

To what extent is it true to say that the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879 achieved very little apart from humiliation for Britain?

By BA student Emma Still

---

Released one hundred years after the Anglo Zulu war in 1879, Douglas Hickox's film *Zulu Dawn* (1979) portrays one of the greatest and most humiliating defeats suffered by the British Army during the Victorian era. Its predecessor *Zulu* (1964) tells of the battle of Rorke's Drift: a seemingly impossible victory in the same war and through these films a surge of interest for the conquest was re-established. While the films are in many respects historically inaccurate, they encompass the British emotions towards both battles: the pride for Rorke's Drift and utter humiliation over Isandlwana, as well as highlighting the changing attitudes towards colonialism. From the films alone, it would appear that the war achieved very little apart from humiliation for the British, whereas, in reality, its outcomes were far more diverse, devastating and durable.

The legacy of humiliation left by the Anglo-Zulu war came almost entirely from the defeat at Isandlwana, which should have been 'an unimportant battle in an unimportant war in an unimportant corner of the world.'(1) However, it turned into 'arguably the most devastating humiliation in the British Imperial history' (2) as a Zulu impi caught the British camp unaware and unprepared, resulting in the deaths of seventy-seven per cent of British soldiers. The defeat was caused almost entirely by General Chelmsford's under-estimation of the Zulu and their successful tactics; the defeat plunged the army into a series of blame disputes, a deep cover-up and a promise for vengeance. Many historians shift the blame between the mistakes of different leaders. However, in the direct aftermath of the battle, Colonel Durnford posthumously became a scapegoat for the disaster. The battle had been hugely humiliating for Britain, who had suffered terribly at the hands of an enemy not thought capable of defeating the strength of the most modern British force.

The immediate reactions in Natal added to the embarrassment as the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal made 12<sup>th</sup> March 1879 'a day of humiliation and prayer in consequence of the great disaster at Isandlwana'.(3) Similarly, the Bishop of Natal delivered a sermon in Pietermaritzburg publicly questioning the justice of the war. However, while Natal reacted immediately, the British press did not hear of the defeat until 11<sup>th</sup> February 1879. Naturally, the Press views were very different to those of the soldiers, for reports show how the news was disjointed due to the problems of communication, as it took a minimum of twenty days for news to reach Britain. The war confronted editors with 'a matter of complete astonishment,'(4) received through sketchy, condensed facts, often resulting in confused articles.

Initially, the Press favoured Sir Bartle Frere, for little was known of the region and its difficulties. Immediately on hearing of the defeat at Isandlwana, the Press struggled to provide an explanation. However, they 'increasingly explained the defeat with reference to the martial prowess of the Zulu people'(5) finding a new respect for the Zulu while lessening their embarrassment. Once it had been established that Isandlwana had caused no long-term damage to colonial possessions and British victories had reaffirmed British superiority, the Press emphasised Zulu military ability, therefore, decreasing the humiliation of the defeat. By the battle of Ulundi, the Press showed a definite sympathetic approach towards the Zulu, deflecting all criticism from Cetshwayo onto Frere. Thus, it may be seen that the humiliation caused by the battle of Isandlwana was devastating to Chelmsford and his men; while lacking bite in Britain, where the Press found 'the easiest way of reconciling apparent British military might and defeat was to emphasise Zulu military ability.'(6)

Due to the time delay from South Africa to Britain, the news of the defeat reached Disraeli on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1879 – twenty days after the battle. The Cabinet met immediately and sent Chelmsford twice the number of reinforcements requested, now believing it 'necessary not only to fight Ketchwayo but to crush him quickly and effectively'(7) to restore British prestige. Disraeli now faced the bulk of the humiliation, for not only had war been declared without government permission, but it had also begun with a devastating defeat. The

final legacy of humiliation left by Isandlwana came in the burial of the British dead. Fearful of another Zulu attack, the British did not return to bury their war dead for five months, and when they did, it was agreed that the scene would be 'set on fire when all traces of the fight will be erased.'<sup>(8)</sup> In relation to the degree of humiliation caused by the defeat itself, the desertion of the field appears relatively insignificant. However, when combined, it adds to the overall humiliation regarding the mishandling of the battle and its aftermath.

The humiliation attributed to the war was heightened by the other defeats suffered by the British army. Ironically, the battle of iNtombe took place on the 'day of humiliation and prayer' set aside by Bulwer: 12<sup>th</sup> March 1879. The battle had a deep psychological impact on the British troops involved, as seventy-nine British died, opposed to roughly thirty Zulu. The battle came in a string of embarrassing defeats that could have been prevented if proper defensive measures had been employed, and thus, combined with these other defeats added to the humiliation of the war.

