

Sir Bartle Frere and the Zulu War.

By D.P. O'Connor

That the border violations of 1878 were an inadequate reason for Britain to invade Zululand in 1879 has long been recognised. The consensus has it that Sir Bartle Frere, an imperial administrator of great experience, had been sent out to South Africa as Governor to carry through a confederation of all the various political units of South Africa at the behest of the Colonial Secretary, Lord Carnarvon, in order to affect a settlement that would provide security, from both internal and external threats, for the Cape settlers, economic development and a closer relationship with Britain. It would also reduce costs for the government in London and provide both Carnarvon and Frere with suitable climaxes to their careers. The policy was always an ambitious one and was already in doubt by the time Frere reached Cape Town.

When Carnarvon resigned over Disraeli's policy in the Balkan crisis of 1878, it seemed that Confederation had lost its main driving force, reducing its chances of success still further. This did not prevent Frere from continuing with the policy and, accustomed to a wide degree of discretion being granted to him, attempting to settle the recurrent instability of the region on his own initiative. After the annexation of the Transvaal in 1877, he became convinced that the destruction of the Zulu army was an 'urgent necessity' if the process of Confederation was to continue because Confederation would necessarily involve the settler polities paying for their own defence in the eventuality of a war with the Zulus and this they were most reluctant to do. By removing the threat of the most potentially threatening independent African polity, he thus hoped to remove the colonists' main objection to the policy. To this end, he began to look for an excuse to destroy Cetshwayo's impis, an excuse finally provided by Zulu border violations.

Aware that the metropolitan government had expressly told him that a Zulu war would be an unwelcome development at that time, Frere hoped that the presentation of a *fait accompli* would override censure and 'with cool deliberation' disobeyed his instructions, and went ahead with an invasion. The defeat at Isandlwana ended his plans and led to his supersession and eventual recall amid a storm of criticism led by none other than Gladstone himself, a storm that has scarcely abated today.

The problem with this consensus is that it does not pose certain questions. What convinced Frere that the war was so necessary that he was prepared to disobey a direct order to abstain from it? Was there something in his previous experience or in the circumstances of the time that convinced him of the necessity for war? And if so, what? Why did he consider a war with the Zulus a matter of such urgency that he could not defer it when ordered to desist? Were there other pressures on him?

There were of course many underlying economic factors for the outbreak of war because competition for land and labour in South Africa was so fierce as to be destabilising. However, the British government showed a great deal of unwillingness to get involved in any systematic colonial expansion during the early and mid 19th Century and, if the settlers on the frontier might have desired imperial intervention, it is a great leap to say that the British government either approved or encouraged it. The lack of defined and policeable frontiers in South Africa was also a central cause of conflict as different peoples, polities and individuals used their various skills, talents and vices to establish an ownership to land that was often based on nothing more than effective occupation. There was little to stop them, as effective governments able to negotiate agreements and then restrain their subjects from breaking them were few and far between. It is also tempting to point to the discovery of diamonds at Kimberley as a potent economic argument for Frere's decision to hasten a British dominated confederation but even with the diamonds, the South African economy remained too small to tempt the British government into a war to ensure that the Zulus did not disrupt it.

Another reason advanced to explain metropolitan concern about events in South Africa is centred on the security of the Cape route to India. This was the original reason for the seizure of Cape Town during the Napoleonic wars and many historians accept it as the prime reason for British interest in South Africa. Even though the actual volume of traffic passing the Cape was small compared with that using the faster Mediterranean/Red Sea route – both before and after the opening of the Suez Canal – it remained, in time of war, an important strategic alternative. As a general explanation for British interest in South Africa, desire for strategic security is often the most convincing, but as a particular explanation for Frere's attack on the Zulus, it needs refining. In order to understand why Frere took such latitude, and why victory was insisted upon after Isandlwana, it is necessary to examine the place of southern Africa in the wider international and imperial situation of the late 1860s and 1870s.

At the beginning of the 19th Century, the route to India lay through the Mediterranean, across Suez and down through the Red Sea. It was, from the beginning, a vulnerable route. French raiders could potentially intercept

vessels in the Atlantic or Western Mediterranean and good relations with the Ottoman Empire were essential to prevent Russian warships transiting the Straits of Constantinople to interdict shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean. A combination of diplomatic and military pressure had so far kept the route open but by 1870, when the Russians repudiated the naval restraints placed upon them by the Treaty of Paris in 1856, these measures no longer appeared to be enough.

In the new diplomatic world of the 1870s, the threats represented by German military and industrial strength, a revival of French colonial interest and the steady expansionism of Russia began to expose British vulnerabilities and “despite appearances Britain was not well equipped to meet new challenges”. These realities were brought into even sharper focus with the Russian attack on Turkey in 1877 and the creation of the ‘Big’ Bulgaria under Russian influence. The Russian armies had routed the Ottomans and had imposed a settlement that included an independent Bulgaria under Russian influence having coastlines on both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The potential for the creation of a Russian fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean was clear and Britain had no choice but to seek a confrontation with the Russians if they were to prevent this threat to the route to India.

Nor was this the only area in which conflict with Russia looked imminent. Throughout the 1860s, Britain was forced to look on ‘fairly helplessly’ as Russia expand into Central Asia at a rate that would bring her close to the borders of India within a very short time. Ili, close to the strategic centre of Kashgar on the Chinese border, was taken in 1871 and Khiva was taken in 1873, raising fears that the Russians were about to establish control over vast swathes of Central Asia as a prelude to moving on India. At the same time that the Russian army was marching through the Balkans in 1877, the British authorities in India were hoping to reconnoitre the passes into India from the north in order to prepare for the possibility of a Russian invasion. Fear of war led Lord Carnarvon to press for a Committee of Imperial Defence to be formed in November 1877. If war with Russia did come, and the Mediterranean route was interdicted, then the Cape route to India would reassume the importance of which the Suez Canal had largely robbed it.

The making of Sir Bartle Frere.

Henry Bartle Edward Frere was born in 1815 into a family of fourteen. He was educated at Bath and in 1834 went out to work for the East India Company in the Bombay presidency. In 1842 he was appointed private secretary to the Governor of Bombay and, after a spell of leave in England and Italy, he was appointed Resident at Sattara (1847 - 49), a Native state south of Bombay, being present at its annexation and becoming the Commissioner for Sattara thereafter (1849 - 50). In 1850, at the age of 35, he was promoted to be Chief Commissioner for the newly pacified, but still unruly, province of Sind, with responsibility for the strategically important Bolan Pass, a post he held for the next nine years. In 1856 he took sick leave and sailed for England, before returning to India in March 1857 in time to play an active part in the suppression of the Indian Mutiny. He served on the Governor-General’s (or Viceroy’s) Council (1859 - 62) and as the ‘legendary’ Governor of Bombay (1862 - 67) before returning to England to serve on the Indian Council (1867 - 77). Known as a leading ‘India hand’, “the most outstanding figure of the ten years after the mutiny,” a keen geographer (President of the Royal Geographical Society, 1873) and sanitary reformer in active partnership with Florence Nightingale, his wide interests included participation in the anti-slavery movement. This prompted Lord Granville to send him out to Zanzibar in 1873 to negotiate an anti-slavery treaty and his success there raised him to the rank of Privy Councillor. The royal connection resulted in his being chosen to shepherd the Prince of Wales on the Indian Tour of 1876, before Carnarvon finally asked him to take on the job of Confederation in South Africa as Governor (1877 - 80). The defeat at Isandlwana and his subsequent recall ended a brilliant career and he died, broken and protesting his innocence, in 1885.

