

WHAT DOTHTHE LORD REQUIRE OF US?

Bishop John William Colenso & the Isandlwana Sermon

Preached in the Cathedral Church of St. Peter, Pietermaritzburg, March 12th, 1879 (1)

By Dr. Anthony W. Henfrey

When the Right Reverend John William Colenso, D.D., Lord Bishop of Natal, stepped into the gothic revival pulpit in his Cathedral Church of St. Peter, Pietermaritzburg to deliver the sermon on Wednesday, March 12th, 1879, he can have had no doubts about the hostile climate of public opinion that he faced. The date had been chosen by the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal, Sir Henry Bulwer, as a “*Day of Humiliation and Prayer, in consequence of the great Disaster at Isandhlwana, on January 22nd, 1879*”. Colenso was determined not to let this day pass without stating his uncompromising views on the origins of the Anglo-Zulu War and where the real responsibility for its disastrous consequences lay. In Colenso’s view the war had been an unnecessary evil; the Zulu nation under Cetshwayo had presented no real threat to Natal; the colonial authorities in southern Africa, notably the High Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, and Sir Theophilus Shepstone, Secretary of State for Native Affairs in Natal, had deliberately provoked the conflict to further their wider ambitions for South African confederation; that in the last resort Isandlwana was a brave act of self-defence by the Zulu nation and that thoughts of revenge for Isandlwana were unchristian. Colenso was no stranger to controversy or unpopularity. Already in his career he had been excommunicated for heresy and had taken up deeply unpopular positions in disputes between white settlers and the native peoples of Natal. His sermon was a supremely brave act coming only seven weeks after Isandlwana. He knew that scarcely anyone in Natal settler society had been untouched by the loss of family, a loved one or a friend. His own daughter, Frances, had been in love with Colonel Anthony Durnford, killed in action at Isandlwana. Yet he repeatedly asked his congregation:

and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah vi, 8)

It is a measure of Colenso’s stature that his unpalatable message was reportedly heard to the end in silence.(2)

The author has chosen not to quote Colenso’s sermon at length within this article. This is not simply the result of space constraints. The sermon is a powerful tract that stands alone and its 5000 words are therefore best read alone. Its message is both clear and accurate as modern scholarship has confirmed. In any event it is reproduced in full in the biographies of Colenso by Cox (3) and Guy (4) and in *Natalia* (5) in each case with the briefest of comments.

Visitors to the battlefields of colonial Natal often link the name of Colenso only with the ugly cooling towers by the banks of the Thukela in the town that was named in memory of his first visit there as Bishop in early 1854. (6) Yet Colenso is more than a long-forgotten name attached to a dreary town. He was a brave man, a controversial theologian and a leading figure in the colonial history of Natal. His work in Natal was to have a profound and lasting influence on the development of the worldwide Anglican communion which continues to this day. The purpose of his life and career can be found distilled into the passion with which he delivered his Isandlwana sermon and pursued his search for justice, mercy and truth. An understanding of Colenso’s life and career therefore plays a key role in understanding the sequence of events that led up to the Anglo-Zulu War and all that followed in its disastrous wake.

COLENSO’S EARLY LIFE

The circumstances of John William Colenso’s difficult early years are well covered by Cox and Guy. (7) His father’s business bankruptcy, his mother’s early death and a disastrous home fire which left Colenso heavily indebted all had a profound effect on the later course of his life. Always a ‘loner’ he had been forced to make his own way in the world firstly as a school usher, then as a struggling undergraduate, a young wrangler, and eventually in 1837 a fellow of St. John’s College, Cambridge. There he taught mathematics and became an accomplished writer of school arithmetical textbooks, following a period as a master at Harrow School. It was the sale of the copyrights of his mathematical textbooks for £2400 in 1853 that ultimately enabled Colenso to lift the crippling burden of debt that had overshadowed his early life, and to embark on his missionary career.

