

The year 1879

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For all those interested in the Anglo-Zulu War, the year 1879 means that period of dramatic events in South Africa and little else. Through this interest, we have learned much about the everyday life of soldiers on campaign, the social structure of the military and the politics of the region. What is less well known are the conditions and events back home and what was happening in other parts of the world.

In many ways the year 1879 could be described in the words of our own Queen Elizabeth as an ‘annus horribilis’. Starting with that great British preoccupation, the weather; it rained most days that year which still holds the unenviable distinction of the greatest rainfall on record. Not only were spirits dampened by the cheerless weather, but the harvest was the worst that century. This was the year of Tennyson’s lines ‘The cuckoo of a joyless June - Is calling through the dark.’

All through the 1870’s, agriculture had been in depression and the catastrophic harvest of 1879 caused so much damage to the cereal growers that the industry never really recovered. As the Victorian essayist G.M. Young wrote; ‘Never again was the landed proprietor to dominate the social fabric... The agricultural depression completed the evolution from a rural to an industrial state...’. To meet the shortfall, demand for U.S. wheat, not only in Britain but for the rest of Europe, brought prosperity to those prairie farmers who had survived years of Indian attacks, locusts, drought, fire and tornadoes. British agriculture had been in decline for some decades and by the 1870s, only 15% of the working population were engaged in farming. Many a boy left the country to seek employment in the rapidly expanding urban areas or emigrated to the United States, Canada or Australia. There was a surge of emigration during 1879 not only from Britain but also Ireland, where there had been the worst potato crop since the famine of 1846.

It was not only agricultural workers that were finding work hard to find. Those men employed in factories which had had a virtual monopoly in supplying products and materials to the rest of the world, now found that they faced increasing competition from the United States and Germany. With the threat of lay-offs and lockouts, the average worker felt highly insecure. With unemployment reaching terrifying proportions many were forced, as a last resort, to enlist in the Army which offered refuge of a sort.

For some, however, it was a good year. Thomas Lipton’s grocery chain made him a millionaire at the age of 29 and F.W. Woolworth opened his first store in the U.S. This was a great age for the theatre with Henry Irving and Ellen Terry at the height of their powers. Gilbert and Sullivan’s witty and catchy operettas *HMS Pinafore* and *Pirates of Penzance* were playing to packed theatres in London. Abroad, there were première performances of Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House* and Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin*.

At a time when Disraeli’s Government was wrestling with the problem of Irish Home Rule, it simultaneously found itself embroiled in two wars. In 1879, the British Army numbered 178,000 and with commitments both at home and abroad, it found itself considerably stretched. War had flared up on the NorthWest Frontier, where the British felt vulnerable to Russia’s steady absorption of the vast territories east of the Caspian Sea.

Fighting had broken out during the latter part of 1878 and by early 1879 the British had occupied the capital, Kabul, and installed a puppet ruler. An uneasy peace lasted but a few months until the British Political Officer, Major Sir Louis Cavagnari, and his escort were slaughtered. It was prophetic that Cavagnari, piqued by the lack of press interest and no doubt having the events in Zululand in mind, wrote; ‘I am afraid there is no denying the fact that the British public require a blunder and a huge disaster to excite their interest.’ Three days later he was dead.

The British public certainly had more than its fair share of disasters to absorb. The invasion of Zululand was considered of so little significance that only one of the London newspapers bothered to send a correspondent to cover it. Instead, all efforts were focused upon Afghanistan where, in the event, the British had a comparatively easy advance.

With reports appearing from The Standard’s correspondent, Charles Norris-Newman, about a stunning British defeat at a place called Isandlwana, interest swung away from events on the North West Frontier. Correspondents were ordered to make haste to Natal and to attach themselves to Lord Chelmsford’s command; for the next few months reports from Zululand dominated the news.

In 1870, Parliament passed the Education Act that enabled the poor to have an elementary education. The rise in literacy during the 1870s resulted in many soldiers writing home about life on campaign. Army life closely reflected civilian society with the officers drawn from the upper echelons and having little or no contact with the working class non-commissioned ranks. Soldiers’ letters are valuable, as they are the only indicators as to what the average soldier was thinking. A working class civilian was less likely to put his thoughts on paper, whereas a soldier far away on campaign would do just that. The vast majority of recruits came from backgrounds of real squalor and wretchedness. Those that had survived common childhood

diseases, like rickets, would suffer from bad teeth, skin disorders and generally poor physiques. The average height of a recruit in 1879 was an under-nourished 5' 4" (for a detailed look at the health of recruits/lower classes, see *Disease and Illness Prevalent During the Anglo-Zulu War 1879* by Adrian Greaves and Dr. Alan Spicer in the Second Edition of the AZWHS Journal, December 1997).