Frere’s career in India led him to believe that the best way to achieve a given end was to empower a suitably qualified individual, leave him to get on with the task and then judge success by results. Advice and support might be offered, but interference in the detail was to be avoided and only in the most extreme circumstances should the judgement of the man on the spot, as the person with the most up to date, first-hand knowledge of the situation, be over-ruled. He had developed this view over time and through direct experience in Sattara, Sind, the Mutiny and Bombay but also through his distrust of the reliability of communications. He had also developed disdain for politicians, having been used to exercising wide discretion.

Frere also came back from India with ideas about Imperial defence. As Commissioner for Sind and Governor of Bombay, Frere formed the opinion that Russia was the real threat to a land-based empire. What was not readily considered was the possibility of a naval threat to the empire at a time when it was widely assumed the Royal Navy was dominant.

During the American Civil War, a number of Confederate privateers, built in Britain, had made impressive cruises against Union shipping and Frere quickly realised the implications for British shipping if the USA were to

allow Russia to acquire such ships from American ports in the event of a conflict with Britain. As if on cue, in October 1866, Frere woke up one morning to find the celebrated privateer *USS Shenandoah* (lately of the Confederate States Navy) riding at anchor off Bombay. For him the ship's arrival emphasised

rather vividly... that she might have dropped upon us quite as unexpectedly in time of war as of peace; that we have nothing to meet her nearer than Trincomalee, a thousand miles distant and not in telegraphic communication with us... a vessel like this could... extort a ransom of many millions sterling. The American Consul... could tell the captain that the mint and the bank alone could yield him three or four millions in silver, and the captain could have no difficulty in dropping a shell into either building as a hint to hasten payment....(1)

In the case of a war with the United States, or any other naval power, such an event could not be ruled out and the appearance of the *Shenandoah* confirmed his belief that Bombay - and almost every other port in the empire - was spectacularly vulnerable in the event of war between Britain and any other great power. And in 1877 -78, the Russian invasion of the Balkans made such a war very likely indeed.

In April, 1878 Lord Loftus reported that Russian crews were being sent to the USA to collect three cruisers that "will be able to copy the tactics of the Alabama" i.e., to act as commerce raiders and privateers. Plans were also being prepared to allow Russian privateers to operate in the Mediterranean, (despite treaty obligations forbidding privateering) (2), "to disturb our transport of troops from India through the Suez Canal" while the commander of the *Sylvia* in Shanghai reported to the Admiralty that a Russian squadron had left Shanghai and was thought to be preparing to raid Hong Kong. Even worse were the reports that contracts were being placed in American yards for cruisers and privateers. These reports were taken very seriously because if they were true then the British naval blockade had failed before the war had begun and the ports, vessels and commerce of the empire were at the mercy of such raiders. Rear Admiral Jones was despatched on a tour of US shipyards and, to his dismay, found that there were 58 possible vessels immediately available to a Russian buyer. There were even rumours of a Russian naval base being set up in Panama and a report that Captain Waddell, late of the *Shenandoah*, had been approached to take command of a Russian privateer launched in America.

Frere in South Africa.

When Frere went out to South Africa, the questions of imperial defence and the crisis in the Balkans were at the forefront of his mind and remained so during the period 1877- 1878. The chances of war breaking out were indeed high and the potential existed for a naval war off South Africa, which could include the destruction of its principal ports by Russian cruisers, privateers and commerce raiders. Carnarvon had given Frere the task of carrying through Confederation as a long term solution to the internal problems of the area and to exclude other Great Powers, as well as the separate, but related, mission of putting the Cape into a state of defence for the short term and Frere expected a 'free hand' to accomplish it. Frere was to adhere to this brief even after the Congress of Berlin in June and July of 1878 removed the immediate threat of a Russian war. That he did not revise his policies in the light of this news - which would have reached him in August 1878 - can be explained by reference to the fact that he, along with many others, doubted whether the Russian army would actually obey its orders and withdraw from the Balkans. Initially they refused to withdraw according to the agreed timetable of complete evacuation by May 1879, did not begin to move until February 1879 and were still in Bulgaria as late as August. It is impossible to ignore the fact therefore that the Zulu war was fought at a time when Russian troops were still within striking distance of Constantinople, the key to the route to India, and the straits, and besides which there were arguments about land and labour supplies.

Frere was convinced that a global war with Russia was imminent. Herbert, then Under Secretary of State to the War Office, had warned him of the "possible danger arising from complications in Europe, the bearing of which upon the present condition of the defences of Cape Town and Simon's Bay have been brought before the War Office" before Frere set out for South Africa and he had been authorised direct contact with the War Office shortly afterwards. Nor did Carnarvon (or Hicks-Beach) do anything to dispel this conviction and wrote to him constantly about the developing crisis in the Balkans. On 22nd August 1877 Carnarvon wrote of his anxiety on "Eastern matters", on 9th October 1877 he wrote of the "revolting horrors and bloodshed in the East", on 29th October he described the European situation as "so critical, so anxious... that I dislike even the discussion of it"; on 2nd January 1878 he told Frere that "There are clouds gathering all round the horizon" and finally, just before he resigned his cabinet post he wrote that the Balkan crisis had "swallowed up every superfluous moment". Frere felt that his first priority was to ensure that the defences of Cape Town were adequate to repel any likely naval threat and he requested that Carnarvon forward him all the documents relating to the defence of the Cape, an analysis of likely threats and the extension of the telegraph. After that he would take measures to exclude any European presence or

influence from rivalling the paramount influence of Britain in the region and, thus secured from external threats, he could turn his attention to the difficult job of persuading the inhabitants of Southern Africa that Confederation was in their own interests. This would not be easy, he knew, and would require a difficult reconciliation between the Boers and the Cape British which would address the issues of security and the 'native question'. Once this was done, - and Frere was confident that he could square this circle and win 'ultimate acceptance' - Confederation could take place and the Empire would have its secure base on the crossroads of east and west. Initially, the actions and intentions of the Zulus, and the fears of the colonists regarding them, were not the main priority and he ordered Shepstone to quash any talk of a war with them, agreeing with Carnarvon's view that "it would be most injudicious at such a moment to accept the further burdens and responsibilities involved in the forcible acquisition of a large territory such as Zululand with a numerous and warlike population difficult alike to civilise and control".

However, right from the outset Frere was to be overtaken by events. Arriving at Cape Town on 31st March 1877, complete with wife, daughters, a salary of £5000 and a special allowance of £2000 to cover the extraordinary expenses he was expected to meet, he had barely got his feet under the table when news of the annexation of the Transvaal reached him on 16th April 1877 (and the Russians declared war on Turkey on 24 April 1877). Writing to Lord Carnarvon shortly before the annexation and lacking direct knowledge of the situation on the ground his instinct was, as always, to rely on the judgement of the man on the spot.

It seems to me that, as matters now stand, criticism as to what Shepstone is doing is as misplaced as suggestions how to hold his paddle would be to a man shooting a rapid. Our best course is cordially to support him in all reasonable ways as long as he appears to be doing his best to carry out our views and instructions. (3)

Taken by surprise at Shepstone's annexation of the Transvaal, Frere did not approve of it but recognised that there was little to be done but accept it in the short term, despite the protests of many influential Boers. Aware that this act would probably lead to a hardening of opinion in the Cape among those burghers opposed to Confederation, he nevertheless decided to back Shepstone, because he had no reason at this stage not to rely on the judgement of so eminent a man, despite the repercussions for Anglo-Zulu relations. The inheritance of Boer border quarrels with Cetshwayo caused something of a diplomatic revolution as previously Cetshwayo had looked to the British as a potential ally against Boer claims. Now he was in direct dispute with them. This was an unwelcome complication for an already complex problem but Frere acted immediately to kill off the very mischievous tendency of suggestions that "the annexation of the Transvaal inevitably meant the annexation of Zululand".