When he married Frances Bunyon in 1846 he automatically relinquished his college fellowship but took up a newly created college living at Forncett St. Mary in Norfolk where he remained until the end of 1853. Following a suggestion to Robert Gray, first Bishop of Cape Town, Gray offered him, somewhat impetuously in view of later events, the position of first missionary bishop of the newly created diocese of Natal and on November 30th, 1853 at the age of 39 he was consecrated in Oxford as its bishop. He arrived in Natal for the first time in early 1854 when his guide around the young colony was to be Theophilus Shepstone, his family’s close friend for the next twenty years. It was during this visit that Colenso was given the Zulu name “*Sobantu*” - Father of the People. (8)

COLENZO THE HERETIC

From the outset of his episcopate Colenso had been uncomfortable with various aspects of contemporary missionary teaching which he was later to experience at first hand in Natal. He was uneasy with the doctrine of eternal damnation which he felt denied the Christian message, and he disagreed with orthodox Christian views on marriage in the context of the missionary world. While Colenso believed Zulu polygamy was unchristian, he did not think it right for a man to leave his second and subsequent wives and their children, quite possibly destitute, in order to join the Christian church. He was quite opposed to local settler opinion on these and other issues, appearing to many of them as arrogant and superficial, and he attracted immediate controversy within the colony. While he was head of the Anglican mission to the local African population, he was also Bishop to the white settlers of Natal. Significantly, however, his views on polygamy were shared, for more practical reasons, by Theophilus Shepstone, Natal's Secretary of State for Native Affairs.

By 1861 Colenso was publicly calling for a reassessment of fundamental Christian beliefs based on his practical missionary experience. This put him on a direct collision course with Bishop Gray, his metropolitan, and in due course virtually the whole of the Anglican establishment. Colenso was being driven by the results of modern scientific enquiry, particularly the works of Darwin and Lyell, which had excited the age and called into question the literal and infallible truths of biblical texts. At the same time Colenso was only too well aware of the meagre results of his seven years of missionary work in Natal which he felt were the consequences of unappealing aspects of the contemporary Christian missionary message. This was brought to a head by the famous questions posed to Colenso by William Ngidi, his African assistant in the pioneering translations of textbooks and the scriptures into Zulu. Could the story of Noah's Ark be literally true? As Colenso relates in his Preface to Volume I of the *Pentateuch & Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (9) he found himself unable to answer Ngidi's question and this helped to focus his mind on the inherent difficulties in accepting all biblical content as literal truth.

He was to be the object of sustained ridicule for the rest of his life over this particular incident. Matthew Arnold, echoing the racist overtones of his contemporaries, viciously attacked Colenso for even suggesting that a Zulu could provide any meaningful critique of contemporary Christian beliefs. (10)

In October 1862 Longmans had published the first part of Colenso's study of the Pentateuch. It was to become a seven-part work in which Colenso set out in detail his criticisms of biblical truth. He achieved instant notoriety even though other contemporary theological works had come to broadly the same conclusions, which were completely consistent with scientific enquiry. What really shocked the Anglican establishment was that traditional views should be challenged by one of their own kind, since bishops were regarded as guardians of the faith. By throwing down a public challenge, Colenso was implicitly threatening the social authority of the Church and its senior clergy at a time when their status within mid-Victorian society was already weakening visibly.

In late 1863 Bishop Gray, prompted by many of his fellow bishops, moved to convict Colenso (in absentia) of "false teaching" in an ecclesiastical court in Cape Town and deprive him of his diocese. The ecclesiastical court's ruling which became effective in 1864 was immediately challenged by Colenso in a civil appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, funded by his many well wishers. This ultimately succeeded on procedural grounds in a judgement issued on March 20th 1865. Colenso immediately returned to Natal to exercise his rights as bishop, whereupon he was excommunicated by Gray in January 1866 and notice was served that he was to be regarded "as a heathen man and a publican". At the same time determined efforts were made by the Anglican establishment to deprive him of the financial support he received from the Church both in Natal and England.

CHURCH SCHISM IN NATAL

More high-profile litigation followed in both the Court of Chancery in London which restored his stipend, and in the Supreme Court in Natal whose eventual decision deprived the Church of control of the properties of which Colenso had been trustee and allowed him to control the income from them. Although Colenso therefore managed to retain his stipend for life his access to funds from sources such as the Colonial Bishoprics Fund to support his clergy was thereafter restricted, further increasing his isolation within the church. In Natal, Dean Green, a High-Church ritualist who had the support of most of the clergy in Natal, actually attempted to lock Colenso out of St. Peter's Cathedral. In 1869 the schism was formalised by Gray's consecration of W. K. Macrorie as Bishop of the legally non-existent place of Martizburg which thereafter became an integral part of the Church of the Province of South Africa. A second cathedral, St. Saviour's (which survived until the 1980s) was built in Pietermaritzburg and clergy were recruited using funds raised by Gray and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The schism continued after Colenso's death in 1883. A successor to Colenso was never in fact appointed, although Macrorie's successors were called "Bishop of Natal". The schism only formally came to an end in 1910 when the passage of the Church Properties Act finally vested all church lands in Natal in the Church of the Province of South Africa.

