

Race, Respect and Revenge; British Attitudes to the Zulu in the Conflict of 1879.  
Introduction to Part 1.

By Daniel Dodman

---

The powerful imagery of the Anglo-Zulu War has resounded since 1879. The dramatic vision of the savage attacking a picturesque, but militarily advanced, British army has been commemorated in television and film. Perhaps more romantically it was a war fought by personalities; most of the officers involved were larger than life individuals who personified the Victorian gentleman and lent a certain gentility to a war which was, at times, exceptionally brutal. The military side of the conflict has been exhausted by enthusiasts for over one hundred years and many of the major battles have become household names; Isandlwana, Rorke's Drift and Ulundi in particular are known to a large number of people.<sup>1</sup> Other battles have been well studied by military historians. Although featuring far less in the public imagination the struggles at Kambula, Gingindlovu and Hlobane were no less dramatic.<sup>2</sup> The latter was a flying battle conducted by mounted British troops down a steep sided mountain in a thunder storm.

Similarly the debate over why the war occurred has continued almost since news of its initiation arrived in England during January of 1879. There has been much revisionist work on this subject and there continue to be a number of arguments about the issue. However, it seems clear that the High Commissioner to South Africa, Sir Bartle Frere engineered the war by issuing the Zulu King, Cetshwayo with an ultimatum that was impossible to fulfil.<sup>3</sup> His motives were his commitment to the confederation of South Africa and the need to placate the Boers after a land settlement commission found against them and supported the claims of the Zulu people.

Perhaps then the crucial reason for revisiting and reopening study of the Anglo-Zulu War is the unique nature of the conflict. The battle of Isandlwana is one of the only times in the late Victorian era where a fully armed and equipped European army was destroyed by a native foe. Comparisons to the much better known battle of The Little Big Horn reveal a huge discrepancy in the scale of the disasters. General Custer lost 210 men at the last stand; Lord Chelmsford in comparison had half of his column wiped out in a little over an hour, a sum of perhaps 650 regular imperial troops, 150 colonials and a large unknown number of Native troops (probably somewhere in the region of 800).

---

<sup>1</sup> Military Historians particularly focus on the battle of Isandlwana and the reason for the British defeat there. There is a superabundance of material concerning this topic little of which reaches a consensus. Potential factors include the deployment of British troops, Zulu deception, ammunition failures and even the suggestion that the British were too engaged in packing up camp and preparing a change of camp site to effectively give battle to the Zulu. It seems likely, however, that there was no simple reason for the defeat but rather a combination of British failure to appreciate Zulu tactics and a number of small incidents that accumulated to create a catastrophic collapse.

<sup>2</sup> One issue of difficulty for the historian is that of the spelling of Zulu words and places. Three solutions exist, firstly British contemporary spelling (which often varied), Zulu contemporary spellings which were often transferred orally and therefore varied and finally modern day Zulu spelling. For the sake of clarity I have attempted to use the latter throughout the whole body of this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> C. de B. Webb, "The Origins of the War: Problems of Interpretation", in *The Anglo-Zulu War: New Perspectives*. Ed. A. Duminy, C. Ballard (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1981)

More British officers died in the battle of Isandlwana than at Waterloo.<sup>4</sup> The number of British soldiers who fell that day had unexpected repercussions, catapulting the Zulu people into the domestic press and altering and sensationalising journal entries. Perhaps most importantly the Zulu successes forced the British army to avoid wallowing in its defeat and instead praise the heroism of those that died fighting such a worthy opponent in open combat.<sup>5</sup>

