

Queen Victoria and Chelmsford's return

By Dr. Wayne Bartlett

Chelmsford's return to Britain was not quite the end of the matter as far as the Queen's involvement in his position was concerned. Victoria invited him to Balmoral – another very public expression of her support for a man who was in many quarters discredited. She noted in her journal that she heard of his arrival back in Britain on 26th August 1879 and wanted to see him at once but he was unable to comply. Instead he was invited to Balmoral just a few days afterwards.

This was a visit that she enjoyed so much that she asked Chelmsford to extend his visit, as he telegraphed back to Lady Chelmsford on September 4th.¹ He would later receive a telegraph from Lady Ely, the Queen's Lady of the Bedchamber, who told him that "you have made a most favourable impression here. I am sure you would like to know this".²

It was shortly afterwards, followed by a friendly letter from the Prince of Wales, who told him that "it gave me such pleasure seeing you looking so well last week after all the severe trials you have gone through". The Prince was also not very complimentary about the press which "seems bent on saying disagreeable things of everybody who has been in the Zulu campaign".³ Chelmsford had launched a vigorous campaign to clear his name and save his reputation, but there were many in the press who were not inclined to support him.

Sir Henry Ponsonby, who was in attendance at Balmoral during his visit, noted in a private letter to his wife that "Chelmsford's onslaught on the newspaper correspondents may be brave but not wise. He is not strong enough to encounter them. It is like his invasion of Zululand with insufficient forces. He may meet with an Isandlwana but scarcely with an Ulundi."⁴

Newspaper correspondents had indeed been harshly critical of Chelmsford. Archibald Forbes was vehement in his condemnation whilst the famous William Russell of the *Daily Telegraph* noted that "you know I stood up for Lord Chelmsford – almost alone – well now I'm forced to say I never did a greater wrong. It was a sin to keep him, ask Buller or Wood, his own men. I believe he cannot be 'all there'".⁵ This criticism from a man who was the most famous of all Victorian war correspondents after his vivid writing during the Crimean War, and who had first coined that evocative phrase the 'thin red

¹ Quoted in French, 306. Interestingly, he was not the only one to receive this privilege: an extended invitation was also offered to Wood. See *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*

² In French 307

³ In French 307

⁴ RA VIC/ADD/A/36/1656

⁵ RA VIC/MAIN/O/35/77 – extract from a private letter from Pietermaritzburg written by the famous journalist William Russell of the *Daily Telegraph* – no recipient is listed in the Royal Archives. The letter is very prescient of the actions of Wolseley in proposing a settlement for the country. The proposals to divide Zululand up "will not be lasting or safe". Within a few years, Zululand was in the grip of a horrific civil war.

streak' which later morphed into the more well-remembered 'thin red line', would have been particularly wounding in the eyes of the public, even though many members of the military establishment were distrustful of Russell.

The Queen's suggestion that Disraeli might now informally meet with Chelmsford were strongly rebuffed. Disraeli's response to the suggestion was that "with regard to Lord Chelmsford, Lord Beaconsfield feels that it would be hardly becoming to receive him, except in an official interview. Lord Beaconsfield, by the advice he had the honour to offer your Majesty, has virtually recalled Lord Chelmsford from his command, and for reasons which appeared, and still appear, to Lord Beaconsfield to be peremptory".⁶ This gave the lie to his assertion back in May that Chelmsford was not being censured through Wolseley's appointment.

Disraeli had further remarked that it had taken as many as 20,000 men to "reduce a country not larger than Yorkshire".⁷ A list of oversights that Disraeli felt should be attributed to Chelmsford followed; he had invaded Zululand "with a light heart", and "no adequate knowledge of the country he was attacking, and no precaution or preparation". As a result of the disaster that followed Chelmsford had become "panic-struck". Disraeli continued with typical flattery to praise the Queen but it could not disguise the fact that they were having a significant difference of opinion and he indeed admitted as much:

It is most painful for Lord Beaconsfield to differ from yr. Majesty, not merely because he is bound to yr. Majesty by every tie of duty and respectful attention but because he has a distinct and real confidence in yr. Majesty's judgement, matured, as it is, by unrivalled political experience, and an extensive knowledge of mankind.