Crashing in upon this unexpected turn of events came the Xhosa rebellion of October 1877 to June 1878 which required his immediate and full attention and thus prevented Frere from going to the Transvaal to attempt to persuade the Boers to accept annexation or Confederation. The air of crisis deepened when Shepstone reported that the Zulus were renewing their claims to the disputed territories in a forceful way and that they were chasing out Boer families. Almost from the beginning, therefore, Frere was forced to contend with the reality of a Xhosa rebellion, the strong possibility of a Boer rebellion and, or, a Zulu attack on the Transvaal, combined with Russian warships interdicting the Cape shipping and landing marines. The pressure of events was not the only problem either, for Frere lost one of his main supports when Lord Carnarvon resigned in January 1878 over the growing crisis in the Balkans.

Still, Frere was not a man to be deterred by difficulties. On his arrival in Cape Town he had immediately seen to it to improve the defences of the port areas against a naval raid despite official foot dragging in London. Although in a "state of uncertainty and anxiety" that if "the treaty of S. Stefano remains unaltered, I think the ultimate result *must* be war", Hicks-Beach was apt to downgrade the seriousness of a Russian threat to the Cape, and wrote to Frere accordingly:

I hope your harbours and stores at Cape Town are to some extent protected: at least sufficiently so to defeat the only kind of attack likely to be made on them, i.e. by a stray cruiser or privateer. (4)

Such "stray cruisers" were not to be despised. The *Shenandoah* had captured 38 vessels in two years and had circumnavigated the globe operating in waters as diverse as the Southern oceans and the North Pacific and was fast enough to travel 300 miles in twenty four hours, thus allowing it to attack civilian shipping off Cape Town and disappear before the Royal Navy could intercept. If Russian cruisers did become active, it was felt that merchant shipping would simply not leave port, trade would dry up, insurance rates rocket and the inevitable outcry would necessitate the diversion of scarce naval resources from other theatres. Frere responded with a warning that was a repeat of his earlier concerns for the security of Bombay.

I wish it were...easy to defend our ports from Privateers, should you be unable to avert a European war. The subject was one of the first things I attended to when I came out.... This was only managed by

commencing work at my own risk.... But Table Bay is still open to any vessel with a single rifled gun, and a Privateer might levy a contribution from our Banks before a man-of-war could come to our help.

The Russians know this well, and when their Squadron was here two or three years ago, the officers used to tell their partners at balls that "they did not intend to wait to be taken by the English Channel or Mediterranean fleets, but to pay visits to the Cape and Indian ports where they would levy contributions, on their way to Petrapaulovski!".

Meantime the enclosed Memo shows the guns Col. Hassard asks for, and if you could only get the War Office to send us *some* of them...I could make a beginning and not run the risk of having to report your flag hauled down and a contribution of half a million or more levied by some wretched Alabama cruiser or Privateer. (5)

For Frere, however, securing Cape Town (and Port Elizabeth "at the mercy of any little steamer that can carry a rifled gun") from an "excellent Privateer" was only part of the answer to external threats and he argued that there were a number of opportunities for European powers to intervene in Southern Africa if they so wished. Excluding European influence meant control of the coastlines and any suitable anchorage in the vicinity of South Africa. He was particularly interested in the possibilities of gaining possession of Delagoa Bay (although Hicks-Beach poured cold water on this) and securing "the exclusive command of the seaboard from the Cape Colony up to the Portuguese frontier on both the West and East Coast" and inland for up to twenty miles. He annexed Walfisch Bay and pressed for the annexation of all territory between the Cape Colony and Natal, including the mouth of the St. John's River, annexed in 1878 as a potential site for a port. A "complete and exact survey" of the coasts was also requested. Clearly these measures were meant "to put an end for generations to schemes such as are now discussed for introducing one of the great military powers of Europe or America as a counterpoise to British influence and supremacy in South Africa", the threat of which was taken seriously within the Cabinet. "You have no idea" he wrote to Hicks-Beach, "how much trouble you may have, any day, if the Americans or Germans were to take a fancy to hoist their flag at any anchorage or watering places on the coast, now little known to any but a few old whaling and guano-collecting captains." What was more, the annexation of the Transvaal was bound to open possibilities for European intervention and Frere urged his superiors not to underestimate such dangers: "We cannot, I think, be too energetic in closing the door to any risk of foreign interference of a character calculated to set up a rivalry with England as the supreme power in South Africa". He was prepared to consider the possibility that Holland might well be absorbed into the German Empire (a view shared by Lord Salisbury and Disraeli) and that inheriting the Dutch Empire would give Bismarck or the Kaiser a moral excuse to interfere in the affairs of the Transvaal should they so wish. He was also wary of the possible consequences of France turning to Bonapartism and embarking on adventures in Southern Africa which could not be defeated without active Imperial involvement. Frere's efforts to construct local forces, including the raising of Native regiments, would go some way to alleviating the defencelessness of the Colony, but he was aware from the beginning that Imperial troops would be needed to defeat a major threat.

Frere's conviction that the Cape faced both immediate and long-term external threats from European powers was in some ways correct, yet in others flawed. The threat from Russian cruisers was a very real one, and by 1884 Russian cruisers were maintaining a presence in the South Atlantic and the Indian Oceans and reconnoitring ports with a view to raiding them in time of war. Similarly, in the new realities of the 1870s, the existence of Belgium and Holland (along with several other smaller European states) after a major European war could not be taken for granted, and this would inevitably raise questions as to their relationships with their overseas interests. Pressure was building in many quarters for a scramble for Africa to begin, "large coastal areas lay open to foreign intervention" and the potential for a new German or French presence in Africa was certainly there. At the same time, it would be unlikely for either Germany, France (or America) to make such a direct challenge to British imperial communications in 1878 for fear of the consequences for their relative positions in Europe, and Russia lacked detailed intelligence on South Africa in 1878. The fact was that all these potential futures for Southern Africa were dependent upon the resolution, whether through war or peace, of the crisis in the Balkans and not, as Frere thought, on the resolution of South Africa's problems. As an old India hand, Frere never grasped the truth that the Empire was an expression or adjunct to British power and not the basis of it. However worthy and valuable an institution it might be, in the event of a war with Russia, Germany or the USA, British power would not depend upon it for victory, simply because it was not large enough or strong enough to act as a counterweight to them. Only alliance with another industrial power with a large population willing to fight a bloody and costly war could fulfil this role. Any conflict between such great powers would be a matter of Divisions, Corps and Armies and not odd battalion or

brigade size skirmishes of the colonial variety and as such, a war in South Africa would only be a distraction from the main engagements on the European mainland, not a decisive contribution to victory there.

Frere and the Administrators - Broken Tools.

Frere had gone out to South Africa expecting to have an effective administrative machine to help in ruling the country and bringing about Confederation. Instead, and to his continuing exasperation, he found the machinery to be ramshackle, and staffed by “ill-informed, short-sighted and reluctant” people, badly trained, poorly selected, inadequately paid, and lacking in vigour - exactly the opposite of what he had been used to in India where “half a sheet of paper” was enough to get things moving. Charles Brownlee, Secretary for Native Affairs among the Xhosa was “very able” but “knows little more of extra colonial Kaffir politics than I do” and Frere was forced to reply on newspaper reports for his intelligence of Natal. He had “not had a line official or unofficial since I came here” and suspected that Bulwer had “nothing to tell, or will tell nothing” blaming Cape/Natal rivalry for this. To Lord Napier, he wrote

I have wished since coming to S. Africa, that we had you or one of your school to help us to do here what you have done in India, and elsewhere. The work is on a smaller scale, and really far easier, if we could set about it in Indian fashion.... The difficulties are the weakness of Government and administration - the want of trained services civil or military....(6)

The Xhosa rebellion, he argued, was a direct result of the excessive centralisation and administrative nonsense that he had always abhorred.

