

## The Battle of Hlobane New Evidence and Difficult Conclusions

By Ron Lock

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It seems to be, when writing of the Anglo Zulu War, that no sooner has one completed the “definitive account” of whatever, when, out of some attic or archive, emerges new and dramatic evidence, an example being the letters of Lieutenant Henry Curling RA, which came to light recently providing new and vivid evidence on the Battle of Isandlwana (AZWHS Journal June 1998).

Such has also been the case with the Battle of Hlobane. Since the publication of my book *Blood on the Painted Mountain – Zulu Victory and Defeat: Hlobane and Kambula, 1879* published only three years ago, three new sources of information have emerged: the diary of Sergeant Major F.W. Cheffins of Raaff’s Rangers, (1) a letter, dated 6 April 1879, written by Major William Knox Leet, 13<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry, (2) and an unpublished portion of Capt. Charles Dennison’s book *A Fight to a Finish*, published in 1904. (3) Dennison was second in command of the Border Horse at the time of Hlobane and the only officer of that unit to survive the battle.

Whilst researching *Blood on Painted Mountain* I tracked down a copy of Dennison’s book in which I fully expected to find a first hand account of Hlobane. It came as a great disappointment – and much of a mystery, when I found that he had written next to nothing about the most terrifying and dramatic event of his life. But, of course, he had written about it – a whole chapter in fact, but for reasons best known to himself had, seemingly at the last moment, withdrawn the chapter and by its omission made his book a poorer account of his adventurous life.

Huw Jones, another commentator on the Anglo Zulu War, particularly the battles of Hlobane and Kambula, has already written an article on the new evidence contained in Dennison’s missing chapter, and has drawn a number of serious conclusions. (4) But before comparing old and new evidence, it is necessary to sketch briefly the events of the battle itself.

By March of 1879, Lord Chelmsford, the Commander of the British forces in Southern Africa, with the early disasters of the war against the Zulus firmly behind him, was contemplating a second invasion attempt. However, his first priority was to relieve the garrison at Eshowe which had been besieged for almost two months. To do this, he believed a diversion was necessary and accordingly requested the commander of No. 4 Column, Colonel Evelyn Wood, to create a distraction on or about the 27<sup>th</sup> of the month.

At the time Wood was laagered at Kambula, 25 miles distant from a flat topped mountain named Hlobane (the Painted Mountain) home of the aggressive abaQulusi clan who were fiercely loyal to the Zulu king. It was known that a rich prize of over 4,000 cattle grazed the mountain top.

Prompted by his second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel Redvers Buller, Wood, in pursuance of Chelmsford’s request, decided to attack Hlobane on the 28<sup>th</sup> March. The attackers would be composed almost wholly of colonial horsemen and native auxiliaries, half of which would assail the mountain from the east and the other from the west, the whole force under the command of Buller. Wood’s role on the day was initially little more than that of an observer becoming, as we shall see, more obscure as the day wore on.

Those attacking the western end were under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Cecil Russell and were made up of approximately 200 cavalry and 440 native auxiliaries including 200 Zulu warriors who had defected to the British, along with their leader Prince Hamu, a half brother of King Cetshwayo. (5)

The force tackling the eastern end was commanded by Buller himself and numbered approximately 400 mounted men, all local volunteer horsemen except for a few imperial officers, and 280 native auxiliaries. (6) Included in the horsemen were the Border Horse commanded by an experienced British ex-cavalry officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frederic Weatherley who had fought in both the Crimea War and the Indian Mutiny. Weatherley’s second-in-command was Captain George Dennison – and it is with the Border Horse, Weatherley and Dennison that we are concerned.

The attacking of Hlobane was ill conceived, the setting of horsemen against a mountain fortress. Hlobane towers 1,500 feet above the surrounding plain and with the exception of two or three precipitous pathways, the flat-topped mountain, four and a half miles long by one and a half miles wide, is inaccessible, being guarded by a skirt of perpendicular, crumbling rock walls containing lairs and caves inhabited in times of attack by the agile and elusive abaQulusi. Huw Jones has suggested that part of the reason for the attack on Hlobane was the temptation of rustling abaQulusi cattle. (7) Such, however, is an extreme supposition and difficult to accept as a likely reason for the assault, even though Wood’s column had acquired a reputation as cattle rustlers. (8) No doubt the possible acquisition of so much booty was an added bonus to the prime target of creating the diversion required by Lord Chelmsford and subduing the abaQulusi prior to Wood advancing with Chelmsford into Zululand on the second invasion.