Lay opinion and the press in the colony appear to have been overwhelmingly on Colenso's side in this particular dispute. The reasons for this are complex. Many of Colenso's lay supporters believed Gray had overreached his authority, and simply resented outside interference from the distant Cape. Others were reluctant to sever relations with the Mother Church in England and consequently lose their right of appeal to the Privy Council. Dean Green

was also a High-Church ritualist and the sympathies of many colonists were closer to the broad-church beliefs of Colenso.

In the longer run, however, Colenso's name had become damagingly associated with unseemly and obscure legal disputes (11) and with quarrelsome personal relationships. He had, as Guy puts it, "gained the reputation as a perverse controversialist concerned only with tearing down." (12) Even his friends and sympathisers became increasingly impatient with Colenso's uncompromising personality and his indifference to well-intentioned advice.

Thereafter the Anglican Church establishment chose to fight Colenso not by answering or addressing the very real issues he had raised but by ignoring his work and ridiculing him at every opportunity, much to its long-term disadvantage. Epithets such as "naïve", "difficult character", "dry mathematician", "under the influence of an intelligent Zulu" are repeatedly used to describe Colenso during this period. It is this image of Colenso that continues to the present time in sources ranging from Colenso's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (13) to Owen Chadwick's seminal work on the Victorian Church. (14) In a very recent (1998) foreword to a republished series of sketches by Anthony Trollope, *Clergymen of the Church of England* that first appeared in 1866, the Very Reverend Michael Mayne, former Dean of Westminster, perpetuates this misleading image of Colenso by describing him as "a distinguished mathematician - though no great scholar". (15) While Colenso was certainly an accomplished writer of school arithmetic text books, there is no evidence that he ever made any original contributions to mathematical thought and theory. As *Vanity Fair* succinctly put it in an article on Colenso in November 1874, "it was resolved that he should be prayed for in the next world and ruined in this". (16) Nevertheless, one must probably accept the modern view that Colenso does not fall within the first rank of great theologians although to describe his work as hasty, superficial and a slight contribution to Old Testament scholarship would certainly be misleading and unfair. It was his lack of subtlety more than anything else which alienated so many from his scholarship.

The ruling of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in the Colenso case was to prove in the long run highly significant for the Anglican Church worldwide. The technicalities of the ruling already form the subject of lengthy articles and are summarised as an Appendix in Cox. (17) Basically the case hinged on whether the Letters Patent of 1847 under which authority Bishop Gray had issued his citation against Colenso had been superseded by the subsequent granting of representative government to Natal and the issue of new Letters Patent when the diocese of Cape Town had been divided into Cape Town, Grahamstown and Natal in 1853. The Privy Council ruled that they had, and therefore that the Bishop of Cape Town had no authority over the Bishop of Natal in temporal matters and could not deprive him of his Natal diocese. Naturally this ruling raised important issues concerning the legal structure and authority of the Church of England in the colonies. It had far-reaching consequences. The First Lambeth Conference in 1868 (to which Colenso was pointedly not invited) was partly the result of concerns raised by colonial bishops in the wake of the Colenso judgement. (18) In 1870 the first synod was held of the Church of the Province of South Africa whose establishment resulted directly from the implications of the Colenso judgement.

COLENZO THE POLITICAL ACTIVIST

By the early 1870s Colenso's position was one of isolation both from the mainstream Anglican Church and many sections of Natal society. It was at this point that his work turned towards the political life of Natal, which occupied most of his energies for the remainder of his life. For Colenso his religious beliefs and his political activities were inseparably linked by his sense of duty and his belief in justice, truth and mercy. His interventions in the politics of Natal were, he felt, driven by his duties and obligations as a missionary bishop no matter how unpopular they proved to be - which indeed they duly did! His first major political controversy arose in the wake of the so-called Langalibalele "rebellion" of 1873 and it was this affair that was eventually to alienate him permanently from large sections of lay opinion in Natal.

