

A Confusion of Montgomerys

By Ian Knight

On page 109 of his 1968 classic guidebook to the historic sites of KwaZulu-Natal, *With Shield and Assegai*, author J.L. Smail includes a photograph of a lonely monument to a Lieut. Col. Montgomery which stands near the site of Fort Tenedos, on the Zulu bank of the Lower Thukela. Montgomery was, according to Smail, ‘the first man to climb ‘The Kop’ at Kranskop, who died on the 22nd September 1883 after being bitten by a snake.’

Now, *With Shield and Assegai* – later expanded and re-packaged as *From The Land of the Zulu Kings* (1979) – remains a hugely enjoyable book. It followed in the tradition of H.C. Lugg’s pioneering *Historic Natal and Zululand* (1949) in attempting to identify the very places where so many extraordinary historical incidents occurred, and between them both books offer a deep sense of the passage of time and its impact on the historical landscape. Lugg was himself deeply rooted in the colonial period – his father, Harry Lugg, had been present at Rorke’s Drift as a Trooper in the Natal Mounted Police, and Lugg himself had joined the Natal Civil Service in 1899, and later became a Chief Native Commissioner for Natal. Lugg had been the first to identify the location of King Dingane’s grave – hitherto kept secret by his assassins for fear of retribution - and when compiling his book had been able to call upon first-hand impressions by both white and Zulu participants in the events themselves. In many cases, traces of forts, of old wagon-drifts and early graves were still visible on the ground in Lugg’s time, yet even by 1949 only a few were marked by formal memorials. Fast forward twenty years to Smail’s time and the traces on the ground were still apparent but the number of memorials was already increasing; yet even Smail’s book reads now as if through a glass darkly, a vision of the past that which has already slipped beyond our reach. Written to cater for the early stirrings of modern tourism to the sites – a phenomenon which did not really build up steam until the late 1980s – it depicts a world of dirt tracks, of crumbling abandoned homesteads, and of monuments and graves almost swallowed up in long grass and bush, a far cry from the well-worn routes of today’s tourist-lodges. Smail’s world was one in which the iron remains of the wagon which carried King Cetshwayo’s body to burial still lay upon the grave, and in which the traditional guardian of the grave would vet travellers before allowing them to visit the spot; today the wagon remains are in the oNdini Museum, the grave itself is marked with a marble slab, and an elderly lady living nearby greets travellers with a visitors’ book.

So one should not, perhaps, be too harsh on Smail for the odd lapse – even though in his caption to the Thukela monument he conflated two very different men named Montgomery, and has sown considerable confusion ever since. The man who first climbed – or, to be pedantic, made the first recorded climb of Kranskop - Alexander Nixon Montgomery, was not the same man as Lt. Col. Nathaniel Montgomery, who had the misfortune to succumb to the bite of a black mamba near the site of Fort Tenedos in 1883. And indeed, just to add to the muddle, there was at least one other Montgomery involved in the Zululand story, Captain and Lieut.-Col. W.E. Montgomery of the Scots Guards (at this time Guards officers still held two ranks, their regimental rank counting higher among Line Regiments), who held a staff appointment with the 2nd Division in 1879, and was present at the battle of Ulundi; although, fortunately for him perhaps, he is mentioned here only for the sake of clarity, and will not crop up in our story again.

Of the other two, Alexander Nixon Montgomery was, it's probably true to say, the more colourful character, an ex-regular officer who had settled in Natal and served with the Natal Native Contingent in 1879. He was a restless, energetic and rather frustrated man who clashed occasionally with his colleagues and, through a dark and ruthless taste for female company, attracted more than a whiff of scandal. He was born in County Monaghan in Ireland in 1839 and purchased a commission as an ensign in the 7th Regiment in June 1855. The 7th were stationed in Gibraltar between 1858 and 1863, and here Montgomery met and married a local girl, Istere Alicia Atrutel (born 1844). Montgomery's military career was undistinguished, probably to his disappointment. Although he rose to the rank of Captain through purchase he had seen no active service by the time he sold his commission and left the Army in 1872 and, together with Istere, moved to Natal and took up a farm in Mid-Ilovo, south-east of Pietermaritzburg. Here he built an imposing colonial mansion which he called 'Ismont' after his wife (from 'Istere' and 'Montgomery'). As well as running his estate Montgomery threw himself into colonial society, became a Justice of the Peace and dabbled in politics – this despite the fact that life at Ismont must have been hectic because Istere bore no less than fourteen children, of whom five did not survive to adulthood.

