

Anglo Zulu War Studies: Where to from here?

By Prof. J. Laband

The trajectory of Anglo-Zulu War studies has been an extraordinary one. After some eighty years of neglect once the immediate interest in the campaign had died down, fascination with this distant colonial war began steadily to burgeon once more, and today a steady stream of books, articles, paintings, talks and videos nourishes an eager audience. As an active practitioner in the field, I venture below critically to investigate this phenomenon, and to question the future direction of Anglo Zulu War studies.

A rash of contemporary eyewitness accounts and reminiscences followed hard on the heels of the Anglo Zulu War. Most of them, such as Ashe and Wyatt Edgell, McToy, Montague, Norbury, Norris-Newman and Tomasson are essentially campaign histories, shading from the personal and anecdotal to the more analytical.(1) Among the latter, the book written by Capt Hallam Parr, Sir Bartle Frere's military secretary, is of significance because of its insight into policy issues;(2) while MacKinnon and Shadbolt's work provided vital biographical details and service records that have ensured it remains an essential reference.(3) The account by the trader, Cornelius Vijn, who found himself detained in Zululand during the war, and which was edited by Bishop Colenso, was the first—and, for a long time, the only one—to provide some insight into how the Zulu perceived the war.(4) But, of course, Major J.S. Rothwell's official account of the campaign, the famous *Narrative of Field Operations*, prepared in the War Office primarily from the diaries of operations kept by the various columns, has remained the authoritative (if necessarily biased) basis for any serious study of the war.(5)

After this first outpouring during 1880–1881, the torrent of publications rapidly dwindled and pretty well dried up by the end of the nineteenth century as new colonial wars captured the public's attention. (6) And there matters stood until in 1936 W.H. Clements roundly condemned Lieutenant General Lord Chelmsford's generalship in *The Glamour and Tragedy of the Zulu War*, (7) which provoked a well researched, if partisan, refutation by Major the Hon. Gerald French. (8) In 1948 Sir Gerald Coupland tempered French's *Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War* with the more objective approach of a professional historian in *Zulu Battle Piece*,(9) though the level of his research was still fairly superficial. It was left to F.W.D. Jackson in 1965, in his now famous revisionist series of articles on Isandlwana, to bring real, exhaustive scholarship to bear for the first time. (10)

But in 1965 knowledge of Jackson's work was confined to a few experts, and Anglo Zulu War studies, which had generally been languishing during the twentieth century on the margins of serious investigation and popular interest alike, and where they seemed fated to moulder on unregarded, received a veritable bolt of vivifying energy in 1966 with the publication of Donald Morris's *Washing of the Spears*.(11) As with the lightning bolt that gave life to Dr Frankenstein's monster, something was brought into being with an indestructible will of its own and has marched remorselessly on, never once out of print.

I do not intend to denigrate a book which has done even more than films like *Zulu* to popularise the Anglo Zulu War and which, with its literary élat, continues to captivate wide, new audiences. Nevertheless, its abiding success has been a double-edged sword. Positively, it revitalised interest in the Anglo-Zulu War. But, negatively, its very success has meant that it has continued to dominate the field, especially at the popular level. Indeed, it even spawned a rash of shorter, and rather paler, imitations by writers like Clammer and Lloyd, spurred on by the approaching centenary of the Anglo Zulu War. (12) Morris and his disciples put all their emphasis on writing a rattling good tale with an essentially non-interpretative emphasis on the details of military operations, enlivened with anecdotes and stories of gallantry and human pathos—not always, it might be added, sticking too closely to what is actually in the sources.

Of course, this kind of military history accords with the traditional treatment of Victorian colonial campaigns which has been content with demonstrating how the fighting part of a war turned out the way it did, and has had no qualms approaching the war from an entirely Eurocentric standpoint.

