

## The Wrong Rock?

An exploration of the true 'claim to fame' of an enduring feature at Fugitives' Drift.

By Ian Knight

---

On 6 September 1879 the *Illustrated London News* published an engraving, based on a field sketch by its front-line artist, Melton Prior, of a feature in the Mzinyathi river gorge downstream from Rorke's Drift. The scene featured the lower reaches of the crossing originally known as Sothondose's Drift, and was captioned 'Fugitives' Drift, Buffalo River, with the stone to which Lieutenant Melvill clung.'

There is no denying the accuracy of the scene. Prior was an accomplished draftsman and a highly experienced journalistic artist, and his sketches are characterised by a remarkable degree of representational accuracy, to the extent that incidental topographical details can often be easily recognised, even today - and despite the potential to introduce errors when his sketches were engraved for publication. Prior's viewpoint at 'Fugitives' Drift' is on the Natal bank, looking downstream towards the head of the gorge below, and across the river towards the steep bush-covered slopes of Mpethe hill where the last of the survivors had descended into the valley. In the middle ground, isolated in the river, stands a large dark rock - the one to which, according to the caption, 'Lt. Melvill clung.'

The allusion is to the fact that, during the final stages of the battle on 22 January, Lieutenant and Adjutant Teignmouth Melvill of the 1/24<sup>th</sup> had famously attempted to save the Queen's Colour of his battalion. Melvill had successfully covered the distance from the battlefield and descended into the valley, and had put his horse into the water to try to swim across the river. At that stage the river was in spate after the recent rain, and most of the rocks were fully submerged in a roaring torrent of brown water. What happened next is described by a survivor, Lieutenant Walter Higginson of the NNC;

*I put my horse in behind Mr Cochrane's but he made a bad attempt at swimming and getting on a big stone in the middle of the river, he turned over and threw me off and I sank at once, as I had my rifle and ammunition with me, but on dropping them I managed better; the current carried me downstream a good distance but I fortunately came on a large rock which I held on to; getting the water out of my eyes I looked round and saw a nigger boy mounting my horse on this side; I called out for someone to stop him, but no one took any notice of me; I then saw Melville coming downstream towards me, he having been thrown from his horse, he asked me to catch hold of the Color, and the force he was going pulled me off the rock into still water; Coghill who had got out alright then rode his horse down to Melville to help him, but as he rode into the water, the Zulus who were on the bank we had just left opened fire on us, and one of the first shots hit Coghill's horse; we were thus all three in the water, and also I think the three last white men to cross the river. We got out alright...(1)*

There can be little doubt today of the identity of the rock sketched by Prior. It remains a conspicuous feature of the crossing, and when the water level is high it becomes an isolated island in the stream, just as Prior depicted (a photo of the rock in these circumstances, taken by the late David Rattray, appears in the book I wrote with Ian Castle, *The Zulu War; Then and Now, After the Battle*, 1993), although in recent years it has been in increasing danger of submersion rather by the rising level of sand and silt accumulating around it. Immortalised by tour guides as the 'coffin rock', it has become a favourite halt during most tours of the site, whether reached, with a sense of relief, at the end of the long walk down 'the fugitives' trail', or merely observed rather more comfortably from the heights on the Natal bank opposite.

The rock lies just a few meters out from the high-water bank on the Zulu side, and that proximity gives Melvill's story a particularly dramatic aspect. Indeed, shortly after the war an illustration appeared, based on Prior's version, and depicting Melvill clinging to the rock and still holding the Colour with the Zulus rushing up close by, the very epitome of British pluck under desperate circumstances.

The question is, did Prior identify the right rock?

Consider the sequence of events outlined by Higginson. He had plunged into the water, and was 'in the middle of the river' when his horse struck a rock and threw him. He then managed to recover, and had been swept downstream when he came upon the 'big rock'. When he grabbed at the Colour, the impetus put both he and Melvill in 'still water'. This could hardly have been the centre of the river, where the current was fierce, nor the Zulu bank, for Higginson was close enough to the Natal side to see someone emerge onto it riding his horse, and feel it was worth shouting above the din to stop him - something in itself that would hardly have been practical if he were closer to the Zulu bank. Note too that Coghill's horse was shot 'as he rode into the water', a clear implication that he was still close to the Natal bank, and had certainly not swum all the way back across the width of the river.