It was also dogged with scandal. In March 1877 Montgomery had begun a rather unsavoury affair – exposed recently by Keith Smith – with a Miss Jessie Hornby, who was eighteen at the time. It is not clear how Montgomery met Miss Hornby but curiously two brothers named Hornby later followed Montgomery into the NNC, and it may well be that they were siblings and family friends. Certainly Miss Hornby had been visiting Ismont when Montgomery had first made fierce advances towards her, seducing her by threatening to shoot her and then himself if she did not submit. She had done so unwillingly, and over the next eighteen months Montgomery had continued to pester her, bullying her into submission by fits of temper, threats, or by threatening to ruin her reputation by exposing her to public humiliation. On 29 March 1878 Miss Hornby had secretly born a child, a boy, which, at Montgomery's instigation, was passed over to African servants at Ismont to be nursed in secret. Sadly the child lived for only four months, and although there were later rumours that Montgomery may have been implicated in his death it seems likely the boy had in fact succumbed to an infant infection and, at the time, his passing was not noted.

There were other dramatic and strange incidents at Ismont too. There was a constant stream of guests at the house and in 1878 one of them, a Robert Huskisson Marr, tried to kill himself by cutting his throat. An inquiry suggested that Marr was in debt and troubled by creditors at the time, although given the dark secrets lurking beneath the surface at Ismont one might wonder if that was the whole story. In any event, Marr had survived, and remained on close terms with Montgomery - he was photographed in a family group dating to the 1880s, and was mentioned in Montgomery's will. Also staying at the house at the time was Robert D'Ombraïn, a family friend who had recently arrived from England, and who served as a witness into the subsequent inquiry into Marr's suicide attempt; D'Ombraïn, too, was destined to play a dramatic part in the curious events which surrounded Montgomery.

Against this background of personal turmoil Montgomery had volunteered for service with the colonial forces assembling for the looming invasion of Zululand. He was given the command of the 1st Battalion of the 1st Regiment, Natal Native Contingent, an appointment probably shaped by his connections. The 1st Regiment was commanded by Bvt. Col. Anthony William Durnford who, as commander of the 27th Field Company Royal Engineers, had been stationed in Gibraltar between 1861 and 1864, his time there overlapping Montgomery's there

by two years. Moreover Durnford's Staff Officer was an officer of the 7th, Captain Geoffrey Barton, who had been lieutenant and adjutant when Montgomery had been a Captain with the regiment. Once he had secured his command Montgomery seems to have used his influence to find positions for his circle of friends from Ismont including Robert D'Ombraïn and the brothers Hornby. Montgomery was 39 years old at the time war broke out, still – as Miss Hornby would testify – an active and energetic man, and Robert D'Ombraïn was 31 or 32; perhaps they were both glad to escape what must have been a rather strained atmosphere, fraught with secrets of one sort or another, at Ismont.

Durnford's command, including the 1st NNC, assembled on the farm of one W.H.F. D'Almaine on the high ground on the Natal side of the middle reaches of the Thukela river, the border with Zululand. Forward from D'Almaine's the ground dropped away steeply into the river valley where a track of sorts led down to a crossing, the Middle Drift. The senior British commander, Lt. Gen. Lord Chelmsford, had initially intended to launch one of his offensive columns into Zululand at this point until lack of transport forced him to reconsider. Durnford's column had nominally been allocated a defence role instead, to guard against counter-attacks on a particularly exposed and rugged stretch of the border, although in fact Chelmsford seems to have toyed with deploying Durnford's column in a more aggressive supporting role. Initially he considered he might order Durnford to cross into Zululand and effect a junction with Col. Pearson's No. 1 (Coastal) Column; then, as the British ultimatum ticked away towards the outbreak of war, 11 January 1879, he ordered Durnford to move north from D'Almaine's farm to join the No. 3 (Centre) Column instead. Rather than leave the middle border unprotected, Durnford left behind two under-strength NNC battalions, the 1st under Montgomery, and the 3rd, under a serving 'special service' officer, Captain Charles Cherry. Durnford had left his staff officer, Captain Barton, in charge at D'Almaine's, and both he and Cherry outranked Montgomery by virtue of still holding the Queen's Commission.

