top is an embryo hedge of aloes and Madagascar thorn. At the head of the tombstones still stand the wooden crosses erected by the troops when they performed the necessarily rough and ready sepulture of their fellow soldiers, and the whole is surrounded by a trench about seven feet by six, outside of which the ground is ploughed up for a width of several yards to guard against the possibility of any injury to the place from grass fires. Three large cactus trees, visible from far and near upon the smooth hill top, mark [the spot]. (3)

The cemetery marked the graves of two British soldiers killed during the fighting of 1879 - not in one of the great battles of the war, but in a rather sad little skirmish which is all but forgotten today. Lieutenant James Henry Scott-Douglas, 2/21st Regiment, and his orderly, Cpl. William Cotter, 17th Lancers, had been carrying messages between British columns on the eve of the battle of Ulundi, and had become lost. For several days their fate was unknown, and only after the battle did passing troops stumble across their bodies, lying out in the open veldt not far from the deserted mission. James Henry Scott-Douglas was born in Edinburgh on 27 May 1853, the eldest son of Sir George Henry Scott-Douglas of Springwood Park, Kelso, MP for Roxburghshire, and his wife, Dona Mariquita Juana Petronila Sanchez de Pina. Known to his family as Jamie, young James had enjoyed an education typical of his class, first at Blackheath and then St. Leonards, ‘where he was prepared by the Rev. J. Wright for Winchester.’(4).

He entered Winchester public school in 1869, and whilst there showed an interest in military affairs by joining the school Rifle Volunteer corps. After Winchester he was ‘prepped’ for entry into Cambridge University, and on 29 February 1872 he received from the Duke of Buccleuch a commission as a Lieutenant in the Queen’s Regiment of Light Infantry Militia. He joined the regiment for training that year and in October was admitted to Trinity College Cambridge. He had soon passed sufficient examinations to qualify him for entrance into the Regular Army as a University Candidate but he opted nonetheless to see his studies through to the end, keeping up his military interests by joining the University Volunteers. In 1875, with his final exams looming, he suffered a set-back when

he fell from his horse and suffered a concussion, and so was unable to sit his finals, but the examiners assessed his previous work and decided him worthy of the award of a B.A. with honours.

On leaving Cambridge he was gazetted into the regulars with a commission in the 19th Regiment. As a Scot, however, he was keen to serve in a Scottish regiment, and transferred into the 21st Royal North British (as they were officially called; they did not receive the title Royal Scots until 1877) Fusiliers and joined the regiment at Portsmouth in January 1876. Over the next three years he passed through a number of courses including garrison instruction (he excelled in tactics and military law), the School of Musketry at Hythe, and School of Army Signalling at Aldershot. By the time news of iSandlwana reached the UK in early February 1879 twenty-five year-old Jamie Scott-Douglas had already established himself as an officer of considerable promise, keen, well-educated and practical. 'Of the soldier like, many bearing and social virtues of Lieutenant Scott-Douglas I, his commanding officer,' wrote Colonel W.P. Collingwood, 'cannot speak too highly'(5).

The 2/21st were camped at the Curragh Camp in Ireland when, on 12 February, a sudden order was received despatching them to Natal to reinforce Lord Chelmsford's command in the aftermath of iSandlwana. Officers on furlough and men on leave were recalled and the regiment embarked at Queenstown on 22 February on the transport *City of Paris*. They had an eventful voyage out – when the *City of Paris* reached Simonstown at the Cape it ran aground and the troops had to be transferred to HMS *Tamar*, finally arriving at Durban on 23 March. By that time the strategic situation was beginning to tilt in Lord Chelmsford's favour, and the 21st were marched to Landman's Drift to join the new 2nd Division under Major General Sir Edward Newdigate. On 1 June the 2nd Division crossed the Ncome (Blood) river and Chelmsford's second invasion of Zululand began.

