

‘The Last of the 24th, Isandlwana’

By Ian Knight

Back in 1987, when I was heavily involved with the Victorian Military Society, I was asked to edit a special Anglo-Zulu War publication for them, a collection of essays by various authors entitled ‘*There Will Be An Awful Row At Home About This*’. I was lucky enough to trace the owner of a very fine painting of an incident in the battle, *The Last of the 24th, Isandlwana*, by the Irish artist R.T. Moynan. At that point the picture had been in private hands since it had been completed, and was only ever reproduced in black-and-white, and I consider it something of a coup that I was allowed to photograph it and reproduce it in colour on the front of the edition. It then occurred to me that I really should include a brief note in the publication about the painting and the incident that inspired it. I did; but since then I have lived rather more in the shadow of iSandlwana and it seems to me there is more to be said.

The story of ‘the last of the 24th’, a soldier who defended a cave set into the cliffs of iSandlwana hill itself, is based on a Zulu account by an anonymous member of the uVe *ibutho* who took part in the battle. The account was gathered in by one of Bishop Colenso’s informants and was published in both the second edition (only) of Francis Colenso and Edward Durnford’s critique of the war, *History of the Zulu War* (first edition published in 1880), and in *The Times of Natal*; a version, based on the *Times* account, was more widely circulated in James Grant’s *British Battles on Land and Sea* (London, 1894). Describing the closing stages of the battle when the companies of the 24th were driven through the camp, the Zulus recalled that one group ‘retired slowly, and always fighting, up the slopes of Isandlwana’. Historians generally agree that this was the remains of Captain Reginald Younghusband’s C Company, 1/24th, which had earlier anchored the left of the British firing line, and which then held, for a while, the shoulder of the hill jutting out below the peak on the south-eastern edge (where a large cairn stands today). This was in many respects a commanding position – it looked down over the camp, where the remaining companies of the 24th and the rest of the garrison were struggling among the tents against the push of the Zulu centre and were being attacked by ‘fresh companies ... ordered up from the right horn’, and it dominated the steep approaches up which the Zulus must advance to attack Younghusband’s men. Of these men a warrior of the uNokhenke recalled ‘They fought well - a lot of them got up on the steep slope under the cliff of the camp, and the Zulus could not get at them at all; they shot or bayoneted as fast as they came up’. And yet this position offered only a temporary respite for there was no way off the mountain at that level, and once the soldiers had emptied their pouches – as inevitably they must – there was no possible way to organise a re-supply of ammunition. Although they could hold their own for a while, Younghusband’s men had effectively boxed themselves in, and as the Zulus steadily eliminated resistance in the camp below their only choice was to remain where they were until the Zulus eventually wore them down – and the number of cairns on the spot today suggests the extent of the casualties they were taking – or to try and effect a juncture with some of the men still fighting below. No doubt this was why, according to the uNokhenke warrior,

At last the soldiers gave a shout and charged down upon us. There was an induna in front of them with a long flashing sword, which he whirled around his head as he ran – it must have been made of fire. Wheugh! (Here the speaker made an expressive gesture of shading the eyes). They killed themselves by running down, for our people got above and quite surrounded them; these, and a group of white men on the neck, were the last to fall. [Quoted in Bertram Mitford, *Through The Zulu Country*, 1882)]

Usually, when such stands collapsed, some men became separated in the confusion or decided to take their own chances, and so it was in this case. According to the James Grant version one man from this group

...struggled up the steep hill in rear of the camp, till he reached a small cave or crevice in the rocks, into which he crept, and with his bayonet and rifle kept off the enemy. The ground in front of this cave fell abruptly down, and the Zulus, taking advantage of the rocks and stones scattered about, endeavoured, two or three at a time, to approach and shoot him.

The soldier, however, was very wary, and invariably shot down every Zulu as he approached. He did not blaze hurriedly, but quietly dropped the cartridges into the breech-block of his rifle, took deliberate aim, and killed a man at every shot. At last the Zulus became desperate, and, bringing up a number of their best shots, poured in a concentrated volley and killed him. 'This had lasted far into the afternoon, when the shadows were long on the ground, probably about five p.m.'

According to Colenso and Durnford, 'This man...my informant said, was the last to die', and certainly 5 p.m. was long after any serious resistance had been eliminated, even deep in the Manzimnyama valley behind iSandlwana, where some of the last groups of the 24th were overwhelmed. Nevertheless, it is impossible, of course, to be sure who was 'the last to die' as the Zulus picked over the battlefield until late in the afternoon, collecting up British weapons and ransacking the camp. During that time it is known that they turned out a number of men who were only lightly wounded or who were hiding among the dead and killed them. Moreover, the uKhandempemvu *ibutho* swept over iSandlwana mountain, across the very top, and killed a few men who had hidden there, tossing their bodies down onto the slopes below [see my 'Kill Me In The Shadows', *Victorian Military Society Journal* No. 74, Sept. 1983]. Exactly who was the last man on the British side to die, and at what time, will never be known.