Durnford, of course, had arrived to join the Centre Column just in time to be caught up in the debacle at iSandlwana on 22 January, where he and some of the men under his command had been killed. When news reached the remainder of his column back at D'Almaine's it caused consternation, provoking fears that the victorious Zulu army might now make a fresh attack by way of the Middle Drift. Under Cherry's direction a large earthwork – Fort Cherry – was constructed to shelter the garrison if it did so.

In fact no attack came and as days stretched into weeks the isolation of the garrison at D'Almaine's began to take its toll. Montgomery, probably resentful that he was now under the command of a man who had been his junior during their time together in the 7th Regiment, quarrelled with Barton. When Barton was moved to a new command at Greytown, further down the lines of communication, Cherry succeeded to the command at D'Almaine's – and Montgomery began to quarrel with him, too. In due course Lord Chelmsford would reiterate the importance of the post there in guarding the border but there was in fact precious little to do, and Montgomery was temperamentally ill-suited to a quiet war. He busied himself where he could trying to keep up the morale of his men and organised a sports day to keep them amused. For an impetuous and overweening man he did at least take a concern in the welfare of his men, explaining to them the movements of the wider war whenever he learned of it – to undermine rumour and keep them motivated – and when they complained to him that they had not been paid he passed on their concerns, and eventually they received their arrears. In the middle of February, Montgomery and two friends decided to climb a local landmark, a great pillar of rock which stands out from the side of the escarpment, overlooking the Thukela far

below, and which the locals called Ntunjambili, and the white farmers, Kranskop. Montgomery was already an experienced climber and he and his friends found a cleft in the sheer cliff-face which offered them a way onto the summit; once there, after admiring the views, they set fire to the grass on top, and a great column of smoke rose up into the sky. Montgomery hoped that on the other side of the river the Zulus would see it, and be astonished. Even this did not entirely distract him, and he took leave to travel to Pietermaritzburg to pursue his unpleasant conquest of Miss Hornby. On one occasion he forced his way into her father's house by breaking a window with his riding crop – no doubt twirling his moustache as he did so.

Most of the white officers and NCOs at Fort Cherry had meanwhile found their own antidote to that particular *ennui* that comes from the dangerous combination of tension and crushing boredom – they drank. They soon earned a reputation for drunkenness and quarrelling, and the medical officer was so often inebriated that he could not attend his patients and was reported. Demonstrations along the border at the end of April and a minor raid at the beginning of April – followed by an inevitable Zulu counter-raid – did little overall to dispel their frustration.

It was against this background that one of the most mysterious incidents of the war took place. At the beginning of April one of Montgomery's daughters, who was sixteen and apparently looked mature for her age, with dark Mediterranean good looks, visited the post, staying for propriety's sake at a Bishop Schreuder's nearby mission until the 8th, when she returned to Ismont. At Fort Cherry on 6 April Robert D'Ombraïn – Montgomery's family friend and house guest – reported to Civil Surgeon John Ryley that he felt nervous and out of sorts. Ryley attributed it to the alcohol abuse that had become habitual at the post and prescribed a laxative. One of D'Ombraïn's friends visited him the following day and D'Ombraïn commented that he had not slept well – the doctor prescribed him a sleeping draft. When more friends – including the Hornby brothers - visited him again on the 8th they thought him improving, but one noticed a distinctly paranoid streak in his conversation. He had risen several times from his camp-bed to look out of his tent, and had asked what the men were saying about him, and then remarked several times that 'they are coming' – asked who, he did not answer – and commented mysteriously that 'there was only one woman that had ever threatened him'. His friend dismissed the comments as unimportant and returned to his duties, intending to visit again later that day; instead, some time between 12 noon and 1.30 p.m., the camp was startled by the sound of a shot. Captain Montgomery and Surgeon Ryley hurried to D'Ombraïn's tent and found him lying dead on his camp-bed; he had put the muzzle of a Martini-Henry rifle in his mouth, passed a riding crop across the trigger, and fired it with his feet. The bullet had blown off the top of his skull and ripped a split down the side of the tent.