Over the next few weeks the 2nd Division advanced steadily towards Ulundi in concert with Evelyn Wood's old Left Flank Column, now re-designated the Flying Column, and the two columns marched a few miles apart so as not to exhaust the same camping sites. Communication between them was largely carried out by runners or by flag signals and, since there was no Royal Corps of Signals yet in existence, it was organised at staff or regimental level. Perhaps because he had passed his signalling course Jaime Scot-Douglas was appointed Chief of the Signalling Staff to the 2nd Division. He approached this task as diligently as he did every other, and established a proper system of signalling from the front-line bases down through the forts on the line of communication to the rear.

By the end of June the two columns were drawing close to oNdini and it was clear that King Cetshwayo was assembling his army to oppose them. The vanguard of the 2nd Division was camped on the Mthonjaneni heights, overlooking the last descent towards the White Mfolozi river and oNdini beyond. The politic intrigues which marked the last stage of the British advance were accelerating too, as Lord Chelmsford was well aware that Sir Garnet Wolseley was on his way to the front to assume command. Chelmsford had no intention of allowing this unless he was forced to, however, and a flurry of messages had passed between the two. On the afternoon of the 30th Chelmsford received a message which he thought important to pass on to Wolseley. Scott-Douglas had been signalling at Mthonjaneni that morning but at about noon a heavy mist had descended, making it impossible to send any further visual signals. Realising the importance of the message Chelmsford now wished to despatch, Scott-Douglas decided to take it himself to the first fort back down the line of communication, Fort Evelyn, which lay about twelve miles away. Although he could command the services of an escort of men from an Irregular unit, Baker's Horse, Scott-Douglas decided on reflection not to take them with him, reasoning that there were likely to be parties of Zulus in the area, making their way towards oNdini, and that, since the escort would not be large enough to resist a determined attack, their presence merely put lives unnecessarily in danger. Instead he decided to go accompanied by just his orderly, Corporal William Cotter of the 17th Lancers.

Rather less is known about Cotter's early life, inevitably, but his career had been promising too, in its way. Born on 28 August 1855 he was an Irishman, the son of a carpenter, a Catholic from Carrigtwohill, near Cork, who had been described by a civilian employer before he joined the Army as 'a handsome young fellow with over the average amount of intelligence.'(6). Captain E.J. Belford, who commanded Cotter's troop, described him as 'an honour to the regiment, and an example to

everyone of what a soldier should be.'(7). It was no doubt these qualities which led to Cotter being detached to his regiment in the important post of orderly to the Chief of Signalling Staff.

The pair set off early that afternoon and, despite the mist, reached Fort Evelyn safely. From there, having delivered his message to be passed further down the line, Scott-Douglas announced that he intended to return to Mthonjaneni. The officer commanding Fort Evelyn urged him to reconsider – the ride out had tired both horses, the weather seemed set to get worse, and it was unlikely they would make the journey before nightfall. Scott-Douglas, however, was aware that Chelmsford intended to renew his advance down the escarpment towards oNdini the following morning and felt he might be needed, and so the pair set off back towards Mthonjaneni at around 3 p.m. After an hour or so the mist grew thicker, as it so often does on the high ground there, visibility plummeted to a few yards. The track meandered across the grassy uplands and at first the road made by the passage of the column's wagons was easy enough to follow. A few miles short of Mthonjaneni, however, there was a fork, another track turning off to the right, away from Mthonjaneni and towards the KwaMagwaza mission. In the murk, and with evening coming on, Scott-Douglas and Cotter took the wrong turn.

That evening their failure to arrive at Mthonjaneni caused some concern at the 2nd Division's HQ but the column was generally distracted by the imminent confrontation with the Zulu king's armies. The following day both the 2nd Division and Flying Column descended into the White Mfolozi valley – some of Cetshwayo's royal homesteads could clearly be seen on the rises across the river, and it was evident a large number of warriors were assembling there. Then, on 4 July 1879, Chelmsford crossed the river with the largest force the British had assembled in Zululand – and defeated the Zulu army within sight of oNdini itself. The fighting lasted scarcely an hour, and it was immediately obvious that the Zulus had been decisively defeated. British troops rode out and circled the plain, setting fire to the royal homesteads, oNdini included; before the day was out Chelmsford had returned to his camps on the White Mfolozi. The war was won, and the spectre of iSandlwana was vanquished – a wave of relief passed over the troops, and Lord Chelmsford tendered his resignation, secure in the knowledge that he had managed to secure victory before Wolseley could arrive to displace him.

