

Letters from Charlie

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Three holograph letters and fragments, written by an unknown officer at Rorke's Drift following the disaster at Isandlwana, were found in a South African library. A close examination of the content of the letters has revealed the name of their author.

While undertaking research on a quite unrelated matter in the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban, South Africa, the editor came across three letters, and two fragments, purporting to be from an unidentified officer serving at Rorke's Drift during February and March 1879.(1) The letters are presented here, transcribed from the original holographs. The spelling and punctuation is unchanged but some illegible words have been re-constructed, while apparently omitted words have been inserted, such being shown in square brackets.

From the spelling, grammar and content of the letters, and also from the style of his living at Rorke's Drift, the writer was obviously a commissioned officer rather than an NCO or private soldier. He demonstrates a wry sense of humour and his letters are full of the rumours of the day. They are written by a very amiable young man whom we would like to know better. Below the surface of light-hearted chatter and bravado, however, a sense of fear also pervades the letters, evoked no doubt by memories of the British catastrophe at Isandlwana only three or four weeks before.

All three letters are addressed to 'Charlie's' mother and the first ends with only his forename; the other two differ in that the second ends with the salutation 'Your sodger boy' and the last, being incomplete, has no name, although the writing and style are unmistakably those of the first two. There is no other reference to his name.

First Letter.(2)

This first letter sets the scene: he is at Rorke's Drift and the previously quickly fortified mission station has been more permanently strengthened. Considering the poor circumstances of the men reported by others at Rorke's Drift at that time, 'Charlie' seems to have lived very well, although there might be some slight exaggeration for his mother's sake.(3) There is an interesting reference to the value of kit, which the writer has lost and this matter is taken up in a subsequent letter.

There are brief references to the fighting at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift and the letter ends with an example of the writer's sense of humour, an hilarious description of his attempts to eat a marmalade sandwich.

12 Feby 1879

Rorke's Drift Fort

My darling Mother,

You see by the heading of this letter that we are still at the same place but it is now dignified by the name of Fort instead of mealy bags. We have now strong high walls to protect us from the foe; I don't think however as they will be required for this purpose. We have not been honoured with their presence anyhow. Poor old Mums, what a state you must have been in on first hearing the news from here especially if the names were not published at the same time. I have written twice since to you; so I hope you will know in a day or two if you have not already that I am all right.

I am still as right as a trivet. I must say it is uncommonly slow here, but we get plenty to eat & drink which is a great thing. The other night we had two fellows to dine with us, making a party of it; we had spinach [?] and giblet soup, salmon (tinned) cutlets, Beef Rissoles & ROAST GOOSE, we were to have pudding but it didn't come off somehow. We drank beer & brandy. Tonight we are to have our first pudding, having hit upon some raisins in a box one of our fellows left here. I have sent in a list of the articles that I lost with their prices, & make the amount of my loss about £35; how much of this I shall receive I don't know. I have managed to get together all I want for the present from the sales of the kits of some of the poor fellows who were killed. I have no news whatever to tell you; we occasionally hear of the other two columns, they are both entrenched I believe & seem to be having some fighting, & also to be having considerably the best of it. We shan't advance until reinforcements arrive from England; what the 24th do in the meanwhile or what they will do then no-one knows.(4) We may remain here until the next advance into Zululand & we may move to more civilised parts. That is going home immediately.

The other day some of the fellows here went out on a reconnoitring expedition & found the Queen's Colour of the 1st Bⁿ in the river.(5) The Adjutant had galloped off with it, but the poor fellow was killed by the river.(6) I don't remember what I told you about the fight before or what the numbers were on either side. Between 15 and 20 thousand Zulus attacked about 800 of our fellows left in camp. It is almost certain that even with these odds against them, our fellows could have held their own, anyhow until the return of the remainder of the column, had it not been for want of ammunition & then not being in any way entrenched. They were actually marched out to attack the Zulus in skirmishing order that is extended. Whilst standing their ground, they kept the Black devils off, & it is said that if they had only stood five minutes more, the Zulu leader was going to call his men off; but immediately [the order was] given to fall back for more ammunition, the Zulus rushed in & scattered as our men were, they had no chance.

The Zulus have no idea of falling back & reforming. I believe, falling back with them means full retreat, so they imagined, I suppose, that we were retreating.

The Zulus were killed by hundreds. It's impossible to say how many, especially as they carried away wagon loads of dead. Somewhere between 2 & 5 thousand, I should think. At the fight here,(7) it is supposed that our 120 heroes were [word crossed through] attacked by 5000, & killed about 2000 of them.

