

The Battle of iSandlwana Remembered – at Cardiff Castle

By Ian Knight

On a surprisingly hot Thursday afternoon, on the last day of August this year, the medieval battlements of Cardiff Castle rang to an entirely unexpected sound; the sonorous traditional war chants of Zulu *amabutho*. Casual visitors, who had brought their families along for a last day out before the start of the new school term, found themselves surrounded by more than sixty Zulu warriors, all of them carrying traditional shields and knobkerries, and many of them wearing the leopard-skin shoulder capes which denote traditional status. To complete the surreal experience, further off, beside a couple of Bell tents standing at the foot of the castle's 11th century Normal *motte*, a group of redcoats were running through their 19th century drill, deploying into skirmish-line and reforming into square.

The Zulus were a party, more than fifty strong, sent from South Africa as a personal diplomatic mission by His Majesty King Goodwill Zwelithini. They were led by one of the royal Queens, Her Royal Highness Queen Mantfombi, who was accompanied by her son, Prince Buza, and by two of her daughters, the Princesses Nomkhosi and Nqobangothando, and included many senior members of the Zulu Royal House including one of the King's brothers and no less than nine other princes. The visit was intended to commemorate the 135th anniversary of the visit by King Cetshwayo kaMpande to London in August 1882; the King, having been captured by the British at the end of the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879, had been held in captivity in Cape Town but had been allowed in 1882 to visit London to argue his case for being restored to his former throne. During his visit he had stayed in London – a blue plaque on a house in Melbury Road, Holland Park, marks where he lodged – and met with both Colonial Office representatives and Queen Victoria herself. His mission had been a partial diplomatic success – he returned to southern Africa laden with gifts, including a silver mug from the Queen, and carrying a promise that he would be restored to at least part of his kingdom. Sadly, an unwillingness by the British Government to see him returned to his former authority – which would in effect have nullified the reasons for the invasion – meant that a large part of Zululand was set aside for pro-British leaders who had ruled in his absence and the King's return only provoked an escalation of the pro- and anti-royalist tensions which had festered since 1879. The King was no sooner restored than a civil war broke out and he was defeated by his erstwhile general, Zibhebhu kaMaphita.

The tragic post-script to King Cetshwayo's visit was not the emphasis of the commemorative functions which rather sought to remember instead the dramatic Zulu success at iSandlwana in 1879 and to use it as a spring-board to further the spirit of reconciliation between the two former enemies. Indeed, in this respect the Anglo-Zulu War is almost unique in that it has created a strong bond of shared history between the combatants which has led to a remarkable and on-going sense of good-will and co-operation.

The Cardiff Castle event was in fact the culmination of a fortnight of activities that had taken place in and around Brecon, and which had been hosted by an organising committee from the regimental museum. Although in 1879 the connections between the 24th Regiment – who fought at iSandlwana – and Wales were in their infancy they have become more pronounced in the century since with the 24th being reincarnated over the years as the South Wales Borderers, the Royal Regiment of Wales and currently the Royal Welsh. The events included a staging by the Zulu party of 'King Cetshwayo; The Musical', displays of Zulu dancing, and two lectures by John Young. Sadly, despite the extraordinary nature of a visit by former African enemies to a small town in Wales, these events attracted very little advanced publicity, and were not always attended as well as they might have been by the public.

The re-enactment at Cardiff Castle was scheduled to include some elements from these shows – notably an extract from 'King Cetshwayo; The Musical', woven into the re-enactment to provide some historical context – and also included the participation of the leading British Victorian Military re-enactment group, the Die-Hards, under the leadership of Tim Rose, in the role of the 24th Regiment. Since I had the privilege of organising a tour by the Die-Hards to South Africa in 1999, which culminated in the first ever re-enactment of iSandlwana on the battlefields on the 120th anniversary, Tim Rose invited me to provide the narration at Cardiff. The re-enactment would be

attended by Her Royal Highness Queen Mantfombi and her party as well as representatives from the South African Embassy in London.

Organising a re-enactment of this sort is not easy. It has to capture the essence of a particular historical event without becoming bogged down in extraneous details, in a manner that will appeal to the audience, but will still respect the memory of those on both sides who died in the battle and those taking part. Because of the nature of the fighting – a Zulu encircling movement culminating in a final rush to hand-to-hand combat – iSandlwana is more difficult to pace convincingly than, say, other 19th century re-enactments where the participants are more evenly matched and where peaks and troughs can be woven into the narrative during the manoeuvring. Fortunately Tim Rose is extremely experienced, having worked with the Zulus on several occasions, and whilst both he (as organiser) and I (as narrator) had our prepared scripts we were both equally prepared to tear them up the moment the ‘shooting’ started and ‘wing it’!

Which was, perhaps, just as well. The event began with the Zulu *impi* assembling on the green before the *motte* and saluting Queen Mantfombi before setting off – past the parked medieval *trebuchet*, which forms a permanent part of the castle display – to recreate the mustering and ritual preparation of King Cetshwayo’s army. Here one of the Zulu actors from ‘King Cetshwayo; The Musical’ performed the role of a British messenger, delivering the ultimatum from Sir Bartle Frere which provoked the war. The Zulus then set off towards the British camp at the far end of the green whilst I tried as best as I could to fill in the historical context over the PA system for the benefit of the onlookers. Early plans to represent various preliminary moves of the iSandlwana battle were soon lost in the excitement of the moment as the Zulus began to deploy in their ‘*chest and horns*’ formation and the Die-Hards deployed in two ranks in front of the tents. As the Die-Hards opened volley fire the Zulu ‘chest’ went to ground, the warriors crouching down behind their war-shields while the surrounding ‘horns’ fanned out to encircle the enemy. Several Zulu ‘heroes’ rushed forward to encourage their men, only to fall dramatically to British fire, and for a few moments it seemed that the attack of the ‘chest’ might fail; yet already the horns were beginning to creep round the British positions, and the Die-Hards attempted to fall back closer to their tents. It was too late – Zulus from the horns were already close enough to engage hand-to-hand, and the ‘chest’ rose up and rushed in. In a few moments of hand-to-hand combat it was all over, the Die-Hards dying as hard as they usually do. One or two stray soldiers seemed to be inclined to make a run for it on unused sectors of the field but the Zulus at last caught them, and the victory was complete. One Zulu snatched up a Martini-Henry and carried it back to the Zulu commanders in exuberant triumph.

Once the fighting was done, the Zulus returned to sing traditional songs of triumph and undergo their post-battle purification rituals under the watchful eye of Queen Mantfombi. After a respectful pause the Die-Hards rose from the dead and saluted her with three cheers.

It was, perhaps, both for those who watched and those who took part, a rather surreal experience but there is no denying the verve and genuine goodwill with which it was accomplished, and it is certainly strange to think that the events of iSandlwana have echoed around the walls of Cardiff Castle in the form of war-cries and blank Martini-Henry gunshots. And there is more to come – this was, explained one of the King’s brothers to the crowd, the first of a series of events which will lead up to the 140th anniversary of the Anglo-Zulu War in 2019, and which will include a development of the battlefield at iSandlwana.

Quite what those plans are for the most iconic battlefield of the war remains to be seen.

Note; At the time of writing, a short documentary about the event is in preparation and will be available to watch on YouTube.