

## The British Soldiery and the Ideology of Empire: Letters from Zululand

By Michael Lieven

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It is widely accepted that public perceptions of British rank and file soldiers changed significantly towards the end of the nineteenth century, with the old stereotype of the soldiery as 'the scum of the earth' being replaced by positive images of 'the defenders of empire'. Edward Spiers, reflecting the conclusion of most historians, has written that 'the army enjoyed unprecedented popular appeal and esteem during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Through numerous expeditions and small colonial wars, it earned more popular adulation than ever before over a comparable period of time. ... and 'Tommy Atkins' earned lasting acclaim'. This shift was accompanied by changing assumptions about the way in which the soldiery themselves regarded their position. Carolyn Steedman has argued that in the late-nineteenth century 'there was an increased and general expectation that the private soldier would personally embrace the principles of Imperial expansion, his political understanding and political stance become a kind of accoutrement and necessary, in a way alien to earlier thinking about the status and importance of the rank and file'. The recent work of a number of historians can be read as lending weight to this argument, though not in a straightforward way, and would suggest that the ideology of empire which rank and file soldiers were supposedly internalising involved not merely a belief in military expansion, but also encompassed patriarchal and racial hierarchies and the construction of masculinity around violent imaginings. Dawson has examined the shaping of private 'phantasies' and the 'pleasure culture of war' by 'those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time' and to which he refers as 'cultural imaginaries'. Bourke, writing about the twentieth century, emphasised the generic structure of the adventure tale in providing a lens through which soldiers framed narratives of their own battlefield experiences. And McClintock, writing from a feminist perspective, described the broader framework in which the hierarchies of race and gender were integral to European Imperialism. This article examines the extent to which the soldiery were indeed incorporated into such a pattern of beliefs and orientations by analysing the letters written by them at the time of the Anglo-Zulu War and in their later accounts of those events.

Traditional representations of military heroism focused on the actions of officers. On occasion individual soldiers did find themselves in situations in which they displayed the qualities of leadership expected of the officer class, but such cases were not celebrated in the same way as the officer heroes. Rank and file soldiers were not expected to lead assaults or turn panic into victory by individual example but their steadfastness, loyalty and obedience were understood as an essential and, in a way appropriate to their class, heroic role. Although Private Wassall won a VC for rescuing a wounded comrade after the battle of Isandlwana, the famous paintings and images of individual heroism at that battle are of the 'Saving of the Colours' by Lieutenants Coghill and Melvill. The contrast is clear in two paintings of the debacle. In de Neuville's painting, Lieutenants Coghill and Melvill, splendidly isolated among a horde of Zulus, cut a swathe through their threatening enemies as they gallop off to save the colours of their regiment at the cost of their own lives, a scene which was represented in a second elegiac painting. By contrast, Fripp's painting of the last stand at Isandlwana shows a small group of ordinary soldiers fighting to the end. They are stalwart, comradely and indefatigable, defending to the last the honour of their regiment and country against a seething black horde; and it is these qualities that are emphasised rather than daring, initiative or individualistic heroism. The assumption that the soldiery shared, in their own degree, a belief in the Imperial project is clear in these representations whose moral in turn encouraged their allegiance.

Such representations, albeit enriched by sensitive depictions of soldier types (the weather-beaten sergeant, the young band boy) accurately reflected the perceptions of their leaders about the qualities of ordinary soldiers as a mass, as well as broader patterns of class and subordination. Thus Lieutenant Logan, while admiring the bravery of the soldiery at Rorke's Drift, wrote that 'the men have the pluck, but without a good officer they are like sheep'. Major Clery reported that 'the fact is that until accounts came out from England nobody had thought of the Rorke's Drift affair except as one in which the private soldiers of the 24<sup>th</sup> behaved so well. For as a matter of fact they all stayed to defend the place for there was nowhere else to go, and in defending it they fought most determinedly'. Certainly many officers, in their letters, wrote as though their men shared their own purpose, albeit in a simpler and less heroic mode. Even anecdotes about the drunkenness or stupidity of the troops serve to emphasise their fundamental soundness when they faced their moment of trial. Major Grenfell wrote of the British debacle at Isandlwana that 'officers and men behaved splendidly- dying back to back- and at the last rallying round the colours, not a man of the regulars attempted to escape till all was lost ...'.

