

The Rev. George Smith and Alphonse De Neuville's Painting in Sydney,
and an Obituary

By Chris Gosling

The Rev. George Smith became one of the most identifiable figures of the Anglo Zulu War in large part to his commanding presence in the foreground of Alphonse de Neuville's painting *The Defence of Rorke's Drift* (1880).

Distributing cartridges to soldiers during the battle' without concern for his own welfare, Smith earned both the nickname 'Ammunition Smith' and a reputation for disapproving of swearing. He was rewarded with a commission in the Army Chaplain's Department, and continued to play a role in Zulu War affairs, presiding over the burial of Melvill and Coghill, and being present at Ulundi.¹ While historically relegated to being a minor participant in the defence, some at the time praised Smith's efforts and urged he be considered for higher reward.²

Commissioned by the Fine Arts Society, London, De Neuville's painting was presented to the Queen on 11 March 1880 and was roundly applauded in the press. Reportedly based on a sketch made by Trooper Harry Lugg, the painting well illustrated the physical nature of the battle and its principle participants. It presented Smith in the foreground as he was remembered, a large red-bearded man in a white helmet handing out ammunition from the haversack slung about his waist.³

In 1882, De Neuville's painting was purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales for £2,000, and was enthusiastically received. Thereafter, it became one of the focal points at the Gallery and stimulated much interest in the characters it presented.

In March 1913, Smith, on route to New Zealand, visited Sydney and saw De Neuville's finished painting for the first time. Already well known from his likeness on the Gallery's wall, Smith found himself feted by the Sydney press. His presence was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as follows:

RORKE'S DRIFT

HERO VISITS SYDNEY

REV. G. SMITH

The Rev. G. Smith, who was chaplain of the little band of Britons who kept the flag flying at 'Rorke's Drift' during that memorable campaign against the Zulus, is at present on a visit to Sydney.

A tall, portly figure, with a long flowing beard showing signs of the sere and yellow, the distinguished visitor is the picture of health.

The 34 years which have elapsed since he served out the cartridges to the few fighting units which were left to defend the fort have not dulled his faculties, and he appears as keen as ever. But his modesty remains. He asks to be excused in not telling the story of that campaign. "I have never told it yet," he said last night.

Eight years ago he retired from active service in the army. He is now on a tour to Australasia, having come this way from Egypt, where he spent a month, arriving by the *Orama*. On Wednesday he will go to Auckland for a fortnight by the *Maheno*, and, coming back via Sydney, will return to England by the *Orsova*.

“I try to escape the rigid winters of the old country every year,” he said. “Last year I was in America, and was delighted with an opportunity of seeing something of that wonderful enterprise, the Panama Canal.”

On Friday Mr. Smith was introduced to the trustees of the Sydney Art Gallery by Sir Francis Suttor, and saw that great work of art in the institution which suggests the trying ordeal the noble band, of which he was a member, experienced at Rorke’s Drift. “It is a fine picture,” he said.⁴

The then Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, G. V. F. Mann, later recalled:

The Rev. George Smith, who is prominent in the painting, visited Sydney in 1912 or 13 and called on me when I was director of the Art Gallery. He had not seen the completed picture, though he posed for the artist in London. He came specially to Sydney on his way to New Zealand, to see it. A tall man with a long grey beard entered my room and told me that his name was Mr. Smith and stated the object of his visit. On inspecting the picture he was visibly upset upon seeing his late comrades, many of whom had since died of their wounds, and stood for some time before the painting in silence with bowed head and appeared very much affected. It was some time before he spoke, and then he said it was all too real and brought to him the tragic experience. He told me he intended to write his story of the subject when he returned to England. This he did and sent me a copy. The title is “Defence of Rorke’s Drift January 22nd, 1879, by an Eyewitness.”⁵

When Smith died at Sumner’s Hotel on the 27th of November 1918, the London *Times* printed only one short paragraph. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, on the other hand, paid an ample tribute to Smith’s passing with the following obituary⁶:

A RORKE’S DRIFT HERO.

