

---

One of the features of Victorian journalism was the 'special artist'. In the days before photographs could be reproduced in newsprint, several publications appeared which specialised in printing highly detailed engravings. Magazines like *The Graphic* and *Black and White* were highly popular. The best and most enduring of all was *The Illustrated London News* and its best and most enduring artist was Melton Prior. As the reporting of wars produced an increase in newspaper sales, the proprietor, William Ingram, was not slow in sending his own representative to go and capture the realities of fighting and campaigning to thrill his own readership.

Melton Prior was born in London in 1845, the son of an artist. By the age of 25 he was already a regular contributor to *The Illustrated London News*. It was not until 1873, however, that his career really started, when he was sent to cover the Ashanti War. In a short campaign in one of the unhealthiest spots in Africa, Prior learned his craft the hard way. Despite the dreadful conditions and hardships he suffered, the sketches he sent Ingram made his reputation and he was ever after in demand. During the next 25 years of recording wars, he was at home for one year only. Small wonder his marriage foundered.

For such a man of action, he cut a rather comical figure. He was short, rather dumpy and had poor eyesight. His fellow reporters named him, "*the screeching billiard ball*", because of his bald head and high pitched laugh. William Russell, the doyen of war reporting, found Prior, "the most insufferable conceited snob I have ever met", but, then, the Great Man had little time for his fellow correspondents. Later, The Times correspondent, Lionel James commented, "But for the genius of his imaginative pencil, he was the prototype of the thousands of colourless citizens who daily flock between Suburbia and the City".

Prior was a pretty rough and ready sort, a common trait amongst his profession, but most people who came into contact with him found him a genial and generous man and popular company. Like most of his contemporaries, he affected a quasi-military mode of dress and draped himself with satchel, binoculars, revolver and bandoleer. He also proudly wore the ribbons of foreign decorations he received from countries in which he reported. It was always a source of disappointment, however, that Britain refused to award war reporters with campaign medals until the Anglo-Boer War.

In 1878, while most of the London press had been sent to cover the Second Afghan War, Melton Prior was assigned to a native uprising in South Africa, in what became known as the Ninth Frontier War. In all ways it was an unsatisfactory campaign for a special to cover. The distances were great, the Imperial forces and their enemy, the Gaiikas and Galekas, were scattered and any fighting that occurred was little more than skirmishing. It was at this time he became well acquainted with the officers of the 1<sup>st</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, who bore the brunt of this campaign.

Prior's only moment of excitement happened when he was relaxing with a friend in a house up-country. The evening was uncomfortably hot and all the windows were wide open to catch any breeze. Prior wrote, suddenly, with a swish, an assegai came through the window and stuck straight upright in the middle of our table". Despite calling out the guard, the culprit got away. Prior learned enough about the local situation, and from rumours, to know that there was going to be war with the neighbouring Zulus and the prospect filled him with foreboding. When he returned to London, he told William Ingram, "You take my word for it, if we do have a war with the Zulus, the first news we shall get will be that of disaster".

Prior's prophecy was sadly realised with news of Isandlwana. Once again, he was on his way to South Africa, as were most of the correspondents who had covered the events in Afghanistan. He was joined by another special artist, named Charles Fripp, covering his first war for *The Graphic*. He produced many sketches but is probably best known for the most widely known Zulu War painting, the last stand of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment at Isandlwana. What the specials found when they arrived was hostility from Lord Chelmsford and his staff and a demoralised army. With little co-operation from the military, the newsmen had to fend and provide for themselves. Prior became famed for the lengths he went to ensure that he enjoyed as comfortable a campaign as possible.

He was not an expert horseman; following a tumble from his horse, he damaged his knee and was forced to hire a wagon. This he loaded with his favourite tinned and potted foods, several cases of brandy and whisky together with a soda-making machine. He later wrote, "I had no fewer than five horses, two in the shafts, one for myself, one for my servant and one spare horse. I followed the army through all its marches in my travelling carriage, and on the eve of the Battle of Ulundi I was the only man who had a tent; all the others lay in the open". Hardly something that enamoured him to the military or his fellow pressmen.

The first opportunity that Prior had to see any action came when Lord Chelmsford led a force to relieve Colonel Pearson's Column that had become pinned down at the hilltop mission at Eshowe, some thirty miles into Zululand.

Chelmsford felt that the relief was a priority and he assembled a substantial force, which he personally commanded. With the certain prospect of a battle, it was somewhat surprising that Prior chose to remain in Natal. He gave as his reason a dream he had had in which he saw himself buried at Eshowe. As if to reinforce this premonition, he received a letter from his mother in which, she, too, had seen his death in a dream.