There is abundant evidence on the attitudes of officers, expressed in long letters, reports and memoirs. Despite the many variations in their attitudes, in general they clearly revelled in the adventure of empire. While they were subject to caste and professional constraints, they enjoyed a degree of choice and agency;

they had significant material and emotional incentives in terms of promotion and enhanced respect and status among their peers; and through their breeding they had been provided with a lens through which they could frame their experiences of war, if only in the fantasies which they told themselves. Even when it came to the killing, which for human beings unaccustomed to it requires considerable psychological training, the officer caste had been prepared from childhood, for they came from backgrounds in which hunting and killing for sport were the norm. The regularity with which officers used metaphors from field sports to describe the killing of black Africans suggests the relative ease with which they could adjust to the nature of their profession. It is much more difficult to identify the attitudes of the soldiery. They wrote less; their letters are short and usually concerned with personal reactions; and their public statements have to be read in the context of their subordination to authority. Many of the letters written by them during the Anglo-Zulu War were published in Frank Emery's *The Red Soldier*, in which he draws attention both to the hardship suffered by ordinary soldiers and to the heroism displayed during the war. Emery, however, prints contemporary letters from the soldiery, their subsequent interviews with journalists, the records of colonial volunteers and later accounts, as though their significance is undifferentiated, without identifying the very different conclusions that can be drawn from the different type of source. The point at which the accounts were recorded coloured the language and tone of the narratives and throws a significant light on the reactions of the authors to the Imperial project. In the main there were few potential material gains for the rank and file, though colonial volunteers might hope to acquire land and some NCOs did gain worthwhile promotion. Those who made a relative success of their lives and who lived to see their actions mythologized were, unsurprisingly, more likely in retrospect to see the events through which they had lived in a heroic light. Thus Frank Bourne, ultimately promoted to lieutenant colonel; Private Hook VC, from the relative security and status of his position as a guard at the British Museum, and Trooper Mossop, on his farm in southern Africa, all found heroic elements in their experience which had been largely lacking from letters written at the time when the events occurred.

Unlike the officer class, the soldiery of the 1870s had no clear lens through which they could frame their experience. The more educated may have read the biographical histories of military heroes aimed at the children of the middle classes and social elites, or the adventure stories of Ballantyne and others: in the main, however, such frameworks aimed at the respectable working classes only emerged later in the adventure stories for boys that were to influence children in the decades before the Great War and, later still, in the films which, Joanna Bourke argues, influenced rank and file soldiers and junior officers alike during and after World War II. Above all the experience of the soldiery did not lend itself to heroic narratives, whether framed by the individual for his private dreams or by writers for public consumption. As Joanna Bourke has written, 'Individual valour and the opportunity to display one's skills were central to all warrior stories' and the life of the infantrymen who bore the brunt of the invasion of Zululand offered few opportunities for such individualistic displays.

Emery has commented on the quality of the letters from Zululand, comparing them favourably to those written by privates and NCOs during World War I which one writer has described as 'ill-educated and often only functionally literate': 'Most of the letters written from Zululand by the ordinary private soldiers are impressive for their vocabulary and emphasis, their vigour and eloquence. ... One is also forced to conclude that the volunteer soldiers of 1879 were more literate than the conscripts of 1916'. In fact many of the letters use highly idiosyncratic syntax and grammar, and even in the case of some more formally correct letters caution is needed since NCOs often functioned as letter writers for illiterate members of their company. Thus Frank Bourne, who was the colour-sergeant of the company defending Rorke's Drift, wrote: 'I found myself "unpaid private secretary" to several men who could barely read and write, and I deciphered and answered their letters home, feeling quite happy in our relations'. Certainly some of the letters share almost identical wording though this is generally the case when they are expressing conventionalised sentiments ('don't vex about me, as it is my own fault'). What is not in doubt however is that the often unconventional syntax of the letters expresses a range of emotions with an openness and honesty which is less often found in the letters of the officers.

Moreover, even when it is formulaic, the writing of the soldiery has to be read with an ear for the irony of many working class cultures. Thus two letters, written to their families at the end of January 1879 start in almost exactly the same way: 'I have the pleasure of writing to you, hoping this letter will find you all in good health as it leaves me at present'; 'I take the pleasure of writing these few lines to you hoping to find you all well as I am happy to say this leaves me at present'. The letters were written in the immediate shocked and panic-stricken aftermath of Isandlwana, and the opening sentences are followed by vivid accounts of the horrors of war and extreme personal hardship, news of the slaughter of hundreds of British soldiers and one writer's awareness of his own likely death.

