

Interview with author Ian Knight

Ian Knight was interviewed at the site of the grave of Maj. Knox-Leet VC

Adrian Greaves

How did you first become interested in the Anglo-Zulu War?

As a small child, I discovered I had a distant relative, a Sergeant in the 1/24th (Sgt. Thomas Cooper), who was killed at Isandlwana. It's difficult not to think of that as fate! Later, my parents took me to see Zulu in 1964, when it first came out. I must have been seven or eight at the time; I remember being dwarfed by a huge screen, with this incredible story rolling over me. It had a terrific impact on me. I often think life would have been simpler if we'd gone to see The Sound of Music instead!

What was the first thing you had published on the Zulu War?

I had an article published in a hobby magazine when I was 17 - which, I am ashamed to say, is 25 years ago now. I dread to think now what it was like!

And your first book?

I spent ten years writing magazine articles before I could persuade a publisher to accept anything on a Zulu theme. My first book was actually an Osprey monograph, *The Zulus*, published in 1989; *Brave Men's Blood*, a year later, was my first full-length book.

How many books have you written altogether?

Including Osprey titles - which account for about half - I think I've written, co-written or edited 24 books now. All but three have been on Zulu or southern African themes. The latest is *Great Zulu Battles*.

Which do you regard as your best book?

A difficult question! I think *Anatomy of the Zulu Army*. I have always been interested in the Zulu perspective, and had long cherished an ambition to write something about the way the amabutho system functioned in a military capacity. I think it's my most original piece of research - though I hope still a good read! Otherwise, I'm proud of my book about Isandlwana - Zulu - although I turned in a ms. that was several thousand words over-length, and it had to be cut. I'd like to put the missing bits back one day, and add some footnotes. Isandlwana is such a controversial subject it would be useful to be able to list my sources for my interpretations! I also think *Fearful Hard Times* - which I wrote with Ian Castle - is a pretty definitive account of the Eshowe campaign.

What other authors do you admire in the field?

I think John Laband's scholarship is astonishing, and his *Rope of Sand* (published in the UK as *The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation*) is a lasting contribution to the field. I still have great affection for Morris's *The Washing of the Spears*, though it has been overtaken by modern research. That in itself is a tribute to his work; it inspired many of us to find out more! As a book to put your feet up to I enjoy T.V.Bulpin's *Shaka's Country*, which is a charming anecdotal history, with a rather wistful quality to it. And Mitford's *Through The Zulu Country* is a great travelogue for anyone thinking of visiting the sites.

When did you first visit South Africa, and how much time do you spend there now?

In 1979, for the Centenary. This was a superb introduction, and I am still in touch with friends I met on that trip. Now I spend two or three months a year there.

And the battlefield tours?

I hitchhiked around Zululand in 1985 with a chap who first had the idea of doing tours. He ran several in the late '80s, but they didn't work out for him. I stepped in 1990, with Ian Castle. We were certainly among the first to take people

out from the UK, and are still the only ones who regularly take people to the more obscure sites. I now also take small weekend tours four times a year.

Who has influenced you most in your study?

My greatest debt is to Makhandakhanda - S.B.Bourquin. 'SB' was a former head of 'Bantu Affairs' in the Durban region, and has a remarkable knowledge of Zulu language, history and culture. He organised many of my early research trips for me, and we often camped out near the sites. In those days there were precious few hotels or lodges nearby. He made Zululand and its past come alive for me in a very magical way. He also had a superb collection of Zulu and military artefacts, which took my breath away; he's in his '80s now, and most of his collection has gone to museums.

What are the highlights of your career?

That's also difficult! I have been lucky enough to meet a number of genuine Zulu traditional historians, and have considered that a real privilege. I once met Chief Buthelezi at Isandlwana, and he produced a copy of one of my books, and asked me to sign it, which was a real thrill! I still haven't worked out how he just happened to have one with him! I recently had a poem dedicated to me by L.B.Z. Buthelezi, one of Zululand's leading poets; he writes in the traditional praise-poem style, so it was very flattering. All I need now is my own praise-singer to declaim it when I next attend a traditional function! I still get a terrific buzz out of just pottering round rural Zululand with like-minded friends, seeking out stories of the past, and obscure historic sites.

You must have had some adventures?

One or two. I've pushed cars out of the mud in a number of interesting places, suffered from heat-stroke, and been drenched by the rain in sunny Africa more times than I care to mention. I once stood on a snake in the grass, a young cobra; fortunately it was just as terrified as I was, and slithered off when I shot about four feet into the air! I fell off Hlobane mountain in the dark one night - I thought I was about to join the ancestral spirits, but actually only fell about six feet, and landed without any damage - and Carolyn, my wife, and I were driving away from a Shaka Day event once when we found ourselves stuck in the road with an impi coming in the opposite direction. They pressed past with shields and spears banging on the bodywork, which was quite scary, but fortunately were in a good mood. On one occasion I was at a Zulu event and I had to giya - to dance a solitary war dance in front of everyone; their reaction was polite rather than enthusiastic, so I have practised my giya-ing since! Probably my most terrifying adventure was knocking over a tree as I tried to reverse into a South African police station - then hitting a parked police car as I tried to extricate myself from the tree!

And future work?

I have just completed *Great Zulu Commanders*, which should be out in time for Christmas. I am working on the story of the Prince Imperial's death, and collecting material for a book on Shaka. I'd like to make a few side-steps in future, and write about other aspects of the Zulu experience; there is talk, for example, of my writing a biography of one of Zululand's great game conservators.

Do you think there is anything more to be said about the Anglo-Zulu War?

Always! Admittedly, one does have to try hard to find fresh approaches, but it is such an extraordinary story that I think I - and other writers - will keep finding things we want to explore. So long as people are still interested in reading them.