The Colonial papers here are lavish in their praises of this little band, & so they ought to be for they saved the Colony.

I hope we shall receive large reinforcements from England. I have heard that the General has only asked for 3 Regts; the papers say 6 and a Brigade of Cavalry. I should like to see 10 Infantry Reg^{ts} & 4 or 5 of Cavalry ordered out, then we might finish the whole thing in about a couple of months.

An awful misfortune has happened. We finished the last piece of bacon this morning, so we shall have to eat ration beef (tough old ox) for [the next] week or two I expect, unless a blessed wagon appears. I will write again shortly darling. Good Bye for the present. Best love to all at home, Your affectionate son

Charlie

[P.S.] I suppose you are [illegible word crossed through] still shivering at home in dear old England. It's hotter here now than it has been. The sun has a knack of rushing up bang over our heads at the earliest opportunity, & won't move for some time, so that one can't get any shade. A man's shadow at midday is about six inches long; it's hardly worth while having a shadow like that. The scenery would be very pretty if there was more wood, but most of the country I have seen is fearfully bare. When there is wood it is very lovely. There are beautiful wild flowers & insects, a-blooming and a-fluttering; But the flies xxxxxx. [Sic] You've no idea of S. Africa[n] flies. In this fort they are in millions; & excessively persevering & so persistent. In England a wave of the hand will drive a respectable fly away, but here if you are eating marmalade, you first push the brutes off when about to lift the desired piece to your mouth, then raise it to your opened jaws, shove them off again by physical strength & pop it in before they make another fiendish attempt.

Second letter.(8)

The letter was begun on the 19th February and was finished four days later, 23rd February, [1879], for which delay the officer provides a reason. A week after his previous letter, the writer now finds boredom setting in at Rorke's Drift and the living conditions at the post have been improved to some extent.

Rorke's Drift Fort

Feb^y 19th [1879]

My darling Mother,

I received your very welcome budget 3 days ago, dated Jan^y 3rd.(9) I would like to have been among you all during the numerous festivities you have been enjoying at home. Never mind, I shall enjoy them all the more when I do return, after my absence from them. It appears that we shall not move from this place until the next advance is made. We don't want to do so now, we are pretty comfortable, plenty to eat & drink but yes, decidedly slow; with the exception of a few fatigues, Engineer work, wood cutting &c. there is nothing else to do. The arrival of the mail is an event of great excitement, but when we have read the papers, & learnt the advertisements in them by heart, we subside again; there are about 6 books amongst us, & lucky is he who manages to get hold of one of them. I have just had one lent me & am therefore content. The latest literary work I have been perusing is a penny life of Luther, with many &

beautiful illustrations. I have no news of the war to tell you; of course there are numerous stories & rumours flying about, of startling character, but they are not to be relied upon for truth. We are just on the border of hated Zululand, the river Buffalo dividing the two countries. The two other columns, under Cols. Wood and Pearson are in entrenched camps in Zululand. Wood has been bothering the Zulus tremendously, burning their kraals & capturing their cattle &c.

Pearson has been pretty quiet lately but yesterday a Native bobby brought us word that he had gained a great victory. It isn't confirmed yet but we hope it's true, it will probably have a great affect if it is.

The Zulus certainly have lost a great number of men, & some people think they are already tired of fighting. They certainly have been very quiet & they have had plenty of opportunities of making themselves disagreeable, by ravaging Natal, with nothing to stop them, but they have not taken advantage of them. ~~We are~~ Our column is encamped behind walls here & at Helpmakaar, & although we could defend ourselves against any number of Zulus we couldn't go out to attack them if they were in large numbers. We have been expecting a visit from them, at on every occasion when the moon sees fit to become full (of what) or renews itself, but they haven't made their appearances yet. They are supposed to be coming tomorrow or the next day; I believe the 21st is the end of the old moon's career & a new one is going to shine forth; I will therefore keep this open until then & let you know if they pay us a visit. We shall certainly be at home to them if they call; & give them balls (of lead) & supper of the same digestible material. I have heard that I can catch the mail by sending this off to day but I expect my letters will go by this mail, so I'll keep this until the next; [illegible words struck out] perhaps I shall be able to send you some news by that time.

I can send you one good piece of news, which is that I am the happy possessor of a box of tooth powder, which arrived the other day from Maritzburg.(10)

On the day we came here, 3 of us asked one of the Mounted Police who was going in to Maritzburg to send us each a Kit; he kindly did, & they arrived 2 or 3 days ago; mine consisted of 2 waterproof sheets, a splendid waterproof coat, 2 blankets, shorts, socks &c; also provisions, jams, potted meats, a doz. of whiskey &c., & a whole set of cooking utensils, so you see I am again set up & clothed.

