

‘Wood Tells Me’;  
The Quiet Assassination of John Chard’s Character

By Ian Knight

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On 17 June 1879 the Flying Column, under the command of Sir Evelyn Wood, was returning towards Lord Chelmsford’s camp on the Nondweni River. Since the new invasion of Zululand had begun at the beginning of the month, the Flying Column - Wood’s old Left Flank Column - had been advancing from the Ncome river line towards oNdini in tandem with the newly-created 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. On the 7<sup>th</sup> a halt was made and supply depot had been established near the Nondweni River. Both columns had off-loaded their remaining supplies, and the transport wagons from both columns were sent back to Natal to load up from the stockpile at the base depot at Landman’s Drift. Men from the Flying Column had accompanied them as an escort, and the expedition had been commanded by Wood himself. The empty wagons had reached Landman’s Drift without incident on the 9<sup>th</sup>, and after several days spent loading up began the march back again on the 13<sup>th</sup>. The area through which they marched had been pronounced clear of Zulus, and indeed had been swept by the cavalry of both columns during their initial advance. Nonetheless, following the death of the Prince Imperial in a skirmish on 1 June, there remained a lingering fear that the Zulu might launch a sudden raid or ambush. This was particularly true of the last stretch of the march, towards the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division’s forward camp at Nondweni, since beyond that lay country that the British had not yet penetrated nor pacified, and there was a perceived risk that the Zulus might by-pass Chelmsford’s men and strike at the supply convoys as they came up in the rear.

The result, according to Wood, was a tense incident which occurred as the wagons funnelled together to hurry across the narrow crossing-points on the Nondweni, one which not only shows the nervousness which prevailed generally among British troops in the aftermath of iSandlwana but also sheds an unexpected light into one of the more curious and inexplicable aspects of the war - an apparent and enduring attempt to undermine the reputation of Major John Chard VC;

... when we crossed the Nondweni on the 16<sup>th</sup> there were only three practical places, and each required repairing parties of a hundred men with pick and shovel. The drivers all knew which was the danger flank, and I foresaw that they would try to cut in as the front of the Column became reduced from fifteen to three wagons, and therefore placed officers on the top of the steep bank of the river to ensure that the wagons had halted, and descended in regular rotation; for once a collision occurred on a slope, the oxen telescoped, and it took us a quarter of an hour to disentangle them.

I was in the river superintending a party digging out the egress on the south side, when, looking round, I saw five wagon drivers racing for the descent on the north side, while the officer on duty was sitting with his back to them smoking, apparently quite unconcerned. The water being up to the horses’ girths, and the bottom strewn with rocks, rendered rapid movement impossible, which added to the irritation I felt. I was overworked, had had no sleep while on the line of march, and, forgetting manners and propriety, I lifted up my voice and cursed him, saying ‘You d-d infernal - idiot of an officer.’ The words were no sooner out of my mouth than I regretted the vulgarity and want of dignity shown in losing my temper. It flashed across my mind that the lazy officer belonged to another Corps. Regimental feeling would allow me (a 90<sup>th</sup> man) great latitude in addressing one of my own comrades, but the fact of my nominally commanding the 90<sup>th</sup> would add to the vexation of the

officer of another Regiment on hearing such language applied to him. My contrition was increased by the echo; in the deep valley, seven times those vulgar swear words were repeated, gradually becoming fainter in the distance. Suddenly I heard the cheery voice of the lazy one's Commanding officer, 'Ay, ay, sir, I'll talk to him,' and then followed a string of expletives in comparison to which my language might be considered fit for a drawing room...(1)

At first glance, this is no more than a light-hearted anecdote told by Wood largely against himself. The absurdity of the situation - of officers pondering the correct etiquette for bawling each other out on the muddy banks of a river in Zululand - provides a suitably deflating moment against the background of the prevailing tension, while the anonymity of the errant officer safeguards his reputation for posterity.

Yet Wood, it seems, was playing a rather curious double game. At first glance, there is nothing in the passage to identify the subject of his outburst, but for those reading his memoirs during his life-time - particularly those who shared his military background - there are several clues to facilitate an intelligent guess. The officer supervising the cutting is at first identified as belonging not - as is implied later - to another Regiment, but to specifically to 'another Corps'. He is described as 'lazy' and 'was sitting with his back to them, smoking'. An officer in a Corps? Lazy? A smoker? Do these sound familiar criticisms? It is interesting to compare Wood's description with a description of the famous John Chard - who had recently won the Victoria Cross as senior officer at Rorke's Drift - by Captain Walter Jones, who was Chard's senior as commander of No. 5 (Field) Company RE (and may, indeed, have been the other officer referred to by Wood). 'He is a most amiable fellow and a loss to the mess', wrote Jones on the occasion of Chard's return to England,

