

BOOK REVIEW

A Soldier Artist in Zululand

Author David Rattray

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Review by Ian Knight

A year after the tragic death of David Rattray - gunned down by intruders in front of his wife at his house in his world-famous tourist lodge at Fugitives' Drift - it remains impossible to apply any normal critical criteria to this, the first book in which he is credited solely as author and one which now carries the unwitting burden of his legacy. David had, of course, written a guide book to the battlefields of the Anglo-Zulu War, but that was a collaborative effort owing a good deal to the Society's own Adrian Greaves; indeed, it is bitterly ironic that while David was above all a communicator - he brought the story of iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift to more people around the world than anyone except arguably Sir Stanley Baker - his art was very much of the present. It lay in the extraordinary power and eloquence of his storytelling, of his ability to mesmerise his audience, and it was best appreciated live and at first hand, sitting on the stones beneath the Younghusband cairn at iSandlwana, or wrapped in blankets against the evening chill at Rorke's Drift as he brought the quiet landscape alive with the turmoil of more than a century ago. With his passing, much of David's power has been lost, leaving too little that is tangible and enduring to suggest the extraordinary impact he made in the field. David often said he was not a historian; with this book he dipped his toe into those dark, murky and often fiercely contested waters, and it offers us a hint of what he might have become - a promise, like all the others, cut brutally short.

The book itself is a lavish production, beautifully bound even in the standard edition, and rather in the style of the old Brenthurst Press publications which catered to the affluent white South African market - since rather diminished - in the 1970s and 80s. David's intended market was no doubt his affluent Lodge guests, but the book is an important one to anyone with a serious interest in the history of the war. It tells the story of the campaign through the eye of William Whitelock Lloyd, a lieutenant in the 1st Battalion, 24th Regiment, who arrived in southern Africa in 1878 and served throughout the invasion of Zululand. That Lloyd was an artist, like so many officers at the time, was well-known; a number of his sketches had been engraved and published in the *Illustrated London News*, while in 1890 he published a collection of largely humorous sketches of military life under the title *On Active Service*. These published works were based on sketches produced in the field, but the extent of Lloyd's output, and indeed the whereabouts of the originals, were largely unknown until they fell into David's lap. The present owners, Lloyd's descendants, were visiting South Africa and chanced upon David's reputation; copies were sent to him for his appraisal, and this book is the result. Altogether something like 150 of the paintings are reproduced here, in colour, a historical find probably without equal in Anglo-Zulu War terms in the last fifty years.

Lloyd's sketches provide the framework through which David's text explores the course of the war - an eloquent text, but rather brief and to the purpose, and one which no more than hints at David's command of the subject. It is Lloyd's sketches which make the book invaluable. He drew almost every aspect of his experiences in Natal and Zululand, and did so with wit and a fine eye for detail and topography. Some of the sketches are in pen and ink, but most are finely executed in delicate water-colours which conjure up not only the subtle hues of the landscape but also the shifting moods of the African light. He drew life on board ship, the views off Cape Town, his brief encounter with the Eastern Cape and his

voyage to Durban. He sketched the 24th on the march through the spectacular Mooi and Thukela valleys, and he sketched the breathtaking views from Helpmekaar. He sketched, too, the tense dawn alerts - the soldiers huddled in greatcoats, straining against the barricades to see signs of the approaching Zulus against the pink of the sun-rise - that followed the disaster at iSandlwana. Later, once the tide of war had begun to swing once more in Britain's favour, he would record the entire advance made by the 24th during the second invasion of Zululand. He recorded impressions of the spot where the Prince Imperial was killed, or views of great columns of men and marching companies in the lee of Babanango mountain, or the sweeping panoramas from the Nhlazatshe heights, looking out over the ancient Zulu heartland. He sketched too the incidents of campaign life, of the rush for water by hot and thirsty men at the end of a long day's march, of the officers' at dinner in their improvised mess, or of a wagon overturned on the road. Many of his sketches are humorous - an officer falling into an ant-bear hole while checking picquets at night, or a race of Sotho horsemen - and indeed among those included here are many of the originals of those familiar from *On Active Service*. Poignantly, he sketched distant views of the battle of Ulundi from his vantage point in the camp on the White Mfolozi river, of the Zulu army deploying through the bush on its way to attack Lord Chelmsford's square, of the same Zulus under shell-fire as they retreated, and finally of the great royal homesteads, including oNdini, in flames.

It is inevitably Lloyd's pictures of iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift which remain the most breathtaking, however, captured as they were within weeks of the conflict. He sketched iSandlwana mountain from a vantage point on top of the Shiyane hill at Rorke's Drift, viewing it through field-glasses to produce a close-up of Zulus wandering through the wagons and debris still scattered on the nek. He sketched the fort built around the storehouse at Rorke's Drift after the fight, including in one the telling detail of a butcher's scaffold where at least one Zulu prisoner was hanged by the vengeful British after the fight. And on 21 July, not long after the final British victory at Ulundi, he accompanied a group of officers who visited the stricken field at iSandlwana. The sketches he produced on that occasion have a rawness undiluted by the passage of time - of the decomposed body of a wagon-driver, lying unburied beside a rock, and of the debris scattered behind the forward British positions, including opened ammunition boxes.

That the successors to the 24th - now the Royal Welsh - are justifiably proud of their connection with the Zulu campaign, and with David Rattray, is clear from the Foreword contributed by the Regiment's Colonel-in-Chief, H.R.H. Prince Charles, and by useful biographical notes added by Major Martin Everett of the Brecon Museum. By way of comparison there are also included a number of modern photographs of the sites, many of which can be precisely identified from Lloyd's careful recording of them.

Only the final chapter - on how the book was prepared - troubled me. Under other circumstances it might have seemed unnecessary - the 'then and now' format is not new, even within the Anglo-Zulu War context, and the effort expended by the author and his team is obvious enough from the results. Since David did not live to see the publication of the book, however, it serves instead as a brittle reminder of the fragility of human hopes, and a eulogy to the man and to the extraordinary landscape of which he will forever now be a mythic part.