I really am perfectly well; several of our fellows have been seedy but this open air life seems to suit me admirably. When we first arrived there were various & disagreeable smells floating about, on account of the wet mealy bags & general dirty state of the place, which by the bye was a haven of & occupied by uncleanly porkers &c., but now it is much improved, the mealy sacks have given place to walls of stone, & the whole place is cleaned every day. We had no shelter either for some time, & as it rained frequently this was disagreeable.

How horrified the poor old Mother would have been to see her son, whom she used to smother with blankets in the dog days, lying on wet ground, covered by wet blankets in thunderstorms. Now we have shelter & are as snug as that disagreeable animal the bug is said to be in a rug. I will leave this for the present, as I'm going for a ride. I can generally borrow a pony when I want to, as nearly all our fellows own one.(11)

Sunday 23rd Feb^y [1879]

I said I would keep this letter open until the New Moon had appeared. She appeared 3 nights ago. I was not an eye-witness of her debut as she arrived, I believe, at a period when I have always understood moons are conspicuous by their absence, viz. about 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning.

Our sable foes have appeared not; & I feel pretty sure they will not do so at all here. This place is too strong for them & they probably know that we are prepared; which is one very good reason for their absenting themselves, as they have an ungentlemanly way of swooping down when they are not expected & keeping away when they are. Another reason is that a good deal of blasting is done here every day, as we are building a new fort (12) & they probably mistake the reports for big gun practice, for their special benefit; this is not calculated to lure them on I should imagine.

But above all, Colonel Pearson has given them a good lesson that will probably make them fight shy of fortified places. Although not yet officially confirmed, the news of the victory that I spoke about is nearly certain to be true, as we have heard it from various sources. It is supposed that they attacked his Entrenched camp, that he allowed them to come close to the walls, & then threw or sprung a mine, which he kindly prepared for them, doing fearful damage. He then followed up those that were not killed to a military kraal, burnt that, drove them out of it & followed them again to another kraal & burnt that also. One version states that he was then obliged to retire with great loss to ourselves, but I don't know the true account of it yet.

About 50 men are supposed to be all that escaped out of Cetewayo's attacking force, which was probably about 5000.

So many false rumours fly about that we never believe anything we hear hardly. I could give any amount of instances.(13) The other day, the people in Greytown heard that a large force of Zulus was

crossing the river to attack two towns so they immediately went into Laager & waited all night for the onslaught. Next morning, they were relieved to hear that the large force was represented by a few Kaffirs who crossed to get mealies. A few days ago, a man was on his way here from some military boss with a message. The brave fellow heard our blasting & scuttled back to say that we were being attacked by a large body of Zulus, that he saw them advance close under our walls & that our rifles & big guns were doing tremendous execution. The said M.B.(14) accordingly sent to ask if this was true, if not he would punish the trusty & trustful messenger.

We had no church parade this morning as it looked like rain. I have just contributed to a fund for the benefit of the widows of our poor fellows who were killed at Isandhlwana. I am sorry to say that one of our officers died on Friday. The poor fellow was ill here, in fact he always has been ill since he came out here; he was taken to Helpmakaar and died the next day. His name is Franklin & a very nice fellow he was, poor chap.

My Captain holds me up as an example, a fellow who can eat like an ostrich & is always ready for work, which statement I certify to be correct.

We are anxiously waiting to hear what troops are coming out here, which we expect to do in a few days. Of future plans I know nothing. Perhaps I may know more by the next mail. Give my love to Marryat, my 16th removed cousin; & tell her that if I could discover who moved her all that distance I'd punch his or her head; tell her also that I will write to her when I have the chance. Kind regards to Knolleys & ditto message.

Any amount of love & kisses to them gals & the babbies [sic] & your own dear old self. Love to Pater & Harry the lunatic. My last letter was an answer to the Pater's questions, if I had lost any luggage; with the exception of that I have lost nothing. All his presents to me are very useful; I have cut my nails, drawn corks, cut sticks &c. with my knife; my watch is going beautifully & although I have not yet practiced on a nigger's vile body with my revolver, I may have that pleasure, perhaps soon. My watch would have gone beautifully if I had left it behind me in camp on the 22nd Jan^y, which is the sort of thing Troublesome would be expected to do, but he did not, so it still is ticking [sic] in my breast & there it shall stick as long as possible.(15) Good Bye dear old Mother; write letters & send them all without intermission, only allowing yourself intervals for sleep or refreshment. Tell me in your letters, what letters of mine you receive, & I can tell if any go astray.