A drunken brawl led to border fighting and things were allowed to drift as in times past. When we came up we found there had been pitched battles [between Galekas and Fingoes]... on British territory, in the presence of large bodies of British well-armed and mounted European police, who, according to custom, quietly looked on, and reported to Government – not to the magistrate who was in their camp – and asked for orders from Capetown by the weekly post to this place, where sat the Commandant of Police, the Civil Commissioner, and Colonel Glyn, commanding Her Majesty’s troops, all absolutely prohibited by Colonial official jealousy from exchanging opinions or even news, and all obliged to apply for orders to Capetown, four or five days distant, by a post only three times a week....Unless I had seen it myself I could not have believed in such a state of things.(7)

Clearly, he felt such confusion would need to be cleared up before any progress could be made and Frere was determined to create a workable administrative system from the top down. This necessarily meant the suspension of his views on decentralisation until such time as he had created a system capable of being decentralised. Convinced that parliamentary forms of government could only really operate in settled and ‘civilised’ conditions, he decided, as a result of the Xhosa revolt, that South Africa was simply not ready for it and disciplined the Cape government into subordination by dismissing it in July 1878, over the issue of control of the military forces in South Africa. Frere held that all armed forces, Colonial and Imperial, should be under his unified command delegated to the Commander-in-Chief, while James Molteno, the Cape Prime Minister, argued that Colonial forces should be reserved to his command. Divided command had produced the Xhosa rebellion, Frere argued and, supported by Hicks-Beach, dismissed the government. Molteno subsequently lost the general election and Gordon Spriggs, whom Frere held in high regard and could be expected to follow his lead, was elected in his place.

Nor was Frere convinced of the effectiveness of Shepstone’s administration in the Transvaal (he had first complained to Carnarvon in July 1877) and sought first to put him under his own command and then supported Hicks-Beach’s decision to remove him. “In my last letter I asked your opinion as to Shepstone,” wrote Hicks-Beach, “All I have heard since confirms me in the opinion that it would be well to change him to some other government.” When Frere finally got to the Transvaal in early 1879, his suspicions were confirmed by the presence of a large number of armed Boers on the verge of open rebellion. “It was not the annexation,” he wrote to Lady Frere, “so much as the neglect to fulfil the promises and the expectations held out by Shepstone when he took over the government, which has stirred up the great mass of the Boers and given a handle to the agitators.” To Hicks-Beach he wrote “The hopes of firm vigorous and progressive government which were entertained at the time of the annexation have been but imperfectly fulfilled. The mode in which mass meetings and protests have been dealt with has enabled agitators to persuade large multitudes that the objects of their agitation are not hopeless of attainment....” According to Shepstone’s own subordinates, this was the result of Shepstone’s “namby-pamby way of playing at government” which the Boers interpreted as weakness.

Things were no better in Natal either, according to Frere. Lt. Governor Sir Henry Bulwer was “a thoroughly patriotic English gentleman, but he has never had much to do with military affairs, and many things which are burnt into one after a few years dealing with Natives in India have to be explained to him, and he is not facile in altering opinions once formed”. The Native Department was “miserably weak”, and Natal “twenty years behind the Cape in organisation for self-defence”.

The administration of Africans would also need a thorough reform and the practice of ruling them under “exceptional laws and...as an inferior race” was to be ended and a more ‘Indian’ approach of associating them with the government was to be introduced. Despite the prevailing attitudes to Africans, Frere regarded racial prejudice as a vulgar affliction of non-official Europeans and firmly believed that:

our first duty to the subject native races is to rule them justly; to give them the advantage we ourselves have possessed for ages in a settled and regular form of government; to protect person and property, enforce the law, and make provision for modifying the law according to the wants of the population.(8)

This would be done by beginning a policy of “organising a service which, without being exclusively native, should give opportunities for the employment of natives in the public service, and for advancing them when found worthy” and Frere recommended that a pilot scheme of this sort should be put into operation in the Transkei immediately. For Frere, South African government was in dire need of a class of Africans who could rapidly be associated with the government and act as mediators between British paramount authority and the people at hut level.

Frere’s view of South African administration as staffed with officials “of no higher status than those of an English borough” “uncooperative” and “utterly incompetent” has found some support among historians, although it may be that the reasons for its under-performance may lie in the sheer complexity of the South African situation, which combined “all the cultural problems of Canada... with the race problems of New Zealand, the economic problems of Australia, and the potentially explosive problems of administration in Ireland” to create “a nightmare for official policy makers” . It was certainly understaffed - in 1871 there were only eleven magistrates administering 300,000 Africans on Shepstone’s Natal reserves. This conviction that the administration of South Africa was incompetent was, however, a major stepping stone towards his disobedience because it convinced him that South Africa was vulnerable to an immediate internal threat, represented by the actual and potential threat of Xhosa and the Boer revolts, at the same time as an immediate external threat from Russia existed. It also fundamentally undermined his confidence in the judgement of his ‘men on the spot’ and forced him to cast around for alternatives. Trusting neither Shepstone nor Bulwer completely, he followed his instinct to listen to the raw data of the men closest to the ‘spot’ to confirm or disprove their opinions. Thus when he read letters from George Potter and G.M. Rudolph from the Zulu frontier describing “arrogant and aggressive” Zulus “doing their worst to bring on a collision”. Frere was inclined to give them more weight than the reports of his officials. When Bulwer wrote to Frere excusing the behaviour of the Zulus in the Disputed Territories as “the aggression of those who feel themselves aggrieved” Frere dismissed him as a “prophet of peace” and told him that he saw “little prospect of the parties to this dispute keeping the peace on that border much longer”. From the end of the Xhosa revolt onwards, Frere felt that he needed to take much more personal control of affairs if the dual aims of defence and Confederation were to be achieved, and he went back to his Indian experience to justify his taking command.

To secure successful administration on the Frontier, there is one point of great importance, which should not be overlooked, and that is, the control - political and military - should be concentrated in one person, carefully selected for his special qualifications for the post, to whom full powers should be given for the transaction of all political duties and for the disposal of the troops. (9)

Frere, the Border and the Zulus.

From the beginning of the Xhosa revolt in August 1877 to its defeat in June 1878, Frere was sunk in a morass of border problems and this was to bring about a fundamental shift in his thinking as regards the Zulus, not least due to the fact that whereas previously he had seen the settlement of Transvaal discontent as first priority, he now ranked the potential Zulu threat as a higher one. As far as the Boers were concerned, a combination of military stick - “The movement of troops to the Transvaal and Natal, especially the former, seems *very* desirable as soon as it can safely be done....” - and constitutional carrot - “With regard to one point to which you attach great importance - a constitution - do you think an elective Volksraad is possible under present circumstances?” - was now to be applied until such a time as Frere, with any Zulu threat removed and aided by as many guns at his back as he could get, could meet with them and settle their grievances on the basis of a devolved constitution under British confederation/sovereignty.