Officers were drawn from the wealthy land-owning class and were generally taller and enjoyed rude health. Physical defects counted for little so long as he was a gentleman. Both Garnet Wolseley and Frederick Roberts had but two eyes between them. The latter was only 5' 3" tall and would have been rejected if he had tried to enlist as a private.

Gonville Bromhead and Walter Kitchener (Lord Kitchener's brother) were almost deaf. Other eminent officers of that period were missing various limbs, which spelled the end of service when it happened to other ranks. Unlike his civilian equivalent, the ordinary soldier was guaranteed to eat regularly, if not well. The meat served in the army was infamous for its poor quality. In the late 1870s, boiled meat was called 'Harriet Lane', after the name of a woman hacked to death by Henry Wainwright, a notorious murderer. Hard tack was another staple food and there was a lack of vegetables; fruit was generally regarded with suspicion.

At home, the moral tone of the working class was generally low. Marriage was casual and illegitimacy prevalent. With few exceptions, they were not churchgoers, although there were plenty of places of worship. Between 1841 and 1876, the Anglicans built 1,727 new churches and restored 7,000 old churches. All denominations increased their places of worship enormously, which led to a surfeit of pews by the end of Victoria's reign. This explosion of church building was brought about by the fear of what effect urbanisation would have on religion.

In tandem with this ecclesiastical building boom, there was a great development in public buildings. Many of our present day public buildings date from this period; town halls, hospitals, schools, water works and sewage farms. Most of these reflect the taste of the time for over-elaborate Gothic architecture and, despite being despised during the 1960s, are now regarded as treasures to be protected.

It was left to the burgeoning middle classes to set the high moral tone that coloured this period. This was an age of tremendous self restraint, suppression of emotions and prudery leading to hypocrisy from the middle classes. This repressed attitude manifested itself in a rigid outlook towards sex and marriage, manners and position, dress and design which were uniformly drab and uncomfortable. Art and literature suffered, as very little of merit was produced at this time. It did, in time, provoke a reaction and produced people like Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley and William Morris.

For all their faults, these late Victorians began to show a greater awareness of the problems of the poor and by 1879 began to do something to alleviate them. It is perhaps not accidental that at a time when explorers, missionaries and empire-builders were opening up Darkest Africa, stay-at-homes should console themselves by exploring Darkest London. A multitude of voluntary social organisations, missions and temperance groups, including the Salvation Army, sprang up to expose and charitably relieve at least some of the misery of the poor.

This was also the 'Year of Electricity'. Sir Joseph Swan demonstrated a carbon filament light bulb in Newcastle, while in America Thomas Edison was advertising his version. By late 1879, the first electric street lighting was in operation along the Embankment and Waterloo Bridge; Britain was slow to develop its electrical industry and persisted with gas. It was left to both America and Germany to take the lead in this new power source. By the end of the year, there were electric trams running in Berlin and electric lighting in several U.S. cities.

But back to the Zulu War. With the gentlemen of the press attaching themselves to the new invasion force on the border of Zululand, the newspaper-hungry British public looked forward to hearing of a resounding victory over Cetshwayo's impis. Instead, they were treated to yet another catastrophe that had broken around the luckless head of the Army Commander, Lord Chelmsford. It was not another great defeat at the hands of the Zulus but the death of the exiled heir to the throne of France, Prince Louis Napoleon. It created a greater stir than the defeat at Isandlwana and was a story that was set to run and run. The ingredients were potent. Brave young descendant (1) of the century's outstanding leader forced into exile. Serving with his adopted country in a far-off place. Violent death and cowardice. Grieving widowed mother. Queen Victoria's involvement. The end of a dynasty. The public thoroughly enjoyed the *Schadenfreude*; all the more so because it had happened to a Frenchman!

Four weeks later the huge British square broke the Zulu army at Ulundi and the nation cheered. Starved of good news and needing a lift, the public welcomed home the worn-out regiments that had suffered greatly during the mismanaged campaign. There were plenty of heroes to fête and their names became known in every household. Queen Victoria, after years of refusing to involve herself in the nation's affairs, was pleased to pin decorations and orders on the tunics of her brave soldiers. For several weeks the country enjoyed being proud of its army until memories faded and fresh news succeeded old.

As the year approached a new decade, another disaster occurred. Appropriately in a year of appalling weather, the iron railway bridge over the River Tay collapsed in a gale and torrential rain. A passenger train was approaching Dundee when this happened and plunged into the depths of the river killing 78 passengers and crew.

Many of the events of 1879, and since then, have a familiar ring even today. Problems with agriculture, a manufacturing sector under increasing pressure from abroad. British inventions exploited by other countries and the ever-present Irish problem. There was even an endangered-species disaster, long before the term was invented. In 1879, buffalo hunters killed the last of the mighty Southern bison herd in Texas.

Reference.

(1) Technically, Louis Napoleon was not a descendant of the great Napoleon: just a great nephew. See the family tree in the accompanying article *The Prince Imperial, A psychological profile*.

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