The historiographical debate over race and the Victorians has been continuing for some time. A transition occurred between the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its evangelically motivated belief that all humans were equal regardless of race, and the end of the century's more explicitly racist emphasis. When and why this change occurred is a subject of great debate. Ronald Hyam is not alone in assuming that "there is no doubting the deterioration which occurred in British racial attitudes in the 1860s."<sup>6</sup> Different historians emphasise different factors when examining the motivation behind this shift. Catherine Hall, for example, has identified what she considers to be a defining moment in the shift of racism. During the 1830s and 1840s racism was based on culture. 'Am I not a man and a brother' was still the dominant philosophy and 'negroes' were still considered to be physically equal. It was their culture that was at fault for their lower technological and moral position in the world and it was therefore potentially possible to raise these backward races from childlike nature to adulthood. The levels of missionary work conducted in areas such as Jamaica reflected this belief. However, the British public reaction in 1865 after the Morant Bay rebellion not only demonstrated that racial attitudes had changed irreparably before this period, but also aided their crystallisation in those who had yet to identify a definite position about race. The 'massacres' prompted a massive backlash and discourse in domestic Britain.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Carlyle and his conservative coalition successfully defended Governor John Eyre from Mill's attempted censure. The success of this action seemed to suggest a change of attitude in the British public. However, what is more important is Carlyle's insistence that blacks were an inferior race. Hall argues that the middle classes' choice between the Jamaican Committee and the Eyre Defence Committee was a choice of the nature of Britishness in the future. By allowing the Carlyle coalition's defence of Eyre to succeed the middle class had rejected radical liberalism and the idea of free market ideals spreading benevolence, civilisation and happiness. Instead they embraced a mindset which would increasingly rely on explicitly biological racism to justify the Empire.

The reason for this shift in attitudes has been explored in great depth by a number of other scholars, not least Ronald Hyam. For him the public reaction to the Morant Bay Rebellion was the culmination of a long process which was multi-layered. The Industrial Revolution helped to increase the difference between the technological capacity of Britain and other peoples, particularly those of India and China. Simultaneously the philosophy of utilitarianism formed a united understanding with evangelical Christianity to condemn entire nations' spiritual and secular arrangements as wasteful and decadent.

---

<sup>4</sup> 52 Officers were killed at Isandlwana, whilst only 48 officers were killed in the three battles of Ligny, Quatre Bras and Waterloo.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 3

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914: a study of Empire and Expansion* (Basingstoke: MacMillain, 1993), p.155

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1836-1867* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002)

Perhaps equally as crucial were the experiences of the Indian Mutiny which helped to silence peace societies and the Aboriginal Protection Society and led the British, Hyam argues, to the conclusion that “the world was increasingly realised not to be so simple a place as had once been believed”.<sup>8</sup> Certainly a number of Parliamentary Acts, including the Floggings Act of 1863, the Prisons Act of 1865 and the Habitual Criminals Act of 1869, represented a hardening of British society.

However, a view which places the emphasis on a change in racial attitudes in the 1860s does have fundamental problems. Douglas Lorimer agrees with Hall’s general assumptions about the changing nature of racism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, he places far more attention on the erosion of ethnocentric principles due to the growth of biological definitions and the rationalisation of racism through Darwinism.<sup>9</sup> Despite assumptions that these scientifically racist motivations began to be felt in the 1850s and 1860s Lorimer makes the point that the physical attributes of Africans were obviously unchanged across this period. The fundamental change in British opinions therefore occurred in the context of the observer. The importance of this statement is particularly relevant for this dissertation as is the subsequent assumption that, “The Victorian language of race may well be ubiquitous within the culture, but its power flowed from its flexibility rather than its rigidity.”<sup>10</sup> It should therefore be considered that race was not a constant ideology in this period but rather varied as the situation or time demanded.

Peter Mandler has highlighted the persistence of enlightenment themes of socio-evolutionary liberalism.<sup>11</sup> Nationalism was perceived as a negative force which might threaten national institutions which defended civilisation. The convention remained that the ‘natural’ progression from primitive civilisations to advanced civilisations (the ‘civilisational’ approach) was the path of human progress. These ideas reinforced the notion that England was at the centre of a multi-cultural Empire and that British civilisation was a product of its institutions not of nationalism or racial superiority. Eventually however, this position would shift with the arrival of popular social Darwinism near the end of the century. The now familiar picture of the tree and branches of race overrode the ladder of civilisation which all could climb. Mandler states that this development occurred slowly however and in the face of a Victorian culture based on a long liberal tradition of moderation.