D'Ombraïn was buried nearby and an inquiry convened into his death. It found no clear explanation for his action, which, it decided, could not have been foreseen, and thereby attributed no blame to Civil Surgeon Ryley or anyone else – although it regretted that more notice was not taken at the time of D'Ombraïn's enigmatic last conversations. Indeed, his motives still remain unexplained. It may be that D'Ombraïn was simply suffering from the strain of life at Fort Cherry; perhaps he was in the early stages of a fever and insipient delirium or perhaps, as Surgeon Ryley had concluded, he had simply poisoned himself by his excessive alcohol intake. Yet it seems curious that two men who might have been considered within Montgomery's intimate circle had attempted suicide, one of them successfully. Robert D'Ombraïn had known something, at least, of the dramas of life at Ismont, and perhaps of the darker side of Montgomery's character; was his death linked to Montgomery in some way, and

perhaps to the visit of Montgomery's daughter? In the 1970s a farmer who had grown up locally, on the property where D'Ombraïn lies buried, reported a story that D'Ombraïn had committed suicide after being jilted by his fiancée; whether this is anything more than a half-remembered rumour, whether it should in any case be taken at face value, or whether it connects to the murky world of the sexual tensions at Ismont remains entirely unclear.

Montgomery was destined to see the war out at Fort Cherry which, despite the excitement of a Zulu raid on 25 June, which ravaged African homesteads on the Natal bank, remained largely uneventful for the garrison. By the time the war ended, however, his involvement with Miss Hornby was beginning to cause official concern. On 9 September she had laid dispositions before the magistrate in the colonial capital, Pietermaritzburg, reporting a number of incidents in which Montgomery had forced himself upon her under threats of violence or exposure, and of the birth and disappearance of her son. They were supported by further dispositions from Miss Hornby's brother-in-law, who called for Montgomery's arrest. These dispositions were forwarded all the way to the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Henry Bulwer, who instructed that inquiries should be discreetly made into their veracity. In the end, although Montgomery does not seem to have denied the thrust of the charges, insufficient evidence was produced regarding the fate of Miss Hornby's son, and rather than risk a scandal involving a high-profile public official the affair was allowed to drop. Alexander Montgomery was neither called to account for his actions – publicly, at least – nor exposed, although there are suggestions that he was warned not to pursue his abusive affair. When the war ended, Montgomery simply returned to his life at Ismont, pausing only to visit the stricken field at iSandlwana along the way (he wrote up the trip for *Leisure Hour Magazine*). It seems to have been his last adventure, and it is perhaps significant that his public career withered. Freed from his attentions, Miss Hornby eventually married and moved on with her life.

By contrast his namesake, Lt. Col. Nathaniel Montgomery, left little mark on KwaZulu-Natal beyond the tragic story of his death. Montgomery was commanding the 1st Battalion, the Welsh Regiment (formerly the 41st Regiment) when it arrived in southern Africa in March 1881 from its previous posting at Gibraltar. The battalion was quartered at Fort Napier in Pietermaritzburg as part of the Natal garrison. With the invasion of Zululand already two years old and the fighting in the Transvaal Rebellion over by the time they arrived, the Welsh seemed set for a routine and rather dreary posting. Already, however, the post-war settlement of Zululand was breaking down and there were frequent clashes between supporters of the new British-backed order and those who remained loyal to the exiled King Cetshwayo. In 1882 the king was allowed to visit London and, in an attempt to stave off the looming crisis, the British Government agreed to restore him to part of his former territory, although great tracts were to be set aside in the north and south of the country as a refuge for his political enemies. The southern part of the country, indeed, was placed under direct British control under the name of the Reserve Territory and a British Resident established at Eshowe. From the moment the king returned to Zululand in February 1883, however, the situation deteriorated catastrophically. His exultant supporters took the opportunity to revenge themselves upon their enemies but were promptly led into a trap and defeated at the battle of Msebe on 30 March 1883. The king's principle opponent, his kinsman Zibhebhu kaMapitha, then launched a counter-attack which defeated Cetshwayo's followers at the battle of oNdini on 21 July 1883. The king fled to British protection at Eshowe, and Zululand collapsed into civil war.