Not wishing to let down his employer, Prior enlisted the services of Chelmsford's secretary, Colonel John Crealock, a capable artist and, "the services of a private individual named Porter. When the fighting did take place... my specially appointed artist was one of the first killed". This is something of a mystery, as the only fighting that took place was the Battle of Gingindlovu and no civilian named Porter or otherwise, was a casualty. Maybe Prior was exaggerating for the sake of a good story.

As Chelmsford's Column crossed the Tugela, Prior paused long enough to send off sketches he had made of the crossing before heading north to join Colonel Evelyn Wood's command in camp at Kambula. He was in time to record the successful defence on 29<sup>th</sup> March and the crushing defeat inflicted on the attackers as they tried to withdraw. He sent a drawing that was not published until 24<sup>th</sup> May, which indicates both the time it took to reach the London office and also the lengthy process in making an engraving.

On 21<sup>st</sup> May, he accompanied the Cavalry Brigade on their visit to the scene of the battle at Isandlwana and produced an accurate depiction of the devastated camp in a drawing entitled "Fetching away the Waggons". It did not, however, show the true horror of the scene for the long grass he drew concealed the remains of the dead in all attitudes of death. He wrote in *The Illustrated London Times* dated 12<sup>th</sup> July,

The sight I saw at Isandlwana is one I shall never forget. In all the seven campaigns I have been in... I have not witnessed a scene more horrible. I have seen the dead and dying on a battle-field by hundred and thousands; but to come on a spot where the slaughtered battalion of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment and others were lying at Isandlwana, was far more appalling. Here I saw the not the bodies, but the skeletons of men I had known in life and health, some of whom I had known well, mixed up with the skeletons of oxen and horses, and with wagons thrown on their side, all in the greatest confusion, showing how furious had been the onslaught of the enemy.

There followed a lengthy period while reinforcements arrived and supplies were gathered prior to the Second Invasion. This became a time when Prior and his colleagues scratched around for subjects to interest their readers. Such less interesting sketches of post-carts, graves, scenes of civil administration and camp life became space fillers until the campaign got on course again.

Finally, after painstaking preparation, the Second Invasion got under way on 31<sup>st</sup> May. Chelmsford must have thought that all precautions had been taken against any further disaster but he had not reckoned on the vanity of Louis Napoleon, the Prince Imperial.

It was the late morning of 1<sup>st</sup> June that Melton Prior exchanged pleasantries with the Prince who, accompanied by another staffman, Lieutenant Jaheel Carey and six troopers of Bettington's Natal Horse, were on their way out of camp for a routine survey for a suitable future camp site. As evening approached, Prior was making some sketches outside the camp when he saw a lone horseman gallop towards a group of soldiers including Evelyn Wood and Redvers Buller. By their body language and the way they immediately headed back to camp, Prior detected something was amiss. When he reached camp, he found it in turmoil. The Prince had been killed! Amidst the great consternation there was the realisation that here was the hallmark of a great scandal. For the reporters present, it was manna from heaven; a major scoop had landed in their laps and they milked it for all it was worth. Darkness prevented recovery of the body but the specials prepared their reports with background information and what could be gathered from the surviving members of the patrol. In the morning, Prior accompanied Archibald Forbes as they descended into the wide valley where the Prince had been ambushed. Forbes was one of the first to discover the naked body of the young Prince and Prior counted seventeen assegai wounds including one through his right eye. Making a makeshift stretcher from their lances, the troopers carried the body back to camp.

For Prior and his colleagues it was a day of high industry. The news, when reported in the papers, caused an even greater impact on the British public than that of Isandlwana. The reason for this was that, apart from the human-interest aspect of a popular and dashing foreign prince dying for England and a grieving widowed mother befriended by Queen Victoria, there were several correspondents on the spot. Whereas at Isandlwana, there was only one reporter, Charles Norris-Newman. Also the cable from Britain had only reached Cape Verde, thus delaying the news by two or three weeks. Because of the delay of processing his sketches, Prior's contribution actually coincided with the Prince's funeral and generated great interest. In total, he had six sketches published, more than any other event during the war.