Another survivor, the civilian interpreter James Brickhill, largely confirms Higginson's version of Melvill's demise;

*Reaching the Buffalo we found it rolling high. No time for choosing the best crossing then. There were Zulus in running lines making for the stiller water higher up. My horse plunged in swimming at once, but had scarcely gone six yards before he stumbled over something large and nearly fell into the rushing stream beyond. I clutched at his mane and guided his rein with care, and yet four times I thought that all was lost, not ten yards below was a waterfall in the seething pool of which three riderless horses were swishing round and round.*

*Mr Melvill had crossed a little higher up, Mr Foley immediately behind him. Mr M's horse seemed to have some difficulty in getting up the bank this side. Our impulse was to go to his assistance, but his horse gave a plunge and I thought was climbing out... (2)*

There are several intriguing clues in Brickhill's account. The reference to the 'waterfall' and 'seething pool' places helps to place the point at which he entered the river, since a large scouring in the rocks below Prior's rock does turn into something of a whirlpool when the river is in flood. It is important to note that Melvill had entered the river upstream, and that when Brickhill saw him, towards the end of his own difficult crossing, he was apparently trying to urge his horse out on the Natal bank, the Colour 'in Mr M's hand up to the last'.

Both Brickhill and Higginson strongly suggest, then, that Melvill had almost made it onto the Natal bank before his horse stumbled and he was thrown. If that is the case, then the rock to which he and Higginson clung must have been in the shallows close to the Natal side, not the Zulu bank. This would then tally with Higginson's suggestion that Coghill's horse was killed just as he entered the water.

There is one final clue with which to help piece the story together. The Colour was lost, of course, torn from Melvill's exhausted grasp as he, Coghill and Higginson dragged themselves through the last half-submerged boulders and up onto the Natal bank. It was found later by a patrol which included Lt. Harford (99<sup>th</sup> Regiment, attached to the NNC). According to Harford, the water level had dropped significantly since the battle, and the patrol had gingerly scrambled down the Natal bank and onto the stones and shingle that form the edge of the river-bed. 'Scarcely had we taken a few steps' [my italics], recalled Harford, 'than I stumbled on the Colour case mixed up with a heap of other things ... Then, as Harber

was returning to his position, I noticed a straight piece of stick projecting out of the water in the middle of the river.' This of course turned out to be the Colour pole, upside down, with most of the Colour still attached but submerged in the water. In other words, the Colour case was in the eddies close to the Natal bank, and the Colour itself in deeper water downstream. Although the Colour could arguably have been washed into the 'middle' (an approximate turn of phrase at the best of times) of the river from either bank, it seems highly unlikely that the case would have been carried across the entire width of the river; it is far more likely that it was washed from the Colour as Melvill lost his grip, and that it sank among the stones as the Colour itself - bigger, heavier, and with considerable drag on the silk - was carried further downstream before the gilt crown on the top jammed between the boulders and it held fast. When a sketch by Harford of the finding of the Colour also appeared in the *Illustrated London News*, it appears to show a group of figures standing on stones exposed at low water close under the prominent cliffs on the Natal bank.

Taken together, then, it seems likely that Melvill had almost reached the Natal bank, and that his horse stumbled and threw him as he tried to climb out. Melvill was carried downstream to his encounter with Higginson and another large boulder which cost him the Colour. How then did Prior come to mistake the 'coffin rock' for the this - as yet unidentified - boulder? Largely, it seems, because the 'coffin rock' is such a feature of the crossing, and made an obvious point of reference on which to hang the story. And one, moreover, which soon attracted the attention of the survivors for, intriguingly, it seems almost certain that it was the 'coffin rock' which had first unhorsed Brickhill. It lies, after all, not far above the 'whirlpool' feature, and close, as Brickhill describes, to the Zulu bank. And when Brickhill accompanied the burial detail which interred Melvill and Coghill's remains,

*... I found that the obstacle in the river over which I had so nearly come to grief was a large solitary rock which then stood over six feet out of water, but whose presence under water when I crossed there was no indication whatever.*