Equally traditional, though by no means irrelevant, is the continuing interest in the study of British and colonial weapons, uniforms, fortifications, military institutions, ethos and training. It has been catered for with extreme thoroughness and professionalism in a number of specialised works on Victorian soldiers and the war of 1879 by authors such as Featherstone, Wilkinson-Latham, Knight and Laband and Thompson, (13) and is kept alive in the pages of specialist journals such as *Soldiers of the Queen* and *The Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*.

It might be suggested, though, that the problem with popular, and often sensationalist, campaign histories of the Morris variety, as with the Eurocentric slant and the narrowly focused interest in weaponry and uniforms which can slide imperceptibly into the antiquarianism so derided among professional

historians, is that the Anglo-Zulu War is extracted from the wider social and historical contexts which give it meaning. This is even more the case if the Zulu perspective is not given the same attention as the British and colonial.

The process of the modernisation of Anglo Zulu War studies could be said to have been begun in 1977 with Frank Emery's *Red Soldier*. (14) The range of soldiers' letters he selected, and the breadth of his commentary, which encompassed both Zulu and British soldiers and emphasised the human experience of combat, places this seminal work within the ambit of war and society studies. War and society studies, which have been receiving increasing recognition in recent years, insist that war can no longer be abstracted from the environment in which it is fought in order that its techniques be studied, as would those of a game or sport. Rather, the idea is that fighting and the internal organisation of armies should both be investigated in the wider framework of political, economic, social and cultural history which gives them historical meaning. (15)

A decade on from Emery's *Red Soldier*, Robert Egerton, in *Like Lions They Fought*, brought anthropological and psychological insights to the battlefield experience of the combatants.(16) At the time, Egerton's approach was novel, and was perhaps not fully appreciated by other, more conventional, historians. Nevertheless, Egerton's is a genre that has been brought to extraordinary heights in Joanna Bourke's *An Intimate History of Killing*, which investigates the traumatic effects of combat in twentieth-century warfare,(17) and suggests how the nature of the Anglo Zulu War might be further investigated.

Egerton, by concentrating in particular on Zulu combat experience, was himself tapping into a significant development related to war and society studies; namely, a burgeoning emphasis on the part the Zulu played in the Anglo Zulu War. Until the 1980s this had been almost entirely neglected, and even Morris's great work has nothing on Zulu strategic planning, shows little appreciation of Zulu tactical objectives and implementation, and entirely neglects Zulu diplomacy, mobilization and the nature of internal political and economic strains. It is in this area that I have specifically attempted to make a contribution to Anglo Zulu War studies, and my thinking on the subject is most clearly articulated in my 1992 book, *Kingdom in Crisis*. (18) My work on the Zulu perspective has been continued by others, and here in particular I think of Ian Knight's *Anatomy of the Zulu Army* of 1995. (19)

These new and innovative approaches have been preceded and accompanied by rigorous scholarly work in other areas of Anglo Zulu War studies, which have made them possible in the first place, and have fitted them into a securer framework. In this regard, the unpublished Masters (1979) and Doctoral (1986) theses of Jeff Mathews come particularly to mind. They set an enviable standard of research, (20) and show the way to further investigation into logistical problems and the conduct of operations, as well as into biographical studies of leading figures of the war. Richard Cope's research of many years into the origins of the war was crowned in 1999 with *Ploughshare of War*, surely the seminal work on the subject. (21) The extensive fieldwork undertaken by Paul Thompson and myself has resulted in the charting of the British and colonial fortifications of the war, and in our interpretation and classification of the sites. Close and longstanding familiarity with the terrain has also made possible our extensive and detailed mapping of the campaign—maps, it might be added, that constantly pop up in familiar (but slightly adapted form) in the works of others. (22)

Paul Thompson and I pioneered the investigation into the generally uncommitted, if periodically panicky, colonial military involvement in the war ;(23) while Paul Thompson is alone in his study of the Natal Native Contingent. (24) Yet even if we have attracted no disciples, I do believe that we have broadened the arena, and have enhanced the 'society' element of the war and society equation.