The two-pronged attack was designed to be a surprise, and, endeavouring to deceive the abaQulusi into believing that the real destination of his column was a target far to the south-east, Buller by-passed Hlobane making an initial bivouac on the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> some three miles away from the base of the mountain.

Here campfires were lit to give the enemy the impression that the column was settled for the night. However, in the early hours of the morning, when it was still dark, Buller and his men began to move against the mountain, leaving their campfires burning.

Meanwhile, Weatherley and his Border Horse, due to a misunderstanding, had got left behind and spent much of the night trying to find and catch up with the rest of the column – and here we will leave them for the moment.

It is extremely unlikely that the abaQulusi were deceived by Buller's feint to the south-east. They would have seen Russell's column heading to the western end of the mountain and, as subsequent events tend to confirm, they would have concluded that their stronghold was to be attacked at both ends. Not only were they prepared for the attack when it came, they were also aware that the main Zulu army, which Lord Chelmsford had assumed would be opposing him 100 miles away at Eshowe, was, completely unbeknown to Buller, camped only six miles away from Hlobane. (9)

Buller's attack against Hlobane was almost unopposed and having once gained the plateau his column proceeded at a leisurely pace, looting cattle as they went, to meet up with Russell advancing from the west. Alas, when both columns attempted to meet in the middle of the plateau they found their way barred by a precipitous cliff that was about to become infamously known as Devil's Pass. While Buller was pondering the problem of getting men, horses and hundreds of looted cattle down from Devil's Pass, 2,000 abaQulusi warriors, advancing across Hlobane from the adjoining Ityentika plateau to the east, trapped Buller and his men against the rim of the pass. Just at that moment the main Zulu army appeared on the plain below where, to the horror of the attackers, it began advancing at a fast jog with the obvious intention of encircling the British force.

The upshot amongst both columns was panic and pandemonium. Russell responding to an ill-defined order he had just received from Wood, and with a clear escape route unopposed for the moment, did not hesitate. Instead of supporting Buller's descent down Devil's Pass, Russell left him to his fate – as he did his own native auxiliaries, and took his column away at speed towards the safety of Kambula. (10)

Whilst all this had been going on, Colonel Wood, with his three staff officers and small escort, had been enjoying the morning, riding in the wake of Buller's advance when, according to Wood, they encountered Weatherley and the Border Horse riding down the mountain away from any fighting that may have been taking place above – and now begins the controversy bought about by the recently discovered chapter of Dennison's book.

Wood's version of what followed is at odds with that of Dennison. According to Wood, hardly had the two parties met when they were fired upon by some snipers in the rocks above, causing the Border Horse, who were leading, to hesitate. Wood with his staff pushed through them directly towards the enemy, leaving most of the Border Horse 200 yards behind. Closing on the rocks sheltering the snipers, Mr. Lloyd, Wood's political officer, was mortally wounded by a marksman at only 50 yards distance. Lloyd was then lifted by Captain Ronald Campbell, Wood's Staff Officer, and carried a short distance to a stone cattle kraal where Wood's escort and the Border Horse were sheltering. Wood then told Campbell to order the Border Horse forward but Campbell "...found most difficulty in inducing the men to advance, as they alleged the position was unassailable..." Campbell then went forward himself with a few of Wood's escort and was shot dead as he reached the snipers' lair. (11)

Wood has yet another description of what happened. In 1917 (38 years after the event) he wrote a more detailed account in his book *Winnowed Memories*. (12) In this version he directs Campbell to order an officer to take some men "...and turn the Zulu's out..." The officer concerned received the order three times but refused to budge whereupon Campbell shouted "Damn him! He's a coward. I'll turn them out". Then, as before, Campbell is killed. However, Wood goes on to describe the officer accused of cowardice and although he does not name him, he is clearly referring to Weatherley.