...but as a company officer he is hopelessly slow and slack. I shall get on much better without him and with Porter as my senior subaltern. Chard makes me angry, with such as start as he got, he stuck to the company doing nothing. In his place I should have gone up and asked Lord Chelmsford for an appointment, he must have got it and if not he could have gone home soon after Rorke's Drift, at the height of his popularity, and done splendidly at home. I advised him, but he placidly smokes his pipe and does nothing ...(2)

In case the association is not already clear, Wood added a footnote to the passage in his memoirs. The object of his ire, it seems, had, at the time Wood was writing his autobiography, been 'Lately Commanding a district in the United Kingdom'. After the Anglo-Zulu War Chard's career had been largely undistinguished, and he had served in a number of peacetime postings in the UK, in Cyprus and Singapore, before returning home in January 1896 to take up the position of Commanding Royal Engineer in the Perth District, Scotland. He was not to enjoy it for long - he was stricken by cancer of the tongue in the autumn of that year, and died on 1 November 1897.

Not the least remarkable aspect of Wood's attack on Chard is that, by the time his autobiography was published in 1906, he had been making it for nearly thirty years. And in private, away from the need to observe public proprieties, he had seldom been so oblique or subtle, persistently niggling away, diminishing Chard's standing among powerful and influential Establishment figures whenever the opportunity had presented itself. For Wood, it seems, the denigration of Chard had become something of a life-long mission, and one that had apparently not ended with Chard's death.

Quite why remains obscure. It is not clear whether the incident on the Nondweni was the start of Wood's irritation with Chard, or whether he had already developed

resentment towards him before serving with him in the field. Certainly, Chard's amiable but lethargic temperament seems to have frustrated some of his colleagues, not least apparently Jones, and Wood himself was nothing if not famously energetic. Yet there were perhaps other reasons why Wood had felt that Chard's rise to fame and glory was unworthy. For many officers their understanding of the conditions worthy of the award of the Victoria Cross were shaped by a romantic sense of knightly gallantry; coming from a social background which regarded highly equestrian skills, many considered that the noblest form of courage in battle required an individual to place himself coolly and calmly in a danger he might otherwise have avoided, and to perform some noble and selfless deed - and if he could do so on horseback, like the knight-errant of old, so much the better. Perhaps the scenario which most typified this outlook was for a mounted man to eschew the chance of escape his horse afforded him and to ride knowingly into danger to rescue a fallen comrade. Such incidents occurred regularly with each new engagement in Zululand as the campaign wore on, and many of them were indeed recognised by the award of the Victoria Cross - Lt. Edward Browne at Khambula, Redvers Buller and William Knox Leet at Hlobane, Lord Beresford, Commandant D'Arcy and Sgt. O'Toole in the action on 3 July before Ulundi. Others were considered but discounted. In fact, by the end of the war it was becoming so obvious that this was a deed sure to attract official interest that it is hard to avoid the impression that many officers were chaffing at the bit to place themselves in an appropriate situation where they might attempt it. By contrast, the desperate defence of Rorke's Drift seemed altogether less altogether lacking an appropriate air of deliberate gallantry, a view witheringly articulated by Chelmsford's successor, Sir Garnet Wolseley -

...it is monstrous making heroes ... of those who shut up in the buildings at Rorke's Drift could not bolt and fought like rats for their lives which they could not otherwise save.(3)

It is also clear that Wood - as a column commander - was in a position to recognise the achievements of his small clique of favourites, and to deny distinction to outsiders if he chose. Wood ensured that Buller, Beresford, D'Arcy and O'Toole all received the VC, but Knox Leet only managed to do so by going over Wood's head and exploiting his influence at a higher level. In the skirmish on 3 July Lt. F. M. Hutchinson of the 4th Regiment performed a similar deed of gallantry to Beresford, D'Arcy and O'Toole but Wood refused to recommend him for the VC. Wood was, moreover, a political as well as military animal, and throughout the war he adroitly positioned himself to draw the maximum benefit from his successes and to obscure his disasters, to associate himself with Lord Chelmsford's victories but distance himself from Chelmsford's failings, and to use his staff to isolate and marginalise outsiders.

There are any number of reasons why Wood might therefore have taken a dislike to Chard - Chard was an outsider, possessed of a very different temperament to Wood's own, and who was enjoying an unprecedented degree of public acclamation for a deed which was considerably at variance with the ideals of heroism Wood himself perhaps adhered to.

