

Who were the real imperialists' the British army or the Zulu?

"In annexing the Transvaal the question of the confederation never crossed my mind."

It was during a debate on the 25th of March 1879 that Lord Carnarvon's claim that he hadn't considered confederation in annexing the Transvaal was met with derision. Not only was Lord Carnarvon the architect of the Canadian Confederation and despite his speech to the contrary pushed the Permissive Confederation Act, which sought to unify many South African states into a confederation, through parliament in 1877. To many within the upper chamber the annexation of the Transvaal represented a demonstrable act of British imperialism. Saul David, author of *Zulu: the Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879* makes this explicit, claiming; 'Sir Bartle Frere knew that both the Transvaal and the Cape were unlikely to agree to confederation until the threat from the Zulu Kingdom had been removed. He was determined to fight the Zulu for the good of the Empire, but was determined to make it look as though it was being fought for local or defensive reasons.'¹ Journalist A.N Wilson even goes so far as to brand the 19th century British as 'jingoistic imperialists'².

There is, not however, agreement amongst academics about the meaning of Imperialism. Economist J.A Hobbs defined Imperialism, in *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), as;

'[A] social parasitic process by which a moneyed interest within the state, usurping the reins of government, makes for imperial expansion in order to fasten economic suckers into foreign bodies so as to drain them of their wealth in order to support domestic luxury'³

Yet sociologist Joseph A. Schumpeter pithily defines imperialism as, 'the object-less disposition of a state to expansion by force without assigned limits.' According to both definitions one of the basic tenants of imperialism is a disregard for the sovereignty, ancient traditions and customs of a nation whilst attempting to promote an alternative set of political and moral principles in this hypothetical state. Britain performed the aforementioned traits with almost maniacal zeal. British expansion was justified by claiming it brought 'good government' to uncivilized, barbaric, people. This the British did. It would be both erroneous and spurious to claim the Indian natives did not benefit from the proscription of suttee in 1829⁴♦. Notwithstanding the benefit's accrued to the indigenous Indians the abolition of the rites of suttee is unquestionably an imperialist act for the British had displayed impunity towards the ancient customs of the Hindus' whilst ensuring subservience to their own set of moral principles.

¹ Zulu: the Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879 (2004 – Penguin) – Saul David - p.50

² The Victorians (2003 – Arrow Books) – A.N Wilson – p. 401

³ Imperialism: A Study (1902 – Cosimo Classics) - John A Hobson – p.367

⁴ Victoria's Wars – p.79

♦ *Suttee is the self-immolation of Hindu widows on their husbands' funeral pyres.*

Moreover, the desire to defend and, indeed, extend its empire was the primary goal of British foreign policy. Disraeli had, for instance, sought to defend the 'Empire of England' at the Berlin congress in 1878, defending Turkey not because he respected the sovereignty of Turkey but because it provided a necessary bulwark against Russian expansion, who threatened British imperial interests in India. It was men like Disraeli and Stafford Canning, a British emissary, who embodied the role of 19th century Britain in global governance. Through Stafford Canning, and numerous other ambassadors, Britain was able to assert its political power globally and influence the decisions of the rulers of sovereign nations. In the 1830's Britain was able to ensure the Protestant Church was recognized in Jerusalem, the death penalty for apostasy was banned in Porte, the removal of the Pasha of Salonika and the enshrinement of basic inalienable rights for Armenian Christians⁵. Britain was thus exerting its own political influence in order to influence global affairs to better itself or further its own principles. Britain had, therefore, demonstrated what Schumpeter brands as 'the object-less disposition of a state to expansion by force without assigned limits' it had projected its own version of morality onto another nation, showing both disregard and impunity towards the sovereignty of Turkey. Lord Carnarvon himself attested to the desire to impose a new legal moral system claiming it was the 'duty' of the British to 'give wise laws, good government and well-ordered finance.'⁶ The British invasion of Afghanistan in 1878 simply because the Amir of Afghanistan received a Russian, but refused a British, mission⁷. Britain was thus clearly imperialist. The fact that it used international diplomacy merely as an opportunity to further its own agenda seems to vindicate the supposition that the Britain of 1879 was demonstrably imperialist.