Nevertheless the image of a lone unknown soldier of the 24th, defiantly holding his ground until his death, certainly had a dramatic appeal and in 1884 – just five years after the battle – it was the subject of R.T. Moynan's large and dramatic painting. Moynan was born in Dublin on 27 April 1856 and, according to his entry in *Who's Who*, was educated 'with a view to entering the Army Control Department...open competition for which suddenly being closed, was induced to study medicine; three years sufficed to prove the profession entirely uncongenial.' Instead, Moynan turned to art, entering the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, in 1883. He went on to win a number of artistic prizes, and studied in Antwerp, before dying a few days short of his 50th birthday. *The Last of the 24th, Isandlwana*, is now perhaps his best-known work, and was painted when he was apparently at the height of his powers.

The painting is both remarkably accurate and loaded with contemporary Imperial symbolism. The artist has clearly researched both the uniform of the soldier of the 24th – down to the 'long service and good conduct' stripe on his sleeve, and the accoutrements scattered on the rocks around him – and, more remarkably, the appearance of the Zulu warriors. At a time when British representations of Zulu subjects could still be somewhat haphazard, Moynan accurately reflects both Zulu features and weapons; from attention to detail evident in the representation of the Zulu shield in the foreground, it is evident that he had examples in front of him when he worked.

In its imagery the painting suggests both a sympathy for Britain's Imperial mission and for the price it exacted. The soldier dominates the composition, viewed slightly from below, a perspective that not only places the viewer among the Zulus at the bottom of the painting but also invests him with a dominant authority. As he falls to the Zulu bullets, the soldier's arms are spread in a pose which hints at a comparison with paintings of Christ's

crucifixion, his left hand raised as if conferring a blessing, a mystical expression on his face; in this reading the Zulus are cast in the role of Roman soldiers, looking on in awe, and it becomes clear that Moynan saw *The Last of the 24th* not as a representative of an invading colonial army but as a Christian martyr nobly accepting his sacrifice as the price of Britain's civilising mission.

Quite how Moynan acquired such accurate references for his picture remains a mystery. Writing in 1895, on the 16th anniversary of the battle, H.G. Mainwaring – who was then a Major, but in 1879 had been a lieutenant in the 2/24th and who had surveyed the battlefield that September – offered an interesting insight into the story;

I determined one day to explore the Rock for a path leading up to the top...Just as I was ascending a rocky shoulder I came to a small cave. Looking into this I saw the floor strewn with empty cartridge cases, also shreds of a red serge jacket. Evidently some poor 24th man had defended himself and made a last stand here. In searching about 100 yards below I came upon a human skeleton with a rope around the neck. After fetching our Doctor from the Camp I asked if the remains were those of a white or black man? He replied undoubtedly those of a white man. This incident I believe was known only to the doctor and myself yet strange to say a friend sent me some years after from Dublin a photo of a picture painted by a Dublin Artist entitled 'The Last of the 24th.' I have a copy now. But how did this Artist get to know of the subject? The little cave was reproduced exactly as I saw it. (Letter reproduced in Norman Holme's *The Noble 24th*, 1999)

How Moynan knew of the story is perhaps easily explained since the account in the Durnford and Colenso book had been published by then; how he got the apparent details of the topography of the cave remains a mystery although, with his earlier interest in a military career, it may be that he had personal acquaintances who had been involved in some capacity with the campaign.

Mainwaring's account raises another interesting point – where exactly was this cave? Certainly today the story is generally associated with a small cave at the very foot of the iSandlwana cliff-face on the south-eastern side, directly above the cairn which marks the shoulder occupied by Younghusband and his men, and which is clearly visible from it. This would certainly be an obvious place for any man separated from the rest to make for, and it is only approached by a steep scramble up through the boulders for the last few yards and the opening is screened by fallen rocks. This cave is perhaps eight or ten feet high, and the upper part extends only a few feet back into the mountain. At the bottom, at the back, is a small chamber, however, no more than three feet high, which extends back a few feet further. Although Moynan's painting gives the grand impression of a man standing full-length in the mouth of the cave, this was always unlikely, given that he would have presented an easy target in a way which is not consistent with the original Zulu account. It is possible that the soldier might have crouched behind the boulders at the mouth, shooting or bayoneting the Zulus as they tried to climb up to reach him – but there is a more chilling possibility. The chamber at the back might just be large enough for a desperate man to crawl into completely; there would be little enough room to move, but everything apart from his head and shoulders would be hidden by the rock. He would not have been able to see beyond the opening of the cave to the battlefield beyond – just an empty square of sky in front of him - and he would have commanded only the few feet that lies between the chamber and the main opening of the cave beyond; nevertheless it would have been almost impossible for any Zulu to reach him without putting his head into view at point-blank range. This would, perhaps, explain the way in which, according to the warrior of the uVe, he was able to shoot or stab anyone who got close to him without, by implication, being exposed himself. The only way for the Zulus to

