

Historical Interpretation and Representation, 1880–2014

By Ruben Rees

In 2002, Laband claimed that as a ‘Small War’ meaningful investigation into the Anglo-Zulu War would be finite and a time to stop was certainly on the horizon.¹ However, there have been only two specific studies and a very small collection of journal articles examining the General Officer Commanding this thoroughly attended period of Imperial history. Despite this, from 1880 to the present day, an intricate web of infamy, accusations of culpability and strong opinion has shrouded the historical debate surrounding Lieutenant General the Hon. Frederick A. Thesiger—later the second Baron Chelmsford—and his conduct as Commander-in-Chief in during the Anglo-Zulu War. Portrayals of heroism, tragedy and Imperial adventure have to a greater extent eclipsed his role and transported the Anglo-Zulu War, toward a seemingly legendary status in popular culture—due mainly to Morris, *Zulu* and *Zulu Dawn*—whilst leaving the other phases of his command; the Ninth Cape Frontier and Second Sekhukhune wars to relative ignominy.^{2,3,4} As such it seems fitting to examine his full command in greater and more balanced detail than has occurred to date.

Resultantly, the historiography has largely been focused on the battles of the Zululand campaign. Therefore debate on Chelmsford has to be discovered within these studies. As such in revealing a historiography relevant to Chelmsford four distinct phases can be identified: initial polemic campaign histories from eyewitnesses (1880-1900), two schools of thought in the 1930s comprising shielders and condemners and revisionism in the 1960s, which has developed from the 1970s onward into a continued scholarship in progressive form.

To explain fully the two schools the former is characterised by glorifying, blame shifting and avid support for Chelmsford which, despite carrying a strong bias (in some cases written by members of his own Staff, for example Molyneux), still holds much value, including many significant arguments that certainly merit re-visitation.⁵ Conversely, the latter—beginning with special correspondents and later journalists turned historians—highlight personal incompetence, over-confidence and Chelmsford’s ‘sloped shoulders’ as their main line of argument. However, their works are scattered with contradictions and inaccuracies. As such the early historiography has proved a fiercely two-sided debate. Whilst moderate revisionism

¹ John P. C. Laband, ‘Anglo-Zulu War Studies: Where to from here?’, *The Journal of the Anglo-Zulu War Historical Society*, 12 (2002), p. 4.

² D. R. Morris, *The Washing Of The Spears: The Rise And Fall Of The Zulu Nation* (London: Da Capo Press, 1965).

³ *Zulu*, dir. by Cy Endfield, (Paramount Pictures, 1964).

⁴ *Zulu Dawn*, dir. by Douglas Hickox, (American Cinema Releasing, 1979).

⁵ W. C. F. Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt* (New York: Macmillan and Co, 1896).

has taken hold from the 1970s onward, there is a pervasive hangover of the condemner arguments.

Despite this, new research into personality, factors affecting Chelmsford, the impact of the press, and the forgotten battles have over time added colour and complexity to what was previously a rather black and white debate. Although granted, these observations often have to be dredged out from the numerous—although worthy—rehashes of ‘battles of the Zulu War’ and recently studies of broader focus—encompassing a larger portion of South African Colonial History—have begun to bring events into greater perspective.

Rothwell’s official account; *Narrative of the Field Operations* has consistently been regarded as the authoritative, albeit necessarily biased, text for academic study into the War.⁶ However, in tracing the very beginnings of the historical debate, Colenso’s controversial: *History of the Zulu War and its Origins* is of great importance. Published in 1880, it is remarkable in its immediacy after the events, and less remarkably, its condemnation of the British invasion and Chelmsford. Despite this anti-British stance, Colenso had been an intimate friend of Colonel Anthony Durnford and as such her work is marked by strong criticisms of Chelmsford’s conduct, which was essentially motivated by the latter’s blaming of Durnford for Isandlwana. Whilst Colenso carries a strong bias and some in-depth analysis is lacking, it is a uniquely Afro-centric source for contemporary analysis.

