

Three letters from an unnamed officer of the 24th Foot at Rorke's Drift.

A Note

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I was intrigued by the reference to three letters from an unnamed officer of the 24th Foot in the British Library Manuscripts Catalogue as the class number (RP 3168) appeared so unusual. Calling them up, it took only a minute to recognise them. The letters in question were photocopies of two complete letters dated 9 February and 19-23 February plus an incomplete seemingly undated letter.

In reality they were the letters of Lieutenant Charles Curll of the 2/24th, the incomplete letter being that of 12 February. These will be well known to most, not least because Keith Smith has reproduced them and a few other fragments in this journal (JAZWHS 14 (2003)) from the Campbell Collections (formerly the Killie Campbell Africana Library) where they are catalogued as KCM 89/41/1/1-4. There are also copies in the Royal Welsh Museum at Brecon as 2003/.113.

I contacted the Manuscripts Department at the British Library to point this out to them and that they could be identified properly on the catalogue. It transpires that the RP (Reserved Photocopies) Collection are manuscripts which owners are required to deposit as a condition of obtaining an export licence so that copies are preserved for research in this country. The owner is guaranteed anonymity for a period of seven years unless waiving that right. In this case, the owner has opted to remain anonymous. As a result, the British Library is unable to do anything with the information supplied to them as to the true nature of these letters, and it is not permitted to even amend the catalogue to indicate the actual author of these letters.

I quote the department's letter to me: 'It is sometimes possible to find out an owner by searching Google, or recognising an item as you did, but the BL is not permitted to disclose this information. I'm glad you tracked down this item and hopefully others will be able to as well, but regretfully we won't be able to assist them.'

Quite why the third letter in the BL collection is incomplete is unclear and there is no sign of the additional fragments quoted by Keith Smith. But at least readers of this journal will now know not to bother calling up RP3168!