There is a little more of Wood's first version: Lloyd and Campbell having been killed, Wood decides to bury them and despite being continually harassed by the abaQulusi, his men set about the laborious task of digging a grave, using spears as spades. Finally he reads a burial service from Campbell's bible. This long drawn out operation cost the Border Horse, as they kept the abaQulusi at bay, six dead and seven wounded. In Wood's own callous words, "He [Weatherley], had lost only six men and seven men wounded up to this hour".

Wood then gives Weatherley permission to follow Buller's tracks up the mountain whilst he and his escort about turn "to see how the other column had fared". In doing so Wood passed a wounded trooper of the Border Horse and, having put him on his spare mount, took him along.

Dennison's account is rather different. Due to the misunderstanding mentioned earlier, the Border Horse had remained most of the day at a spot between Kambula and Hlobane, whilst the rest of the column rode on. It was only at dusk that they started to follow. At that time they had only marched three hours from Kambula –

say twelve or thirteen miles, with the same distance to go to Hlobane. There was no moon, and like other accounts of that night, it was pitch black and raining; consequently the Border Horse soon lost their way. After riding for several hours Dennison believed he saw stars appearing but soon realised the sparkling points of light were campfires of an immense army below him and to the right. Undoubtedly it was the Zulu army bivouacs to the south of Nyembi Hill.

Weatherley then orders Dennison to reconnoitre. He takes two men and:

leaving our horses and arms we went forward on foot down the grassy slope of the mountain side towards the fires in our front, feeling our way down the rain sodden decline. Until we reached a ledge down behind which the light of many fires lit up the sky, while away on both sides of a wide deep kloof, and glimmering away far down like stars far distant, we could see the many fires of a Zulu impi while the hum of many voices broke the silence of the night. 'Twas a weird scene that we looked upon as scarce breathing, noiselessly we advanced step by step to the edge of the krans below us. When within a few yards I touched one of the men and whispered "wait here both of you" then cautiously feeling my way I reached the edge of the ledge and looking gently, quietly over to see beneath me groups of Zulus squatting around fires all along beneath the rocky ledge I lay on. So close did one lot just below me seem to be that with a rifle I thought I might have reached their bald ringed heads.

(Spelling and punctuation of Dennison's account as per his manuscript.)

Dennison and his two companions, overhearing the warriors discussing Kambula as their objective, withdrew and rejoined Weatherley who decided to stay put, despite the proximity of the enemy, until they "...could get the right direction to Hlobane" – presumably, when it got light.

As far as can be judged, the Border Horse at that moment, would have been about four and a half miles away from the point, at the base of Hlobane, where Buller was to lead the assault. Dennison continues:

About three o'clock in the morning I saw distant flashes away north, which we judged was the flashing of firearms on Hlobane. I quickly woke the Colonel and had such men as were asleep awakened. All mounted and silently as possible we moved away in the direction of the flashes of light we had seen, which as we advanced became more incessant and gave continuous light to guide us.

There is, of course, no way that flashes from firearms at such a distance could be seen through drizzling rain with that sort of intensity of light. What Dennison probably saw was the guttering fire of the beacons that the abaQulusi burned for most of the night, on top of Hlobane.

As it slowly got light the mountain loomed in front of the Border Horse and a loud and continuous firing was heard:

As we crossed the last marsh 'twas now quite light. We saw a party of horsemen galloping across our front. We caught them up at the foot of the mountain. 'Twas Colonel Sir Evelyn Wood the officer commanding our Column, with some of the mounted infantry. Lt. Cyrus Fowler and some others I recognised, among whom was Capt. Campbell and Colonel Wood's interpreter, a Natal man. "What's the matter Weatherley, where do you come from?" asked Col. Wood as we rode up. The position was explained. Colonel Weatherley told Col. Wood about the Zulu impi. "Nonsense" was the retort. "I have had my men out yesterday, there is no Zulu impi about". I said, "I saw them, was in fact almost within touching distance of them and judged them to be a strong force". He said, "Can't be Dennison, you are mistaken". I made no reply further, but watching my opportunity I rode to Colonel Weatherley's side and said "Don't you think Sir, we should place a picket on that hill" pointing to a semi conical hill to our east. "Leave our horses here and advance up the hill on foot until we gain the top where we can get them up". "No, No" said Colonel Wood who overheard the latter part of my suggestion, "the others in advance had gone up with their horses, you can do the same". I saw the folly of such a course for one could plainly see that we should have to fight our way up the mountain and to do so leading our horses appeared to my mind (untutored) though I was in military tactics, to be wrong. However up we went doing the best we could.