If Wood's motives remain murky, however, it is rather easier to chart the extent to which he attempted to influence the Establishment's perception of Chard, and much of the negative imagery which continues to influence our understanding of Chard today can be traced directly to Wood's influence. Wolseley's comments on Chard have been widely reproduced, but less well-known is the extent to which these had been shaped by Wood. Wolseley, of course, arrived only towards the very end of the campaign, and his attitudes were soured by a real sense of frustration that he had been cheated of the chance to take

personal command of the final humiliation of the Zulu kingdom. But while Wolseley was scathing in his private Journal about officers whom he associated with Lord Chelmsford's command failures, his attitude towards officers with whom he had served in his own successful African campaign was rather different. Both Wood and Buller had been a part of the influential circle, the 'Ashanti Ring', who had served with Wolseley in 1873/74, and it was upon them that Wolseley, on his arrival in Zululand, relied for private insights into the events and personalities of the early part of the campaign. 'I put up with dear old Wood', he commented in an entry in his private journal for 15 July 1879, 'both he and Buller say Chelmsford is not fit to be a Corporal.' That same day, after inspecting Wood's Flying Column, Wolseley presented the VC to John Chard, quite probably with Wood's views fresh in his mind -

I presented Major Chard RE with his Victoria X: a more uninteresting or more stupid-looking fellow I never saw. *Wood tells me* he is a most useless officer, fit for nothing ... (4)

It is quite likely, too, that Wood's opinion had coloured the judgement of Major Francis Clery, who had gone to Natal as a special service officer, and had originally hoped to serve with Wood, whose manner and attitude he admired. Clery, to his disappointment, had been attached to the Centre Column instead, but when Chelmsford reorganised his forces after iSandlwana, he had got the posting he desired, and served throughout the rest of the war as Deputy Adjutant General to Wood's Flying Column. It is perhaps hardly surprising then that Clery, writing from the Flying Column camp at Wolf's Hill on 16 May, said of Chard 'there is very little to say about [him] except that he too is 'a very good fellow' - but very uninteresting' (5).

The conclusion of the campaign gave Wood further opportunities to make his opinion of Chard known in the most powerful of circles. In September 1879 both Wood and Buller were invited to meet Queen Victoria at Balmoral. They took the opportunity to discreetly distance themselves from Lord Chelmsford - pressed on the point, Wood reluctantly declared Chelmsford 'the kindest and most loveable of men, but he is not hard enough for a soldier' (6) - while Wood found time to repeat a familiar anecdote. 'They spoke to me about Rorke's Drift', wrote the Queen's Private Secretary,

The defence was brilliant and stubborn. But the puzzle to them was - who was the man who organised it - for it showed genius and quickness neither of which was apparently the qualification of Chard. A dull heavy man who seemed scarcely even able to do his regular work. One day Wood sent him to clear some ground and when he arrived later found nothing done and Chard asleep. Another day he was sent to find a ford and make it passable. Fearing his man and that a halt might be inconvenient to the Army, Wood rode forward. Found Chard quite helpless - he didn't seem to take in clearly what a ford was ... (7)

It is quite impossible to know, of course, how many times Wood told this and similar stories or to whom - and indeed whether it had any effect on Chard's subsequent career. Yet there is an irony in this, for the very character traits Wood so despised - Chard's apparent lack of energy and dash - were the very ones which Queen Victoria, when she met Chard herself, came to admire. The Queen, it seems, was much taken with Chard's modesty - and having heard his quiet account of the battle she would retain a contact with him throughout his life. Yet in the end Evelyn Wood has almost succeeded, for it is his negative assessment of John Chard's character which has come down to history, and which so many modern historians have accepted almost without question.

Is it possible then to find an unbiased view of Chard's personality and professional capabilities? Perhaps not, although certainly Captain Jones' views should not be entirely discounted. But if Chard's relaxed and reserved manner are a constant thread running through the judgement of his contemporaries, so too is his affability, and perhaps the last word should go to Captain H. Watson, an officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Dragoon Guards who dined with Chard in May 1879 and, with no apparent axe to grind, remarked

I never met a nicer humbler fellow than Chard, he never boasted, or mentioned the Zulus, or Zululand, except when asked ... He is nice looking, very quiet and unpretending ... I asked Chard a great deal about Rorke's Drift, and he told me without any fuss, or making out he had done anything.

#### References.

- (1) Evelyn Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*, London, 1906.
- (2) Captain Walter Parke Jones, reproduced in Frank Emery, *The Red Soldier*, London 1977.
- (3) Wolseley, entry for 19 March 1880 in Prof. Adrian Preston (ed.) *Sir Garnet Wolseley's South African Journal 1880*, Cape Town 1973.
- (4) Entry for 15 July, *ibid.* My italics.
- (5) Reproduced in Sonia Clarke, *Zululand At War*, Johannesburg 1984.
- (6) Memo of private conversation between the Queen and Sir Evelyn Wood, 10 September 1879, Royal Archives.
- (7) Major-General Sir Henry Ponsonby, letter to his wife dated 11 September 1879, Royal Archives.
- (8) Letter dated 26 May 1879 in the Campbell Collections, university of Natal, quoted in Saul David, *Zulu*, London , 2004.