Meanwhile, Chelmsford's advance towards the Zulu capital, Ulundi, ground on at a snail's pace. He had learned that the British Government was replacing him with General Sir Garnet Wollesley and Chelmsford was determined

not to be denied a final victory over the Zulus. One aspect that was not reported, as it would have reflected badly on the British Army, was the behaviour of some of the raw recruits and their less-than-steady officers, who had been sent as reinforcements. There had already been incidents during the relief of Eshowe, when nervous soldiers blazed away at their own side thinking they were being attacked. During the advance on Ulundi, Prior witnessed a repetition of this type of panic during one night when hundreds of rounds of ammunition were expended. Prior later wrote, "A more disgraceful scene I have never witnessed, more particularly when we realised that six rounds of canister were actually fired by the artillery, without having seen a single enemy".

After taking over four weeks to travel 100 miles, the British formed a huge square on the plain outside Ulundi. Despite the confusion and time it took to manoeuvre so many men, beasts and wagons into a defensive position, the Zulus failed to capitalise by attacking the British at this vulnerable phase. When Cetshwayo's magnificent impi did charge, it took less than half an hour of Martini-Henry, Gatling and artillery fire to break their spirit. Before they were routed, they had made a stirring sight. Twenty thousand warriors chanting and rattling their assegais against their stiff cow-hide shields. Swishing through the grass, they charged to their destruction.

Within the square, Prior was busy making notes and sketching. During the height of the battle, with bullets whizzing by, Prior put his notes and sketchpad in his saddlebag and left his horse with a trooper. He wanted to reach one of the corners, where he expected to see the Zulus charge. Having found a position, he realised that he had left his sketchpad in his saddlebag and returned to fetch it. To his dismay, he found the flap undone and all his notes and sketches had been taken. The trooper pleaded ignorance, so Prior began a panicky search without success. Petrified with shock at his loss, Prior sank to his knees amongst the sound and fury of the battle, and wept. A passing staff officer, Captain Sir William Gordon-Cummings (later accused of cheating in the notorious Baccarat Scandal) came to his rescue and gave Prior his own sketchpad. The resultant sketch from inside the square became one of Prior's most detailed and best engravings that *The Illustrated London News* published.

When the Zulus gave way and the cavalry was released to ride them down, Prior and the other specials rode into Ulundi, which was well ablaze. Prior became separated from his colleagues and so engrossed in his sketching that he did not see an assegai-wielding Zulu approach until the last moment. Abandoning his artwork, the artist dug in his spurs and cleared a blazing fence to safety.

Back at the camp, Prior drew furiously all afternoon as he tried to recall the details of the lost sketches and notes. As night fell, Archibald Forbes showed his determination to be first with the news and, against Chelmsford's wishes, chose to set off immediately to the telegraph office at Landsman's Drift, some 110 miles distant. In an act of generosity, he volunteered to carry Prior's sketches, although the latter was not too confident of Forbes's chances of evading the Zulus who were scattered about the surrounding countryside. In an epic ride, Forbes did reach Landman's Drift the following afternoon. He sent a telegraph of the news, and then rode onto Durban, where he mailed his full account and Prior's sketches. Incredibly, he had ridden 295 miles in just 55 hours!

With the Zulus defeated, Melton Prior returned home in some triumph and was guest of honour at a dinner thrown by Fleet Street's finest at the Holborn Restaurant. He had little time to savour his fame and enjoy domesticity again, for he was soon on his way back to South Africa to cover the troubles brewing in the Transvaal against the Boers. This was the pattern of his life. During the next two decades, he was to be found sketching in Egypt, Greece, Turkey, the North West Frontier, Burma, Rhodesia, and South Africa. He evaded death many times. He exchanged shots with Afridi tribesmen, nearly drowned in the Nile, escaped being bayoneted at Tel el Kebir and was shelled at the Siege of Ladysmith.

For someone who looked so comical and unprepossessing, Melton Prior lived a heroic life. He braved death and hardship to produce sketches of war that were technically superior to those of his contemporaries. His images of the Zulu War are still evocative and vivid. When he died in 1910, he was a disappointed man and realised that the course of his life had been run. Heavy censorship during the last years of his career had left him frustrated and the advent of news photography spelled an end to the special artist. With his death, the Golden Age of war reporting ended.

### **Acknowledgements.**

*Campaigns of a War Correspondent* by Melton Prior pub.1912

*The Zulu War of 1879* as reported in *The Illustrated London News* – compiled by S. Bourquin & Tania M.Johnston. Published in Durban 1971

*Front Line Artists* by Peter Johnson pub.1978

*Man of War* by Alan Hankinson pub.1982

*The War Correspondents- The Anglo-Zulu War* by John Laband & Ian Knight pub.1996