While the language of the officers is usually more complex, it is used to express the conventionalised response of their caste to the experience of war. Only occasionally, in letters written in a state of shock, do the letters of the officers reveal something of the physical chaos of the battlefield and the psychological

disorientation of the writer. John Keegan has written of traditional battle writing 'with its reduction of soldiers to pawns, its discontinuous rhythm, its conventional imagery, its selective incident and its focus on leadership'. In the 1870s, before narratives of Imperial glory were widely produced for the working classes, the soldiery were less often affected by such writings and as a result, Steedman has argued, 'the writing of the rank and file can be expected to produce a clearer account of what military life is "really like", how battles really are' and a 'willingness to present the confusion of the battlefield'.

This article argues that, in the main, the contemporary letters of the troops show little evidence that they had accepted a heroic view of empire. It was only later, after they saw the way that they had been incorporated into heroic representations of events (and of the defence of Rorke's Drift in particular), that they came in turn to tell their story in those terms.

## II

The officer class easily recognised the heroic image of themselves, whatever their individual self-doubts, for it was embedded in the narratives on which they were raised and it is reflected in the letters, which they sent to their families. The views of ordinary soldiers are more difficult to pin down and cannot be reduced to a single viewpoint. It is possible to find evidence of ordinary soldiers who shared the semi-official version of the need for war against the Zulus to protect defenceless Zulu women from the savage tyranny of King Cetshwayo, a generic theme of adventure tales. Thus in December 1878, Private Goatham wrote that 'we are only waiting to strike the blow for the revenge of the poor unfortunate women that his [Cetshwayo's] devils outraged and massacred'. He went on to assure his reader that 'although large and powerful, [the enemy] have not the pluck and martial spirit of an Englishman'. Equally Private Pettit wrote of King Cetshwayo that his brother 'that is with us has been driven out of the country by him, and he has killed his mother; so by that it is nearly time that they should crush him, for he has been the terror of South Africa for many years'.

The evidence that most soldiers had a less than heroic self-image of themselves individually or collectively is plentiful, even if, at times, it has to be read in their silences. While the officers sought glory and represented themselves and the Imperial project in martial terms, the soldiery more commonly expressed resentment, fear and suffering. Steedman has argued that 'to be resentful and angry in small and unscribed ways is one form of resistance' and that through the expression of such attitudes the historian is able to measure the distance of individuals and classes from hegemonic positions. The historian needs, however, to be careful in making such judgements since ritualised grumbling and shirking were on occasion combined with whole-hearted support for the military expansion of empire as in the autobiography of George Mossop, a young trooper in the colonial irregular cavalry.

The dominant themes of the letters written at the time are the wish for survival and the need for comrades to stick together in order to achieve this. The impression is strengthened by the consistency of the theme in letters addressed to different audiences; wives, relatives, fellow soldiers and drinking companions. The soldiers were in Zululand not by choice or for glory, but by force of circumstance. Their only purpose, in the main, was to get out alive, leave the army and go back to their homes. Even before the war started the tone was set by Alfred Davies who wrote, 'Dear Father and Mother, you would hardly credit what I have been through. I have not seen a bed since I left England.' The refrain is echoed in several letters. Lewis Probert wrote, 'I don't like to tell you, dear mother and father, what hardships I have to go through' and later added, 'I am glad to tell you that George Holly is all right; he called me a fool for coming out here'. Corporal Brown complained that,

We had our breakfast and Christmas dinner after we had crossed, at the other side, a dinner that was not fit for a dog to eat – at least, the meat we had dogs would not eat it; it was bullocks that had died at the side of the road and were then cut up for us. As it said on the card a joyous Christmas you wished me, and I can assure you it was a joyous one; the worst I ever spent in all my born days.