Notwithstanding the use of British ambassadors abroad the British Empire was partially propagated through diplomacy but also through military conquest. The British Empire grew by such an extent in the 19th century that the century was dubbed, initially, by R. Hyman as the 'imperial century'⁸ in reference to its immense growth. Superficially, the British invasion of Zululand in January of 1879 is indicative of the same British imperialism that governed their response to the Eastern Question. To invade a nation and depose its head of state would appear a palpable act of imperialism, for it shows impunity toward the notion of national sovereignty installing an alternate political, military and economic system upon a group of peoples without consent. Britain had certainly expanded without 'consigned limits.' To many inhabitants, of the 'uncivilized world' the British flag would have stood out, lambent, like the swastika did to the *untermensch*. To argue to the contrary, is to overlook numerous salient points.

In many ways the Anglo-Zulu war was engendered in much the same vein. It was the same voracious imperialism that led Lord Carnarvon to annex the Transvaal in 1876. In this instance it was the desire to establish a confederation of the South African states, akin to the successful confederation in Canada, formed in 1867. The impunity which the British showed the independent states of South Africa, like the Transvaal under Thomas Burgher and Zululand under Cetshwayo, whilst trying to

⁵ The Crimean War (2004 – Robinson London) - Alexis Troubetzkoy – p.70

⁶ Carnarvon's address on Imperial administration to the Philosophical Institution, Edinburgh, 5th November 1878

⁷ 'Pax Britannica'? British Foreign Policy 1789-1914 (1989 - Longman 1st edition) – Muriel E Chamberlin - p.136

⁸ Britain's Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion (2002 – Palgrave MacMillan) - R. Hyman – p.1

achieve its own political aims – confederation – is indeed the act of an imperialistic nation.

Yet there is, as stated before, significant evidence to the contrary, with regards to Britain in South Africa. Under the administration of William Ewart Gladstone the British troop presence in South Africa had been vastly diminished. A reduction in the size of an occupying force is hardly commensurate with a nation striving for more empire. It would be totally purblind for any nation, especially a putative imperialist nation, who harbored expansionist desires to decrease the size of their fighting force. It would be equally moronic for any nation who anticipated an armed conflict to disband great swathes of their army in the contested region. And yet this is what the British did in the Cape region. In 1867, prior to Gladstone's reduction in the size of the British troop in the Cape region, the British had five battalions stationed in South Africa. By 1872, however, this number had been reduced to a mere two and a half⁹. Withal, the Cape Mounted Rifles were also disbanded by the prudent Gladstone, due to the financial cost of their existence, in 1870¹⁰. It is unlikely that British had been planning an invasion of Zululand; if they had it would have been totally insensate to vastly deplete their own troops. Furthermore, even the commander of the British forces in the Natal, General Theisger, the 2nd Baron of Chelmsford, believed war was not inexorable and could be avoided through diplomacy;

"It is possible that the anticipated disturbance may yet be brought to a peaceful end".¹¹

The British had clearly departed from the imperialistic mindset which had resulted in palpable acts of ruthless imperialism in the name of the crown. The reduction in troop numbers and the diplomatic and peaceful views of the Theisger could not serve as a greater contrast to the Britain which was responsible for the slaughter of mutinous Sepoys, after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the Armitisar massacre of 1919. Whilst Britain were expeditiously reducing troop numbers in the Cape region they were exponentially increasing the size of their fighting force in the Indian and Afghan region, primarily out of fear of Russian expansion. Expansion in the Cape was not, in 1879, the aim of the British, the focal point of their militarism being Afghanistan. Lord Beaconsfield, the first Lord of the treasury in 1878 acquiesced to Frere and Chelmsford's appeals for greater troops but with the strict injunction that they only be used for defensive purposes¹². In fact Disraeli seemed to have entirely devolved the issue to Chelmsford and Frere having stated 'in all these affairs I must trust to you, and you are a person in whom I have much trust. Do what you think is wisest.'¹³ The British were thus not acting in the imperialist vein they are often accredited with. In terms of economic benefits, an invasion of Zululand would have yielded little. The total Cape imports were valued, in 1880, at £7.5 million – total Lilliputian compared to the British balance of trade, where exports alone were valued

