The Sun Turned Black
The Isandlwana eclipse debate.

By Ian Knight

Between 1.30 p.m. and 2 o'clock on the afternoon of the 22 January 1879, the British defensive perimeter around the camp at Isandlwana collapsed. Over-extended and under pressure from a determined Zulu attack, the companies forming the firing line fell back to take up a position closer to the tents. 'Like a flame the whole Zulu force sprang to its feet', recalled one Zulu warrior, 'and fell upon them'. (1) So swift was this advance that the Zulus intercepted the British companies as they crossed the flat ground in front of Isandlwana, and the fighting raged hand-to-hand. The British were pushed back to the nek below Isandlwana, where they tried to make a stand, only to find that the right 'horn' of the Zulu army had already cut their line of retreat, and was rushing in from the rear. The desperate struggle which followed took place in a nightmare world of noise, smoke and dust, and the accounts of many of the Zulu survivors betray an almost hallucinogenic quality produced by the overwhelming assault on senses overstretched by the psychological tension of pre-battle rituals, by fear, horror and rage. 'Our eyes were dark', recalled uNzuzi Mandla of the uVe regiment, 'and we stabbed everything we came across'. (2)

Indeed, it seemed that nature itself conspired to add an apocalyptic touch at the height of the killing. According to a warrior of the Nokhenke ibutho,

> …The sun turned black in the middle of the battle; we could still see it over us, or we should have thought we had been fighting till evening. Then we got into the camp, and there was a great deal of smoke and firing. Afterwards the sun came out bright again …(3)

This is an almost perfect description of an eclipse. With startling symbolism, the moon passed across the face of the sun at the height of the battle, and the sun set temporarily on one of the darkest hours of the British Empire. As one African folk-story has it, God closed his eyes, for He could not bear to look on the horrors that mankind was inflicting upon itself.

Yet in the light of the recent eclipse in Britain, it is perhaps relevant to ask just how effective the eclipse was. Certainly, there is no doubt that it took place. (4) In fact, however, it was only partial, a full eclipse being visible further north. It began about 1 p.m. – just as the Zulu attack was developing – and ended shortly before 4 p.m. It was at its height at about 2.30 p.m. – probably the time that the fighting was raging most hotly on the nek. Yet even at its height, the sun was obscured by no more than about 65% - in other words, the effect was not unlike the eclipse witnessed in Britain last year. (5) A thin sliver of sun remained visible, and the light dimmed to something akin to twilight.

This may have been all the more noticeable on a hot, cloudless African day (6), but it is debatable whether the eclipse would have aroused much interest had it not been for the battle. Certainly, few British accounts refer to it, and Trooper Fred Symons of the Natal Carbineers, out at Mangeni with Lord Chelmsford, was almost alone in recalling a strange, still, oppressive gloom – all characteristics of a partial degree of black-out – and felt a 'presentiment that something was going to happen either to us or those at the tents.' (7)

Yet a lack of evidence cannot be taken as anything more than proof that the British had other things on their mind at the time. Certainly, none of the British survivors of Isandlwana mentioned it, but all were exhausted and traumatised by their experiences. Nor did any of the garrison at Rorke's Drift; but they, too, underwent such an extraordinary experience shortly afterwards that they can be forgiven for the oversight.

Perhaps more telling is the fact that there seem to be no references to the eclipse among accounts originating from elsewhere in the country on that day. Certainly, none of the copious accounts of the battle of Nyezane – fought a few hours before Isandlwana, in the coastal sector – appear to mention it. But is this really surprising? The battle of Nyezane was over by about 9.30 a.m., and after a rest to recover and bury the dead, Col. Pearson ordered his men to continue their march. At the time that the eclipse took place, they were toiling up the steep slopes on the road to Eshowe, and no doubt their minds were full of the conflicting emotions released by their recent conflict – elation, relief, shock and horror. Of course, it must also be said that there is less evidence for the state of the weather on the coastal strip, where the heat of the day might well have given rise to low cloud or haze which made the eclipse less noticeable.

Certainly, the Zulus at Isandlwana were only too aware of the strangeness produced by the eclipse. The reason for this lay in the very different Zulu psychological attitude towards combat. For the Zulus, the shedding of blood in battle unleashed powerful supernatural forces – known as *umnyama*, literally 'blackness' – and before entering on a campaign the Zulu army was ritually prepared for the consequences of this. The ceremonies they undertook bound the individual warriors into a whole, and effectively isolated them from ordinary civilian society; they remained in this state under they had undertaken the counterpart

cleansing ceremonies at the end of the fight. The result was a heightened emotional condition that became more pronounced as contact with the enemy became imminent, and which was only released in the adrenaline rush of combat. In such a state, the warriors were highly suggestible to anything that confirmed their expectation of unnatural or apocalyptic phenomena. It must be remembered, too, that the Zulus were much more in tune with their natural environment than the British interlopers – they lived out among it for most of their lives - and much more sensitive to shifts of mood and atmosphere.

Nevertheless, it must also be said that the effect of the eclipse at Isandlwana was probably exaggerated in the Zulu mind by the confusion of dust and smoke. Almost certainly, this made the darkness seem greater than it actually was, as a telling quote by a warrior of the uMbonambi suggests - 'The tumult and the firing was wonderful', he remembered, 'every warrior shouted 'Usutu!' as he killed anyone, and the sun got very dark like night 'with the smoke'. (8) Even so, in that desperate killing frenzy, the growing gloom can only have been taken by most warriors as proof that a great and terrible *umnyama* was indeed released by the battle.

It is interesting to note, too, that in a skirmish on the northern front, not far from the Hlobane Mountain, on the same day, the Zulus were scattered by men under Col. Evelyn Wood's command. The principal Zulu commander had been the Swazi prince, Mbilini waMswati, who was thought to possess great mystical powers as a warrior. In particular, his fortunes were believed to derive from the sun, and afterwards local Zulus had no doubts that the eclipse had been an omen of his defeat. (9)

Many of the victors of Isandlwana, too, seem to have regarded it as a portent of catastrophe. As indeed it was; and not just for the British, for the long-term consequences of Isandlwana were to bring utter ruin upon the Zulu kingdom.

References.

1. Account by uMhoti of the uKhandempemvu (uMcijo) regiment, papers of Trooper F. Symons, Natal Carbineers, Talana Museum, Dundee, SA.
2. Account of uNzuzi Mandla, Natal Mercury 50th anniversary supplement, 22 January 1929.
3. Name unknown, included in Bertram Mitford's *Through the Zulu Country; Its Battlefields and its People'*(1883).
4. The pocket diary of Lt. W. Cochrane of the 32nd Regiment, serving with the 'Native Horse', for example, included a printed entry for 22 January; 'eclipse, visible South Africa, Madagascar etc'.
5. I am indebted to Andy Willmott for providing me with scientific data on the eclipse.
6. The journalist, Charles Norris-Newman, recalled that even when viewed from Mangeni, twelve miles away, 'the sun was shining brightly on the white tents, which were plainly visible'. *In Zululand with the British* 1880. Commandant Hamilton-Browne of the NNC recalled 'a huge black shadow that lay on the hills … Not a cloud was in the sky, so I knew that the black shadow resting on the hills must be the Zulu army moving down to attack the camp … *A Lost Legionary in South Africa*, (1913).
7. Symons papers, Dundee Museum.
8. Included in Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country.*
9. See 'Mbilini, Manyonyoba and the Phongola Frontier', in Laband and Thompson, Eds. *Kingdom and Colony at War*, 1990.