The soldiers expressed fear in a way that is lacking in the narratives of officers except where it emerges in the form of mild self-deprecation, which is then belied by the modestly recorded heroism shown in action. The openness of the letters is apparent in the description by Sergeant Brown of men, including himself, crying at the scene which met them when they retreated to the battlefield of Isandlwana: 'when we saw what had happened every man could not help crying to see so many of our poor comrades lying dead on the ground, ... Oh father, such a sight I never witnessed in my life before. I could not help crying to see how the poor fellows were massacred'. The fear is palpable. Henry Moses wrote, after Isandlwana: 'we are in fear every night, and have had to fight the Zulus who came on us and killed 800 of our men. I wish I was back in England again, for I should never leave. ... Dear Father, and sisters, and brothers, goodbye. We may never meet again. I repent the day I took the shilling. ... Would send you a letter before but have had no time; and now, you that are at home stay at home. Goodbye, if we never meet again, and may God be with you'. Corporal Brown wrote, 'I am very sorry to tell you that there will be many a poor wife lose her husband and many a father and mother lose their son. I am afraid, but I hope and trust to the Almighty that I shall not be one of them for my

own darling's sake'. The atmosphere of shock is clear in Private Morgan's fevered reiteration of the words 'cut up':

the Zulus have cut up six companies of the 1/24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, and one company of our regiment. Poor Johnny Ealey, he may be cut up for what I know, for it is rumoured that it was his company that was cut up.

The fear, verging on terror, felt by the troops is recorded in accounts of the panics that occurred intermittently throughout the war. Such panics resulted in the deaths of pickets and sentries on night duty, when they attempted to rejoin the main body of troops and, since they are also the moment at which the individual throws off his responsibility to the collective good, they are generally only acknowledged by authors who take on the position of observers in the narrative. Thus the aristocratic Guy Dawnay could amusedly describe a cowering group who 'had a poorish time, crouching behind a little wall, with a storm of bullets over them, and had a sergeant wounded and two horses killed. In all, seven men were wounded, and three or four horses killed, and why there were not more, I can't make out. ... Many amusing incidents'. Panics indicate the moment when the individual's rational terror becomes public and communal; when the individual choice to hide or surreptitiously escape becomes publicly acknowledged. It is also the moment, which all military training is designed to prevent, and therefore represents a sudden collective rejection of military discipline and aims.

The fear was matched by a stoical acceptance of their fate: 'unless we have more troops sent out soon I think all the men will be killed. I hope you won't vex for me, because it was my own fault that I came out'. Resignation was mixed in most cases by an acceptance of their own responsibility for their plight; few blamed the social circumstances that led them to face death in a cause for which they had few positive feelings. Private Davies wrote, 'my dear father and mother, if I should fall, don't vex about me, as it is my own fault'. Regretting his enlistment, Private Ward wrote,

I am now very sorry for it. I was under the influence of drink when I did so. I have already served fifteen months of my time, and I must go through it the best way I can. ... I hope and trust that God Almighty will guide me safe through all, so that I may return to my dear native country once more. ... Dear aunt, I wish I had listened to your good advice and give up the drink, I would not be where I am at present.

The dominant tone of the letters is not glory, individual or collective, but a simple wish for survival and surprise at achieving it. Sergeant Smith wrote,

I am thankful at having been saved from the cruel slaughter and bloodshed that we had all gone through in the last four days. ... how we ever escaped I can hardly tell you. ... I myself had given up all hope of escaping.

Victory was desired less for the sake of British glory than as a necessary step to liberate them from the horrors in which they found themselves and return them to their families in Britain: their desperate courage was the necessary price to achieve that end. Corporal Lyons wrote;

My dear wife, I trust you will feel too thankful to God for having preserved my life, to fret over what might have been a great deal worse. I feel very thankful to God for leaving me in the land of the living.

Even Private Ellis, who had worked out the future strategy of total war before the General himself was forced by events to adopt it, wrote before the war started that 'you might thus think that to fight with Cetshwayo is but of little importance to the soldiers; indeed everybody think of returning home'. It was outrage at the breaking of this comradesly solidarity that led to the first death at the hands of the defenders of Rorke's Drift; that of a white sergeant who bolted in the hour before the Zulu impi arrived, and who was shot in the back by the outraged troops forced to stand and defend the post. There is indeed an adventure narrative embedded in these letters but it is less that of the individual hero reaching for glory than of the ordinary man struggling for mere survival against apparently hopeless odds: the hoped for gain, at most, was to return to a life of bare existence as an unskilled labourer though for some it was beggary or the workhouse.