The British Government was keen to avoid any further entanglement in Zulu affairs but in order to protect British interests in the Reserve Territory a small column of troops was assembled

at the Lower Thukela in September 1883. Designated the 'Eshowe Column', their instructions were to march to Eshowe and secure it by erecting a defensive position. The column was commanded by Lt. Col. Nathaniel Montgomery and was just over 500 men strong, including three companies of the Welsh, a squadron of the 6th Dragoons and artillery support. By 20 September the column had assembled at the old 1879 entrenchment at Fort Pearson, on the lower reaches of the Thukela river.

Here, on the morning of 25 September, Montgomery decided to go shooting wildfowl. Accompanied only by his adjutant he took the pont across the river to what, just a few years before, had been the Zulu bank. Both men had apparently taken their horses with them but dismounted to walk on foot among the overgrown ruins of Fort Tenedos, hoping to turn up some birds. Montgomery was walking through waist-high grass when he suddenly complained of a sharp stabbing pain inside his thigh, and he and his adjutant decided he had been bitten by a black mamba. They returned to their horses but Montgomery immediately complained of feeling unwell. His adjutant managed to help him onto his horse but he was feeling nauseous and complaining that his legs were increasingly unresponsive. The adjutant led their horses to the pont and they were ferried across to the other side where Montgomery was immediately admitted to the hospital tent. Despite prompt medical attention his condition continued to deteriorate until he became delirious and his limbs paralysed. He died that night and was buried in one of the old 1879 cemeteries nearby.

Events, of course, moved on without him. Command of the Eshowe Column passed after his death to Lt. Col. Hawthorn of the Royal Engineers, and within days the column had advanced to Eshowe and established itself there, and the Zulu civil war played itself out to its tragic conclusions.

There is one last curiosity to note before we leave this curiously tangled tale of two Montgomerys. Not long after his death Nathaniel Montgomery's fellow officers in the Welsh Regiment commissioned a stone monument in his memory which was erected close to Fort Tenedos. This has led to further confusion regarding the grave at Fort Pearson – was the man buried in two places? Clearly not; in fact it seems that the monument on the Tenedos side merely marks the area where he had been struck down, but that his remains actually rest at Fort Pearson, where he died.

As for the other Montgomerys, Istere died at Ismont in 1900, as did Alexander himself on 19 January 1911, at the age of seventy-one. He was largely insolvent at the time of his death, and a guest in his own home – he had already passed title of the estate to his son-in-law.

And Robert D'Ombraïn still lies in his lonely grave near Fort Cherry. When I last visited it, in 1985, it was in a forlorn state, a small sandstone headstone lost among the sugar-cane and badly eroded. Since then, a local farmer has apparently replaced the stone with a modern headstone, and Robert D'Ombraïn's memory lives on – together with the mystery of his death.

NOTES;

John Laband and Paul Thompson first drew attention to the story of Robert D'Ombraïn's suicide in their *War Comes to Umvoti* (University of Natal, 1900), and Paul Thompson expanded upon Alexander Montgomery's role in his *The Natal Native Contingent and the Anglo-Zulu War* (1997). Keith Smith examined the story further in his paper *The Lonely Grave at Kranskop*, published online in 2011. Keith Smith also exposed Montgomery's pursuit of Miss Hornby in *Captain Montgomery's Secret* in his *Dead Was Everything; Studies in the*

Anglo-Zulu War (Frontline, 2014). My thanks are due to Jenny Spencer-Smith for confirming aspects of Alexander Montgomery's family history.

Photographs.

- 1). Ismont, Captain Alexander Montgomery's impressive colonial mansion in mid-Ilovo, photographed during the 1880s. Montgomery himself stands on the left, with one of his daughters.
- 2). Montgomery family group at Ismont, 1880s; Alexander Montgomery standing left with his wife Istere seated in white, surrounded by some of their daughters. On the right, wearing the striped blazer, is the unsuccessful suicide, Robert Marr.
- 3). The 'kop' at Kranskop, also in the 1880s, an isolated spur which juts from the escarpment on the Natal bank far above the river Thukela – in 1879 the border with the independent Zulu kingdom – below. In February 1879 Alexander Montgomery and two friends climbed this feature, and set fire to the grass on the top.