Another disastrous defeat came just days later on 25<sup>th</sup> March at the battle of Hlobane. The attack was a debacle with over one hundred British dead, highlighting another defeat caused by insufficient preparation. While the battle provided another cause for humiliation, Lieutenant Colonel Buller received a Victoria Cross in an attempt to lessen the extent of the defeat. Therefore, the first invasion of Zululand, between January and late March, resulted in a series of heavy defeats, leaving the strength of the British army, the government and the Empire utterly humiliated.

However, the humiliation of the government had started before the war with the disobedience of Sir Bartle Frere and Sir Theophilus Shepstone. British foreign policy aimed for a confederation of South African States, and while the annexation of the Transvaal in 1877 took Britain a step closer to this, it also involved them in Transvaal disputes. Following a series of border incidents in 1878, Frere presented Cetshwayo with an impossible ultimatum, knowing it could only lead to war, despite the repeated warnings of the British government to avoid this at all costs. Many revisionist historians, including Saul David, accuse Frere of provoking an unnecessary war. However, Saul David also believes that British politicians must accept some responsibility, for Frere had been continually reminded that the neutralization of Zululand was vital for confederation. However, Frere's disregard for government warnings resulted in the British being thrust into a war, which they had not wanted, and this inability to control appointed officials caused increasing humiliation. This was only worsened by the relative timing of the war, where Disraeli already faced a heated climate in Russia and Afghanistan.

The Anglo-Zulu war continued to interrupt Disraeli's calculations, as it was the first time this part of the world had affected British policies. The war started when the government was least prepared for the risks involved and when Chelmsford called for reinforcements after Isandlwana, Disraeli feared that his foreign policy was in jeopardy. The cost of the war forced him to raid the sinking fund, as he had promised no new taxation in his Budget. This weakened his policies, pressurising Disraeli at a time when he already faced considerable humiliation.

This was emphasised by Gladstone in the build-up to the 1880 election in his Midlothian campaign. Gladstone felt that 'in Africa you have before you the memory of bloodshed, of military disaster, the record of ten thousand Zulus slain for no other offence than their attempt to defend your artillery with their naked bodies, their hearths and homes, their wives and families.'<sup>(9)</sup> The campaign secured a majority of fifty-one, and fifty-five percent of the votes for the Liberals, removing Disraeli's conservative party from power.

As well as aiding the 'fall of Disraeli,' the war also resulted in the deterioration of Disraeli's previously close relationship with Queen Victoria. On immediately hearing of the defeat at Isandlwana, Queen Victoria sent a message to Chelmsford stating that she placed 'entire confidence in him and in her troops to maintain our honour and our good name.'<sup>(10)</sup> Likewise, she sent a similar message to Frere expressing her 'implicit confidence in him.'<sup>(11)</sup> Both messages were sent without Cabinet permission, resulting in severe criticism from Parliament and the Press, as she had effectively pre-empted any attempt to recall either man. This worsened the situation for Disraeli, as the Press and Cabinet members demanded their

removal, forcing his party to defend them, despite their convictions. It was not perhaps the actions of Victoria that resulted in Disraeli's humiliation, but the climate of them. If the defeat had not been so devastating, then public opinion towards Chelmsford and Frere would not be so heightened. Likewise, the timing of her actions resulted in embarrassment, for she had expressed her support so willingly before the true nature of the defeat was known, and thus, she could not have known the causes and miscalculations that had resulted in the heavy loss of life. Therefore, while Queen Victoria had not embarrassed Britain, she had achieved minor humiliations for Disraeli and herself.

The Queen and Disraeli disagreed later regarding the appointment of Sir Garnet Wolseley as High Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief in May. Queen Victoria believed that replacing Frere and Chelmsford would 'lower this country in the eyes of all Europe'.<sup>(12)</sup> Thus, Queen Victoria felt that the appointment alone was humiliating for her empire, whereas many others felt that it would prevent further humiliation. Despite the Queen's message stating that she 'would sanction the proposal submitted if her warnings are disregarded but she could not approve it,'<sup>(13)</sup> the Press and Liberal party were complimentary of his appointment. However, the time delay between England and South Africa again proved significant, for before Wolseley arrived, Chelmsford had won the battle of Ulundi and the war was effectively over, leaving Wolseley to manage its aftermath. As Queen Victoria was a respected and influential monarch, Disraeli's public disagreements with her arguably weakened his already diminishing support, offering another minor contributor to his political defeat in 1880.