After the rebellion had been brutally suppressed, he had actively championed the cause of Chief Langalibalele and the Hlubi and Ngwe peoples both in Natal and London. He believed, rightly, as we now know, that they had been the victims of exaggerated and false charges of rebellion and of a grotesque miscarriage of justice. Even the Colonial Office in London and its new Secretary of State, the Earl of Carnarvon, a liberal-minded Tory (19), had serious private misgivings about the behaviour of local colonial officials. However, an inability to communicate over long distances and an overwhelming desire not to undermine the public position of those same officials invariably made London reluctant to act decisively. Only later when the dust had settled in 1875 was the Governor of Natal, Sir Benjamin Pine, quietly recalled. In retrospect the Langalibalele rebellion was a crisis largely of the colonial government's own making and its over-reaction largely reflected a general sense of insecurity.

Colenso's long friendship with Theophilus Shepstone, which had begun on his arrival in 1854, was brought to a painful end by the Langalibalele rebellion. Colenso realised only afterwards the full extent of Shepstone's complicity in what modern scholarship has confirmed was an aggressive and dishonourable campaign against native peoples even when measured by the standards of Victorian imperialism. Yet Colenso was not without powerful friends and allies. A small group of Liberal MPs and lobby groups such as the Aborigines Protection Society made sure that the official line did not go unchallenged in London.

Vanity Fair's article on Colenso in its issue of November 28th, 1874, referred in glowing terms to Colenso's "noble" fight on behalf of Langa libale. Even more significantly he had the support of Queen Victoria who privately wrote from Osborne to the Earl of Carnarvon on Christmas Eve 1874:

The Queen has privately through a mutual friend, expressed to the Bishop of Natal her sense of his noble, disinterested conduct in favour of the natives who were so unjustly used, and in general her very strong feeling (and she has few stronger) that the natives and coloured races should be treated with every kindness and affection, as brothers, not - as alas! Englishmen too often do - as totally different beings to ourselves fit only to be crushed and shot down. (20)

But at the end of the day, Colenso proved far too trusting of those in colonial authority who he thought should have been motivated solely by a disinterested Englishman's belief in truth, justice and mercy and in their manifest destiny to bring enlightenment to the heathen world. In reality these ideals were inevitably tempered by the prevailing beliefs of officialdom and Natal society in matters concerning imperial expansion and racial supremacy. It was to be a recurring feature of Colenso's involvement in both religious and political controversies that he failed to recognise the frailties inherent in other human beings who could not meet his own exacting standards of personal conduct and belief.

COLENSO & NATAL PUBLIC OPINION

When Colenso stood in his pulpit on March 12th he was no stranger to bitter political controversy, and the fault lines between the various sections of white opinion in Natal were already clearly drawn. It would be wrong to assume, even in the aftermath of Isandlwana, that a consensus of opinion about the war prevailed in Natal. In reality it was far more complex although difficult to assess with complete accuracy. At one end of the political spectrum there was undoubtedly a small band of idealists who supported Colenso in his beliefs and his analysis of recent events. Colonel Durnford, killed at Isandlwana, was one who bravely and consistently stood up to be counted. They were quite prepared to appeal to higher authorities and pressure groups outside the colony if this helped their cause. Such outside "interference" appears, however, to have caused much resentment within Natal, even among those who were broadly

sympathetic to Colenso. There were therefore those who, to varying degrees, supported Colenso's views in public (but one suspects largely in private) yet deeply resented any appeal to higher authorities over matters which they believed were the concern of Natal alone. Statham, editor of the *Natal Witness*, who had been deeply critical of Frere well before the war, was one of these, although it is hard to pigeon-hole him. (21) He had been suspicious of the Colonial Office's motives ever since the annexation of the Transvaal in 1877. Referring to Colenso's representations in London for justice on behalf of native peoples, Statham wrote in his editorial eulogy that followed Colenso's death in 1883:

The battle was in many respects an unequal one, because in England there was the Colonial Office, the great bane of colonists, always ready and eager to be misinformed, and to reward and support those of its agents who misinformed it". (22)

Even Dean Green, Colenso's fiercest theological opponent, was reported in the *Times of Natal* of May 23rd, 1879, as having called on Frere to show "peace and moderation". They were certainly the tip of a much larger iceberg. *The Witness* after all continued to sell newspapers and Colenso and Green still attracted congregations.