It is one of the aims of this dissertation to examine how the Zulu is described in the light of this historiographical debate. Are the Zulus treated in a biologically racist way or is their representation more sympathetic? As well as considering this factor, it is also my intention to investigate how domestic politics affected the treatment of the Zulu in the popular press and art. Was the Anglo-Zulu War viewed in the context of political debates at home? More fundamentally were the Zulus themselves central to the debate surrounding them or were they an illustration to be ignored as the problem passed and more pressing issues arose elsewhere in the Empire?

---

<sup>8</sup> Hyam, *Britain’s Imperial Century*, p.161

<sup>9</sup> Douglas A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester University Press, New York: Holmes Meier, 1978)

<sup>10</sup> Douglas A. Lorimer, “Race, Science and Culture: Historical Continuities and Discontinuities 1850-1914”, in *The Victorians and Race* Ed. Shearer West (Aldershot Scholar Press, 1996), p. 32

<sup>11</sup> Peter Mandler, “Race and Nation in Victorian Thinking”, in *History Religion and Culture: British Intellectual History, 1750-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

With these aims in mind each of my three chapters has a very specific purpose. The first attempts to document how soldiers and officers perceived the Zulus they were fighting against and with whom they had a great deal of contact. Many of the journals produced at the time seem to suggest that there were distinct differences between the attitude of British troops fighting in Zululand and the British public at home. The second chapter attempts to examine the way in which the British press talked about the Zulu. This is particularly relevant with regards to the way in which the slow and periodic flow of information gave newspapers the opportunity to adapt and change their perspectives depending on the events in South Africa. The final chapter is a greater exploration into the wider motives behind contemporary considerations of the war. Its aim is to explore the idea of 'Britishness' and the concept that much of which was written about the conflict was dictated by British culture and politics rather than race or the Zulu.

The majority of this dissertation will be based on three separate types of sources. The first chapter will be mainly concerned with the published and unpublished journals of the British officers who fought in the conflict and the letters which were sent home by these officers and their men. These sources, when taken as a collection of a number of different individual perspectives of the war, are enlightening. Although some were intended for publication, and therefore are altered to portray the situation in a certain light, as a complete body they help to demonstrate the ways in which officers rationalised defeat at the hands of the Zulu. It is also worth noting that many of these journals are free of any political motivations which were important at the time.<sup>12</sup> Colonel Evelyn Wood's account, for example, represents a perspective of the war from retirement and therefore is largely free of these kinds of partisan motives.

The second chapter is based mainly on newspapers. The golden age of the British political press provides a unique opportunity for the historian. The political dividing lines between liberal newspapers and Tory newspapers heavily affected the way in which the war was reported. In addition many of the 'apolitical' papers, for example *The Graphic* or *Illustrated London News*, add a completely new perspective to the problem. The reading public for which these papers catered was interested in the visual depiction of the Zulu and the Zulu War. The papers themselves often failed to publish their own editorials instead relying on the correspondents of other papers to describe events in Zululand. However, the written word can often be substituted in these situations by the more illustrative line drawings reproduced in the papers. It is this type of source along with the more formal military artwork of the age which forms the majority of material for the final chapter. The analysis of these sources is not intended to be indicative of an entire society. It is impossible to reconstruct what the 'average' Victorian thought by looking solely at artwork or individual perspectives and recollections. Instead it is perhaps wiser to use these documents to examine how the Zulu was presented to the British population.

The sources reveal an omission in historical knowledge which may throw light on two issues which have been discussed by historians of the Victorian period, firstly that of race and secondly that of 'Britishness', identity and politics. It is hoped that by studying

---

<sup>12</sup> In particular many journals published during 1879 and 1880 were used to defend General Chelmsford's actions during the campaign or to apportion blame for Isandlwana. Similarly some accounts of the war were published with the intention of demonstrating the validity of the conflict and confirming a Tory '*causis belli*'.

the Anglo-Zulu War it is possible to gain a snapshot of opinion and therefore an insight into the standard Victorian response to the 'other'.