Using extracts from Chelmsford’s correspondence to Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, Colenso makes a clear case for Chelmsford being in need of reinforcements from late 1878 and throughout the first invasion.⁷ Whilst this does not disprove the over-confidence arguments it does add another dimension to the first invasion of Zululand. Colenso also stresses that Chelmsford had recognised from his past experience, the need for the formation of a defensible position whenever halted, however, foolishly neglected his own orders.⁸ In most stark and personal terms Colenso claims—with reference to Isandlwana—‘he would blame the dead to cover the faults of the living!’ Colenso’s Afro-centric perspective makes her work of great importance and sheds light on some signal issues in Chelmsford’s command that have been a crucial influence on contemporary historians writing on the subject.⁹ Colenso also highlights a key debate surrounding Chelmsford. The question of whether it was over-confidence and arrogance or lack of resources that led to the disaster at Isandlwana and the failure of the first invasion and how Chelmsford blaming the dead impacted on the his interpretation.

Although the Anglo-Zulu War has enjoyed numerous and varied scholarship, Lord Chelmsford is in all but two studies, a caveat. In 1994 Laband edited and annotated *Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand Campaign*, which brings together Chelmsford’s Papers to form a purely ‘Chelmsford-driven’ narrative.¹⁰ This recent work centralises the papers effectively and exposes his handling of the campaign lucidly for further scrutiny. However, French’s *Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War* can be recognised as the flagship mid-period study of Lord Chelmsford’s command and as such, despite sitting firmly in the Shielder school and

⁶ Intelligence Branch of the War Office, *Narrative of the Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War of 1879* (Uckfield: The Naval & Military Press Ltd, 1881).

⁷ Frances Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and its Origin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1880), p. 261.

⁸ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and its Origin*, p. 274.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 294.

¹⁰ Laband (ed.), *Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand Campaign 1878-1879, (Army Records Society)* (Dover: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1994).

having a very defensive style, puts forward a convincing argument. Published in 1939 it leans heavily on the correspondence and reports from Lord Chelmsford as its main material. The study came as a refutation of the journalist turned historian; W. H. Clements' *The Glamour and Tragedy of the Zulu War*, which condemned Chelmsford in 1936. Clements' work follows the traditional condemner line and draws on the press reporter's arguments from the period. Up until this spike the scholarship had to a greater extent dried up—with the exception of Molyneux's pro-Chelmsford; *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*—as other colonial wars and the First World War galvanised the public's attention.

French's arguments are vital in that they show a completely pro-Chelmsford argument. It is also important as this marks the first phase of edited secondary analysis of the events in South Africa. (French highlights some key primary material that will be revisited in this paper: Chelmsford's official correspondence and papers). His main thesis is that all the main reverses sustained by the British force—such as Isandlwana, Hlobane and Intombi River—came as a direct consequence of Commanders in the field not following the 'precise' orders given by Lord Chelmsford.¹¹ A view purported by Chelmsford in his self-justifying speech in the House of Lords, 19th August 1879. This therefore identifies another point of contention that must be addressed by the re-examination of Chelmsford's original battle orders, which has already seen recent attention by Greaves in 2001.¹² French also lays a hefty amount of blame with the press for Chelmsford's portrayal in the years that followed. In turn another area of primary analysis can be drawn out with the examination and verification of newspaper reports from 1879 and the motivations of reporters such as Forbes in depreciating any successes Chelmsford achieved.¹³

However, French's bias is ubiquitous and leads to a shielding of Chelmsford's flaws. The selection of material designed to protect Chelmsford and lay the blame for Isandlwana on Colonel Durnford also discredits the work greatly. However, it does show an example of contemporary support for Chelmsford, despite there being a strong backlash against him in the 1880-1881 outpouring of scholarship in the early historiography which came mainly from the press. It also highlights how easy it is to fall into the trap of examining Chelmsford subjectively through the 'glaze of Isandlwana'. French chronologically highlights the occasions in which Chelmsford's personal command did lead to well executed victories over the Zulu impis such as Gingindlovu and Ulundi. Whilst Chelmsford has been keenly criticised for the disaster at Isandlwana, he has received a tepid response over his successes. In this vein it can be argued that Isandlwana has biased many against conducting an objective study of his wider command at both a tactical and strategic level and the often confused press accusations have become a 'hang up' influencing a large extent of writing on him.

In terms of the current research surrounding Chelmsford, it is evident that traditional criticisms and arguments have achieved a strong continuum within the historical debate. Whilst French can certainly be held up as a high watermark in the ebb and flow of Chelmsford's interpretation, Jackson and Morris's influential pieces in the mid-Sixties mark a spate of revisionism—coinciding precisely with the overall rise of military history research following its decline over the fifties.¹⁴ However, following this rather sensational outpouring the steady publication that has followed has turned toward moderate revisionism. In 2011

¹¹ Gerald French, *Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War*, (London: John Lane, 1939), p. 130.