War generates its own cycle of hatred. The massacre of their companions at Isandlwana produced terror, loathing and a craving for revenge even among those whose main desire was to escape from Zululand alive. Many letters described the scene in the sacked camp emphasising the way in which the stomachs of the dead had been ripped open in what appeared at the time to be the result of torture and violent mutilation. Patrick Farrell wrote,

It was the most horrid sight that was ever seen by a soldier, dear brother. ... it was enough to make your blood run cold to see the white men cut open, worst than ever was done in the Indian Mutiny,

thus explicitly linking the desire for revenge to a case in which such a response had, it was thought, been legitimised by the behaviour of Britain's enemies. Particular images caused horror and were amplified in the telling. Thus Sergeant George Smith, who fought at Rorke's Drift but was not an eyewitness at Isandlwana, described how in the latter battle, 'the Zulus took one of the band-boys and hung him up by the chin on a hook, and cut him up in bits'. A mood of anger and vengefulness against the killers of their comrades was one which many armies seek to inculcate, and was very clear in the orders issued by officers in the pursuits which followed the British victories in Zululand; 'no quarter boys and remember yesterday'. A few accounts communicate the sheer exhilaration and release of killing, without the need to excuse it as justifiable retribution. Thus a cavalry trooper's letter on the British victory at Ulundi is interesting for its frank relish in killing expressed in the stereotypical language attributed to ex-public school subalterns in adventure stories for boys:

I have great pleasure in telling you I'm not among the pegged out ... We had a glorious go in, old boy, pig sticking was a fool to it. After all the humbugging, marching reconnoitring, short grub, and very bad what there was, rain, frost, heat, and the thousand annoyances of a campaign, especially such a one as this, we had a day that made up for the lot. ...

As we left the square the infantry ceased firing, and gave us a rattling cheer, then we were among the Zulus. You should have seen us. With tremendous shouts of 'Death, Death!' we were on them. They tried lying down to escape, but it was no use, we had them anyhow, no mercy or quarter from the 'Old Tots.

Such passages, amplified in a generation of adventure stories, would if typical, support the thesis that the soldiery were successfully incorporated into an ideology of masculine aggression and pleasurable violence which Dawson and McClintock suggest were embedded in the ideology of empire. Such views did not, however, accord with the way most rank and file soldiers wrote of themselves at the time nor with their experience of life in the army, although, as will be seen, in time they came to read and even to report their experiences in terms of the images projected onto them by others.

If the experience failed to produce an Imperialist consciousness it undoubtedly hardened racial sentiment about black Africans although this was, in part, balanced by the real respect for the courage of the enemy. The Zulus were demonised, offering an apparently real justification for the British conquest. In the aftermath of Isandlwana and other British disasters the Zulus were described as 'devils', 'black devils', 'demons' and as 'vipers'. In the context of the letters discussed above, this can be read in part as the product of fear verging on terror as well as evidence of the developing racial attitudes to black Africans which had changed since the days of the campaign to abolish slavery.

Ordinary soldiers were not an undifferentiated mass; they held different views about empire and, as Carolyn Steedman has shown, complex and self-contradictory opinions. When the soldiery glorified their actions the tone was often one of vainglorious boasting and a straightforwardly expressed desire for revenge. Certainly the urge to survive and regret at ever having enrolled were compatible with the exhilaration of killing, although such emotions were, not surprisingly, more often expressed in the aftermath of British victories when the pursuing cavalry, swept away with bloodlust, could cut down a fleeing enemy, who had given up resistance. Private Snook wrote, in a letter to the landlord of his public house in Devon, and therefore intended to be read to his drinking companions, of finding wounded Zulus, 'begging us for mercy's sake not to kill them; but they got no chance after what they had done to our comrades at Isandlwana'. By contrast field officers and those with some responsibility for the civilising mission of empire less often openly acknowledged a straightforward motive of revenge since it might, in the eyes of the British public, lower that mission to the level of the supposed savages whose improvement was the aim of empire. When, in the aftermath of Rorke's Drift, the post was renamed Fort Revenge an irritable correspondence resulted in which Chelmsford insisted to Colonel Glyn of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment that such a name was unsuitable: 'However strong our feelings may be and however legitimate our desire to avenge the loss of the brave fellows who fell at Isandlwana, I am sure it will be unwise to give public vent to it ...' Equally the occasional admission by officers that they had ordered the killing of those trying to surrender or of the wounded, had to be publicly repudiated.