Despite the necessity for such a study there are limitations to its usefulness. Firstly the Anglo-Zulu War's unique nature also makes it difficult to extrapolate across the range of Victorian thought. The Zulus received a huge amount of interest after the battle of Isandlwana and were subsequently idealised by the Victorian public. Eventually even King Cetshwayo would visit London and become, briefly, part of high society. This fact makes it difficult to judge how representative the Victorian treatment of the Zulu was when compared with their perception of indigenous peoples generally. Despite the large amount of source material and the relative importance with which the war was treated in the year of 1879 it should be remembered that the interest in the war passed quickly. The British obsession with the Zulu would, however, endure until the modern day. Therefore it is possible to view this dissertation in one of two ways. Either as an interesting case study into an unusual conflict or as a demonstration of how historiography, by attempting to paint a wider historical picture, is in danger of simplifying a potentially complicated situation. The British defeat at Isandlwana brought to the fore a range of complex, interlocking themes which shaped the way the British people understood the Zulu. It is hoped that by examining the sources it is possible to gain a greater understanding of these themes that arose from the Anglo-Zulu War.

### **Part One, Finding the Zulu: Responses of British army personnel and War Correspondents in the conflict of 1879.**

“The Zulus were taller, better-looking and better made generally than the ordinary [blacks]”<sup>13</sup>

The common Victorian practice of writing memoirs and keeping journals has resulted in a wealth of material relating to the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. There are an abundance of sources which, although used by many scholars of the Anglo-Zulu War, have never been effectively analysed to evaluate the racial perception of the soldiers who fought in the war. The sources themselves present problems; most accounts were written several years after the event and are therefore influenced by the racial attitudes held at the time of writing. However, some are either directly, or at least partially, taken from diaries written at the time. Even those which were not can be considered useful. Memoirs, by their nature, attempt to depict events as their author remembers them. Although certain sources will inevitably be biased by racial attitudes at the later time of writing most have proved surprisingly insightful and accurate. Since race is a largely subconscious issue, their writers' recollections seem to be representative of their opinions in 1879. A study of these collections of memoirs, letters and journals reveal distinct differences in the combatants' opinion of the Zulu people and the Zulu race when compared to those prevalent in the domestic British environment.

---

<sup>13</sup> Binden Blood's account quoted in Ian Knight, *By the Orders of the Great White Queen* (London: Greenhill, 1992) p.212

Perhaps the most obvious illustration of this is the evident confusion which categorised military and newspaper correspondents' responses to the Zulu people. The Battle of Isandlwana shattered complacent military assessments of Victorian power and gave the few correspondents who had travelled to Natal something to literally write home about. Much of this confusion is an attempt to reconcile previously held beliefs about the Zulu people with the stark reality of the bloodied ground under the shadow of Isandlwana. To attempt to demonstrate this more clearly it is necessary to break the discussion into four separate parts. Firstly, the impact of race as a social construct on those that fought in the Anglo-Zulu War. Secondly, the differences in racial response towards the Zulu people between officers and men. Thirdly, to examine the distinct difference made between the Zulu people and Natal Kaffirs by almost all those on the campaign. Finally, to examine any biological definitions of race detailed in the accounts of those who fought.