The combined party then continued uphill, following Buller's tracks "...making straight for the path showing red against the summit..." where they could see the enemy taking up position. Wood then gives the order "Keep to the left" which caused them to face "... a horseshoe krans of great height..." its base strewn with boulders and scattered bush amongst which the enemy were concealed.

A large number of cattle in a kraal could be clearly seen and Dennison speculated that they, the cattle, may have been the reason for Wood deviating to the left – perhaps a sly innuendo in Dennison's part to the propensity of Wood's column to loot! (13)

Very soon the Border Horse came under fire for the first time:

Several of our men were struck down amongst which were my two faithful followers Bernard and Barth, [the two who scouted with Dennison at Nyembi a few hours earlier] both were shot dead near me, several were wounded, including my batman, by name, Cameron, Sergeant Fisher and others whose names I now forget... we were working from rock to rock, when word was passed onto me from [word indistinguishable] Weatherley that he wanted me. I returned to where he stood near some rocks, with Rupert his son sitting near him under the cover of a rock. Col. Wood was a little way off near him was the dead body of his servant and interpreter Lloyd. "Colonel Wood says you must charge Dennison" Colonel Weatherley said. I looked amazed at such an order where men could only baboon fashion make progress. As I was turning to rejoin my men, Capt. Campbell who was with Colonel Wood rushed forward calling "Forward boys". A few minutes later he was lifted back a lifeless corpse. The top of his skull was blown off. My men lifted the body over the rocks, Lysons and Fowler assisted for which they were rewarded the V.C. each. I know that Colonel Wood stated in his report that the Border Horse hesitated, hence the reason Capt. Campbell rushed forward. What I have stated is simple truth. The Border Horse never deserved a slur in action, Colonel Wood was mistaken. Immediately Captain Campbell fell, Col. Wood left us with his mounted infantry and retired. I was standing alongside of Colonel Weatherley when Colonel Wood left, he gave no order or I must have heard it. He took with him one of our wounded, a young man named Andrew Hammond...

It will be seen that much of Wood's and Dennison's accounts are similar – almost identical in part, but in differing on the important issues, one can only conclude that one or other has deliberately falsified what happened that day.

Perhaps the question is why did Dennison withdraw the chapter from publication? Huw Jones has suggested the reason being that by 1904 Wood was a Field Marshal – and in this I agree. He was also an esteemed public figure and a revered reformer of the common soldier's conditions of service. Aspersion by an obscure colonial concerning events that happened a quarter of a century earlier would not have been well received. It is also possible that Dennison's publisher insisted on the chapter's withdrawal.

Huw Jones has accepted Dennison's account without reserve, but in fairness to Wood, there are a number of flaws in what Dennison has written that require comment. Perhaps, quite innocently, some came about by tricks the memory can play when writing on events long past.

We have already seen that he mistook the abaQulusi beacons on top of Hlobane for rifle-fire. He also said he recognised "Lieutenant Cyrus Fowler" as one of the party accompanying Wood; this is incorrect, the man concerned was Private Edmond Fowler who was later awarded the Victoria Cross. Dennison also confuses Lieutenant Colonel Cecil Russell, commanding the Eastern column attacking Hlobane, with Captain Baker Russell, and entirely different officer in Chelmsford's army; and on two occasions Dennison mixes up the 96<sup>th</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> Regiments with that of the 90<sup>th</sup>. But of greater concern is his and Weatherley's alleged conversation with Wood when reporting the presence of the Zulu Army. On being informed of its close proximity Wood is said to have replied "*Can't be, Dennison. You are mistaken*". Whereupon Dennison and Weatherley leave it at that making no further comment. How weak! Surely Weatherley at least, who had just about seen as much active service as Wood, and held a British Army rank of Lieutenant Colonel, would have insisted that Wood heed their news? Remember, however, that Weatherley himself had not seen the Zulu Army – and was it also that Dennison did not get as close to the enemy on that black and rainy night as, twenty five years later, he believed he had? Perhaps, at the time of meeting up with Wood, Dennison was less convinced of what he had seen and Weatherley even less so.