Having put down the first Xhosa revolt by November 1877, another faction (the Ngquika as opposed to the Gcaleka) revolted necessitating a further campaign that dragged on for seven months more. To his mind, Confederation was still an attainable end - a belief he kept right up until his dismissal - but it could only come about after a Pax Britannica had been established to replace those polities based upon semi-independent clans and chiefdoms, "the gigantic evil to which all this chronic insecurity and warfare is due". As early as August 1877 he had complained of "the constant imminence if not of Kaffir wars or combinations, of outbreaks among them and other native tribes" and that "no one tribe can be disturbed without others joining in the excitement". Carnarvon agreed with him, but urged that the Transvaal be given "the first consideration and that...the whole strength of the Imperial forces must be directed in that quarter". Frere began to argue for British borders to be pushed "up to the Portuguese frontier to the North" on the grounds that

Your moral responsibilities in the shape of white settlers, missionaries and traders already extend quite as far as the proposed frontier. No chief considers himself safe without your countenance and recognition; all fear that any...flagrant ill treatment of white people would expose the perpetrators to severe punishment from you. All feel that you protect them from slavery and the slave trade and from ill treatment by lawless white people. The English flag and English influence are already the symbol of guarantee for such peace and order as now prevails. (10)

Furthermore, the lack of a definite statement of British authority was likely to encourage instability.

There can be no doubt that this last war...might have been avoided, had Kreli been...told that we know of no king, nor "paramount chief" save Queen Victoria, that he could only be allowed to govern by ruling according to our ideas of law and justice and not according to the dictates of Witch-doctors - and that killing the Queen's subjects involved hanging at Tyburn and not exile to Elba. (11)

With disturbances among the Mpondo of the Eastern Cape and in Griqualand East continuing, discontent in the Transvaal, and a still unresolved Pedi war, the Zulu border violations of July 1878 came as a final straw. Even before the end of the Xhosa rebellion he was expecting a 'trial of strength' with the Zulus and that "neither Justice nor Humanity will be served by postponing the trial - if we establish a good cause", despite Carnarvon's repeated assertion that war with the Zulus was inopportune given the crisis in the Balkans. Defeating the potential Zulu threat therefore represented a return to first principles, in much the same way as his reform of the administration had been and Frere became convinced that "Britain must demonstrate once and for all her ability to govern and her will to do so". To all intents and purposes, he was back in Sind wishing for Indian Irregular cavalry. "The essence of the whole business," he had written in 1865

is first to put down all violence with a strong hand; then, your force being known, felt and respected, endeavour to excite men's better nature, till all men seeing that your object is good and of the greatest general benefit to the community, join heart and hand to aid in putting down or preventing violence. (12)

As to the seriousness of Mehlokazulu's raids in July 1878 and the attempt to mitigate them as "the rash act of two hot-headed young men in their father's absence", Frere also had established views from his time in Sind.

Another leading principle is that no private person whether British subject or foreigner is on any account, permitted to plunder or kill... Robbery and murder are treated as equally criminal, whether the victim is a British subject or not. The plea of family...in such cases is always considered an aggravating circumstance, or proving the most deliberate malice aforethought. (13)

These views had been restated to the Cape Argus in September 1877 in the context of the Xhosa rebellion.

No subjects of an independent chief can be permitted to invade a territory belonging to the Queen, and if the independent chief will not, or cannot punish the offenders, the government will see that justice is done. (14)

Cetshwayo's offer to pay £50 in compensation for the murders was only likely to enrage Frere's humanitarian sentiments further.

I still believe that there is no law which would permit me to accept £25, or any other sum, as composition [sic] for the abduction with a view to murder, of anyone on British soil. I believe that my countrymen would have justly disowned me, as unworthy of the name of Englishman, had they believed that I advised the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal to accept that, or any other sum, as a bribe to blind the eyes of my countrymen to what had been done, or on any grounds to palliate the outrage. (15)

Frere believed that the practice of freely importing firearms and distributing them as wages without restriction was a recipe for disaster. In Sind, it was “a cardinal rule” that “no private person is allowed to bear arms without written permission” if the “long continued tranquillity of the border” was to be achieved. The attempt to control the possession of guns in the Peace Preservation Act of 1878 was a direct result of this belief but disarmament would have no meaning if the importation of guns into Zululand went unabated. Bulwer had already complained of the activities of John Dunn in this respect, yet nothing was done to prevent them effectively until Frere prevailed upon the Portuguese at Delagoa Bay to cease selling arms and ammunition to the Zulus in 1878. By that time there were upwards of 20,000 effective weapons in Zulu hands. This fact alone drew Frere’s attention - and he suspected Bulwer of conniving at the trade - until he was convinced that a general settlement of frontier disputes under British paramount authority could not take place until Cetshwayo had felt the strong hand.

A strong hand required troops and these were scarce at a time when they were likely to be needed in Turkey. Frere was able to scrape up 5,476 British regulars, 1,193 Colonial cavalry and 9,350 Natal Native Contingent and another 5,000 Natal Zulu militiamen by the time of the invasion of Zululand in January 1879 but he did not consider them enough or of the right quality and wanted Hicks-Beach to send out another Regular Infantry Battalion with another one on call if needed. He had been assured that these would be forthcoming but it was on this issue that the attention of the whole cabinet was drawn away from Russia to South Africa, and which was to lead to Hicks-Beach’s remarkable about-face and Frere’s subsequent disobedience.

For Frere, establishing paramount authority and preparation for a Russian war went hand in hand and the general air of crisis meant that he had to move faster than he might have wished. At the end of April 1878, a Russian Mission had arrived in Kabul and in September 1878, British-Indian forces had clashed with the Afghan army in the Khyber Pass. With the Russian army still refusing to leave the environs of Constantinople, it seemed essential to him that the Zulu threat should be dealt with swiftly, before the widely expected war with Russia began. “You must not think that I was insensible to your difficulties in Turkey and Asia,” wrote Frere to Hicks-Beach. “I doubt whether you felt them more acutely than I did.... Had things gone wrong in Turkey or Afghanistan you would not have thanked me for putting off a war now, when it involved both war and [a Boer] rebellion when you were in the midst of a European war”. From the end of the Xhosa rebellion Frere began actively to seek ways of disarming the Zulu military machine.

Men go to war out of ‘honour, fear, and interest’ and in this case all three motives were evident. During the (southern) winter of 1878, Frere decided that it was within the British interest to defeat the Zulus and that to decline the contest would, after the border violations, mean a serious loss of credibility. Fear of the Zulu military machine let loose in Natal was also a powerful factor and before very long it was no secret to anyone, let alone Hicks-Beach, that Frere was preparing for war. Bulwer was ordered to report on the state of the Natal artillery on 26th July 1878, while Commodore Sullivan was reporting on Zulu strengths to the Admiralty on August 12th 1878. Hicks-Beach decided to delay the issue of medals for the Xhosa campaign “until it be seen whether it will be necessary to engage in any further military operations in the eastern portion of the colony” and even gave Frere the option of sending troops into Zululand via Delagoa Bay, after the Foreign Office negotiated rights of passage with Lisbon. Frere, visiting Natal for the first time, was, as usual, quite candid.