There was a third group of cooler heads epitomised in the privately expressed thoughts and despatches of the Lieutenant Governor, Sir Henry Bulwer, who had never felt that conflict was imminent, necessary or desirable. From the outset, Bulwer had realised that Shepstone's annexation of the Transvaal in 1877 had fundamentally destabilised the fragile political balance in south-eastern Africa. As he wrote to Shepstone in January 1878:

... we are looking to different objects - I to the termination of this dispute by peaceful settlement, you to its termination by the overthrow of the Zulu kingdom". (23)

Bulwer had signed the December 1878 ultimatum to Cetshwayo with great reluctance. He also resented Frere's aggressive actions and his impositions on the colony. While Bulwer recognised his responsibility as Governor for defending the colony, waging an aggressive war was quite another matter. Even so, Bulwer was much closer to Frere in his views than he was to Colenso. In his private despatches to the Colonial Office and in his correspondence during the early months of 1879 there is no overt sympathy for Colenso or for the message contained in his sermon. Bulwer's concerns relate to the successful prosecution of the war and the defence of the colony now that he was stuck with the problem.

Both Colenso and Bulwer were adamant that white settlers in Natal were in no way responsible for provoking the war, nor could it be justified as being essential to Natal's security. They both independently tried to put the record straight with regard to the widely-held view in Britain that the Anglo-Zulu War had been prosecuted in the cause of Natal's settlers in order to serve their own selfish interests. Colenso wrote:

I think the colonists have been harshly and unjustly judged in England in respect of this War. Speaking of them generally I have no hesitation in saying that they never urged it on, or even dreamt of it, until Sir B. Frere came up here, and wheedled them into following his lead. (24)

Bulwer echoed these views in his private despatches to Frere and Wolseley.

Finally there was probably the largest section of opinion, certainly once the war had begun, which jingoistically and largely uncritically, backed Frere. They looked eagerly for revenge and the elimination of the Zulu army.

As Bill Guest has pointed out, (25) there had regularly been periods when the prevalent mood in the colony had been that of an almost pathological sense of insecurity with regard to Natal's black neighbours. By late 1878, there was a widely established, if largely unquestioned, assumption that a Zulu invasion of Natal was imminent and that a longstanding restlessness among the native peoples of southern Africa could be attributed to Zulu instigation. Yet while settlers might regard war as probable or even inevitable, few actually regarded it as desirable. Once the war began, however, support for the official Frere line strengthened immeasurably. The majority of settlers anticipated a common fate at the hands of invading Zulu impi, whatever their views on the origins of the war.

Prior to the war, Frere had been well aware of the ambivalence of local public opinion towards his wider imperial ambitions. In December 1878 he had written to Shepstone:

I do not think that even with all your knowledge of Natal you fully recognise the difficulties we are in with our countrymen here ... how half-hearted is the support we get not only from gun runners and pseudo-philanthropists, but from a mass of half-informed and prejudicial people, who to much contempt and ill-will towards the Transvaal Boers, add a curious sort of sympathy for Cetywayo (sic), such as one might feel for a wolf or hyena one had petted. Then there are many who, from habit, mistrust all we do because it is done by government or by what they call 'imperial' and not by Colonial people. The net result is that our own countrymen hereabouts are only half of them *heartily with us, in all we do, and our difficulties are as much from our own people as from Cetywayo's.* (26)

Frere, however, skilfully exploited the general sense of insecurity within the colony to provoke a crisis which would demand action even though these demands would never be unanimous. In doing so Frere enjoyed a key advantage over the settlers since the absence of an elected government in the colony made it impossible for them to exert control or directly influence official policy towards the Zulu Kingdom.