Dennison also makes no mention of the grave digging and burial of Campbell and Lloyd which must have been a harrowing experience, occupying well over an hour, during which, as mentioned earlier, several of the Border Horse were killed and wounded. (14) Thus the omission of the burial is inexplicable, especially so when Dennison does recall in detail Wood taking away a wounded trooper on a spare horse – both Dennison's and Wood's accounts agree on this point. No, all Dennison has to say on the subject is that:

immediately Captain Campbell fell, Colonel Wood left us with his mounted infantry and retired.

It did occur to me that perhaps Wood left the bodies unburied, merely saying that they had been interred to placate the dead men's next of kin. However, as Wood mentions their burial in his official report written within two days of the battle, and the subsequent adornment of the site with monuments is well documented, I can only conclude that the dead men were buried, more or less, as Wood describes. Nevertheless the question remains was there any reason for Wood to accuse a dead man of cowardice?

Wood and his second-in-command Buller, had not only made a colossal blunder in attacking Hlobane in the first place, but had compounded the error by underestimating the number of abaQulusi warriors on the mountain itself and failing to detect the Zulu army – all these inefficiencies and blunders combined to produce the second greatest calamity of the Anglo Zulu War. (15)

However, luck was on Wood's side for the next day at Kambula he fought and won the most decisive battle of the war. Thus he was able to sweep the defeat of Hlobane under the carpet of victory even to the extent of referring to Hlobane as a success! He also gambled that, if authority chose to take a closer look at his defeat, a scapegoat was conveniently to hand. Huw Jones maintains that in Weatherley Wood had found his victim: "Weatherley was the perfect candidate for the role of scapegoat; not only was he dead but his life had been recently marked by scandal and intemperate behaviour". (16)

Be that as it may, I do not see how branding Weatherley as a coward would have helped Wood's case. Weatherley's involvement in the Battle of Hlobane was insignificant and had little or no effect on the outcome of the debacle. In any event Wood did not need Weatherley as a scapegoat as he had a far more plausible one in Russell who could justly be blamed for deserting Buller and many men under his command. (17) But what Weatherley's death did achieve for Wood was to provide someone whom he could blame for the death of his two staff officers, Campbell and Lloyd.

Wood must have been overcome with guilt and self-recrimination as he stared, horrified, at the bodies of the two young men; both killed in a matter of minutes after the first encounter with the enemy. Had he been more prudent a leader, and used discretion and stealth in taking the snipers' lair, the two men might well have survived. Wood must have been forcefully reminded of a similar incident, four years earlier, when Lieutenant Arthur Eyre, a young officer of the 90<sup>th</sup> Regiment who, through Wood's patronage, was allowed to accompany Wood to West Africa during the Ashanti Campaign of 1874. (18) A bond of mutual fondness existed between Wood and Eyre, with Eyre often putting himself between Wood and danger.

Eyre was mortally wounded whilst leading a column with Wood nearby. The young man was the last remaining son of the late Sir William Eyre, and Wood wrote to his widowed mother: "...I fastened up the body...and buried him carefully covering his grave with dried leaves so that it might not be discovered..." (19)

Later Wood was to write to Eyre's aunt: "...I do not like to write more to Lady Eyre than I can help for I can well imagine my name will have a painful ring in her mind so long as life lasts..." (20)

Now, as Wood rode away from the freshly buried bodies of Campbell and Lloyd, he must have been struck by the similarity of Eyre's death and burial. Campbell, like Eyre, had been especially close to Wood and twice in times of illness, Campbell had nursed Wood "...as tenderly as could a woman". (21)

There is little doubt that calmly as he may have written about their deaths twenty-six years later, at the time Wood was shattered for he deviated from meeting up with Buller; sent a misleading order to Russell, a warning to the camp, and then disappeared for the remainder of the day. His movements for the next eight hours, while his men fought for their lives, remains a mystery. (22)

Like Eyre, Campbell and Lloyd were not obscure young officers without influential connections, and it must have occurred to Wood that the question could well be asked how it was that his young staff officers were frequently killed while he survived.

Thirty years old Captain the Honourable Ronald Campbell, Coldstream Guards, an old Etonian, was the second son of the Earl of Cawdor, whilst Llewellyn Lloyd's father was not only a retired British general but was also a member of the Natal Legislative Assembly.