On a review of the whole situation and from the best evidence I have met with, I am bound to state as my own opinion that it would be impossible to imagine a more precarious state of peace. It seems to me that the preservation of peace in Natal depends simply on the sufferance of the Zulu Chief, that while he professes a desire for peace every act is indicative of an intention to bring about war, and that this intention is shared, so far as it is possible to judge in such a despotism, by the majority of his people. (16)

Nor was Hicks-Beach anxious to restrain him in looking for a pretext for war and wrote to the Admiralty “to be furnished, for the information of Sir Bartle Frere, with any evidence...of British rights of sovereignty beyond the Tugela river...” As to the Boundary Award in the Disputed Territories and Frere’s demand that Mehlokazulu should be handed over for trial, Hicks-Beach was agreed with Frere’s analysis that it was likely to encourage a Zulu attack on the Transvaal by betraying a “sign of a weakness” on the part of the Colonial government, intimidated by Zulu military might and border violations. Indeed he regarded the Commission from the beginning as little more than a “clever unprincipled” production of Durnford and Colenso’s and had recommended that Durnford be kept “to entrenching, road making and barrack building - and not let him have anything to do with ‘diplomacy’ in such inflammable regions”. Whatever the outcome, however, Hicks-Beach insisted that “your arbitration must be upheld at all costs”. Crucially, Hicks-Beach asked for Frere’s advice as to how the effects of the Boundary Commission’s report might be somehow circumvented.

We appointed the Commission: they heard all the Transvaal case, and have reported in favour of the Zulus, who (rightly as it seems) did not think it necessary to produce evidence. On what ground can we act against the Report? For our action must be based on ascertained facts and I do not know where we are to get them, if not from our own Commission. (17)

Frere and Hicks-Beach agreed that a peaceful Southern Africa required that the Boers be kept quiet and that the potential Zulu military threat be removed. The report of the Boundary Commission was not likely to achieve either of these outcomes and Hicks-Beach had asked the experienced administrator for a solution. Frere gave it. The Boers would give land in the Disputed Territories in return for the removal of the Zulu threat, while the Zulus would gain land in return for a general disarmament and recognition of Britain as the paramount power, by the acceptance of a Resident.

Much of Frere's justification for subsequently coercing the Zulus was based on his assessment that they represented an immediate threat to British paramount authority at a vulnerable time. In this he was wrong, although a strong case can be made out to say that they did constitute a potential threat for the medium term.

Cetshwayo, in common with his predecessors, was a tyrant whose methods of government created the very instability that his military system was designed to prevent. In September 1876 he had executed a number of girls who had married without permission and when reprimanded by Bulwer had replied that "it is the custom of our nation and I shall not depart from it.... My people will not listen unless they are killed". Execution for trivial offences or witchcraft, torture, political assassinations, mistreatment of the minority *amaLala* were all in evidence and there were a large number of Zulu refugees in Natal, including the Christian *amaKholwa*, the product of a steady drift from the 1840s onwards, which could only encourage more destabilising dissent within Zululand. Although Cetshwayo was firmly against war with the British in 1878, many Zulus were eager to wash their spears in Swazi blood, a desire that he shared, and his capability to restrain his warriors for the longer term must be severely doubted in the light of the appearance in 1878 of a pro-war party among some *indunas*, pressurised by younger warriors eager to prove themselves against the British. The existence of an opposition-in-waiting, led by Hamu (and other factions whom Cetshwayo had offended during his succession dispute) who would exploit any discontent generated by Cetshwayo's response to British power, might also lead Cetshwayo into an unwanted aggression against the British or British protected polities at some time in the future.

Frere did not overestimate the effectiveness of the Zulu army, but recognised that it was a match for the Colonial forces. It was in fact ossified in its tactics, deficient in weaponry and undisciplined on the battlefield, but was capable of sweeping up the farmsteads of the Transvaal and Natal if it could muster sufficient strategic surprise. By rejecting the use of horse and gun, the Zulu military establishment had refused to learn the lessons of defeat at the hands of the Boers, and by placing too much emphasis on individual bravery rather than collective discipline encouraged the impetuosity which made battlefield command and control of the younger warriors almost impossible. One of the main reasons for Frere's disobedience lay in his belief in the sheer impossibility of carrying out a defensive policy in the face of a Zulu invasion and it is a convincing argument that to assume a policy of 'defence not attack' was simply not practical in circumstances dominated by the rise and fall of the Tugela river. Frere's belief that a "fall in the river rendering it easily fordable, a very usual occurrence at this season" could bring a Zulu *impi* into Natal at any one of a hundred places and, "which shewed no quarter to age or sex and which had the power, if they only wished, to evade every post held by English soldiers and sweep the utterly defenceless country farms and open towns and villages of all life and property" and be back across the river with virtual impunity was essentially correct. Military orthodoxy held that "the defence of a river crossing is the worst of all possible assignments, especially if the front that you are to defend is long; in this case defence is impractical". Adopting a purely defensive strategy, Frere believed, would hand the initiative to "the caprice or anger" of Cetshwayo and make it necessary to parcel out the troops along such a wide front that they would be vulnerable to defeat in detail. In effect, it would negate any chance of deterrence, as it would not arouse enough fear among the Zulus as to make them decide against fighting. The only chance of avoiding such a situation would be to march into Zululand *en masse* and force the Zulu *impis* to converge for a decisive battle.

However, despite the missionaries' fears about Cetshwayo's religious policy, their expulsion from Zululand in September 1877, and the various Black rape scares of the 1870s that heightened fears of what the enforced celibacy of the Zulu army would do if let loose, and despite Shepstone's conviction that Zulu power was "the root and real strength of all native difficulties in South Africa", Cetshwayo had no immediate intentions of war with the British or Boers in 1878.

Frere had a legal pretext for invasion in Cetshwayo's Coronation Laws of 1873, which arrogated to Britain the right to depose him if he did not govern according to British notions of justice and fairness and this made finding a

reason for invading Zululand and deposing “Ketchwayo, in the guise of Mephistopheles” a relatively simple task. His theoretical grounds had been laid out in 1876 when he had argued that

All have an inherent right to live, free from apprehension of any extinction at the hands of the neighbours, as long as they do not give such neighbours any just cause for war...(18)

However,

By common consent of all civilised nations...interference is justifiable...in cases where the interests of the stronger Power are directly at stake. (19)

That interference in the affairs of other nations in pursuit of vital interests was justifiable was an accepted canon of European diplomatic practice since the emergence of a diplomatic system after the religious wars of the seventeenth century. Frere was perfectly happy to argue that a great power was within its rights to interfere in the internal government of a smaller power if it felt its interests were threatened by the manner in which those internal affairs were conducted, especially if the smaller power showed itself unable to prevent aggression of the Mehlokazulu type. The same argument also justified British interference if a smaller power such as the Zulu kingdom attempted aggression against a neighbour - like the Transvaal or Swaziland. In such a way, the prevention of tyranny and a pre-emptive strike against an army potentially poised to invade a British protected polity could be used as the grounds on which the Coronation laws of 1873 might be invoked.

Frere's determination to go to war was made firm in his request for reinforcements submitted on September 10th 1878. This request could not however be met by Hicks-Beach without the permission of the Cabinet and, when asked on 12th October 1878, the Cabinet, faced with war in Afghanistan and a Russian army still encamped outside Constantinople, were doubtful as to the wisdom of diverting troops to a third theatre of war. This turn of events immediately sent Hicks-Beach into a panic as he realised that Disraeli and Salisbury, the leading men of the party, did not share Frere's fears that the immediate global nature of the Russian threat extended to an immediate threat to South Africa, and that he was therefore dangerously out of political step. He had so far agreed “with all that was said and done by Frere” and, despite his inexperience in Colonial affairs, he was an experienced enough politician to know when to tack with the prevailing wind and immediately began sending dispatches which would distance himself from his previous encouragement of Frere. Undoubtedly Hicks-Beach was correct in accepting the collective decision of the Cabinet, but it is difficult not to agree with W.B. Worsfold that in editing the papers that were submitted to Parliament he covered up how close he had been to Frere.