Throughout the Anglo-Zulu War specific circumstances conspired to play a part in creating an individual's perception of race. One example in particular illustrates this exceptionally well. On the morning of 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879, Lord Chelmsford divided his forces in half in an attempt to find the Zulu *impi* and bring it to battle. In the camp at Isandlwana he left the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot and one company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. By the time the general returned to the camp in the late evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup> most of these men were dead. Many of the primary sources used in this section were written by individuals who left the camp that day and were faced with the sudden realisation of the disaster when they bivouacked overnight on the corpses of men they had talked to hours before. The horror of that night features strongly in all accounts. Charles L. Norris, a War Correspondent, vividly painted the scene for readers in his 1880 account *In Zululand with the British throughout the War of 1879*,

“But oh! How dreadful were those weary hours that followed! While we all had to watch and wait, through the darkness, with what patience we could muster, for the dawn of day, with the knowledge we were standing and lying amongst and surrounded by the corpses of our late comrades.”<sup>14</sup>

For many more soldiers their experience was devoid of the rhetoric of the journalist and took a more personal level which is far more shocking. John Maxwell was an officer of the Native Natal Contingent whose reminiscences of the Zulu War depict an amiable man who admired the Zulus greatly. However, even his accounts cannot hide the horror of the battlefield of Isandlwana. Having been woken up late in the evening to ensure that the pickets around the general's force were secure he

“tripped and fell down the mountain some ten or twelve paces. Naturally I had my hands in front in the position I can remember of one about to take a dive, and what a dive it was, for I found myself with my hands in the inside of what turned out to be the body of a 24<sup>th</sup> man.”<sup>15</sup>

Maxwell was greatly shocked recovering only when he had the chance to wash the blood from his hands in a river the next morning. Similar incidents were experienced by all those who returned to Isandlwana.

---

<sup>14</sup> Charles L. Norris-Newman *In Zululand with the British Throughout the War of 1879* (London: W.H, Allen, 1880), p.62

<sup>15</sup> John Maxwell, *Reminiscences of the Zulu War by John Maxwell*, Ed. Leonie Twentyman Jones (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Libraries), p.6

Although the bivouac on the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> is only one incident which affected those who were part of it, war by its very nature has a deep impact on those who fight. Many of those who saw the battlefield of Isandlwana would never forgive the Zulus. Their perception of the Zulu 'race' was tainted by their own loss of pride and friends. This simple fact separates the attitude of those in the remnants of the central column from those on the left and right flank. Perhaps more crucially hatred and the desire for revenge is found more profusely in the writings of regular British officers who had campaigned long and hard with the men who fell at Isandlwana.<sup>16</sup> Major Harness of the Royal Artillery is a prime example in finding the death of his friend Stuart Smith particularly hard to bear; "poor Smith [was] killed, I believe most gallantly trying to spike the guns."<sup>17</sup> In the column, many like him fundamentally changed their tone when describing the Zulus. "The awful black devils watched the general out of the camp, and then as soon as his command had got clear away, they came down like bees out of a hive and there was awful slaughter."<sup>18</sup>

The Battle of Isandlwana, along with individual events and personal losses, created a desire for revenge which was not present before the battle. Chares Norris best describes the development;

"Many a vow of vengeance was breathed in the stillness of the night; and many and deep were the sobs that came from the breasts of men who perhaps, had never sobbed before, at discovery even by that dim light, of the bodies of dear friends, brutally massacred."<sup>19</sup>

The usefulness of this approach is limited, especially in depicting an overall impression of the British soldiers' view of the Zulu. However, it does help to explain why some individuals' testimony varies in ferocity from those who did not suffer so graphically. More intriguingly, it is obvious that in many cases the simple memory of the battleground was enough to create a concentrated dialogue of aggressively racist material which was then counteracted a few pages later by an explicit admiration for the Zulus. Barely two months after the Battle of Isandlwana Harness again wrote to his sister, this time to express great admiration for the way in which, at the Battle of Kambula, "The Zulus attacked...in the most plucky way"<sup>20</sup>

The second issue which is extremely obvious in the soldiers' accounts of the war is the way in which the officers and their men differed in approach and response to the Zulu threat. British officers at this time were still of a different social class to the men they led. Very few officers had worked their way through the ranks and most were well-educated. In particular, the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot had an experienced officer corps: the majority of whom had served for some time and knew much about the indigenous peoples against whom they fought. In direct contrast, the average soldier, even when well-educated or at least capable of communicating his opinions clearly, had a

---

<sup>16</sup> For example Harford treats the Zulus with little ill-feeling.