⁹ History of South Africa Vol. III (1964 – Cape Town) – G.M Theal -p.148

¹⁰ *Ibid* p. 149

¹¹ Zulu: the Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879 (2005 – Penguin Books)

–Saul David

¹² 'Pax Britannica'? British Foreign Policy 1789-1914 (1989 – Longman 1st edition) – Muriel E. Chamberlin – p.136

¹³ Disraeli and the Rise of a New Imperialism (1996 – University of Wales Press) – C.C Eldridge - p.44

at £286 million¹⁴. There was, therefore, no tangible economic reasoning behind the British invasion of Zululand in 1879. Economic grievance being the main impetus behind imperialism according to J. A Hobbs. By definition, therefore, the British could not have been in any way imperialist in their actions in South Africa. Moreover, there was little strategic advantage in possessing the area known as Zululand. Historically the reason behind the British interest in the Cape region was because it was the most reliable route to India. Yet in 1869 the Suez Canal was opened and thus relieved the Cape of its strategic importance. There was no strategic advantage to controlling Zululand from 1869 onwards, and it was for this reason that Gladstone, and others, diverted their attention away from the Cape and toward Afghanistan and the Russian frontier. The invasion of the Zululand in 1879 wasn't, therefore, as a result of a preconceived plan on the part of the British government and the foreign office but rather an inevitable conflict born out of tension arising from the proximity of a warlike kingdom (the Zulu) to a peace loving, civilized state.

Whilst British foreign policy, as stated before, is tainted by clear acts of imperialism, the annexation of the Natal in 1843 under Henry Croete being yet another example, the Zulu history was equally pockmarked by similar acts of aggression and militarism. The entire Zulu nation was born out of violence and expansionism. Upon Senzangakona ascension to the Zulu throne in 1762 the Zulu clan numbered only 1,500¹⁵. Yet this small, insignificant tribe grew not through diplomacy, but due to expansionism and conquest. The Zulu king iShaka[♦], who succeeded Senzangakona, was responsible for the majority of the Zulu growth. It was Shaka's aim to expand the Zulu nation and so, one morning the eLangeni tribe awoke to find the Zulu impi surrounding their kraal. While the eLangeni allowed themselves, without any protest, to be subsumed into Zululand, although the fact that the eLangeni were totally surrounded may have precipitated their capitulation. Shaka turned his attention to the neighboring Buthelezi tribe, led by the pugnacious Pungashe, who refused to be subjugated and faced Shaka in battle, which Shaka emerged from as the victor¹⁶. So successful was Shaka's brand of ruthless militarism and Zulu nationalism that the Zulu empire, in 1817, was near its zenith in terms of landmass, having quadrupled in size and having an army which now numbered some 2,000 warriors¹⁷. Unlike the British invasion of the Zululand the Zulu expansionism was carefully controlled from the centre. Unlike Disraeli, Shaka did not devolve power to his commanders; the Zulu imperialism was a preconceived plan to unite the various clans in the cape region into one large amorphous tribe accruing unto itself huge economic rewards. Yet, like the British there was no popular consent behind the Zulu expansion. Compared to Britain, with the exception of the centralized control of the Zulu, there is little difference between the two nations. Britain had used ruthless force in India to suppress the Sepoys, Shaka had used extreme violence to suppress members of different clans, notably non-conforming members of the eLangeni who were impaled on sharpened stakes and left to die. The British, in the name of the crow, imposed new

¹⁴ The Causes of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 (2009 – Natal Society Foundation Natalia) – Damian O'Connor – p.28

¹⁵ The Washing of Spears: the Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation (1994 – Pimlico) – Donald R. Morris – p.48

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.53

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.54

[♦] Interestingly iShaka translates as 'intestinal beetle', a common Zulu illness/complaint. The minor irritant from which Shaka's name is derived mirrors the minor irritant that the Zulu were to become to the British.