His first telegraph message to Frere was sent on the 12th October 1878 (received 4th November 1878) and expressed the startling view that “I feel some doubts whether more troops can be spared. As the hostilities in Cape Colony are now at an end, would not the police and volunteers be sufficient...?” Frere protested but Hicks-Beach refused the troops again on the grounds of “a confident hope that by the exercise of prudence and by meeting the Zulus in a spirit of forbearance and reasonable compromise” war could be averted. Frere was to “redouble the exertions which I am sure you have already employed to avoid the outbreak of any such war, as ...I fear you thought too probable...” On the 14th November 1878, he rejected Frere's request for the annexation of the coastline north of the Tugela on the grounds that “...there do not appear to me under existing circumstances to be any sufficient reasons for the step proposed, I cannot but think the present moment singularly inopportune for such action”. On the 28th November 1878, Frere received word that he would now get a reinforcement of two Infantry Battalions but that the Cabinet was “*most anxious* not to have a Zulu war on our hands just now”. Frere chose to interpret the dispatch of reinforcements as an indication that Hicks-Beach was coming round to his point of view, argued that the best that could be expected of Anglo-Zulu relations was an “armed truce”, and went ahead with the ultimatum to the Zulus on 11th December 1878. He felt that he had grounds enough for war and that he had made his case for it with the strong support of the Colonial Office in general and Hicks-Beach in particular. To throw the whole policy into reverse at such a crucial stage was, to him, simply madness and a prime example of the inadvisability of such interference from afar. Furthermore, Frere felt that to withdraw an ultimatum once issued would be to destroy any credibility that he possessed with the Zulus and encourage them to think that the British yielded from fear, a result that could only encourage the pro-war party in Cetshwayo's councils. Even if Cetshwayo had decided not to take the initiative and invade (as Frere was convinced he would) there was always the distinct possibility that “the impetuosity of his young men or the dissatisfaction of the old ones...might any moment precipitate his action, and compel him to attack”. Frere also disagreed with Hicks-Beach's analysis that a Zulu war would hinder the attempt to force the Russians out of the Balkans. Hicks-Beach argued that

We believe that Russia will carry out her engagements in the Treaty of Berlin if she thinks we are in a position to insist upon her doing so. But if, when the time fixed for her evacuation of the Balkan provinces arrives, she should have reason to think that we were so fully occupied elsewhere as to be unable to interfere with her in that

part of the world, there would be great danger of her declining to do so, with the by no means improbable result of a European war. The Afghanistan affair has therefore arisen at a most unfortunate time: and you will see how much the risk arising from this would be increased by the addition of a Zulu war. (20)

As far as Frere was concerned, "it was impossible to delay without incurring the danger of even greater evils than a Zulu war" which would no doubt involve an "occurrence in the Transvaal which might draw our troops up thither" and quite possibly a general uprising "among any of the numerous tribes to which Cetshwayo's emissaries during the past two years have been directed". For Frere, the best way to convince the Russians of British determination was to demonstrate that the control of her empire, and the routes between the constituent parts, was secure and such "half measures" that Hicks-Beach was proposing were useless. Nor did he consider his request for two battalions of Infantry unreasonable, even considering the emergencies in Constantinople and Afghanistan. Disraeli had moved only six battalions of infantry, two regiments of cavalry and four companies of sappers to Malta in 1878 in order to threaten the Russians, which left 136 battalions of infantry, and 40 regiments of cavalry available in India alone - facts which Frere, with his intimate knowledge of the Indian army gained during the debates surrounding its reorganisation after the mutiny, knew very well. The war he contemplated was not intended to be on anything like the scale of the wars of his youth in India, but more likely to be modelled on the Ashanti campaign of 1873 - a swift decisive engagement followed by effective withdrawal - and a settlement based on those common among the Princely States of India, after which the troops could be forwarded to India along with other colonial forces in an "extended scheme of Imperial defence". Above all he wanted to avoid a long bush war such as he had recently experienced with the Xhosa.

On the same day as the ultimatum was issued, (11th December 1878) Hicks-Beach protested his innocence about Frere's policy again and claimed that "I really do not know at all what you contemplate in this direction..." In addition "it is only fair to you to tell you distinctly how the matter presents itself to me". On Christmas day 1878 he wrote again that "I have already, both publicly and privately, impressed upon you to such an extent my views as to the necessity, if possible, of avoiding a Zulu war, that I do not wish to repeat myself". But by the time Frere received it on the 28th January 1879, Colonel Pulleine's battalion had already made their last stand and Lts. Chard and Bromhead had saved Rorke's Drift.

Frere's Disobedience.

The decision to go to war against the orders of his superiors was an act of gross insubordination exceeding any acceptable discretion that Frere could legitimately have expected to wield. That he disobeyed was due to a combination of his belief that there were major threats to the Empire emerging in the form of Russian, American, German and French power that could only be met by a wider consolidation of the British Empire, his attitude to devolved authority and the presumed inadequacies of elected politicians in a crisis, his conviction that there was an immediate Russian threat to the empire, and that there was a strong possibility of a Zulu attack on Natal and, or, the Transvaal. This analysis was flawed in some important respects, yet he felt it to be so correct and the needs of the moment so urgent, that he acted on it even though he probably knew that it was a step too far. Frere's disobedience is interesting because, as has already been noted, his biographers have all found much to praise in him and little to condemn, and have presented a picture almost entirely at odds with the one presented by politicians at the time, the historians of the Zulu war in general, and Norman Etherington in particular. They have pointed to his activities as a philanthropist, anti-slaver, humanitarian, geographer, civil engineer and administrator in such a way as to produce a picture of a very hard working, conscientious official of model probity and efficiency, with which it is difficult to find evidence of serious fault before this extreme act.

He was physically brave, being prepared to face down angry demonstrations without recourse to troops and calm and collected in the face of panics such as occurred after Isandlwana. He was thoughtful, lucid, analytical and showed reasonable foresight in his decision making, which was also pragmatic and undoctinaire. He was deeply Christian, yet prepared to extend a very wide measure of religious tolerance to other faiths and restrain over-zealous missionaries. He bore the petty bureaucratic prejudices against him as a Bombay man, rather than a Bengal officer, without complaint even though it may well have contributed to his failure to become Viceroy. He refused to accept the idea that any one race was inherently better than another and worked to reconcile the conquered not just to acceptance of British rule, but to participate increasingly in it. He mixed socially with Indians throughout his career, especially during the post-mutiny period when he risked the opprobrium of Calcutta society for doing so, and was appalled at South African attitudes to Africans. He does not appear to have been motivated by a desire for fame and conspicuously missed out on the opportunities for advancement that a more active participation in the Mutiny might have provided, nor did he lobby for any appointment after he left Bombay but appeared to be content to serve in any

capacity that his masters desired. He was never wealthy, nor did he seek to amass a fortune, when it is conceivable that his many contacts would have yielded a lucrative post if he so desired it. Accepting the appointment to South Africa meant forgoing a comfortable retirement for a return to the hardships of camp life when his health had already been broken by long years in India. Similarly, he never resigned his post even when completely humiliated by Hicks-Beach after Isandlwana. All in all, it seems hard to escape the conclusion that Frere really was a selfless man, motivated by service to the Empire and the peoples within it.

Frere's correspondence and writings do show up a number of other traits however. While he was always careful to be as courteous as possible, he was capable of a withering sarcasm for those he felt were incompetent in general and guilty of a deep loathing for the twists and turns of politicians in particular. He could also be curiously unworldly and seems not to have considered that others within the political establishment may not have understood his motivations. Having been used to wide discretion from the beginning of his career, he demanded more and more, believing himself both competent to wield it and responsible enough not to abuse it. He did not understand their suspicions of him and seems to have been completely unaware of the speed and ruthlessness with which they could move when it suited them. This naivete can also be seen in his dealings with the Bombay financiers who, he seems not to have considered, might be less honest or disinterested in money than he was.