Your loving,

Sodger boy.

[P.S.] I am sorry to say that the news of Pearson's victory is utterly without foundation; he has had no fighting whatever.

There are three particularly valuable references in this letter, which provide evidence as to the identity of the writer. The first is his allusion to an officer named Franklin dying on the Friday previous to the date of his addendum to the letter, 23rd February. This officer can only be Second Lieutenant Reginald William Franklin, 2/24th, and who did indeed die at Helpmekaar, (but on the 20th February, which was Thursday, rather than Friday).(16) Since our correspondent refers to him as "one of our officers", the writer was probably an officer of the same battalion.

The second hint is the words "... if I had left it [the watch] behind me in camp on the 22nd Jan^y..." The camp to which he refers is obviously that at Isandhlwana because only Lieutenant Gonville Bromhead's 'B' company remained behind at Rorke's Drift, while the remaining seven companies of the 2/24th went on to Isandhlwana. The reference to his lost kit in the first letter now becomes clear.

The last clue relates to his reference to his captain: not every company in the 2nd Battalion was led by a captain and Bromhead's 'B' Company is a good example. Those companies commanded by captains were: 'A' (Captain J.M.G. Tongue), 'D' (Captain W. Penn Symons), 'F', (Captain H.B. Church) and 'H' (Captain J.J. Harvey).(17) Before dawn on the 22nd January, six of those seven companies of the 2/24th left the camp with Lord Chelmsford, leaving all their kit behind, while 'G' company remained in camp under Lieutenant Pope because it had been on piquet duty the previous night.(18) Thus, our writer must have been out with Lord Chelmsford and lost his kit in the ensuing sack of the camp by the victorious Zulu.

The author has checked the initials of those officers who were with Lord Chelmsford that day and only two possible candidates with the forename initial 'C' emerge: Lieutenant C.V. Trower, whose company is not known, and Lieutenant C.E. Curll, of 'H' Company, which was commanded by Captain Harvey. Enquiries at the Royal Regiment of Wales Museum, Brecon, established the forenames of these two men: Lieutenant COURTNEY VOR TROWER and Lieutenant CHARLES EMILIUS CURLL;(19) thus since Lieutenant Trower does not have the forename 'Charles', we might assert with some confidence that our correspondent was Lieutenant Curll.(20)

Third Letter.(21)

This is an incomplete letter and is therefore unsigned, although the handwriting is identical to those above.

Rorke's Drift
March 25th [1879]

My darling Mother,

I commenced you a letter today, although I only sent one off to you 4 days ago.

I have literally no news to tell you; the only movements that I hear of are one to relieve Col. Pearson,(22) whose communications are cut off, & another to bury the dead at Isandhlwana.(23) The reinforcements I believe will form the Relief Column but who will perform the other duty I don't know. I suppose they send the Colonial papers to London; if so you ought to be well up on all the news. Ella will tell you that I received your two budgets from home. They came most unexpectedly. Two loads of letters had arrived at Rorke's Drift, but there ~~delay~~ were none for me amongst them, so I despaired of receiving any until next mail. I was awfully disappointed, but the next day one packet arrived, & I received another 2 days after. How is everyone at home and where oh where are those [?] photographs the Nicholsons promised to send me. It seems as if I had been away a fearful time from England, but it is only 4 months after all.(24) I suppose it is because I have done such a lot & seen so many new scenes. There's an awfully jolly little Intombe(25) or Kaffir girl comes here to sell milk. Now, shall I take her home as the wife of my buzzum [!]? I don't think I will on second thoughts, as she would have to dress in civilized society, & her figure is perhaps after all her chief charm. I shall finish this for the present, & keep [word crossed through] it open as no mail will go for some time, ...

Fragments.(26)

Two fragments from a letter or letters, perhaps even parts of the third letter above, presumed to be from "Charlie", since the handwriting is identical.

Fragment 1.

... the ... very

..[na]me is Symons.(27)

Fragment 2.

any amoun[t] ...

still assur[e] ...

safety & ...

Charles Emilius Curll was born in Hong Kong on the 8th June 1856. His military career may be summarised as follows; (28)

Appointed Second Lieutenant in the Leicestershire Militia on 1st May 1877, aged 20 years;
Transferred in the same rank to the 24th Regiment (2nd Warwickshire) on the 14th September 1878;
Promoted to Lieutenant on 23rd January 1879;(29)
Promoted to Captain on 5th January 1884;
Promoted to Major on 9th June 1893;
Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel on 29th November 1903, when he was given command of the 2nd Battalion, a position he held until his retirement;
Retired as an Honorary Brigadier-General with pay on 29th November 1907, aged 51 years.