<sup>17</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Harness, R.A to Caroline Margaret Harness 25<sup>th</sup> January 1879, Mr H.F Oppenheimer's library, Little Brenthurst, Parktown, Johannesburg,

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Howard's account, quoted in Ian Knight, *Invasion of Zululand* (Johannesburg: Brenthurst Press, 1979) p.82

<sup>19</sup> Norris-Newman, *In Zululand* p.62

<sup>20</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Harness, R.A to Caroline Margaret Harness 6<sup>th</sup> July 1879, Mr H.F Oppenheimer's library, Little Brenthurst, Parktown, Johannesburg,

comparatively poorer understanding of the Zulu people.<sup>21</sup> Most notably, both officers and men struggled throughout the war with the concept of the mutilation of bodies. The Zulus practiced a process termed *qaqa* in which the lower abdomen was cut open. The reason for this practice was the belief that, if the stomach was left sealed, as the body of the dead man the Zulu had killed would swell in the hot African sun, so would the body of the Zulu who killed him. For the British Victorian, this desecration of corpses was particularly difficult to accept, however, the acceptance of this practice varied greatly between officers and men. The practice of *qaqa* was well known amongst the officers; Hamilton Parr and John Maxwell both referred in detail and with a great deal of accuracy to the process. To the men however, it was both horrific and alien. Sergeant W.E. Warren sent a letter to his father stating, “the Zulus mutilated them and stuck them with assegai all over the body”.<sup>22</sup> For some the Zulus’ mutilation of the British was even worse, Patrick Farrell described the situation as “worst [sic] than ever was done in the Indian Mutiny”.<sup>23</sup> This example represents a divergence of opinion which is increasingly obvious as the war continues. The officers of the British army admired the Zulus’ martial skills as a potential challenge to their own. In the days of Victorian honour and an increasing domestic emphasis on the importance of a healthy mind and body, there was much to admire about the way these ‘savages’ fought. However, for the trooper, fear of mutilation and pain far outweighed the awards that many officers were seeking. So great was this fear that a range of increasingly outlandish stories were developed about the barbarous nature of the Zulu. In particular, there was a recurrent theme voiced by Private William Meredith that at Isandlwana; “Even the little boys that we had in the band, they were hung up on hooks and opened like sheep”.<sup>24</sup> This story is almost certainly untrue.<sup>25</sup> However, its existence illustrates the fear and loathing which the ordinary man held for the Zulu which was not repeated in the ranks of the Officer Corps.<sup>26</sup> Indeed John Maxwell, after his return to the devastated camp at Isandlwana, was quick to

“mention this because on the way I heard some terrible stories about the mutilated bodies. These were invented for the occasion, as it was impossible for those who wove these yarns to have distinguished anything in the night, it being exceptionally dark.”<sup>27</sup>

Although the difference of opinion regarding the Zulu varied significantly between officers and men it is also important to note that there was a marked disparity in the way in which Zulus and the Natal Kaffir were dealt with. During the Anglo-Zulu war the Natal Native Contingent (NNC) was created. This contained mainly Zulus exiled

---

<sup>21</sup> See Frank Emery, *The Red Soldier: Letters from the Zulu War, 1879* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), pp.15-20 for a discussion of the respective education of soldiers and officers.

<sup>22</sup> Sergeant W.E Warren, printed by *The Bristol Observer*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 1879.

<sup>23</sup> Private Farrell, printed by *The South Wales Daily Telegram*, 27<sup>th</sup> March 1879.

<sup>24</sup> Private William Meredith, printed by *The South Wales Daily Telegram*, 24<sup>th</sup> March.

<sup>25</sup> To accept that it is true we have to imagine that the Zulus in the final stage of the battle were prudent enough to take a captive alive (highly unlikely) and then preserve something to hang the boy up on. Since almost all the evidence points to the fact that the Zulus began plundering tents and destroying almost everything in the camp such an accusation would have required more organisation than the very last confused stages of the battle contained.