REV. GEO. SMITH PASSES HENCE.

A world-wide interest will be taken in the death of the Rev. George Smith on November 27 in England. This event took place at Sumner’s Hotel, Fulwood, where the famous army-chaplain had been in residence for some time. Mr. Smith was personally known and admired in Church circles in Sydney, as he spent a few days here less than a decade ago on his way to New Zealand, where he had friends. On that occasion he was at once recognised by hundreds who had never seen him before in the flesh, and in the same way his death will carry with it a feeling of loss to thousands who have been impressed by the admirable portrait of him painted by De Neuville in his celebrated picture of ‘Rorke’s Drift’ in the New South Wales Art Gallery. Amidst the flames and smoke of the blazing hospital-huts, standing behind their frail breastwork of biscuit boxes and mealie-bags, stand the devoted British soldiers who are resisting the Zulu hordes. No figure amongst them all is more striking than that of the big, bearded padre, who hands up cartridges from the fast diminishing supply to Major Chard VC and other desperate defenders. That man is George Smith. The little British cantonment and the wounded within it were thus saved from destruction by a gallant band of little more than 100 men, who beat off an army of 4,000 Zulus. Of the latter 370 of their bravest warriors were left upon the field.

Mr. Smith was originally a missionary in South Africa, and whilst there he was ordained by the Bishop of Maritzburg. He was rector of Estcourt and St. John, Mooir River, Natal, in 1878, when the Zulu war broke out, and at once

offered his services as one of the chaplains to the troops. It was on the advice of Archibald Forbes, who was convinced of his special gifts for such work, that he decided to devote himself to army service. In the course of the war he was the first to enter Ulundi, and he shared to the full in the glory of the thrilling event of January 1879, thenceforth emblazoned forever in the annals of British history.

From that time onward Mr. Smith's long career was ardently identified with regimental service for the uplift of the British Tommy in many lands. He was in the Nile Expedition, and in all the Egyptian campaigns from 1882 to 1887, including the battle of Tel-el-Kebir, and was subsequently chaplain at Aldershot, Cork, Shorncliffe, Wollwich, Netley, Malta, and Preston. His duties at Fulwood were interrupted for brief periods by calls to Caterham, and he was ordered to Harrismith, Orange River Colony, in 1903-4.

Mr. Smith was a native or Dooking [*sic*], Norfolk, and was never married. He lost his two elder brothers within a short period of his own death, which was preceded by indifferent health for a few weeks. He was buried at Preston Cemetery with full military honours, the gun-carriage bearing the coffin covered by a Union Jack, and being accompanied by a military escort and firing party, whilst a numerous party of officers from Fulwood Barracks also attended. The faithful padre was not forgotten by the Regiment that immortalised itself in 1879, as the officers of the 24th Regiment placed a wreath upon his coffin bearing the words, "In memory of Rorke's Drift."

¹ For general details of Smith's history in South Africa refer Canon William M. Lummis, M.C., *Padre George Smith of Rorke's Drift* (Norwich: Wensum, 1978), pp 15-45.

² See, for example, S. B. Tristram's letter in the London *Times* of 27 March 1879, p 11.

³ For reviews of De Neuville's painting and a reprint of the pamphlet of its presentation to the Queen refer "The Defence at Rorke's Drift" in *The Journal of the Anglo War Historical Society*, 13 (June 2003). Details of the painting's history are included in the Art Gallery of New South Wales' De Neuville file.

⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 March 1913.

⁵ From a letter held in the Art Gallery of New South Wales' De Neuville file. Smith's own account of the battle was published unsigned by the *Natal Mercury Press* in 1915 under the title *Defence of Rorke's Drift, January 22, 1879 [By an Eyewitness]* and was largely reprinted in Lummis, *Padre George Smith of Rorke's Drift*, pp 48-55. The Art Gallery of New South Wales still has the copy Smith sent to Mann.

⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 February 1919, p 6.