Significantly, the expression of conventional military attitudes, such as loyalty to the regiment and pride in Imperial victories, is to be found not in the contemporary private letters written by the soldiery, but in later accounts, recorded after the soldiers had been exposed to the public presentation of the events in which they had taken part. Thus Corporal Lyons recorded of Rorke's Drift that 'every man fought dearly for his life, but we were all determined to sell our life like soldiers, and to keep up the credit of our regiment'. This, however, was an account given to a journalist who interviewed a group of soldiers who had been invalided back to Britain. The other soldiers interviewed at the same time gave equally dramatic tales of the defence at Rorke's Drift exhibiting none of the fear or anger with which the earlier letters are infused. Serving soldiers being

interviewed for publication were not in a strong position to voice their complaints. By the time these interviews took place Rorke's Drift had been mythologized in the British press and Lyons and his comrades had come to represent their experiences in a new light. When Queen Victoria added a wreath to the colours of the 24<sup>th</sup> in July 1880, the men might even have agreed with the sentiments which she recorded in her journal: 'I trusted the conduct of the two brave young men, who gave their lives to save these colours, would never be forgotten', to which the Colonel assented, and all seemed much moved. The surprise of these men at the way in which their actions were interpreted is nicely expressed by Hook, writing 25 years later, describing the ceremony in which General Wolseley gave him the VC: 'It was curious, but until then I had scarcely ever thought about the Victoria Cross, in fact we did not know or trouble much about it ...'.

In later accounts one finds narrative styles which are indistinguishable from the popular histories written by those who had not been involved, accounts which lack the tone of fearful longing for home of most contemporary letters. Sergeant O'Clery of 'the Buffs', in a book of true life adventures, *Told from the Ranks*, reflected the braggadocio of the stereotypical subaltern of Imperial adventure stories. The cause of the war was a 'filibustering expedition which some of [Cetshwayo's] young warriors had made into Natal'; a bullet is 'a dose of death'; provisions are taken from a Zulu kraal in exchange for a 'payment in lead'; and at the Battle of Ulundi 'Colonel Redvers Buller, who, with his cavalry, had done splendid service in reconnoitring the country, advanced and set the smaller kraals on fire. This opened the ball'. Former Colour Sergeant Bourne, writing in 1936, by which time he had been commissioned and retired as a lieutenant colonel, provides a conventional tale of the heroism shown during the defence of Rorke's Drift which concludes: 'Now just one word for the men who fought that night; I was moving amongst them all the time, and not for one moment did they flinch, their courage and their bravery cannot be expressed in words: for me they were an example all my soldiering days'. Even in some of these later accounts, there is however a residue of the ambivalence felt at the time. Thus Private Hook VC, recorded in 1905, gave a racy account of the heroism shown at Rorke's Drift, but he twice reverted to a telling metaphor to describe their position: 'we were trapped like rats in a hole'. Later he rhetorically asks: 'what were we to do? We were pinned like rats in a hole'. More common than the references to 'black devils', and long before the Zulus were mythologized by Rider Haggard and other writers as heroic savages and placed at the pinnacle of the racial hierarchy of savage peoples within the empire, were the soldiers' expressions of admiration for the courage and sometimes the intelligence of the Zulus: it was a respect tinged with a sense of awe. The Zulus, wrote Sergeant Morley,

were like lions and not afraid of death. As soon as one man fell another took his place, and those that think the niggers in Zululand will not fight, are sadly deceived. The way our camp was taken could not be more cleverly taken by one of our generals ....

The same image was used by many of the correspondents. Private Ellis wrote; 'I can assure you that the Zulus are a lot of fearless men. They poured upon us like lions'. That respect is discordantly amplified by the casual racism of Colour Sergeant Burnett writing of the battle of Khambula:

The Zulus stood for about four hours, our people firing shells, rockets, martinis, and the Gatling guns. I never thought niggers would make such a stand. ... I tell you what it is: our school at Chatham, over one hot whiskey, used to laugh about these niggers, but I can assure you that fighting them is terribly earnest work and not child's play.

Of the same battle an infantryman wrote that 'I never saw the like, nothing frightened them, as when any of their numbers were shot down others took their places ...'. The general view was summarised by Sergeant Jervis after the battle at Khambula: 'I confess that I do not think a braver lot of men than our enemies in point of disregard for life, and for their bravery under fire, could be found anywhere'.

The growing respect for the Zulus also engendered a degree of revulsion among some soldiers at the ruthlessness of the slaughter. Jervis accepted unquestioningly the argument from revenge:

our cavalry chased them seven miles, and the Zulus, overcome by fatigue and exhausted by having no food, and marching ten miles to our camp to attack us, threw down their arms and begged for mercy. The mercy shown to our comrades at Isandhlwana (sic) and to our volunteers the day previous was shown to them and the slaughter of the Zulus who were shot down and killed by the officers' swords, helped to swell the casualties of these Zulus.