The Queen's response to the forthright catalogue of shortcomings listed by her Prime Minister demonstrates clearly how much at odds she was with him on the issue of Chelmsford (the letter was written from Balmoral, almost at the very time that Chelmsford was in attendance there, on 1st September):

"The Queen has today received Lord Beaconsfield's letter, which she must say has grieved and astonished her. Her wish that he should see Lord Chelmsford.... was that he should hear everything from them who knew all and have gone through endless difficulties, and not to decide on condemning people in most difficult and trying positions from the Cabinet, pressed by an unscrupulous Opposition (at least a portion of it) [in itself an interesting insight that the Queen was not above involvement in party politics] and still more unscrupulous press – without allowing them to state their own case and defend themselves. How can civilians decide in a Cabinet on the causes for movements and the reasons for defeat? she is surprised at his [Disraeli's] severity, unmerited to a great extent, against Lord Chelmsford. He has obtained the decisive victory at Ulundi, which has paralysed Cetywayo [sic]....."

⁶ French 347

⁷ This reference sounds rather like a rebuff to an earlier letter to Stanley on 10th June in which Chelmsford had asked "do people at home imagine that a country so large as Zululand and peopled by such warriors as the Zulus could be, can be conquered offhand?" In Laband, 190.

To recall a General whenever he is not successful is to act as the French used to do formerly. The Queen maintains that the war was imminent, and that the Colonies might have been attacked, people murdered and horrors committed, which would have ended in a very different way, to what it will do, it is to be hoped, now; but (for) which we shall have to thank those who are engaged in it..... The Queen does not pretend to say that Lord Chelmsford has not made mistakes, but she cannot bear injustice, a want of generosity towards those who have had unbounded difficulties to contend with, and who ought to be supported at home and not condemned unheard”.⁸

This was the Queen in full flow, with perhaps months of pent-up emotion coming out. Here we get a full insight into Victoria’s views; the war was entirely justified, Chelmsford had been appallingly treated and had won the decisive victory at Ulundi – not a mention being made of Isandlwana. Although a few months earlier she had accepted that there might be room for complaint against Chelmsford, she had now clearly decided that this was substantially not the case. Her views that the war was imminent when Frere and Chelmsford launched what she clearly saw as pre-emptive measures is questionable to say the least: there were no Zulu impi massed on the borders of Natal waiting to invade when the invasion of Zululand was launched. It appears though that the Queen had bought the arguments of Frere and Chelmsford completely.

But Disraeli’s letter had also given the game away to some extent. It had been said at the time that the appointment of Sir Garnet Wolseley had not been intended as a censure on Chelmsford but now the Prime Minister was admitting it was. But he would not be moved. Although he wrote a placatory letter to the Queen in response to her diatribe, he continued to refuse to receive Chelmsford at Hughenden Manor, his country seat in Buckinghamshire. He did however receive him at Downing Street on October 7th but the extra approval of a reception at Hughenden was denied him, though it was granted at the request of the Queen to Colonel Wood. Demonstrating perhaps the personality differences between Wood and Buller, the latter returned his invitation to Hughenden when he found out that Chelmsford had not been invited.⁹

The Queen committed her thoughts on Chelmsford to her journals, noting on 2nd September that “At a little past 8, Sir H Ponsonby brought in Lord Chelmsford. He kissed hands, on coming to the title [he had not yet been formally given it, as he had of course not been in the country since his father’s death], & expressed great gratitude for the confidence I had shown him. I knighted him, and gave him the Grand Cross of the Bath (Military Division), Mr Cross and Sir H Ponsonby being present. He is tall, very thin, & looks much worn. He is singularly pleasing and gentlemanlike.”

[The award of the Grand Cross was the highest rank possible within the Order of the Bath and further showed very public support for Chelmsford.]

⁸ Quoted in French, 350-351

⁹ Morris 594