

The Victorian Pictures in the collection of Her Majesty The Queen.

The Defence of Rorke's Drift.

Oliver Millar

St. James's Palace (Buckingham Palace no. 3350. 119.4 by 211.5 cm, 47 by 83 in. Item 186. Signed and dated 18 EB 80.

In No. 186 the Zulus are attacking the north-west corner of the outer perimeter of the station, which at that point rested on a rock ledge. The roof of the hospital in the background has caught fire. For the identification of the figures, see below. In recognition of the heroism displayed by the defenders, eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded; Chard and Bromhead were promoted to brevet Major.

Painted for Queen Victoria who had, according to the artist, asked her, through Sir Henry Ponsonby, if she would paint for her 'a subject to be taken from a war of her own reign'. Although urged by her friends to take 'Rorke's Drift' as a subject, she first proposed to the Queen the finding of the body of the Prince Imperial. This was at first approved by the Queen and Mrs Butler began to plan the composition; but she received a message that the Queen thought it better not to paint that subject and she was therefore compelled 'to chose the popular Rorke's Drift'. (1)

The commission from the Queen was also discussed in letters between Sir Henry Ponsonby and his wife. On 7 June 1879 Ponsonby wrote that the Queen wanted two pictures of scenes from the Zulu War, but that Mrs Butler was only to do one: 'none equal to her for English soldiers'. Lady Ponsonby discussed the commission with the artist, who was under, or gave, the impression that she was to paint in due course two pictures for the Queen, and proposed £800 as the price for the 'Zulu one', which was to be full of figures, and if the Zulus are to be got at she will make them sit... She says the Queen has always shown such a peculiar and detailed interest in soldiers, not looking upon them as machines, as people do, that she particularly likes to think she is painting it for her. I thought her charming... The price was settled, in fact, at £1,000. The Royal family had clearly been interested in the picture, *The Remnants of an Army*, which Mrs Butler had exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1879 (582).

After the 24th had returned home, 'some of the principal heroes' were first summoned to Windsor and then 'sent on' to the artist. She went to Portsmouth, where the 24th was quartered, in order to make all the necessary studies from life. She received every assistance from the officers of the regiment and the staff. 'they even had a representation of the fight acted by the men who took part in it, dressed in the uniforms they wore on that awful night. Of course, the result was that I reproduced the event as nearly to the life as possible but from the soldier's point of view of the thing.

What caused the great difficulty that I had to grapple with was the fact that the whole mass of those fighting figures was illuminated by firelight from the burning hospital. Firelight transforms colours in an extraordinary way which you hardly realize till you have to reproduce the thing in paint'. The 'one salient figure' among the Zulus was painted from 'a sort of Zulu' produced for the artist by Dr Pollard (letters of Sir Henry Ponsonby, 7, 10-13 and 16 June, MSS. In W.R.A.; Mary Ponsonby, ed. Magdalen Ponsonby (1927), pp. 148-50; Elizabeth Butler, *An Autobiography* (1922), pp.186-190). In an undated letter from the painter to Val Prinsep, preserved in papers in the possession of his grandchildren, she writes about her efforts to find for her 'a Negro model' who may have been needed in painting 186.

A modern key attached to the back of the picture is unreliable. One of Elizabeth Butler's sketchbooks, in the National Army Museum, contains two rapid sketches for the whole composition, a sketch of the figure of Lt. Bromhead and four studies of the figures firing over the mealie bags in their left foreground. One of these is inscribed 'Jenkins; by the artist, but no soldier of this name is recorded as having been at the action. The following identifications are suggested.

In the right foreground, with his shoulder bandaged and carrying ammunition, Private Frederick Hitch, VC., 24th Regiment, who was severely wounded; behind him, attending to a wounded man, Surgeon Major Reynolds, VC., Army Medical department; and, with his right arm flung upwards, Acting Commissariat Officer James Dalton, VC., who had urged that the station should be fortified and, if possible, defended and was wounded in the shoulder. (1) In the centre of the composition are Lt. Chard, VC, pointing with his left arm, and Lt. Bromhead, VC, holding his sword. Both of them had sat to Mrs Butler. Behind them can be seen the Rev. George Smith, chaplain, who was active throughout the battle in encouraging the defenders and in replenishing the supplies of ammunition at the perimeter. The soldier lying on the ground and looking towards Chard and Bromhead is probably Corporal Frederick Schiess, VC., of the Natal Native Contingent; and the figures in the left foreground are said to include Privates Robert Jones, VC., and William Jones, VC., both of the 24th Regiment (C. Wilkinson-Latham *The Defence of Rorke's Drift Tradition*, no 55, pp.6-8)

The artist herself stated that she had 'managed to show, in that scuffle, all the V.C.s and other conspicuous actors in the drama'. The names above do not, however, include Private John Williams, Private Hook or Corporal William Allen, who was wounded in the arm, is identified in the modern key as the figure identified by Mr Wilkinson-Latham as private Hitch. On one of the leaves of the sketch book. The artist noted 'Private Hitch in London' beside studies of a whiskered civilian who cannot readily be identified with anyone seen in the picture. It has been pointed out by P. Usherwood and J. Spenser-Smith, *Lady Butler Battle Artist 1846-1933*, National Army Museum (1987), no. 33, that the artist had no previous experience in including portraits of living people in her compositions.

Mrs. Butler took the picture, 'in its pale, shallow, early stage' to Windsor so that THE queen could see it. It was examined on 16 December 1879 by the Queen, Prince Leopold, Princess Louise and Princess Beatrice, as well as by Lord Beaconsfield; and the artist explained to the Queen 'every figure, even the most distant'. The Queen described the picture as 'sketched in with some heads, nearly finished. It will be splendid & the drawing is most powerful. Mrs. Butler was there herself. She is very ladylike and pleasing, and explained everything with great enthusiasm.

The figure of Private Hitch is the most finished, & wonderfully like. All officers, & men, are portraits, & everything is painted from descriptions, & just as it was, drawn to the very smallest detail. She made them put themselves into the attitudes in which they were. Major Chard is also very like (2) Major Bromhead is to be painted near him' (Journal); both Chard and Bromhead had been invited to Balmoral. It was the artist's 'wonderfully correct drawing' which the Queen specially mentioned in a letter to the Crown princess, 17 December (W.R.A. Add. U32). On 11 March 1880 she saw, at Buckingham Palace, De Neuville's painting of the same subject, but thought it 'far less real and effective' than Mrs Butler's, which she saw again on 13 March, 'much advanced' (Journal). The artist was paid £1,000 by the Lord Chamberlain's department in September 1880. The picture was received at Windsor from the painter on 14 July 1880.

Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1881 by permission of the Queen, it attracted a 'great crush' *Art Journal* (1881) p.230; *Athenaeum*, 28 May): also shown in 1881 at the Egyptian Hall. Later at St. James's; transferred to Clarence House in 1946, but returned to St. James's.

References.

- (1) He was, however, leaning over the barricade when he received his wound.
- (2) Sir Henry Ponsonby records the hope that Chard would not appear: he was so ugly it would spoil the work of art.