Related to war and society studies is a burgeoning interest internationally in how and why wars are commemorated. Investigation encompasses a range of art forms from monuments to paintings, novels and films, and extends to the growing war and disaster site tourism industry—or 'dark tourism' as John Lennon and Malcolm Foley have dubbed it. (25) Ian Castle and Ian Knight have begun to explore these aspects in their *The Zulu War: Then and Now* (1993), (26) though there remains room for much more to be done.

Underpinning these focused studies is a steadily growing corpus of edited and annotated primary material—letters, newspaper reports, documents—made available to researchers (and the interested public) in printed form accompanied by scholarly introductions and, in many cases, detailed and valuable notes. Sonia Clarke's *Invasion of Zululand* of 1979 and *Zululand at War* of 1984(27) set an extremely high standard, which I attempted to maintain in my *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign* (1994). (28) I would like to suggest that the most valuable and comprehensive (if the most expensive) resource for researchers into the war must be Ian Knight's and my six volume of the *Archives of Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War*, brought out in 2000. (29)

Recently, Dr Tony Pollard of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Glasgow has literally opened up a significant new line of investigation into the Anglo Zulu War with his archaeological digs in 2000-2001 at Fort Eshowe and the Isandlwana battlefield. These excavations complement Rob Rawlinson's work in the early 1980s at oNdini, King Cetshwayo's *ikhanda*. (30) There is no doubting the importance of archaeological exploration in seeking material confirmation for contemporary reports of the war, though I must add that its progress is bedevilled by the very easily bruised dignity of the provincial heritage body through whom Dr Pollard's team must work, Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali.

Researchers into the Anglo Zulu War, as I have suggested, are being presented with all sorts of new opportunities and directions, which I hope we will pursue further. However, we should never forget that the ultimate objective of academic research should be to make scholarly work available to a wider, more popular audience. So, to what popularising ends has our increasingly extensive and sophisticated pool of knowledge of the Anglo Zulu War been put? Is our research being effectively deployed to reach those outside the narrow, dusty carrels of the researching fraternity?

I believe it is. A television crew making *Secrets of the Dead* documentary for Channel 4, where it was subsequently aired, accompanied Tony Pollard's archaeological dig at Isandlwana. And Ian Knight, for example, in *Brave Men's Blood* (1990) produced a fine, popular book that incorporated all the recent academic advances and really deserved to supersede Morris's *Washing of the Spears*. (31) Yet what Knight has also shown, and Ian Castle as well, is that it is possible to write accessible works with a general readership in mind which are not merely syntheses of other people's research, but which also extend the boundaries of knowledge. I think, for example, of Castle and Knight's *Fearful Hard Times* (1994), which is without doubt the best and fullest treatment of the coastal campaign;(32) or of Knight's biography of the Prince Imperial (2001), which possesses all the merits of meticulous research, historical empathy and detailed contextualisation. (33) If asked where Anglo Zulu War studies should be going, I would answer: in this direction.

I feel very strongly, though, where Anglo Zulu War studies should NOT be going. What I shall say below is likely to antagonise many readers. But I go along with the bumptious Sir Garnet Wolseley who wrote in his diary after hauling the officers of the 2/21st Regiment over the coals: 'I have made enemies of them for life, but I felt bound to say what I did in the interests of the army'. (34)

Part of the problem lies with publishers who believe that there is an inexhaustible market out there for another—and yet another—book on the battles of Isandlwana or Rorke's Drift. Perhaps there is, but Anglo Zulu War studies are not best served by rehashes, even when they are, for example, competently executed by people as proficient as Knight and Castle.(35) But at least the latter's recent contributions to the *Battleground South Africa Series* incorporate the fruits of the latest scholarship.

