

BOOK REVIEW; *Zulu; The Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War*

Saul David. Penguin/Viking, ISBN 0-670-91474-6, hardback, 476 pages, illus, maps, price £20.00.

By Ian Knight

Saul David's *Zulu; The Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War* attempts a meaty history of the war for the general reader. The author's previous books have included an entertaining biography of Lord Cardigan – who presided over another famous Victorian military blunder, the Charge of the Light Brigade – and a well-received history of the Indian Mutiny, and indeed it is in his understanding of the politics and mores of the Victorian period that his strengths in this book lie. Isandlwana – which took place just eleven days after the invasion of Zululand had begun – turned the Anglo-Zulu War into a very political conflict. In one fell swoop it focussed both press and public attention on South Africa, where Imperial policy had grown decidedly murky away from the spotlight, and produced the inevitable clamour for both blame and praise. While the policies that had led to conflict were called into question, the search was on to find a scapegoat for military failings in the field, and the senior British commander, Lord Chelmsford, was firmly in the frame. Yet, as the author points out, although Chelmsford was genuinely shocked by the disaster, he was adroit enough to allow the brunt of the criticism to fall on a junior officer, Lt. Col. Durnford, who, having had the misfortune to be killed, could not answer back. The Prime Minister, Disraeli, was not fooled, but his attempts to censure Chelmsford were firmly blocked by the Queen herself, who intervened personally to protect Chelmsford's reputation. Indeed, as further disasters followed swiftly on the heels of Isandlwana – including the death of the young Prince Imperial, heir to the Bonaparte throne in France, who had inveigled himself onto Chelmsford's staff as an observer – Chelmsford retained his command largely due to a Herculean effort by his supporters at home. In the end, he was allowed to hang on long enough to inflict a final defeat on the Zulu – to the intense irritation of his appointed successor, Sir Garnet Wolseley, who was even then hurrying to the front.

In this regard, *Zulu* is a needy reminder both that Queen Victoria still retained in 1879 a very real level of influence in British politics, and that the making and breaking of reputations even then contained a marked element of spin. The victory at Rorke's Drift was bolstered by the award of no less than eleven Victoria Crosses – a comparatively new award, which had caught the public imagination and attracted press headlines – in stark contrast to the behind-the-scenes wrangling of the officers in the field which were fraught with muted accusations of cowardice and an undignified scramble for preferment.

Yet on the subject of the war itself, upon which the sales of the book will no doubt depend, it is disappointing. For someone who clearly enjoys his reputation as an iconoclast, Saul David has produced a curiously old-fashioned history, reserving his blame and praise for the British, who still remain centre stage. Like the film *Zulu* – upon which the book's title trades – it uses the emotive power of that African name to conjure up the air of 'heroism and tragedy', which still clings to the war, while offering us only limited insight into the Zulu viewpoint. Whereas in the film this was a deliberate ploy, to create a sense of Imperial alienation from the African landscape and invest the Zulu warriors with an unnerving sense of menace, it is unsatisfactory here, and marginalizes the Zulu people in the history of their own dispossession. Indeed, the use of words such as 'kraal' to refer to Zulu homesteads – a word which most historians in the field have long since abandoned because it is neither a Zulu word nor precise in its meaning – adds to the dated feel of the book. Despite its length, few Zulu characters ever really come alive, and there is little sense of what is going on inside the kingdom under the trauma of the British invasion. Like in the movies, the Zulus only emerge into view when they are about to impact on the British. Indeed, there is remarkably little sense of African atmosphere in the book, and one gets the feeling that while Saul David is at home in the dusty corridors of Imperial power, he is ill at ease in the rolling green hills of Zululand.

Given the author's admission in his Acknowledgements that he spent only a year researching and writing the book, it's hard not to feel that it is hurried. His prose is engaging and whisks the reader through the rather sad tale easily enough, but there are errors and omissions aplenty, and anyone with an interest in the war will easily spot the influence of recent specialist books on the subject (Lock and Quantrill's controversial study of Isandlwana, for example, Adrian Greaves' *Rorke's Drift* and *The Curling Letters*, my own *National Army Museum* and *Prince Imperial* books). There is no mention, for example, of the war of raid and counter-raid that took place along the Anglo-Zulu borders throughout the war, and several major characters – such as King Cetshwayo's adviser, the extraordinary 'White Zulu' John Dunn – are introduced only in footnotes. There are, moreover, a surprising number of factual mistakes. The Hales rocket was not fired from its trough by 'a hand-lit fuse' (p. 76), but by tugging on a lanyard attached to a friction detonator. The Imperial Mounted Infantry – a scratch cavalry