political structures upon conquered nations in order to prevent any insubordination. The Zulu did exactly the same, with conquered tribes yielding their cattle and their males to Shaka and adhering to the new political system which emphasized the importance of the army, ensuring loyalty to the new political system by forcing every male to serve in the army. There was no diplomacy behind Shaka's expansionism. The Methethwa and the Qwabe kingdom were both defeated by military force and their menfolk incorporated into Shaka's army¹⁸. It is indubitable that Shaka's expansionism was a demonstrable example of imperialism. Zululand had expanded, in the words of Schumpeter, 'without limits'. Moreover, the incorporation of cattle into Zululand highlights the economic aspect of Shaka's expansionism, which renders the Zulu imperialist by Hobbs' economic definition of imperialism. Shaka showed total impunity to the idea of sovereignty. Enforcing his own military based reforms on many of the black tribes in the Cape region. This is a total contrast to the British expansion in Africa, which was met with little opposition and, in some cases, supported by both Boers and native Africans. The Transvaal Boers, for instance, according to a contemporary source 'did not view the reasons for annexation, of Shepstone, as spurious at all.'¹⁹ Whilst 8,000 African Swazi and numerous Transvaal blacks were integral in Sir Garnet Wolsey's victory over the Pedi in 1879, with the Swazi forming the majority of the British belligerents at the decisive Battle of the Hill in 1879²⁰. The readiness of the natives to unite under the British banner seems to vindicate the claim that the British were welcome in the Cape region as an alternative to the maladroit governments' they had replaced. Thomas Burgher, premier of the Transvaal, had decimated the country's finances, rendering the British as a preferable alternative to Burgher.

Zulu imperialism did not reach its zenith under Shaka Zulu. King Cetshwayo kaMpande who ascended to the Zulu throne in 1872 was a once described as a 'celibate man slaying machine' and equally was equally as expansionist. The only contrast between Shaka and Cetshwayo being that whilst Shaka's ideas of Zulu expansionism only endangered the sovereignty and independence of other clans Cetshwayo's expansionist eye encompassed much of the British and Boer lands. In fact, it was Cetshwayo's ruthless Zulu nationalism was the main instigator of the Anglo-Zulu war. He had always desired great swathes of the British controlled, since 1843 at least, Natal formerly the 'Free Province of New Holland in South East Africa'. Cetshwayo had made his desire to possess much of the Natal, including areas which had been previously ceded to the Boers of Natal under the Treaty of Waaihoek which granted the Boers recognition of their unspecified claims to land lying east of the Blood (Ncome) River. His seizure of Boer farms under the jurisdiction of the president of the Transvaal, Joubert, in 1875²¹ again highlights his desire to increase the size of the Zulu kingdom. He was, as Schumpeter wrote, in reference to imperialism, attempting to expand without 'consigned limits.' Moreover, at the Border Commission, of 1878, which was created, ostensibly to resolve border disputes between Cetshwayo and the Boers, Cetshwayo made such an extravagant demand for land so far north of the Phongolo it fell outside of the purview of the commission²². Cetshwayo had thus exhibited his expansionist intentions, claiming

¹⁸ The Social System of the Zulus (1950 – Shuter & Shooter) – Eileen Jensen Krige – p.11

¹⁹ Fueling the Empire : South Africa's Gold and the Road to War (2003 – John Wiley and Sons) – John S. Stephens – p.118

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.124

²¹ The Struggle for South Africa 1875-1899 () – R.I Lovell – p.21

²² Ploughshare of War: the Origins of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879(1999 - University of Natal