The enormity of these events rather overshadowed the fate of Scott-Douglas and Cotter. They were noted as missing and there was a widespread assumption that they had fallen in with one of the parties of Zulus making their way towards oNdini. Over the next few days the columns were broken up and began to retire from Zululand, and it was not until 13 July that some of the Flying Column, heading back to Natal by way of KwaMagwaza, discovered their fate, according to Evelyn Wood's official despatch.

Commandant White of Wood's Natives (Irregulars) informed me this morning that one of his subalterns had found the body of a Corporal of the 17th Lancers a short distance outside the camp. I therefore proceeded with a few of his natives and my own personal escort, to a ravine about one and a half miles E.N.E. of the mission station at Kwamagwasa. and near a path leading to Ulundi. I found the body of Corporal William Cotter, 17th Lancers, as pointed out by a Private of Wood's Irregulars, and about a hundred yards on the Kwamagwasa side of it the body of Lieutenant Scott-Douglas. Both soldiers had been killed by assegai wounds, I imagine four or five days ago. Neither body had been mutilated. There was no property on the body of Corporal Cotter, except a note-book and a missal. Lieutenant Scott Douglas' tunic had been removed. In the trousers pocket there was a small purse containing £10 10s, which had evidently been overlooked. I knew Lieutenant Douglas, and his name is on his linen. I sent back to camp for entrenching tools and a clergyman, when the Revs. Coars and Baudry attended, and buried the bodies in the presence of the Lieutenant-General Commanding. I directed Commandant White to proceed further, he found Corporal Cotter's lance. From his statement and the opinions of Wood's Irregulars I gather Lieutenant Scott-Douglas and Corporal Cotter were dismounted, and when about a mile and a half E.N.E. of Kwamagwasa they met some Zulus and were killed. (8).

Before the bodies were buried Wood had Cotter's chevrons – apparently stained with his blood - removed from his sleeve and three or four buttons cut from his tunic. These, together with the lance

pennon, 'much torn', he later sent to Cotter's family in Ireland. Of Scott-Douglas' sword there was no sign. (9).

The bodies were buried side by side on the hill above where they were found and wooden crosses placed over the grave. Then the troops of the 2nd Division marched on their way, and the history of Zululand entered a new phase, a long and tragic tale of bloodshed and civil war which marked the unravelling of the old Zulu kingdom. Very quickly the deaths of Jamie Scott-Douglas and William Cotter were forgotten, just another small tragedy in a war that had spawned so many.

For Bertram Mitford, however, it was the smallness of the affair, its intimacy, which made it deeply moving. It seems likely that, whilst at KwaMagwaza, he had made inquiries about what exactly had happened to Scott-Douglas and Cotter, as he gives by far the most complete impression of their deaths. After getting lost

...they remained, hiding in the ruins of the mission buildings during the whole of the next day, owing to the vicinity of hostile hands. Let us imagine the position of these unfortunate men. Far from human aid, in the heart of an unknown and savage country, no friendly bush or rocks to conceal their movements from the eagle glance of the enemy's scouts, who from many a commanding eminence would sweep the bare treeless hills and valleys; forced to lie close in daytime, and at night hardly daring to move lest they should lose themselves yet more. Only two – alone, lost and without food – surrounded by ruthless foes with the glance of a hawk and the movements of the panther, what chance had they? On the 3rd they evidently tried to retrace their steps, starting back by the way they had come, but not got far. Cresting the ridge which runs right across the station about half a mile from the ruins, they were fated to fall in with a large body of Zulus from the Empandleni district who were on their way to join the impi at Ulundi. These immediately gave chase. The doomed men fled for about a mile along a spur, then, dismounting, abandoned their horses and plunged into a deep grassy ravine, presumably with the intention of hiding. Fatal move! – flight alone could have saved them, for what possible chance had they of baffling by concealment those human bloodhounds trained in all the signs and sounds of the wilderness, able to track them by a displaced blade of grass or the disturbed note of a startled bird. On reaching the bottom of the valley they appear to have separated and taken different directions, for their bodies when found were discovered lying some distance apart. I visited the spot where that of Lieutenant Scott-Douglas was found; a deep narrow ravine, one side a smooth round slope, the other covered with mealies and tall grass, while through a line of tangled bush dotted with tree fern, plunging from rock to rock, a mountain stream hurled its clear waters down with a pleasant murmur; and there, beneath the arching feathery fans of two spreading tree ferns, the unfortunate officer met his death. Standing there I could picture the whole scene. The desolate ravine, alive with grim dark figures and flashing spears glancing through the long grass – the hills echoing with exultant shouts as nearer and surer those pitiless savage warriors closed in upon their prey securely trapped in that lonely defile – and the doomed Briton at bay, his back to the hill, the branched canopy overhead and the bounding water-course at his feet. Then the wild 'Usutu' pealing in ferocious triumph – a sudden rush – and all is over. Whether exhausted and worn out by hunger and the hard despairing race for life, or in the hope that he would be spared, it does not appear that the unfortunate officer made much resistance. But that he died facing his relentless foes there can be no doubt. (10).