However, he went on to write that 'a more horrible sight than the enemy's dead, where they felt the effects of shellfire, I never saw. Bodies lying cut in halves, heads taken off, and other features in connection with the dead made a sight more ghastly than ever I thought of'. Even in some of the most matter of fact accounts there is a strong suggestion that the writers were disturbed by the events which they had witnessed. One writer described how, after the Zulus fled followed by a barrage of shellfire,

the cavalry followed them up for about eight miles, killing everyone that they could lay hands upon. It was a most awful sight. For miles around the camp the dead lay very thick; it took three days to bury them ..

In these accounts the excitement generated by the killing appears to be matched by a genuine shock at the extent of the slaughter.

The general conclusion was summed up by Private John Price in a letter to his parents; 'Tell Harry not to enlist for God's sake, or else he will be sorry for it'. Relatively few ordinary soldiers at the time matched the tone of excitement, typical of the officers, which is clear in the letters which Captain Hutton wrote to his parents, letters written in moments of reflection and not in the afterglow of bloodlust: 'I am rather ashamed to own it, but I like this life, and I am as happy as the day is long. It is to me like a shooting expedition with just a spice of danger thrown in to make it really interesting'. It is also doubtful that many of his men would have confirmed Lieutenant Logan's account of their reaction when they were ordered to return to the camp at Isandlwana:

the tired men brightened up, and we marched off at a rattling pace for a twelve mile tramp, to have a slap at the niggers.

### III

The popularisation of empire led to a change in perceptions of the rank and file, the old image of a drunken, deserting, flogged soldiery being replaced by an image of the heroic and increasingly educated, serious and Christianised NCOs, an essential part of Britain's Imperial mission. However, the reality of the lives of the men who carried this burden of heroism in 1879, rescuing the honour of the British army, still had much in common with the soldiers of the old army; the unemployed, sometimes unemployable cast-offs of industrial society.

Of the 112 non-commissioned officers and men of the company who were present at the defence of Rorke's Drift, no less than twenty seven were, during their time in the army, promoted to non-commissioned rank and subsequently demoted to the ranks; some of these may have chosen to step down from the often unrewarded responsibilities of NCO status. Several were demoted on numerous occasions generally, it seems, for offences related to drunkenness. Corporal Allen, who won the VC, was gaoled on seven occasions. Drummer Meehan had been gaoled for forty-two days. Private Anthony Connors had been sentenced to 168 days hard labour, which he served in Milbank Prison. Private John Murphy had been gaoled and received twenty-five lashes. At least seventeen out of the company had been sentenced to terms in prison either by the army or by the civil authorities. Though they had become heroes, a small band on whom rested the honour of the British army, in many cases their new status does not seem to have much altered their behaviour.

Within a few weeks of the victory Private Deacon was imprisoned for 'Failing to obey an order' but managed to get out of the prison and desert: there is no further record of him. Private William Bennett was also to desert within a year of the glorious stand. Private William Wilcox was gaoled for disgraceful conduct and was still in prison when the rest of the regiment sailed from South Africa. Private Michael Kiley received fifty lashes within weeks and before the year was out he was to be gaoled by the civil authorities back in Britain. Michael Tobin was also sentenced to fifty lashes while the war was still being fought, although in his case the sentence was remitted. In the view of some soldiers the effect of floggings was to complete the psychological as well as the physical collapse of the victims. Later William Neville served twelve months hard labour for assault. In contrast to these punishments for relatively minor crimes, Private Ashton went unpunished for an act that was seen as a minor by-product of war. Ashton, on enquiring what to do with a Zulu prisoner, was told not to bother his officer and to get rid of the prisoner who he therefore hanged, an action that was accepted as an understandable mistake. The courage with which these men fought at Rorke's Drift is a reminder of the force of comradeship, and of the survival instinct, in building fighting units: as Prof. Richard Holmes has shown, the toughest of such units can operate effectively in causes with which the individuals concerned are entirely out of sympathy.

All this is a reminder that these soldiers, glorified in subsequent years, as pillars of the Imperial project and, in recent years reconstructed as the product and bearers of racist and masculinist ideology, were often themselves the brutalised victims of a dehumanising system. In a great many cases they enrolled because of their poverty, hopelessness, frustration and lack of education; they were often people whom could make no bearable life for themselves in the ruthless changes brought about by industrial society. The frequent punishments may be further evidence of their resistance in the only forms that were available; disobedience and drunkenness. Enrolling as failures they were broken by the harshness of army life before being returned to the world in which they had been unable to create a worthwhile existence.