kill him in comparative safety, indeed, would have been for warriors to gather in the lee of the rocks outside the wider opening – then suddenly present themselves and fire together into the cave, and hope that one hit him.

Certainly, if that were the case, Mainwaring's details about the skeleton with a rope around the neck take on a new significance. Why would the Zulus, who generally in the heat of battle stabbed every enemy they could reach, go to the trouble to tie a rope around a victim's neck? Perhaps because his body was wedged in a small chamber of rock, and the only way they could drag it out to strip and search it was to tie a rope around his neck - and pull. Perhaps this is what Mainwaring was implying when he talked of the shreds of red coat still lying in the cave – torn off when the body was dragged out and left to tumble 'about 100 yards below'?

If so, the image of the man's last moments are a far cry from the romanticism of Moynan's painting. No longer standing proud in full view of the enemy, he was instead cramped and unbearably claustrophobic, the rock pressing in on all sides, every shot from his rifle deafening him as it reverberated off the walls and filling the cave with smoke, his only vision of the outside world a few glimpses of the hostile faces suddenly looming across the opening from beyond the rocks.

It is, however, by no means certain that the cave so beloved by modern tour-guides is the one where the incident occurred – or, indeed, whether only one such incident occurred. There remains some confusion about where Younghusband's company ascended to its position on the shoulder of iSandlwana, with most Zulu accounts giving no more clues than that they 'retired slowly'. It has been argued that they did so after first falling back along the foot of iSandlwana, above the camp, and then climbed up where the modern footpath ascends. Yet this would have been an extraordinarily difficult manoeuvre at that stage of the battle since all survivors' accounts agree that the fighting was by that point raging hand-to-hand. It is difficult to see how any body of men might have retained cohesion whilst climbing up a steep slope whilst under attack. Moreover, were that the case, there would have been no reason why the Zulus could not have occupied the shoulder of the hill above them and cut them off during the ascent.

It is more likely that Younghusband's men retired up an ascending slope which starts at the northern foot of iSandlwana, on the eastern edge, and rises steadily under the cliffs to end on the shoulder on the south-east corner. Earlier in the battle Younghusband's company had occupied the left of the British line, a few hundred yards forward from the northern end of iSandlwana; any retreat on the eastern side of the mountain would have brought them close to this route. By following it they could have climbed a more gentle slope, keeping back the Zulus in front of them as they did so, protected on their left by the immediate presence of the cliff-face, and still in a position to offer, whilst their ammunition lasted, some covering fire across the camp below. The fact that there are a number of cairns along this route – potentially the graves of men who fell during the retirement – tends to confirm this.

If that is the case, then there are other potential caves where the 'last survivor' story might have played out. A little off the main tourist paths and largely unnoticed today there are a number of such gauges along the eastern face of the mountain. Most are not deep, extending only a few feet back into the hill-side but some do offer significant defensive features – a steep approach, a cluster of fallen boulders, or – in at least one case at least – an interconnecting chamber which opens in one place and re-emerges a few yards further along the mountainside. Any one of these caves might have offered a refuge to a member of C Company who became detached from the rest of the group as it passed by, and might fit the descriptions offered by the Zulu eye-witness and by Lt. Mainwaring.

And it should be remembered, too, that there are other stories of men killed in the shadow of the mountain; most are less detailed than that of the warrior of the uVe and have

attracted less attention as a result; it is not inconceivable, however, that they are all that remain of stories of other men who, like the lone soldier of the 24th, thought in vain that the crevices of the mountain might be a good place to hide when all other hope had gone.

In the final analysis there is enough first-hand testimony to suggest that the incident depicted in Moynan's dramatic painting did indeed occur in some form or another – but who that last soldier was, and where exactly he met his end, and whether he was the only one to do so in that way, is unlikely ever to be established beyond doubt.

1). R.T. Moynan's *The Last of the 24th, Isandlwana*.



2). The cave at the foot of the iSandlwana cliff-face where the incident is generally thought to have taken place.