The same cannot be said for some other recent popular books. Ron Lock's *Blood on the Painted Mountain* (1995) provided a painfully outmoded account of Isandlwana coupled with descriptions of Hlobane and Khambula, which were excoriated in a review by Huw Jones who, as a Swazi expert, has approached these two battles from a novel and highly informed perspective. (36) Edmund Yorke's *Rorke's Drift 1879* (2000) is particularly disconcerting because, despite all the scholarship displayed, it singularly fails to engage with our greatly enhanced understanding of the mainsprings of Zulu strategic intentions in 1879 and the Zulu way of war, and falls into the time-honoured delusion of arguing that the defence of the post saved Natal from a major Zulu invasion.(37) I fear such works as Lock's and Yorke's are retrogressive, for they feed the assumptions and prejudices of a conventional type of readership and fail to lead it in the direction scholarly Anglo Zulu War studies have actually taken.

Related to this, I believe we should also beware of allowing ourselves to be sucked into the sanitised operations of the heritage industry, which projects a 'feel good' version of the past for tourists. The Anglo Zulu War, especially its origins and consequences, should actually be all about 'feel bad' history. When some of us romanticise the war in the interests of tourist consumerism, we are doing Anglo Zulu War studies a grave disservice.

So where then do I suggest Anglo Zulu War studies should go from here? I believe several fruitful lines of investigation can be pursued further.

Firstly, there are continuing possibilities for publishing additional edited and annotated contemporary material to increase the resources available to historians, such as Adrian Greaves's and Brian Best's *Curling Letters of the Zulu War* (2001).(38) Secondly, there is scope for further biographical studies that are fully researched and contextualised. Thirdly, room still exists for the detailed examination of specific campaigns and battles. The pitfalls here are various, however. Such studies can lapse into antiquarianism, the heaping on of detail to no novel effect in terms of new interpretations; even worse, they can lead to the reaffirmation of old, discredited positions that ignore many of the new advances in scholarship. On the

other hand, through meticulous and responsible scholarship they are capable of forcing us radically to reassess our current understanding and to accept new interpretations. Isandlwana in particular is open to revisitation of this radical sort, and I look forward to the forthcoming publication of Ron Lock's and Peter Quantrill's reinterpretation. With any luck, it will stimulate invigorating debate and further research, as has Adrian Greaves's controversial new book, *Isandlwana* (2001).⁽³⁹⁾

I believe there is considerable scope for further film documentaries on the Anglo Zulu War, although these have their sensationalist and distorting perils too. A considerable challenge is the appropriation of the memory of the war and its sites by the heritage industry. This can romanticise, trivialise and sanitise the sites, turning them into politically correct theme parks. Never forget, in modern memory the Anglo Zulu War is a political tool. The absurd Zulu nationalist version of the battle of Blood River of 1838, peddled by the official guide at the Ncome monument, is a dire warning of what might happen at Anglo Zulu War sites. There is already a tussle for the control of the Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift sites, for considerable commercial interests are at stake, as well as the appropriation of the 'acceptable' version of the past. Historians can play their part in this fray through serious research into how memory of the Anglo Zulu War has—and is being—exploited in the media, in heritage sites and in political discourse.

What other avenues might we still explore? There is still work to be done, for example, on analysing and contextualising the iconography of the war. Perhaps the main challenge is to mainstream the Anglo Zulu War by investigating it—rather as Bruce Vandervort has done in *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa* (1998) ⁽⁴⁰⁾ - in the wider context of colonial campaigning, and comparatively in the context of warfare in Africa. Certainly, we must encourage Zulu historians to tackle the war. Their perspective will certainly be different and most probably confrontational, but it will undoubtedly revivify the debate.

And here I make a final point. Through our specialised Anglo Zulu War journals and other books and publications, as well as through societies such as The Anglo Zulu War Historical Society, we have created over the past thirty-odd years an international clearing-house for new information, ideas, interpretations, trends, minutiae and trivia. And we don't want the whole undertaking to dribble away in trivia. The Anglo Zulu War was what Colonel Callwell called a 'Small War'. ⁽⁴¹⁾ In other words, it was a short, colonial campaign waged by British regulars and colonial troops against tribal warriors. Which means that, in the larger scale of things, it was a minor campaign, and that meaningful investigation into how it was conducted must necessarily be finite. Therefore, those of us studying the Anglo Zulu War must accept when it has come time to stop. That point, I believe, is not now far away.

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