When news of their deaths reached home the families of both men were heart-broken by their deaths. Whilst Cotter's family could do little more than remember him in a small memorial book into which they compiled all the references to his death they could find, Sir George Scott-Douglas was at least able to make a pilgrimage to the spot where his son fell, taking with him a stone memorial to place on the grave. In a touching gesture of a common grief which united those at opposite ends of the social spectrum Sir George, at Cotter's family's request, also planted a number of Irish shamrocks about the site.

Curiously, that same year, many of the items which were taken by the Zulus after they killed the two men were recovered. In 1880 another traveller, Captain Walter Ludlow, asked John Dunn if many of the items looted by the Zulus after their victories had still survived. To his surprise ...an induna came in with Lieutenant Douglas' sword, saddle bags, and watch; also the helmet of the trooper who was killed with him. It made one feel very melancholy to look at the half-rusty sword, with the marks of blood on the blade, showing how gallantly its owner had defended himself. (11).

Scott-Douglas' monument, and the walled enclosure around the grave, are largely the same today as Sir George Scott-Douglas left them and Bertram Mitford saw them; however, Cotter's grave had been made of sandstone and the inscription became so weathered as to be unreadable. In 1984 a new granite headstone, incorporating the 17th Lancers' regimental badge and motto, was erected on the site.

In truth the deaths of Jaimie Scott-Douglas and William Cotter was a small enough affair against the bloodshed of the war as a whole but Mitford shared Ludlow's overwhelming sense of melancholy at the tale;

It was a clear, still evening; the shadows were already deepening in the valley, though the surrounding hilltops were gilded by the glow of sunset. I turned to leave the tragic spot, feeling that a kind of solemnity and awe pervaded it, as though faint voices from another world were mingling with the metallic ring of the mountain stream upon its stony bed and the weird piping of a bird in the sedges. Murmur on, winds, in the cool eventide; fall, streamlet, with tuneful plunge into your rocky cells; birds trill out your clear notes through this mournful solitude, this vale of death; sing a requiem over the hapless stranger, done to death, despairing and exhausted, and alone in a far-off land – for these are the incidents that render war a horrible thing... (12)'

That atmosphere at KwaMagwaza lingers still, and Bertram Mitford is not the last to feel the sad spell cast by the lonely British graves in Zululand.

References.

- 1). Bertram Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country*, 1883.
- 2). Ibid.
- 3). Ibid.
- 4). J.P. Mackinnon and S.H. Shadbolt, *The South Africa Campaign of 1879*, 1880.
- 5). Ibid.
- 6). Privately published memorial to William Cotter by his family (photocopy in author's collection).
- 7). Ibid.
- 8). Evelyn Wood, report, Cotter memorial. I shorter version of this report is included in C.L. Norris Newman's *In Zululand With The British*, 1880.
- 9). Wood, quoted in the Cotter memorial.
- 10). Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country*.
- 11). Captain W.R. Ludlow, *Zululand and Cetewayo*, 1882.
- 12). Mitford, *Through The Zulu Country*.