force raised from volunteers from infantry battalions who could ride – were not ‘armed with unwieldy Martini-Henry rifles’ (p. 68) but with Swinburne-Henry carbines. James Rorke, the Irish border-trader who gave his name to Rorke’s Drift, did not die ‘childless’ (p. 159); his sons, like many second-generation frontier farmers, crossed the colour divide and married Zulu wives, a choice which placed them outside the rigid confines of white colonial society, and has left their history largely unwritten. Frances Colenso, the daughter of the Bishop of Natal and defender of Durnford’s reputation, was not ‘Fanny’ to her family (p. 64) but ‘Nel’. The Natal Carbineers – one of the most important of the locally raised white volunteer units – are referred to as the *Royal Natal Carbineers* – a title they only enjoyed between 1935 and 1961. Indeed, there is a good deal of confusion in evidence here about the distinction between Volunteer troops – who were part-time soldiers raised under the Natal Volunteer Acts, did not enlist under Queen’s Regulations, and who required a special dispensation to fight outside Natal territory – and the Irregulars, who were raised directly by the Crown for full-time service for a specified period.

Nit-picking? Perhaps, but these are all points which could have been resolved with a greater familiarity with even recent literature on the war. There are questionable judgements, too. Was Lord Chelmsford really ‘offhand to the point of rudeness when dealing with Colonial officers’ (p. 38)? Certainly, Chelmsford’s experiences in the earlier Cape Frontier War had left him sceptical of colonial officers’ judgement, but his manners were generally impeccable, and Commandant Hamilton Browne – himself a Colonial – noted that his personal behaviour was ‘kind and courteous.. a manner that endeared him to all of us. No General that I ever served under in South Africa, was so respected and liked as he was, and certainly, no Colonial officer ever said a word against him’. In dealing with the events surrounding Isandlwana, the author is quick to point out that Lord Chelmsford, splitting his force on the eve of battle, failed to take a reserve supply of ammunition with him; later, at the height of the fighting, Quartermaster Bloomfield of the 2/24th is blamed for being ‘pedantic’ (p. 135) in the distribution of ammunition. The crucial point, however – that Bloomfield was husbanding the very reserve supplies, which Chelmsford had ordered to be made ready in case he needed them, is missed. And, in assessing the behaviour of an officer who had abandoned his men at the battle of Ntombe, Dr David remarks that ‘there were marked similarities between Harward’s conduct and that of Major Spalding at Rorke’s Drift, the only difference being that Spalding did not abandon his men while an enemy attack was actually in progress’ (p. 248). More could not, surely, hang on such a difference as that?

In his account of the crucial battle of Isandlwana, the author has followed a recent revisionist interpretation, which is by no means generally accepted; nothing necessarily wrong with that, but he makes no effort to evaluate contradictory evidence, to the extent that several statements given here simply cannot be supported. At the height of the battle, says the author, Second Lieutenant ‘Dyson’s small party never received the order [to withdraw] and were speared to a man’ (p. 132). In fact, while Dyson’s ultimate fate remains hotly debated, the only direct evidence – from either side – comes from the survivor, Captain Essex, who went out of his way to describe how he delivered that order to Dyson, and how Dyson obeyed. The conventional version of the start of the battle of Isandlwana – in which a British patrol stumbles upon the resting Zulu army, and provokes a spontaneous attack – is described as ‘great cinema; but not the truth’ (p. 123) – despite the fact that plenty of those who were there recalled the incident in exactly those terms.

There are some curiosities, too, in the maps, most of which steadfastly ignore the progress that has been made in the cartography of the war over the last twenty years. The map of Rorke’s Drift (surely the most mapped of all the battles!) reduces the Shiyane hill – which in fact dwarfs the mission – to the size of a hummock, and marks the Mzinyathi River in the wrong place. The map of the battle of Ulundi is based on a contemporary sketch-map, complete with original distortions of scale, and includes the contemporary annotation of the ‘road taken by our troops’ – a gung-ho flourish, which seems slightly surreal at this distance. All of the illustrations have been used before in books, which, moreover, are still in print.

There is no doubt that the Anglo-Zulu War will continue to attract writers and historians for the foreseeable future to what is, after all, both important history and a dramatic story, and there is perhaps a need for a new study, distanced from the claustrophobic confines of the specialist military history press, and aimed at a general readership. *Zulu; The Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879* will no doubt sell well, but as the last word - it falls distinctly short.

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