LOCAL REACTION TO COLENZO'S SERMON

The obvious place for reflection of public opinion is in the lively pages of the contemporary Natal press. In early 1879 Natal was well served by a variety of titles. *The Natal Witness* and *The Times of Natal* were both published in Pietermaritzburg and appeared three times a week. *The Times* appeared on Monday, Wednesday and Friday; *the Witness* on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. *The Natal Mercury* and *The Natal Colonist and Herald* were both published in Durban. *The Mercury* was (and still is) published daily; the *Colonist* appeared like its sister paper the *Witness* on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

The contemporary press prior to and during the war was by no means a uniformly uncritical mouthpiece for the official government line. While the *Times* and *Mercury* largely toed the official line the *Witness* and its sister paper, the *Colonist*, took a much more critical view of the events leading up to the war. The fact that they did so suggests that a significant section, albeit perhaps a minority, of settler opinion sympathised to some degree with Colenso's analysis of the war and its causes. Significantly it was the firm of P. Davis and Sons which owned the *Witness* and its printing works that published Colenso's sermon in full later in 1879. (27)

Throughout this period, the *Witness* was edited by the enigmatic Francis Reginald Statham who had arrived in Natal at the end of April 1877 to take up his position at the age of 33. Statham had been attracted to the *Witness* by its reputation for a robust independence. But independence and a tendency to identify with the underdog, as Statham was later to find out, had their price. These attributes won him few permanent allies within the various factions of colonial society from which he was to some extent isolated by a touchy and unpredictable personality. This included even the Colenso family. (28)

The British annexation of the Transvaal in 1877 had been bitterly opposed by Statham. It had irrevocably destabilised south eastern Africa and set the British Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, on a collision course with the Zulu Kingdom. Even while the war was progressing and providing the *Witness* with an abundance of copy, Statham continued to attack Frere and his two rival newspapers which he believed were in the pay of Government House. In an editorial of March 8th, 1879, he described his two rivals as "subsidised serpents". His advocacy of an independent Zululand and South African Republic cannot however have been an entirely popular point of view and this seems to have led to increasing alienation from his employers. Whatever the reason, Statham temporarily cut his ties with the *Natal Witness* at the end of 1879 to take up the editorship of the *Cape Post*.

Nevertheless, analysis of the local press in the aftermath of Colenso's sermon provides some interesting insights into Colenso's position in Natal. The most obvious fact is the virtual absence of any direct comment on the sermon anywhere in the local press. Even the most virulent anti-Zulu letters to the press largely seem to omit any reference

to Colenso during this period. In the aftermath of Isandlwana there is precious little indication of any significant and reasoned public debate within the colony of the moral issues surrounding the war. The concerns were of a more immediate nature: fear, self-righteous justification for what was being done, the urge for revenge. One can only speculate why this was so. Perhaps much of local society had long ago despaired of Colenso's views on native problems and his sermon, however, powerful, added little to his widely known position.

The *Witness*, Colenso's closest press ally, carried no reference at all to the sermon in the days that followed. On March 15th, Statham vigorously attacked Frere in a way that Colenso would have sympathised with, but still made no mention of Colenso or of his sermon. The correspondence columns at this time are full of support for Frere, as are the public meetings convened for that purpose. One of them held in Pietermaritzburg on April 7th attacked the "rabid" editorship of Statham. (29) *The Mercury* on March 17th in its "Notes from Maritzburg" contained further comment on the Day of Humiliation and noted "The temptation was too much for Bishop Colenso who made use of it to propound his well-known pro-native views, and to condemn our authorities for the action they had taken in connection with the war". *The Times of Natal* on March 14th made much the same comments describing Colenso's sermon as "an elaborate political address". The *Times* sympathies were to remain overwhelmingly on the side of Frere. On April 9th, a long letter in the *Times* from Canon Bowditch on "The Moral Aspect of Politics" attacked Frere's policies prior to the outbreak of war. This only served to generate a large number of hostile column inches of correspondence and leaders supporting Frere. Much the same pattern was the case in the *Mercury*. A letter from Mr. James Saunders on March 26th must have expressed the views of many settlers on the subject of Colenso:

Yet I dare not conceal the conviction which, the more I study the subject, the more it is forced on me, namely that it is under providence to the Bishop of Natal more than any man living, that is traceable the growth of that feeling among natives, which, ever since Langalibalele's trial, has led their chiefs, first to the edge and then over the precipice which has engulfed in one common ruin, and made so many fatherless and widows of both races.

We are all but paltry instruments in the hands of a higher one, and I can but say His will be done.