¹² Adrian Greaves, *Isandlwana: How the Zulus Humbled the British Empire* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military Press, 2010).

¹³ Archibald Forbes and Neville Lloyd Walford, *Mr. Archibald Forbes and the Zulu War* (Uckfield, Naval & Military Press, 1880).

¹⁴ F. W. D. Jackson, *The Hill of the Sphinx* (Bromley: Westerners' Publications Limited, 1965).

Saul David claimed ‘Many Generals blunder in war, but few go to such lengths to avoid responsibility’.¹⁵ In this statement he appears to have arrived at the same conclusion as Colenso in 1880. This highlights that a number of criticisms that have created a subjective opinion of his command since the press scathing of Forbes and Clements. Another example of criticism is Pakenham, writing in 1991 who described Chelmsford on the eve of the invasion as; ‘in high-spirits’, ‘supremely confident’ and in no doubt he had ‘ample men to thrash the Zulus’.¹⁶ However, Knight—considered one of the leading authorities in this field—writing twelve years after Pakenham claims Chelmsford shared a widely held view amongst the army and administration in South Africa that the Zululand campaign would be both short and successful.¹⁷ Whilst this view of over-confidence is widely acknowledged in current research, it is important to recognise that it was not solely confined to the Commander-in-Chief. Lock and Quantrill argue that ‘swaggering over-confidence’ was exuding from everyone in the column: from the rank and file right up to Chelmsford.¹⁸ Colenso’s question of troop numbers is therefore contentious and shows an example of how Chelmsford’s catalogued belief in the strength of British firepower has to an extent, been confused over the years with having ‘ample’ troops.¹⁹ Colenso contests the view taken by Pakenham, claiming, he was aware of the need for reinforcements.²⁰

This is also verified by Ian Beckett, an eminent scholar of the Victorian era, who observes that Natal volunteer units were required to compensate for Chelmsford’s deficiency in mounted men.²¹ As such the question of attitudes and influencing factors grows in import as an area of re-examination in the period of the first invasion of Zululand that has been typified by failure and attributed largely to Chelmsford’s over-confidence.

The last twenty years has seen a greater emphasis on contextualising Chelmsford’s personality and character. Knight regards him as a typical Victorian gentleman and a product of his background and class. Crediting him with personal courage and strong administrative ability.²² However, he is also described as a reluctant delegator and a competent if not inspired commander. Evidenced by the conduct of his campaign he is additionally described as stubborn, reliant on proven techniques and terse under pressure. However, Lieven has described Chelmsford bitterly as ‘the wretched commander’ and affirms that he falls in with the Crimean stereotype of ‘blundering generals’.²³ Despite this South African writer, Kinsey compliments Chelmsford’s decisive action at Ulundi and attributes success to his determination to vindicate his losses at Isandlwana.²⁴ Smith’s radical tome, *Dead was Everything*,²⁵ also examines the character of Chelmsford and comments on his kindness, basic decency and thoughtfulness. In addition to this however, comments are also made about

¹⁵ Saul David, ‘Zulu: The True Story’, *BBC History – British History in Depth*, (2011),

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/zulu_01.shtml, (last accessed 16 October 2014).

¹⁶ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa, 1876-1912* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1991), p. 55.

¹⁷ Knight, *The National Army Museum Book of the Zulu War*, (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, 2003), p. 280.

¹⁸ Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom, Zulu Vanquished* (London: Greenhill Books, 2005), p. 19.

¹⁹ Edmund Yorke, *Zulu, The Battle for Rorke’s Drift, 1879* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2005), p. 42.

²⁰ Colenso, *The History of the Zulu War and its Origin*, p. 257.

²¹ Beckett, *The Victorians at War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 101.

²² Knight, *The National Army Museum Book of the Zulu War*, p. 280.

²³ Michael Lieven, ‘Heroism, Heroics and the Making of Heroes: The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879’, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 30:3 (1998), p. 422.

²⁴ H. W. Kinsey, ‘The Sekukuni Wars Part II’, *The South African Military History Journal*, 2:6 (1973), (para 40).

²⁵ Keith Smith, *Dead was Everything, Studies in the Anglo-Zulu War* (Frontline Books: Barnsley, 2008).