Some found relatively secure jobs among the uniformed working class (notably Private Hook in his well-recorded post as an attendant at the British Museum), but many continued the decline that constituted their lives. Several were discharged as unfit. Even the sturdy, respectable and relatively successful among non-

commissioned officers could be physically broken by the hardship and disease that were the corollary of life in the ranks of the Imperial army. Sergeant Jones wrote:

I am sorry to have to point the misery of war in every letter, but God help me, my sufferings are indeed terribly hard. I have no idea what I shall turn my hand to when my time of service expires. I am perfectly certain that I shall never be able to work at any hard employment, but I must trust to the Goddess Fate to rule my future, I suppose.

The brutal lives to which they were condemned extended beyond their physical conditions. Private Hook's wife 'believed' that he was dead, sold all his belongings and married again in his absence. In the longer term many of these soldiers shared the fate of veterans of the Crimea and other wars: prison, alcoholism and the workhouse awaited the likes of Privates John Wall and William Camp. Many more were discharged as broken men, unfit for heavy work, and received gratuities of up to twelve pounds, enough, if they avoided alcohol, to keep them for a few months. These were the backbone of the Imperial army that Lord Chelmsford had led into Zululand. From this perspective, as Steedman has argued,

the idea of being a soldier has not been ... to do with the horrors of masculinity; it has been to do with powerlessness, and the situations that the powerless get into, those places where people can do things to you, and with you, as if you were not properly human.

It is in the context of this life of hardship and fear in which the degree of choice was, at best, marginal that we should read the gratitude and pride of the soldiers when treated well. At the end of his narrative Hitch recorded how Lieutenant Bromhead 'brought his Lordship to see me, and his Lordship spoke very kindly to me and the doctor dressed my wound. Bromhead was my principal visitor and nurse while I was at the Drift'. Gunner Howard's pride in reporting Lord Chelmsford's praise is palpable and contains no hint of *Punch's* satire on the General's understated words: 'The General said we were a brave little garrison, and that this showed what a few men could do if they only had the pluck'. Hook, after his courage in defending the hospital in Rorke's Drift and rescuing his comrades, wrote: 'I am now servant to Major Black (his man being killed) and a nice gentleman he is and I like him very much'.

#### IV

The letters from ordinary soldiers tellingly indicate the distance of most of the letter writers from the ideology of empire and from the mythology of adventure that underpinned it. They had nothing to gain from the war and much to lose. None had chosen to fight in this war and many were only in the army because the alternatives had seemed even worse. Glorifying in the Imperial project was officially sanctioned and supported by various media: one should not be surprised to find evidence of such views in some of the letters and if it had been more widely shared then one would expect to find the evidence for it in the general tone of these letters if not in explicit endorsements of the mission on which they were embarked. The letters are often articulate, intelligent and moving: if the soldiers had indeed shared some belief in the Imperial mission with their officers, then there is no reason why it should not have been expressed. In fact the letters show little commitment to the mission beyond the immediate desire for survival or revenge. Much more pervasive is the sense of being an almost helpless object, used by others for purposes in which the writer has no share. Steedman has compared such a perspective with the world of children's stories: it 'is to do with the soldier's presentation of himself as a figure who is used in some way, by other people, or by social forces. (The world which frames character and action in children's stories is mysterious in something of the same way, beyond their cognitive reckoning)'. In a world in which the individual could not actively resist or take control the conclusion from these letters is very clear:

I wish I was back in England again, for I should never leave; I repent the day I that took the shilling;  
Tell Harry not to enlist for God's sake, or else he will be sorry for it.

The letters examined above, which were widely diffused among their working class audience and widely published in the provincial press, indicate the limited extent to which the dominant ideology of empire had been successfully inculcated among the mass of rank and file soldiers who were used to implement the policy of Imperial expansion. They also indicate the way in which the dialectic of killing and revenge itself generated hatred and racist attitudes among the soldiery, without involving them in a commitment to the adventure of empire. And the handful of later accounts by the participants suggests the way in which, by the end of the nineteenth century, popular representations could retrospectively incorporate the participants themselves into the heroic myths of Empire.