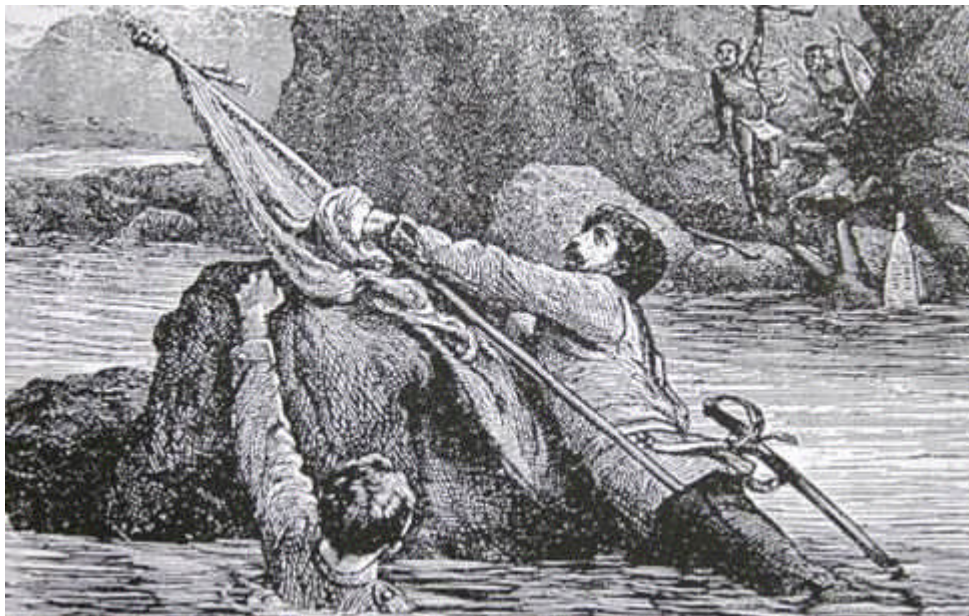
This is a clear description of Prior's rock - and one which suits the engraved picture almost exactly. So if the 'coffin rock' must give up its status as one of the mythic elements in the Melvill and Coghill story, it still stands as an important feature in the broader saga of the crossing, a formidable obstacle to Brickhill, and no doubt other fugitives unknown.

There is, of course, one last point to make, and one which adds immeasurably to the poignancy of the incident. For if Melvill was not unhorsed close to the Zulu bank near the 'coffin rock', then he had almost reached the Natal side still in the saddle and with the Colour in his possession, and the gap which lay between him and safety was not the full width of the flooded Mzinyathi, but little more than a few meters of rocks and gentler water. To have come adrift at such a point was falling at the last hurdle indeed.

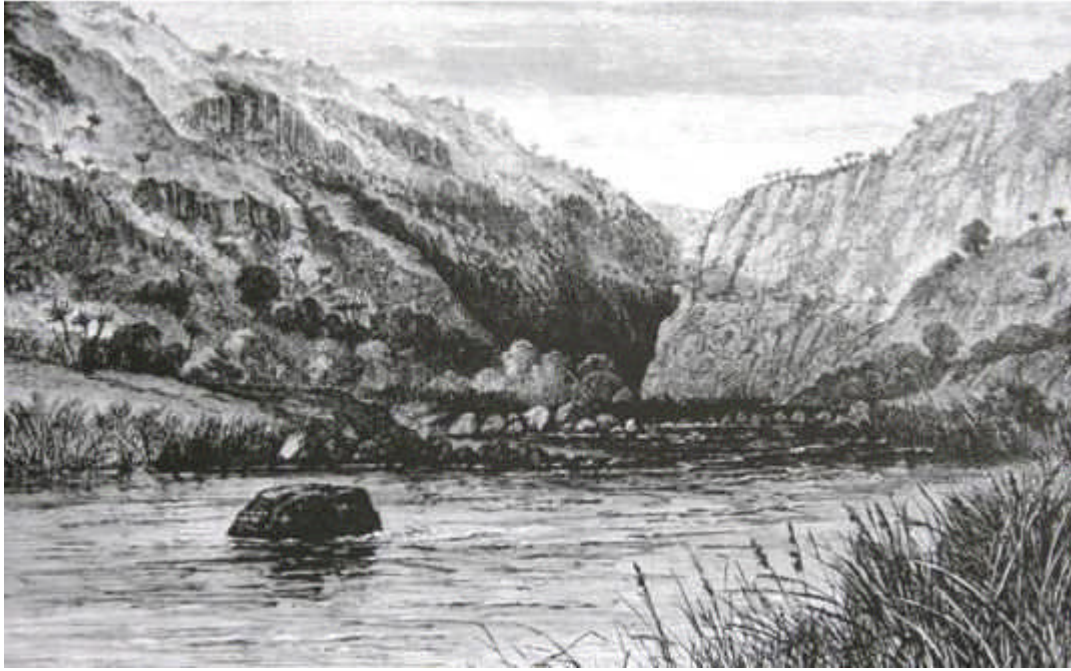
The 'coffin rock' near the Zulu bank, surrounded by fast flowing water.  
From *The Zulu War; Then and Now*.



A dramatic engraving, based largely on the Prior sketch, of Melvill and Higginson clinging to the 'coffin rock'.



Melton Prior's sketch of the rock, sketched from the Natal bank, as published in the *Illustrated London News*.



References.

1. Higginson account, WO 32/7726, Royal Archives Kew.
2. Brickhill account, Talana Museum.