Chelmsford's 'surprising' and 'well concealed... ruthless streak'.²⁶ While Best claims Chelmsford was 'thrust into a position for which he was not intellectually equipped.'²⁷

Ultimately, Knight judges that 1879 tested Chelmsford's character to an unexpected degree, and claims he failed to rise effectively to the challenge'.²⁸ This thoughtful research into personal attributes and background are a new twist in the debate surrounding Chelmsford. Critically it shows that alongside the well-known weaknesses of inflexibility and over-confidence he also had strengths that were bought to bear in other areas such as administration and determination. This enables a greater depth of evaluation to be made on Chelmsford and his conduct in South Africa.

Specific themes have also attracted consistent debate in recent years. Yorke advocates that Chelmsford's pre-invasion planning was based heavily on the issues of transport and logistics in a country with difficult terrain and a lack of roads, which links to Greaves' view of Chelmsford as a meticulous administrator.²⁹ Chelmsford has also been criticised for having invaded during the annual review of the Zulu Army. However, Yorke affirms that Chelmsford identified the Zulus' key strategic weakness in the form of food shortages. He also praises Chelmsford's initial strategy; claiming a strike toward the Zulu centre of gravity Ulundi, would force the Zulu impis to a decisive battle.³⁰ Guy also lends credence to this view, stating that Chelmsford's deliberate pre-harvest invasion prevented Zulu Warriors committing to a long campaign.³¹ Adding greater depth to this revisionist epoch, Beckett examines the press and places military failure and a failure to appease public opinion at home on an equal footing for Chelmsford's failures.³² Best notes that Chelmsford's failure to ingratiate himself with the press invited criticism and hostility in abundance.³³ Consequently, Beckett places the spotlight on the impact of the Press on Chelmsford's legacy and appropriately identifies another centrally important theme.

In much of the research to date Chelmsford has been a caveat to more popular events in Anglo-Zulu War Studies that have held greater resonance in popular culture; the '*disaster*' of Isandlwana and the '*miracle*' of Rorke's Drift are two such examples. However, the experts in this field must examine the less popular studies of the Ninth Cape Frontier and Sekhukhune Wars to gain a complete view of Chelmsford's command. The lack of this wider analysis to date had predominantly been due to the Anglo-centric nature of the historiography and also rests to an extent, with the lack of high profile events in these less significant or popularly regarded colonial insurgencies. However, Greaves' recent research is beginning to redress this imbalance. Co-written by Xolani Mkhize, *The Tribe that Washed its Spears*, published in 2013 makes some reference to Chelmsford in this lesser-studied period. Greaves credits Chelmsford's 'determination and skill' as a military commander as being one of the main driving forces behind bringing the long running frontier wars to a conclusion in 1878.³⁴ Best also verifies this, believing Chelmsford's conduct proved he 'did not shirk hard work' and 'his handling of the troops had been exemplary'. However, he is also said to have displayed a

²⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

²⁷ Brian Best, 'Lord Chelmsford', *The Journal of The Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*, 2 (1997), p. 4.

²⁸ Knight, pp. 27-29.

²⁹ Yorke, *Zulu, The Battle for Rorke's Drift, 1879*, p. 42.

³⁰ Yorke, *Zulu, The Battle for Rorke's Drift, 1879*, p. 41.

³¹ J. J. Guy, 'A Note on Firearms in the Zulu Kingdom with Special Reference to the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879', *The Journal of African History*, 12:4 (1971), p. 565.

³² Beckett, *The Victorians at War*, p. 96.

³³ Best, 'Chelmsford's Juggernaut, The March on Ulundi', *The Journal of The Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*, 11 (2002), p. 2.

³⁴ Greaves and Mkhize, *The Tribe that Washed its Spears, The Zulus at War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2013), p. 78.

‘curious personal weakness’.³⁵ Spiers comments that ‘systematic cavalry drives’ were valuable during this period of bush fighting and that the campaign ‘repeatedly demonstrated’ the effectiveness of ‘concentrated fire-power’ against much larger enemy formations.³⁶

This provides evidence for a broader examination of Chelmsford’s performance as an independent commander; and shows that judging him a failure; unwilling to take responsibility, is not necessarily a moot point. It furthermore brings 1878 into the spotlight for further investigation as the experiences and factors clearly shaped Chelmsford’s attitude going into the first invasion of Zululand. Phillip Gon claims that the Battle of Centane was considered a ‘model action in colonial warfare’ and was viewed by Chelmsford as an exemplar of inferior numbers in a fixed position overcoming far greater odds with firepower.³⁷ The discussion of the earlier conflicts against Sandhile, Mbilini and Sekhukhune therefore provide interesting gobbets for analysis into Chelmsford’s command, attitude and overall performance. This also enables comparisons to be made with the Zululand campaign, which is important in identifying whether a step change occurred in Chelmsford’s attitude to command and the enemy.