land that belonged to the Boers and was well beyond the land ceded after the Treaty of Waaihoek of 1861. Notwithstanding the exorbitant Zulu land claims, which was clearly an anemic attempt at a land grab by Cetshwayo fuelled by the same expansionist mindset which had beleaguered Shaka Zulu, the Zulu delegates at the commission were both obdurate and antagonistic toward the British and the Boer delegates. When invited to cross examine P.L Uys, a Boer delegate who, incidentally, was killed at the Battle of Hlobane by the same people whose ruthless militarism he had attempted to appease, the Zulu delegates refused²³. The Zulu delegates further annoyed all those present by refusing to address Shepstone by his proper title. Notwithstanding the blatant Zulu provocations the commission found in favor of this murderous, expansionist peoples who had only recently ceased in murdering Boer farmers and occupying their farms²⁴. To accrue unto the Zulu diplomatic characteristic merely because they attended the Boundary Commission is totally factious. Not only had they exhibited total contempt for the workings of the commission but it is unlikely, given the lengths they were prepared to go through to regain Boer farms, they would have observed the ruling had it of been in the favor of the Boers. This is further highlighted by two incidents of 1878 where the Zulu showed a total disregard for the accepted boundaries which were agreed upon in July of 1878 after the aforementioned Boundary Commission at Rorke's Drift. The first arose after a Zulu marital dispute, which saw kaQwabe flee across the border into the Natal, only to be carried back across the border 'as if he were old hide' and killed²⁵. Cetshwayo clearly had little regard for the borders between Zululand and the Natal. His expansionist eye viewed the - legitimately - British controlled Natal as rightfully property of the Zulu. The only question that remained in Cetshwayo's mind was on which side of the river did he wish to fight for the Natal? In fact the Boundary Commission is testament to the pragmatic nature of the British, granting the Zulu land which they had no right to possess under a Treaty signed by Cesthwayo in 1861 whilst he was acting as the nominal paramount of the Zulu.

Everything about Zulu society was based around the military. Every young male, for instance, was required to serve in the military and was trained as a warrior²⁶. Moreover, King Cetshwayo had exhibited his violent and militaristic sympathies on a number of occasions. The most demonstrable example of Cetshwayo's untempered aggression is shown in his slaughter of the female members of inGuge tribe if found living with a man less than forty years of age. If these women were able to flee into the Natal or the Transvaal then their fathers' cattle were punitively confiscated²⁷. Cetshwayo was also responsible for the slaughter of the Tonga tribe in 1876²⁸ as well as the sacking of numerous Christian ministries in Zululand which had been 'befriended during his father life time²⁹'. There was nothing to suggest Cetshwayo had any inhibitions about applying the same ruthless militarism to resolve the issue of the British. His refusal to cooperate with the peaceful endeavors of the British at the boundary commission show that Cetshwayo had no respect for the British or their

Press) – Dr. Richard Cope – p.194

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.195

²⁵ The Zulu War: Islandhswana and Rorke's Drift (1963 - JB Lippincott) – Rupert Furneaux – p.21

²⁶ Zulu Battle Piece: Islandhswana (1948 – Tom Donovan Publishing ltd) – Sir

Reginald Coupland – p.23

²⁷ Zulu Kings and their Armies – Jonathan Sutherland and Diane Carwell – p.93

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ Paper by a Mr Brownlee - Secretary for Native Affairs in the Cape Colony

salient claim to land in the region. Bartle Frere's claim, therefore, on the 28th of October 1878 that:

*'The continued preservation of peace depends no longer on what servants of the British government here may do or abstain from doing, but simply on the caprice of a blood thirsty despot, with an organized force of 40,000 men at his command.'*³⁰

Whilst Frere got the size of Cetshwayo's impi totally wrong (in fact it numbered 50,000 men³¹ he was not wrong about Cetshwayo being a 'bloodthirsty despot'. Cetshwayo had clearly exhibited his contempt for the British and war was becoming increasingly inevitable. A Dutch merchant, by the name of Vijn Cornelius, who happened to be parley to Cetshwayo's military preparations prior to the formal declaration of war, wrote of a general expectation of war. He tells of how 'the men and young men of Zululand have all been called up to the king for some reason or other – although in Natal it was thought they were coming over to attack the whites'³². Natal certainly did perceive the Zulu preparation as preparations for war. In a dispatch from Shepstone to Carnarvon, Shepstone describes how; 'war is the universal cry amongst soldiers'³³. Whether Cetshwayo had been planning an attack on the Natal he did little to placate the British who had reason to suspect an imminent invasion given the Zulu had shown total impunity to the external borders of Zululand constantly venturing over into the British controlled Natal.