Forty years in India had led Frere to believe that his duty was to the long-term interests of the Empire and not the short-term gains of party or the interests of politicians. His attitude to authority was shaped by a career that had given him wide powers without much scrutiny by elected representatives who necessarily conducted business with one eye on their constituencies, and one is left with the distinct impression that he felt that parliaments should be advisory bodies, rather than executives in their own right. As his career advanced, and he built up his considerable wealth of experience, he found it more and more difficult to tolerate politicians, and preferred to work with those practical, dedicated types, such as John Jacob, Pelly, Florence Nightingale and David Livingstone who sought no great fame for themselves and who were, perhaps prepared to flout conventions for the greater good. The reality was that Frere was very much at home in the semi-military style government of India, but in a system where the wishes of Parliament, however short-sighted or disagreeable, were paramount, Frere was out of his depth. A better diplomat than a politician, he lacked the necessary instincts to tailor his actions to the parliamentary situation and believed that cabinet ministers would back him in the same way as an Indian superior would, judging him only on the final results, when in fact they would scrutinise his actions far more carefully for their impact on their own careers and policies, as well as on the wider interests of Britain. Nor did he understand that absence of immediate criticism did not automatically mean the endorsement of his policies by his superiors, or that he could be reined in at any time. He failed to understand that Hicks-Beach, however erroneous his actions might be viewed by Frere, was responsible for Colonial policy and that in overriding Frere's policy became fully responsible for any disagreeable events that might flow from it. Rage as he might at the possibility of a massacre in Natal, a rising in the Transvaal, the destruction of Capetown by a Russian squadron and the severing of an Imperial lifeline in the event of a war, once Hicks-Beach took control, they ceased to become his responsibility. Frere's desire to avoid such calamities did not override his duty to obey his superiors, however lowly he regarded them, and however much he considered that his position as the man on the spot gave him a better angle of vision and a surer basis of judgement.

He also failed to realise that the good opinion of many in the establishment, including Lord Carnarvon and the Queen, was not the same as having a political constituency or power base and this left him dangerously exposed to party movements, especially when he had made such an enemy as Gladstone. He never seems to have considered the possibility that he might be sacrificed to party politics, and as such, showed himself to be a babe in arms in the rough and tumble of parliamentary politics, where virtue was not enough on its own to ensure success or survival. He interpreted Hicks-Beach's reversal of policy in November 1878 as mere political cowardice and his contempt for it was to push him over the edge into outright disobedience. For him this was "the spasmodic action of the Home Govt., with few traditions such as the Indian Govt. still possesses and swayed now by a vote in the House of Commons, now by a philanthropic society or by the crotchets of those who by the chances of party are sent to rule the Colonial Office". His views were not given the weight that he felt were due to them - "A puppy dog in Bond Street or Fleet Street is bigger and stronger than any elephant in Africa" - and Hicks-Beach was endangering any progress towards "an Africa Pacificatus". This, combined with his debates with Gladstone and his general opinion of politicians was to lead Frere into a fatal error of judgement, when he failed to consider the possibility that a slick, party politician could avert a war and expand British influence by using the skills gained in political infighting, as Disraeli did between 1877 and 1879 in the Balkans. One of Frere's key justifications for starting a Zulu war - removing the immediate danger to the South African base and preparing it for a Russian war - was thereby rendered null and void.

Frere fell far from the pedestal he had earned for himself through a unique combination of events. His disobedience might well have been overlooked had not three distinct factors collided during 1879. The first was

that, Disraeli was successful in getting the Russians out of the Balkans without recourse to war; the second was that the lucky Zulu victory at Isandlwana brought massive scrutiny and irritation down on him for the reverse; the third was that Gladstone decided to use the exaggerated reports from Zululand as a stick to beat a government already weakened by a reversal in Afghanistan.

Frere was no swaggering imperialist bully grinding the faces of peaceful pastoralists into the dust at the behest of top-hatted capitalists eager to enslave them in the farms and mines of South Africa as his most vehement denigrators argue. Rather he was a conscientious servant of an Empire he believed to be benevolent and who feared that it was about to be tested in a global war against a far worse alternative. To that end, he believed himself justified in breaking up a rival Zulu empire, which he believed had no other rationale for its existence than war for its own sake, lest it strike at a vulnerable imperial station independently but simultaneously with Russian naval forces. Had Disraeli been less of a genius, and failed to persuade the Russians to withdraw, Frere might well have been pardoned, the ruin of Zululand by Garnet Wolseley avoided, the First Boer War averted, and Confederation pushed through by a sympathetic and competent administrator going on to serve as its first Viceroy. What is certain, however, is that the fate of the Zulus was decided by reference to factors residing primarily outside South Africa rather than within it.

References.

1. Frere to Lord Cranborne, Secretary of State for India, October 2, 1866. Cited in *Martineau*, Vol. I, p. 464.
2. Privateering is the commissioning of civilian vessels to act as warships for the purposes of capturing enemy flagged cargo ships. The European powers had agreed to outlaw this practice in the Treaty of Paris 1856. See *Scharf*, p. 58.
3. Frere to Carnarvon 4th April 1877. Quoted in *Martineau* Vol II p. 180. Frere was at sea on his way to Cape Town.
4. Hicks-Beach to Frere 4th April 1878. Reproduced in *Worsfield*, p. 72. Hicks-Beach had also sent a circular to all the colonies on the defence of ports against “attack by a small squadron” which appears to have been based on Frere’s warnings. CAB 7/1/2 *Correspondence Respecting the Defences of the Colonies* No. 15 p. 7. 20th March 1878.
5. Frere to Hicks-Beach 30th April 1878. Reproduced in *Worsfold*, pp. 72 - 74. Frere wanted 12 large naval guns as a minimum.
6. Frere to Napier 21st July 1880. IOR MSS EUR F114/69 Napier Papers.
7. Frere to Ponsonby 17th October 1877. Quoted in *Martineau* Vol II p. 199.
8. Sir Bartle Frere, *The Union of the Various Portions of British South Africa*, (London, 1881), p. 12.
9. Frere to Colonel Merewether 27th March 1876. IOR MSS F81/65 Frere Collection p. 61.
10. Frere to Carnarvon 14th November 1877 PRO 30/6/33.
11. Frere to Carnarvon 14th November 1877 PRO 30/6/33. This was pure Napier who when challenged about his ban on suttee replied “My nation also has a custom. When men burn women alive, we hang them.” Quoted in P. Mason, *The Men Who Ruled India* (New York, 1985), p. 145.
12. Frere to Lord Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay 28th May 1855, quoting Jacob. IOR MSS EUR F.75/7 No. 49. John Jacob Collection.
13. Frere to Lord Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay 28th May 1855. IOR MSS EUR F.75/7 No. 49. John Jacob Collection.
14. *The Cape Argus*, September 18th 1877, PRO 30/6/33.
15. Sir Bartle Frere, *Afghanistan and South Africa*, (London, 1881), p. 16. Frere’s use of English occasionally let him down.
16. PRO CO 879/14 No. 306. Frere to Hicks-Beach 30th September 1878.
17. Hicks-Beach to Frere 2nd October 1878. Reproduced in *Worsfold*, p. 103.
18. Sir B. Frere “The Turkish Empire”, *Quarterly Review*, October 1876, p. 504.
19. Sir B. Frere “The Turkish Empire”, *Quarterly Review*, October 1876, pp. 504 – 505.
20. Hicks-Beach to Frere 28th November 1878. Reproduced in *Worsfold*, p. 137.