Historiography has therefore been the driving force behind forming a set of questions pertaining to a fully contextualised thematic analysis. Chelmsford’s operational performance in the campaigns must be evaluated in addition to the factors affecting his attitude going into the first invasion and second invasions that contribute to an overall learning curve analysis. Finally his portrayal in the press contributes to the overriding question of the extent to which he has rightly or wrongly been remembered for his flaws.

Consequently the methodology has rested with examining original documents from 1878-1879 thematically. This comes mainly in the form of the personal, official and semi-official papers of Lord Chelmsford. The personal perspective from which these are written allow a candid scrutiny of how Chelmsford perceived events and therefore how he aimed to react to them. However, these are naturally limited by the personal bias, prejudice and furthermore how true they are to actual events. Although, by cross-referencing them with secondary material, dispatches and correspondence from Evelyn Wood—chosen for his important role outside Chelmsford’s Staff—John North Crealock, Sir Garnet Wolseley and other prominent and obscure individuals from the rank and file it may be possible to arrive at some corroborated conclusions. News reports are also a vital source that comes with the obvious disadvantages of political leaning, personal vendetta and the potential of lampoonery. However, by reversing these into an advantage, the spins can be analysed with reference to public opinion and therefore contribute to answering the question of how Chelmsford has been remembered. As such *The Times*, *Punch*, *The Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News* are going to be a focus for their particular angle along with various regional papers.

These collections brought together and appraised in symposium will explore Chelmsford’s tenure thematically. In this manner the study will focus in on three central themes; operational command, learning curve, and press portrayal in order to examine the poor reputation that has clung to him so strongly.

³⁵ Best, ‘Lord Chelmsford’, *The Journal of The Anglo Zulu War Historical Society*, 2 (1997), p. 2.

³⁶ Edward Spiers, *The Victorian Soldier in Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 37.

³⁷ Phillip Gon, ‘The Last Frontier War’, *The South African Military History Journal*, 5:6 (1982), (para 21-22).

Henty, a prominent Victorian novelist, writing six years after Chelmsford's resignation, asserted the massacre at Isandlwana was due entirely to the over-confidence and carelessness of the Officers commanding No. 3 Column.³⁸ Ian Knight noted that for the rest of Chelmsford's life he 'never really escaped the field of Isandlwana'.³⁹ In this respect it can be argued that Chelmsford has to this day been bound reputationally to his own inauspicious-Thermopalaе.

As a result it is clear that there are a number of strongly founded criticisms of Chelmsford's command that will likely remain irrevocably associated to him. However, it is clear that there is a wider range of events and issues than simply those failures that have achieved the most attention to date. As such the theme of operational command will by addressed be comparing and contrasting Chelmsford's performance in all the campaigns during his tenure. This pursuit must therefore encompass his whole command from its beginning in the last throws of the Ninth Cape Frontier War and the Second Sekukuni War right through to his resignation following the victory at Ulundi. This will aid in the objective appraisal of his whole command and shed light on Chelmsford's key successes and failures. Learning curve is also an area of investigation that will thoroughly question the factors affecting Chelmsford's attitude toward the enemy and colonial warfare throughout 1878-1879 and examine whether a step change occurred in Chelmsford's attitude between the earlier campaigns and the first invasion of Zululand. In this overall endeavour Chelmsford's correspondence, reports and orders provide an insight into his mindset throughout his command and used in conjunction with verifying sources will form a credible judgement on his performance as GOC. Representation in the home and colonial press are the final theme which must not be neglected when considering how poorly Chelmsford's command was portrayed by the work of Forbes and later Clements which has consequently been remembered in national memory. As such, the hope exists that a comprehensive and impartial appraisal can be reached on a Victorian General and Peer who has over the past 135 years, rather than falling into ignominy, aroused such strong, mixed and often negative feelings amongst experts and laymen alike.

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³⁸ G. A. Henty, *The Young Colonists, A Story of the Zulu and Boer Wars* (United Kingdom: Blackie & Sons Ltd, 1885), p. 156-182.

³⁹ Knight, p. 280

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