A further disagreement between Disraeli and Queen Victoria arose after the death of the Prince Imperial. After a rousing public send-off, Louis Bonaparte – the pretender to the French throne – served as an observer to the war, before he was attacked and killed on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1879. After this, the Queen wanted the Prince to have a state funeral. However, she was vetoed by the government, who feared such a tribute would be inappropriate and politically insensitive with France. Despite this, the funeral was impressive, with forty thousand guests lining the procession route. It is often argued whether Disraeli's absence from the affair was based solely on the grounds of illness. However, the war had resulted in another minor disagreement between the two, and thus, while neither may have been humiliated, the war had weakened Disraeli's friendship with Queen Victoria further.

The circumstances surrounding the death of the Prince Imperial, however, were far more humiliating to Disraeli and Chelmsford. The fateful reconnaissance mission was of the Prince's asking and came after direct commands from Chelmsford to ensure that Prince Louis never 'left the immediate precincts of the camp without a proper escort.'<sup>(14)</sup> When they were attacked by about forty Zulus, the man under whom Prince Louis was detailed to help Carey, fled, leaving the Prince, his Zulu guide and one other to be killed. While it is unlikely that Carey and his men could have saved the Prince, their desertion was strongly criticised, resulting in Carey being tried by Court martial, found guilty and sent back to England. Chelmsford was in shock, for just as his campaign was beginning to improve, this tragedy had occurred. Therefore, the nature of the Prince's death was a further source of humiliation for Britain, as a significant public figure had been killed in an already unsuccessful and unnecessary war. This was increased yet further at the time, as the death of the Prince 'provoked at extraordinary degree of press interest, far more than had done the slaughter at Isandlwana.'<sup>(15)</sup> Thus, while the infamy of the Anglo-Zulu war in modern history lies in the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, at the time, more humiliation arose from the Prince Imperial's death.

In the midst of this list of failings, it is difficult to remember that the war was victorious with four successful battles. Most notably, the battle of Rorke's Drift became a mask for the humiliation of Isandlwana, due to its British success and proximity to the defeat. While the British press heralded the battle as vital to prevent a Zulu invasion of Natal, most Zulu sources agree that King Cetshwayo specifically ordered his commanders not to invade, for he knew this would make a negotiated peace impossible. As Ian Knight believes, while 'it might perhaps be stretching the point to suggest that Chelmsford deliberately promoted Rorke's Drift as a means of obscuring the depth of his defeat... there can be little doubt that it

did serve to divert awkward questions about the failing of his own generalship.’(16) Similarly, eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded to the defenders of Rorke’s Drift with more going to one regiment than any other single military action. Some historians suggest that these awards were deliberately staggered over many months to deflect attention from the drawn-out and costly war. Even without the timeframe, the sheer number of Victoria Crosses awarded suggests that the events at Rorke’s Drift, no matter how unplanned, were used to lessen the blow of the Isandlwana disaster.

Similarly, the public adored stories about the saving of the colours, the last stand at Isandlwana and the defence of Rorke’s Drift. This characterises the Victorian public’s attitude towards the army: both their ambivalence and scorn and how they ‘thrilled to its adventures overseas and romanticised both its victories and defeats.’(17) Rorke’s Drift also partly created the legacy left by the Anglo-Zulu war, for it was through the media attention it attracted that a process began which ‘gradually shifted the focus of popular historical consciousness away from Isandlwana and on to Rorke’s Drift.’(18) This was highlighted in the films of the 1960s, for ‘the tendency has been to present Isandlwana as the backdrop to the more dramatic events at Rorke’s Drift, whereas in fact Rorke’s Drift was ‘merely a tactical side-show of no great strategic consequence.’(19)

Where Rorke’s Drift was a remarkable feat, other less famous battles show similar courage and determination at a time when morale had been greatly weakened. In the direct aftermath of Hlobane came the battle of Khambula, which was an outright success and is often seen as the turning point of the war. For after the battle King Cetshwayo realised that he could no longer win through battle nor would he gain a negotiated peace. Thus, the battle was vital not only for its significance to the war’s outcome, but also for the reaction and timings in Britain, as its success could cover up some of the previous humiliation.