<sup>26</sup> See Michael Lieven, “The British Soldier and the Ideology of Empire”, in *Anglo-Zulu War Historical Society Journal*, 12 (December 2002) for a detailed discussion of this and the level of education of a typical British soldier.

<sup>27</sup> Maxwell, *Reminiscences of the Zulu War*, p.6

from Zululand and native blacks pressed into service. Their armament was poor (limited mainly to their traditional weapons) and their organisation even worse. The performance of these units was a constant embarrassment to Chelmsford. They regularly created panics and false alarms during the night, they often deserted, and they were even blamed by some for the ultimate defeat at Isandlwana. It is when one compares the description of these units to the description of Zulu units that it is possible to see the first signs that 'race' was sometimes applied to indicate superiority in some groups and inevitable inferiority in others. A clear distinction is consistently made between the efficient and deadly Zulu and the lowly and troublesome Kaffir. Harford goes as far as to describe the Kaffirs in his regiment as, "a real cheery lot...full of buoyant spirits and chaff and excellent fellows to work with... but, as was found out too late in the campaign quite useless as fighters".<sup>28</sup> So great was the number of attempts by the NNC to retreat during the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> January that members of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot were placed behind the lines of the natives and told to bayonet the first one who ran away.<sup>29</sup> Commandant George Hamilton Browne of the NNC was even more scathing of the troops that were placed under his command. He regularly disarmed his men, removing their rifles and claiming that, "the Martini Henri is not a rifle to be played with by a duffer, we were ourselves in the greater danger of our own men than the enemy were".<sup>30</sup> Dramatically opposed to this was Hamilton Browne's great respect for the Zulu fighter. The only men in his command he valued were the 300 exiled Zulus who fought with him and had in common his "contempt of the Natal [African]"<sup>31</sup>. More obviously he spoke of the Zulu as the "finest fighting savages in the world!"<sup>32</sup> Nor was Hamilton Browne alone in his condemnation of the NNC; Major Harcourt M. Bengough was engaged in building a fort for the defence of Natal. When it was completed he took the chief of the local NNC to see it and was asked,

"What is this for?" I said "This is a fort: if the Zulus from over the river attack us here, we go into the fort and shoot them down." The old chief shook his head, looking very knowing and said "No, you don't think that we are going to be caught here, like rats in a trap! Why, how are we going to run away?"<sup>33</sup>

This intense criticism reveals a great deal about the military approach to the Zulu. Zulus were admired because they were athletic and effective militarily. They therefore fitted themselves into the role of the noble savage. The Zulus were seen as a pure people unaffected by the impact of the white man and therefore still confident and harmonious in their natural environment. In contrast, the Natal Kaffirs' military skill had been eroded by contact with whites and yet they were not yet civilised enough adopt the characteristics which made a white man superior. The NNC was consistently associated with cowardice, foolishness, drunkenness and violence the diametric opposites of the attributes accepted by Victorians. Captain W.C.F. Molyneux touched upon this point

---

<sup>28</sup> Henry Harford, *The Zulu War Journal of Colonel Henry Harford C.B.*, Ed. Daphne Child (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1978), p.24

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.34

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton-Browne, *A lost legionary in South Africa by G.A Hamilton-Brown "Maori Browne"* (London: Laurie, 1912), p.103

<sup>31</sup> Hamilton-Browne, *A lost legionary*, p.103

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.126

<sup>33</sup> Harcourt Bengough, *Memories of a Soldier's Life* (London: E.Arnold, 1913), p. 125

when describing the end of the battle of Gingindlovu when the NNC massacred wounded Zulus;

“we were all hard at work when the most appalling yells were suddenly heard...It turned out, however, that one of our native battalions had come across a crowd of wounded Zulus in a patch of bush, and with the chivalry peculiar to the nature of the semi-civilised were killing them in cold blood.”<sup>34</sup>

Clearly what disturbed the British most about the NNC was that their contact with Europeans had stripped away the integrity of these noble savages. Outside their natural environment the continuity and community of these African people was removed. Simultaneously the military experience of the NNC had seemed to suggest the Natal Kaffir was progressing slowly towards becoming a fully civilised body of men. The Natal Kaffirs therefore occupied the uncomfortable position between fully integrated, civilised blacks and the natural, noble Zulu. It was perhaps of little surprise, therefore, that the Zulu and the Kaffir should increasingly be talked about with a separate language and in a separate discourse.