Whilst the historical orthodoxy, Saul David standing lambent amongst them, portray the iconic Battle of Rorke's drift as a mere border skirmish, it was by contrast a victory that was integral to British survival in the Cape. In fact Saul David goes so far as to state that 'Cetshwayo specifically ordered his commanders not to invade Natal'³⁴ implying the Battle of Rorke's drift was born out of insubordination amongst the Zulu commanders. Yet this polemic is flawed in a number of regards. Contrary to Saul David, there does exist evidence to suggest Cetshwayo *had* ordered an invasion of the Natal. His intentions to invade the Natal were exposed at the Border Commission where the Zulu delegation claimed land which they had no tangible claim to. Moreover, a Zulu deserter speaking on the 24th February 1879 states:

'(Cetshwayo addressing the Zulu impi) I am sending you out against the whites, who have invaded Zululand, and driven away our cattle. You are to go against the column at Rorke's Drift, and drive it back into Natal, and if the state of the river will allow, follow it up through Natal, right up to Drakensburg. You will attack it by daylight, as there are enough of you to eat it up.'*³⁵ⁱ

³⁰ Telegraph from Bartle Frere to the foreign office:

Zulu Kings and their Armies – Sutherland and Carwell – p.92

³¹ Zulu Battle Piece: Islandhlwana (1948 – Tom Donovan Publishing ltd) – Sir Reginald Coupland – p.23

³² Cetshwayo's Dutchman: Journal of Vijn Cornelius - p.6

³³ Despatch to the Earl of Carnarvon from T. Shepstone, January 5th 1878

³⁴ Zulu: the Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879 – (2005 – Penguin Books) – Saul David – p.167

* Army/Military force

³⁵ First reported by *The Witness* on the 24th of February 1879

The order is explicit, invade British controlled Natal and sack Drakensburg after defeating the British at Rorke's drift. Yet there is a possibility of the source being truncated. The British had, prior to the victory at Rorke's drift suffered a humiliation at Islandhlwana. The publication of this source, in a newspaper after all, could be a mere attempt to regain some of the face lost at Islandhlwana and ensure public support for what would appear to an ill-conceived war overseen by maladroit commanders. Yet this, however, is unlikely. The location of Rorke's drift is integral in establishing if, indeed, Cetshwayo had intended upon an invasion of the Natal then it would make sense to attack Rorke's Drift for lies on the border between the British controlled Natal and Zululand. Moreover, if Cetshwayo didn't harbor any desires to invade the Natal why did he order an attack on Rorke's Drift a former mission station with a few hundred, or so, British troops, it would have been a total waste of effort.

What the British did, therefore, when they restored Cetshwayo to the throne shortly after the conclusion of the war³⁶ was recreate the polyglot mosaic of various tribes that the concerted efforts of Shaka and Cetshwayo had eviscerated. The British were not acting in a demonstrably imperialist vein during their occupation of the Cape region, in fact the invasion of Zululand served to redress the grievances of the fleeing Zulu refugees, who were fleeing from what Rev. P.D Hepburn branded 'a godless despot'³⁷. Britain's invasion of Zululand was, therefore, both morally righteous and not fuelled by an innate Disraelian 'neo-opportunism' that had led to numerous wars fought under the British flag and was instead induced by flagrant atrocities and provocative actions on the part of King Cetshwayo who was far more imperialist in his foreign policy than the British.

ⁱ This is a primary source extracted from a book comprising solely primary source entitled Zulu 1879 (2005 - Leonaaur) - D.C.F Moodie - pages 48

³⁶ Warfare, Political Leadership and State Formation: The Case of the Zulu Kingdom, 1808 – 1879 (1999 – University of Pittsburgh (Ethnology, Vol. 38, No.4 p. 371-399) – Mathieu Deflem – p.379

³⁷ The Zulu War: Islandhlwana and Rorke's Drift (1963 - JB Lippincott) – Rupert Furneaux – p.21