However, Khambula had little effect on the British public, because it was so poorly reported in British newspapers. The details of the defeat at Hlobane were mishandled, so that in extreme cases the battles of Hlobane and Khambula were reported as one or Hlobane was ignored altogether. This confusion came partly from the lack of attention to these events, and partly due to the ambiguous wording of Wood’s initial official report. In Stephan Manning’s article on Press confusion regarding these battles, he raises the question whether it can be ‘argued that Wood’s ambiguity was deliberate to deflect from the scale of the reversal of Hlobane.’(20) Even if it was not deliberate, the ambiguity of the report, aided Wood’s reputation at a time when ‘if the scale of the British defeat at Hlobane had been reported correctly, the army and surely the government, would have been heavily criticised.’(21) Where iNtombe resulted in much criticism and humiliation, this would have been worsened by the scale of the defeat at Hlobane, and thus, the timing and misreporting of the news prevented the outbreak of ‘near panic and a crisis in confidence in the conduct of army operations.’(22)

The battle of Gingindhlovu was another British success, caused by an unprepared Zulu impi attacking an especially strong British position. Coming so soon after the success at Khambula, on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1879, the battle boosted British morale, and it was after these battles that a speedy end to the war seemed more likely.

However, these successes were not without their own minor embarrassments, for after Rorke’s Drift and Khambula, major atrocities took place as unknown numbers of wounded Zulu were killed. This resulted from the culture clash between the British and the Zulu, for while it was traditional for the Zulu to disembowel their victims to release their spirit; the British did not understand this and thus, wanted to avenge this mutilation of their men. However, news of the atrocities was kept from the British press for fear that they would further weaken the British reputation. Despite efforts, one letter depicting the aftermath of Khambula appeared in the North Devon Press, sparking public outrage and protests from the Aborigines Protection Society to the War Office. Thus, despite their victories, these battles still had humiliating undertones, which in many cases remained unpublicised, showing that the Anglo-Zulu war could have been yet more humiliating to Britain.

The greatest success came at the Battle of Ulundi, when the British took King Cetshwayo’s capital, forcing him to flee and ultimately ending the war. The battle was rapid

and caused much celebration as the drawn-out war was finally over. Chelmsford, who now believed that he had redeemed himself, asked for permission to resign and return home. Thus, because the war was now victorious, Chelmsford believed that any humiliation caused by the defeat at Isandlwana had now been overcome, if not forgotten.

However, even some embarrassment for Britain could be drawn from the immediate aftermath of the battle in the burning of over four thousand Zulu homes at Ulundi. Considering the war was publicised as an attack against a brutal king, it is difficult to understand why so many Zulus were killed and the capital destroyed once it had been established that King Cetshwayo was no longer there. Thus, through the victory at Ulundi, the Anglo-Zulu war achieved victory for Britain, despite maintaining its legacy of defeat, courage and humiliation.

The aftermath of the war failed to achieve peace immediately, and for some time, it was a humiliating blemish on the state of the Empire. With Cetshwayo's capture on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1879, the Zulus stopped their resistance and surrendered. However, Wolseley adopted the theory of 'divide and rule,' by breaking Zululand down into thirteen Chiefdoms, which in the theory may have been logical, yet due to its selfish nature and lack of adaptation to the situation ultimately failed and tensions grew between the British's Chiefs and the Royalists. It soon became evident that the war's main aim, confederation, was no longer feasible, and thus, the Colonial Office saw little reason to keep Zululand divided. Due to the escalating violence, the British government allowed King Cetshwayo to return to Zululand and rule a small portion of his country. The arrangement was a disaster and eventually Civil war broke out.

Problems in the area heightened, for without the Zulu threat, the Boers regarded the British as unnecessary invaders, resulting in the Anglo-Boer War of 1880-1881. This also arose from the annexation of the Transvaal in 1877, which left the Boers despising British interference in the region. During this war, the British suffered a series of degrading defeats, most notably at Majuba Hill in 1881, before accepting a humiliating peace where the Transvaal regained much of its independence. Thus, it may be seen, that by removing the threat of the Zulus, the Anglo-Zulu war directly led to Anglo-Boer war, which caused yet further humiliation for Britain.

After King Cetshwayo's death, in February 1884, his son, Dinuzulu, joined the Boers to regain control of Zululand. After October 1886, the new British government recognised the new Boer state and Zululand was annexed to the British Crown. Therefore, eight years after the Anglo-Zulu war, the British government finally assumed responsibility for its victory in 1879. During this time, Zululand had suffered famine, civil war, and lost two-thirds of its land to the Boers: all problems heightened by their defeat to Britain and the consequent mishandling of the region. As the war was unnecessary, the humiliation was intensified by the period that passed before peace could be re-established, and the problems resolved.