Yours, etc." (30)

Perhaps this lack of immediate public reaction to Colenso's sermon is not surprising. By then everyone knew perfectly well where both they and Colenso stood. There was nothing to be gained by publicly attacking or defending the bishop. Perhaps Natal was too preoccupied with the war and obsessed with the threat of a Zulu invasion which never came. It was only with Zulu defeats at Kambula and Gingindlovu and the relief of Fort Eshowe in late March and early April that the tide of war visibly turned against the Zulus. Even those who knew deep down that Colenso was right - and there must have been many - also knew that imperial prestige required the destruction of Cetshwayo. The thought was largely of revenge even though the publication of Frere's despatches for the period prior to the war had already revealed how accurate Colenso's analysis had been. By that time it was too late. Large sections of local opinion had long ago broken with Colenso. When the Natal Carbineers returned from the war in late July, Colenso's name was conspicuous by its absence from a long list of VIPs who welcomed them back at a "public luncheon in the Park" in Pietermaritzburg. (31) Yet Colenso would have enjoyed "Ye Ballad of ye Bold Bad Bishop" published by the *Witness* on September 13th.

Its last stanza read:

Why, why do you agitate men so,
Keeping at it again and again so?
Always telling the truth
In old age as in youth,
Irrepressible Bishop Colenso.

COLENZO IN AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

When Colenso died in June 1883 he seemed to have achieved so little. His religious beliefs had isolated him from many of his friends; his missionary endeavours had yielded few tangible results; the Anglican Church in Natal was in a state of bitter schism. Zululand had suffered from invasion and the Zulu Royal House had collapsed in a bloody civil war which many people actually blamed on Colenso. Justice, mercy and truth had yet to be shown to Langalibalele and his people. This superficial impression of failure is reinforced by the few tangible reminders of Colenso's career. His Norfolk parish church of Forncett St. Mary now stands abandoned and vandalised, its churchyard overgrown. Its fine medieval flint tower, like so many of its neighbours, dominates the flat East Anglian landscape but is a mere shadow of its former glory. Stripped of its contents, the inside carries no trace of any links with Colenso. Colenso's family homestead at Bishopstowe, a few miles east of Pietermaritzburg, was accidentally burnt down shortly after his death and what remains of a smaller rebuilt house is in a sorry state. But here there is hope since a local group of dedicated enthusiasts is now working to rehabilitate the buildings, including the simple missionary schoolhouse that Colenso established. Yet this superficial assessment of Colenso is inaccurate. Even his colonial contemporaries realised that with his death a great and good man had departed this world. The *Times of Natal* and the *Mercury* which had so bitterly opposed Colenso during his lifetime both recognised in short low-key

editorials the nobility of his purpose and his integrity. It was left to the *Natal Witness* to give a long eulogy of Colenso's work. In its full-page editorial on June 23rd, 1883, immediately following his death, Statham wrote of the Isandlwana sermon:

A sermon on the duty of doing justice and loving mercy, in which the annexation of the Transvaal was alluded to as a crime for the justification of which another crime - the Zulu War - was necessary - such a sermon as this would not easily be forgotten".

Statham went on:

The cause, then, which the Bishop fought, was the cause of the whole Colony, because it was, although chiefly confined in one special direction, the cause of justice, and honesty, and understanding.the Bishop has been opposed, maligned, slandered, misrepresented. That was a necessary consequence of his action. But there can be little doubt that such slanders and misrepresentations - we are especially referring to those proceeding from high official sources - will ultimately recoil, with grievous effect, upon those with whom they originated".

Within little more than a generation of Colenso's death his approach to biblical criticism had become the conventional wisdom and no modern Anglican theologian would now seriously dispute the general thrust of his beliefs or seek to deny him a position within the Anglican Church. Modern scholarship has confirmed his analysis of the Anglo-Zulu War so cogently set out in his sermon. He therefore stands in a long line of Anglican activists against racial injustice in southern Africa which has continued into the post-apartheid era.