How much easier it would be if their deaths could be robed in glory: heroes usurping a coward with their valour – and Wood free of blame or responsibility. It certainly worked that way, for on advising Campbell's widow of her husband's death, her reply gushed with Wood's praises: "I can only say that proud as I always was of my dear Ronald, I am prouder than ever now to think that he risked his life to save such as you, and the thought of his glorious soldier's death is such a grand thought that I shall ever love to dwell upon it...I cannot imagine with what joy he must have made the last dash forward to carry out your order." (23) Wood seems to have had a morbid fascination with the detail of the young officers' deaths for in his two volumes of *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*, apart from several pictures of Wood himself, there are only three other illustrations of persons, two of which depict the deaths of the young men concerned.

Yet, apart from all other ramifications brought about by Dennison's manuscript, does it exonerate Weatherley from cowardice as Huw Jones believes it does?

It seems to me that Dennison's account, rather than clarifying what transpired on Hlobane Mountain, makes events even more confused and, alas, instead of exonerating Weatherley from a charge of cowardice, Dennison unwittingly corroborates Wood's version. Dennison states:

I returned to where he [Weatherley] stood near some rocks with Rupert his son sitting near him under cover of a rock, Colonel Wood says that you must charge Dennison. I looked amazed at such an order where men could only baboon fashion make progress.

One can only conclude that Weatherley did indeed receive Wood's orders to charge, refused to do so and, instead, was in the process of passing the buck to Dennison when Campbell leapt forward only to be killed several seconds later.

However, Dennison's manuscript does reveal the circumstances of Weatherley's death, the massacre of the Border Horse and Dennison's escape. These will be dealt with in a later article as will some of the events recorded in the papers of Sergeant-Major Cheffins and Major Knox Leet.

## References.

1. Kindly provided by Mr. Lindsay Reyburn of Pretoria.
2. Kindly provided by Mr. Richard Stock of Cheshire, UK.
3. Provided by the Transvaal Archives. Pretoria, ref. A 1889.
4. *Natalia*: Journal of the Natal Society, Issue No. 27, December 1997.
5. Lock, Ron, *Blood on the Painted Mountain* (hereinafter referred to as *Blood*) London 1995 pp127-128.
6. *Ibid* pp45, 47.
7. Jones, Huw, *Natalia* No. 27 pp45.
8. Captured cattle were sold to appointed 'Prize Agents' and the cash received distributed, according to a laid down scale, amongst the troops involved. See *Regulations – Field Forces, South Africa 1878* p28. \*
9. On the 19<sup>th</sup> March Chelmsford wrote to Wood "Reports say that all the Zulu Army that Cetshwayo can collect is now, or will be in a few days, out or about Eshowe..." Sir Evelyn Wood papers, Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg.
10. Lock, Ron, *Blood* pp142-144.
11. Wood, Sir Evelyn, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*, Vol. 2 pp49.
12. Wood, Sir Evelyn, *Winnowed Memories*, London 1917, pp290.
13. Lock, Ron, *Blood* pp127-182
14. Wood, Sir Evelyn, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* pp50, 51.
15. Lock, Ron, *Blood* pp47.
16. Jones, Huw, *Natalia* No. 27 pp52-53.
17. Within a short time after the battle of Hlobane, Russell lost his command and was transferred to the remount depot at Pietermaritzburg. *Blood* pp180, 181, 209 and 210.
18. Wood, Sir Evelyn, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1 pp255-279.
19. Sir Evelyn Wood papers, Killie Campbell Library, Durban. Letter to Lady Eyre 6 February 1874.
20. Wood papers, Killie Campbell Library, letter dated 13<sup>th</sup> February 1874
21. Wood, Sir Evelyn, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2 p56.
22. Lock, Ron, *Blood* pp178-179.
23. Sir Evelyn Wood papers, Killie Campbell Library, Durban. Letter from Lady Campbell dated May 21<sup>st</sup> 1879.

\* Please see the following article about Cattle raiding and bounty. Ed

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 official orders issued by Lord Chelmsford in November 1878 state...

**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.

Payment was always made by cheque, not cash, the cheques being issued by the official paymaster or his nominated staff and then countersigned by an officer. This resulted in many cheques being lost or damaged by weather or wear and tear. There were many instances of cheques being treated by the recipients as 'cash' and used for barter.