One of the most positive achievements of the Anglo-Zulu war was the creation of a legacy of courage and heroics, which left the public with a greater respect for the Zulu. The effect of the war on the Victorian public is clearly illustrated in the novels of Henry Rider Haggard, which provide an exceptional reflection of patriotism and popular prejudices to promote an emotional commitment to the concept of the Empire. Surprisingly, Rider Haggard's novels show a particular respect for the Zulus, which was probably heightened by their temporary triumph at Isandlwana. Therefore, the portrayal of the Zulu in Britain during the Anglo-Zulu war led to a lasting respect for their people, as was displayed during King Cetshwayo's visit to Queen Victoria in August 1882.

While this respect for the Zulu lasts today, many people believe that without British interference, Zululand would have remained independent. Recently there have been attempts to win back Zulu sovereignty, resulting in further bloodshed, as well as a revival in the Zulu sense of national consciousness, pride and unity. The role of the Zulu monarchy in the province of Natal is recognised and protected by the South African Constitution, for as Saul David believes 'the Zulus were conquered in 1879, but not, it seems, defeated.'(22) Hence, this shows how little the Anglo-Zulu war achieved. While it resulted in bloodshed and the breaking up of a nation, it did not achieve its initial aim of confederation, nor did it result in a

lasting peace. In many respects it was an unnecessary war that spurred a further war in 1880-81 and an underlying feeling of resentment today.

Consequently, while the Anglo-Zulu war was ultimately victorious for Britain, it also achieved considerable humiliation through the series of defeats they suffered. Likewise, the nature surrounding the outbreak of the war resulted in further humiliation, as did the mishandling of the war's aftermath and the eight years that passed before Britain finally resolved the issue. The Anglo-Zulu war could be seen as a series of embarrassments from its initial defeat at Isandlwana, to the death of the Prince Imperial. However, this view ignores the many successes of the war, as well as the undoubted fact that the British were victorious. Ultimately, the Anglo-Zulu war achieved considerable humiliation for Britain. However, it would be untrue and unfair to say that this is all it achieved, for it led to the annexation of Zululand to Britain, the Anglo-Boer war, a new British Prime Minister, and achieved considerable respect for the Zulu nation. More importantly, the Anglo-Zulu war left a legacy, often distorted from the truth, but containing stories of heroics and great courage. As emphasised in John Tenniel's cartoon in *Punch*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1879, the Anglo-Zulu war also taught Britain a lesson of respect for other cultures and to truly 'despise not your enemy.' (24)

## References

1. Laband & Matthews, *Isandlwana*, (1992) page 1.
2. Best & Greaves, *The Curling Letters of the Zulu War 'There was an awful slaughter,'* (2001) jacket cover.
3. Laband & Matthews, *Isandlwana*, (1992) page 64.
4. D. Dodman, *Depicting the Zulu: The British Popular Press's Presentation of the Zulu People*, Chapter 2, *The Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*, Journal 24 (December 2008).
5. D. Dodman, *Depicting the Zulu: The British Popular Press's Presentation of the Zulu People*, Chapter 2, *The Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*, Journal 24 (December 2008).
6. D. Dodman, *Depicting the Zulu: The British Popular Press's Presentation of the Zulu People*, Chapter 2, *The Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*, Journal 24 (December 2008).
7. Saul David, *Zulu The Heroism and tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, (2005) page 217.
8. Best & Greaves, *The Curling Letters of the Zulu War 'There was an awful slaughter,'* (2001) page 129.
9. Taken from Gladstone's speech at St Andrew's Hall, Glasgow, on 5th December 1879.
10. Saul David, *Zulu The Heroism and tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, (2005) page 219.
11. Saul David, *Zulu The Heroism and tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, (2005) page 220.
12. Saul David, *Zulu The Heroism and tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, (2005) page 298.
13. Saul David, *Zulu The Heroism and tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, (2005) page 299.
14. Saul David, *Zulu The Heroism and tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, (2005) page 318.
15. Laband & Knight, *The Anglo-Zulu War* (1996) page 126.
16. Knight, *Nothing remains but to Fight* (1996) page 126.
17. Knight, *Nothing remains but to Fight* (1996) page 127.
18. Knight, *Nothing remains but to Fight* (1996)
19. Knight, *Nothing remains but to Fight* (1996)
20. S. Manning, *Press Confusion Over the battles of Hlobane and Khambula in the London and Devon Newspapers*, *The Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*, Journal 24 (December 2008).
21. S. Manning, *Press Confusion Over the battles of Hlobane and Khambula in the London and Devon Newspapers*, *The Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*, Journal 24 (December 2008).
22. S. Manning, *Press Confusion Over the battles of Hlobane and Khambula in the London and Devon Newspapers*, *The Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*, Journal 24 (December 2008).
23. Saul David, *Zulu The Heroism and tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, (2005) page 377.
24. See figure one.