

Cattle Raiding by British and Colonial troops.

By Adrian Greaves

Cattle raiding and seizing ‘other prizes’ by British troops during the Zulu War is a subject only briefly alluded to by most historians. In the case of the British attack on Hlobane, frequent references are made in various reports to ‘seizing Zulu cattle’ but the significance of this action is deeper than it appears. On the face of it, seizing Zulu cattle certainly deprived the enemy of a vital food source, it also attacked their fundamental economic base – cattle signified wealth to the Zulus.

What is not generally appreciated is the fact that a great deal of ‘plunder money’ could be officially earned by formally undertaking cattle raiding expeditions. I venture to suggest that it was this fact which made such undertakings so popular with the invasion force; it indicates another reason why Col. Buller and his attacking force were so keen to ‘attack’ Hlobane, not a position of any military significance but one where Zulu cattle were massed. It might also account for their lax attitude to scouting prior to their attack on Hlobane; they were unaware that the main Zulu force was approaching Hlobane and was camped only a few miles away.

The following is an extract from the official orders issued by Lord Chelmsford in November 1878.

“Item 145. ‘Cattle and other prize’.

The following rules, having reference to the capture of cattle, or other prize, will be adhered to by all forces serving under the orders of the Lieutenant-general commanding-

On any cattle or other prize being taken, the officer commanding the corps or party making the same will at once report the circumstances and number or nature of the prize to the officer in charge of the operations, who will thereupon determine what troops will share, and will appoint prize agents to arrange for the disposal of the cattle, &c., and to distribute the proceeds according to the following scale, viz.-

Trooper or private – 1 share.

NCO – 2 shares.

Captain or subaltern – 3 shares.

Field officer – 4 shares.

Officer in command of the operations – 6 shares.

Officers of the staff – shares according to their rank”.

This particular order will have been common knowledge throughout the British invasion force and may explain their enthusiasm for such cattle raids.