The doctrine of eternal damnation disappeared from the Anglican agenda almost entirely unnoticed and without any conscious disavowal. Colenso had no doubt that modern science could not and would not replace or invalidate the value of faith. Modern Christian theology, just as Colenso did, now recognises that it is the message of the Bible that is important rather than its literal truth. Today Colenso would be classed alongside David Jenkins, former Bishop of Durham, and, from a previous generation, Hensley Henson, successively Bishop of Hereford and then of Durham, both Anglicans of standing, who raised questions about received doctrine but remained in the church. In a recent authoritative book, *The Bible in History. How Writers Create a Past*, Professor Thomas Thompson provides a modern critique of the Bible's historicity. (32) He does so using much the same approach that Colenso did 140 years ago, but is able to draw upon a vastly greater reservoir of biblical and archaeological scholarship than Colenso was ever able to do.

Thompson's view was that:

the Bible doesn't deal with what happened in the past. It deals with what was thought, written and transmitted within an interacting intellectual tradition". (33)

no longer shocks, but provides a modern expression of Colenso's main message. Since 1968 all clergy of the Church of England have had to accept a remarkably flexible "Declaration of Assent" when being licensed by a bishop. Recognising the "broad" nature of the Anglican Church, the individual now affirms loyalty to an "inheritance of faith" instead of declaring acceptance of a specific set of doctrinal confessional statements. Colenso's conviction for heresy would be all but impossible within this modern framework of belief. Where Colenso would find things little changed, perhaps, would be in the reactions to his beliefs about marriage, but even here change is under way.

Like so many missionaries, Colenso was ahead of his time and the stream of ideas that inspired him in the 1860s subsequently turned into an irresistible flood. Christianity has moved out of the Latin world, raising fundamental questions of authority as it has done so, just as Colenso found in a new African world at the dawn of a new scientific age. The Anglican Communion is now largely Afro-Asian and is following the Christian way in an emerging global culture which includes, but is not confined to, a European tradition. Colenso would have been perfectly at home in this environment. Closer to home the Church of England continues to grapple with the nature of its relationship with the state and, indeed, with the establishment, being inextricably tied up with both. Yet, at the same time, the Church recognises its need to offer an effective critique which issues from the Christian gospel - what Robert Runcie has described as "critical solidarity". "Interfering prelates" is a description as familiar to modern Anglican bishops as it was to Colenso.

When the author recently knelt in front of Colenso's final resting-place he was conscious of being close to a brave human being. Colenso may so often have irritated his friends and supporters. He was in many ways his own worst enemy, like so many who know they are right and fail to understand how human weakness in others can corrupt the best of intentions. Yet the words of his famous sermon can still inspire, just as they did those that first heard them.

Colenso lies directly in front of the altar in his old Cathedral Church of St. Peter in Pietermaritzburg. The inscription reads:

John William Colenso D.D. - Bishop of Natal
Sobantu
Died June 20th, 1883
Aged 69

Close by on the wall is a small brass plaque on which are inscribed the following words:

Provincial Synod Resolution
11 July 1985

That the Provincial Synod, meeting in the Diocese of Natal whose beginnings were marred by division and controversy, rejoices in the gift of reconciliation given us by Christ who is our peace; gives thanks to Him for the uniting of two former cathedral parishes into one new cathedral parish dedicated to His Holy Nativity whereby He began to draw all people to Himself; recognises and affirms the faithful and steadfast leadership of the first Bishop of Capetown, Robert Gray, in laying firm and lasting foundations, in faith and order, for the church of the Province of Southern Africa; recognises and affirms also the courageous leadership of the first Bishop of Natal, John William Colenso, in the area of pioneering biblical scholarship, cross-cultural mission and the pursuit of social justice.

John William Colenso can rest comfortably in peace.

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THE COLENZO HOMESTEAD RESTORATION PROJECT

The Colenso family homestead at Bishopstowe, 9 km east of Pietermaritzburg, has been lived in by various owners over the years. Since its severe damage by fire in 1884, it has been altered and added to but in recent years has come very dilapidated. It has, however, been saved and has been leased for 50 years to the Anglican Diocese of Natal. An independent committee is now overseeing its restoration. The first phase - complete re-roofing to prevent further rain damage - was completed at the end of 1996. It has now been declared a National Monument. The aim is to renovate the house, the chapel-cum-schoolroom and the garden, with its view over the valley towards the majestic emKhabathini (Table Mountain) - the same view that inspired Bishop Colenso 150 years ago.

Further information about the Restoration Project can be obtained from:

Colenso Homestead Project,
PO Box 13692,
Cascades,
3202 SOUTH AFRICA.

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