References.

1. The letters are in file KCM 89/41/1, "Letters from 'Charlie', an unidentified British soldier ... stationed at Rorke's Drift ...". I am indebted to the Director of the Campbell Collections of the University of Natal, Professor Yonah Seleti, for permission to publish the documents for the first time.
2. KCM 89/41/1/1 (i – ii).
3. See, for example, the letters dated 25th February and 16th March from Captain Walter Parke Jones, Royal Engineers, in Frank Emery, (ed.), *The Red Soldier: Letters from the Zulu War, 1879*, London, 1977, p. 141f.

4. This is the first indication that the author belonged to the 24th Regiment.
5. The missing Colour of the 1st Battalion was found on the 4th February. The Colour of the 2nd Battalion was never found. See report from Colonel R.T. Glyn to the Deputy Adjutant-General, Colonel Bellairs, Public Record Office, Kew, WO 33/34, Enclosure in No. 89; Daphne Child (ed.), *The Zulu War Journal of Colonel Henry Harford*, Pietermaritzburg, 1978, pp. 48ff; Charles L. Norris-Newman, *In Zululand with the British Throughout the War of 1879*, London, 1888, re-printed 1988, p. 116
6. The bodies of Lieutenants Teignmouth Melvill and Nevill Coghill, 1/24th, were found the previous day, the 3rd February. Melvill was Adjutant of the battalion and Coghill was Orderly Officer of the regiment.
7. Rorke's Drift, fought on 22/23rd January, 1879.
8. KCM 89/41/1/2 (i – vi)
9. A 'budget' refers to a packet of papers, or letters.
10. Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal.
11. Officers usually had at least two of their own horses and one wonders what happened to those of the author.
12. Fort Melvill.
13. The rumour previously recounted about a Pearson victory is an excellent example of a tale, which had no basis in fact, as the writer indicates at the end of the letter.
14. Presumably 'Military Boss'.
15. The underlining of the letters emphasizes the writer's play on the words.
16. J.P. Mackinnon, and S.H. Shadbolt, *The South African Campaign of 1879*, first published London, 1880, re-published London, 1995, p. 192f.
17. Information about company officer assignments in the 2/24th is drawn from Appendix VI, in F.W.D. Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx: The Battle of Isandlwana*, London, 2002, pp. 69ff.
18. The last entry, dated 22nd January, in the diary of Lieutenant C. Pope, quoted in Norris-Newman, p. 180, says that his company was relieved by one of those of the 1/24th.
19. I am indebted to Major Martin Everett, Curator of the Museum, for originally providing this information. See also Norman Holme, *The Noble 24th: Biographical Records of the 24th Regiment in the Zulu War and the South African Campaign 1877 – 1879*, London, 1999, p. 102.
20. There is a reference to Lieutenant Curll standing with Captain Harvey and Lieutenant Banister, 'H' Company, with officers of 'F' Company, looking across the plain towards Isandlwana: account by Lt. H.G. Mainwaring, 2/24th, written on 22 January, 1895 in Holme, p. 197.
21. KCM 89/41/1/3.
22. The column to relieve Colonel Pearson at Eshowe was long in preparation and did not cross the Lower Thukela until 29th March, fighting the battle of Gingindlovu on the way on 2nd April and arriving at Eshowe a day later.
23. An expedition to the battlefield had been undertaken on the 14th March by Major Wilson Black, 24th Regiment, but none of the dead had been buried. See the account of an 'eye-witness' in Norris-Newman, pp. 122ff.
24. Perhaps further evidence that the author was Lieutenant Charles Curll: he arrived in Natal on 12 November, 1878. (Holme p. 102).
25. *Intombi* is the diminutive form of the Zulu noun *intombazana*, meaning a young girl.
26. KCM 89/41/1/4.
27. This is probably a reference to Captain Penn Symons, who commanded 'D' Company, 2/24th.
28. Information provided by *Hart's Annual Army List, 1885* supplemented by Holme, p. 102.
29. The day after the battle of Isandlwana; one might presume that Curll received this step as a result of the deaths of Lieutenants H.J. Dyer (Adjutant), Sub-Lieutenant T.L.G. Griffith (commissariat duties), C. d'A. Pope and F. Godwin-Austen ('G' Company). Dyer and Griffith had also been out with Lord Chelmsford but returned to the camp with Major S. Smith, (R.A., commanding 'N' Battery, 5th Brigade), and Captain A.F. Gardner, (14th Hussars, general staff duties), arriving soon after noon. Major Smith also lost his life.