The final element of discussion is the proposition that increasingly the Victorians saw race as a matter of biological definition.<sup>35</sup> The evidence for this is, at best, limited in terms of the military in Zululand. There are a few very specific instances where the Zulus are treated not as less advanced equals but as a subject for zoological study. However, perhaps the most graphic of these is that retold by Harford,

“I came across the body of a very fine specimen of a Zulu in the skeleton stage, which I took the Surgeon Reynolds out to have a look at. He too was impressed with the statue and splendid proportions, and brought away one or two bones of scientific interest, and the soles of the feet which had become detached and were just solid pieces of horn. I also took one of the collar bones and the lesser bones of one of the arms, which I intended some day to give to the Durban museum.”<sup>36</sup>

Clearly the Zulu is portrayed here with the same zoological interest that would be invested in an animal and therefore may mark out a biological definition of ‘race’. However, this particular example is special and unrepresentative of the whole. Harford was obsessed with biology; he once delayed an attack on a Zulu position to secure a particularly rare type of beetle.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps even more impressively, and much to Hamilton Browne’s annoyance, he commandeered the only supply of gin in the column and then proceeded to use it to preserve the insects he had captured.<sup>38</sup> This type of biological classification of the Zulu is extremely rare and this is represented by the language which is most commonly used to describe the Zulu people. The most common phrase used in all accounts is ‘the enemy’. Perhaps the second most common phrase is ‘savage’. Finally ‘race’ is used rarely and fleetingly. Enemy is void of any biological implications; savage and race, however, are not. Savage is a reversion to an old romantic model of classifying the native. The Anglo-Zulu War demonstrated not only the power of the Zulus but also the imprecision of British attempts to define and understand Africans. By 1879 Zulu and

---

<sup>34</sup> W.C.F Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1896), p.139. Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Catherine Hall, *White Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992)

<sup>36</sup> Henry Harford, *Zulu War Journal*, p. 47

<sup>37</sup> Hamilton-Browne, *A lost legionary*, p.108

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p.164

Kaffir had become separated as two different peoples, the linguistic use of savage and race therefore helped to stem what was increasingly a more diverse environment than the British had previously imagined.

This chapter is designed to explore the different responses of British and colonial individuals to the Zulu while they were engaged in the Anglo-Zulu War. It attempts to explain that there was no singular, overriding approach to the Zulu people. Individuals were shaped by their own experiences both before and during the war. Crucially, biological analysis of the Zulu was infrequent. Criticism of the Zulu was limited mainly to their violent, savage ways which is of little surprise considering one of the stated aims of the war was to replace Zululand with a Christian, peaceful nation. Most individuals seem to have admired the 'plucky' Zulu and his capacity for bravery and self-sacrifice.

Despite this, an examination of the military mindset in Zululand is important because it reveals distinct differences from that which applied domestically. The British soldiers simply had more sources of information than those who read about the war at home. Domestic information was filtered through the newspapers which, as we shall see, carefully depicted a controlled picture of the war. For those in Natal, their personal experiences on the battlefield, the constant rumours, and their pre-conceived conceptions all shaped opinions. This led to a multi-faceted view of the Zulu people. Massacres, mutilation and the position of the Natal Kaffir all filtered down into the popular press in a simplified form. For the British soldiers who fought however, the experience of the Anglo-Zulu War often confused their ideas about 'race' and the Zulu people.

To be continued.... In the next Journal No. 24.

