

DONALD R. MORRIS

The Washing of the Spears,

Of all the many books written about the Anglo-Zulu War, the most famous remains Donald R. Morris' *The Washing of the Spears*. First published in 1966, it has stayed in print in one form or another ever since, and remains a remarkable achievement – a literate history of power and eloquence which has profoundly affected the historiography of the subject.

Donald R. Morris' was born in 1924 and raised in New York City, he joined the US Navy in 1942. After the war, he graduated from Annapolis University with a degree in Electrical Engineering – his biographical notes wryly comment that out of 410 men in his class, he stood 1st in Naval History, 2nd in English, and 409th in Electrical Engineering. After several years serving on destroyers – he earned two battle stars in Korea – he was detailed to the CIA where he remained until 1972. Although the CIA insisted that he describe himself on the dust jacket of *The Washing of the Spears* as a 'Lieutenant Commander in the Ready Reserve', he actually spent seventeen years on Soviet counter-espionage activities. This included overseas postings in Berlin, Kinshasa, and Vietnam.

He began writing in the 1940s, and had two short novels published in the '50s – *China Station* and *Warm Bodies*. The latter was made into a film, *All Hands on Deck* – which he has never seen. He began working on *The Washing of the Spears* in 1958. Since its publication, he has written for a wide variety of journals, and was news analyst for *The Houston Post* between 1972 and 1989.

Question; I notice from the foreword in the book that you first discovered the story of Rorke's Drift when you were a child. John Aspinall once told me that he first came across Shaka in a Rider Haggard story at the age of twelve, and his fascination for the Zulus has stayed with him ever since. My own interest came from early exposure to the film *ZULU*. At that age one makes no pretence to serious historical study - why is it, do you think, that the story has such imaginative power?

Answer; For most boys, an interest in military history starts early – before it's really possible to understand wars, battles, maps. Small actions *can* be comprehended (you don't need a map; a picture tells a whole story), starting with 'one on one' – hence the grip of the Western shoot-out, and such actions as the Alamo, Custer's Last Stand and Rorke's Drift.

Q.; You mention that Hemingway suggested you write it as a book; care to tell us more about that? As a writer, were your themes influenced by Hemingway?

A.; I met him in Cuba under unusual circumstances. My mother-in-law had known him many years before, and suggested I look him up when the ship I was serving on, the USS Murray, was destined for Havana during a tour of the Caribbean in 1955. I drove out to his house, and found him sitting on the porch, accompanied by another author, who was somewhat the worse for wear. Hemingway was happy to talk, and took an interest in my career – I was staggered to find he had read my first novel (I later discovered he had read nearly every military novel published). I told him I was writing an article for *True* on the defence of Rorke's Drift – he advised me not to throw the story away on a magazine. There had never been a good book on the Zulu War in England, he said, and none in America. His knowledge of Africa – not just the fauna and big game hunting – but the history and ethnology as well, was awesome. Who was I to argue with the Lord High Panjandrum of American letters – though if I'd known it would take eight years, *The Washing of the Spears* would never have been written. Our meeting came to an end when Hemingway's companion – who, it turned out, had arrived unannounced and drunk – became obstreperous, and I had to throw him out.

Q.; Your early career was in the Navy. I understand you saw action in Korea - and were involved in 'spook' activities in Vietnam?

A.; I served with destroyers after 1948 graduation from the Naval Academy – including service in Korea. In 1956, after graduating from Naval Intelligence School and a nine-month Russian language course, I was detailed to the CIA – where I went through their Junior Officer Trainee language course, and was detailed to the Soviet Division. In 1960 the Navy signalled 'Come back, come back, wherever you are,' so I resigned my commission, took a reserve commission, and continued with the CIA until 1972, when, with 30 years' government service, I retired and went to work for the *Houston Post*. I spent five years in West Berlin working on Soviet counter-espionage operations (and I was there the day the wall went up!) *, and two years in Paris,

Q; Did you want to write at this stage?

A; I sold my first piece as a Midshipman to the Naval Institute Proceedings; they paid me \$265 – which was four month's salary for a Midshipman. I asked myself, 'How long has this been going on?', and have been writing for publications ever since.

Q: Were you working on *The Washing of the Spears* during your time in Berlin? Surely it must have been difficult writing about Anglo-Zulu history from there?

A: The bulk of the early work on the book was done while I was with the CIA there. My wife was literary; we had four small children. They were put to bed about 20.30, and the bulk of the work was done between 20.30 and 02.00, and on the weekends (minus some night work for the CIA, and a social life!). My wife had strict instructions – 'In the event of a fire, first the manuscript, *then* the children'. Berlin was actually an excellent place to work on the Zulu War and South African history. Afrikaners *were* home and didn't write letters; all the records and letters were British and mostly in London, where we took all our leaves. Over the years I bought most of the secondary sources (they were cheap then!). We were close friends of M.M. Kaye, wife of Brigadier Goff Hamilton, then commander of the British contingent in Berlin. She gave me access to the London Library, and through that I was able to borrow (in Berlin!) anything from any British library!

I had written to Dr. Killie Campbell, but it was obvious that despite the fact she was sitting on the greatest collection of Africana in the world, she was untrained, and couldn't really answer questions by mail. She turned my letter over to Ian Player, however (he just happened to be visiting when she opened the letter), and he got in touch independently. At the time he was Senior Ranger in the Natal Parks Board, resident on the Mfolozi, and a native Zulu speaker. He answered scores of questions about everything from Zulu to cattle diseases, and when I took a month's leave to visit kwaZulu, he took a fortnight off and we visited all the battlefields in a Land Rover (this was 1962 and there wasn't a paved road north of the Tugela; empty cartridge cases, beer bottle shards, boot heels, were still to be found on the sites). That's when I found the twisted, corroded copper strap, attacked with an axe and a bayonet to open the box, on the site of the ammo train at Isandlwana – Ian and Colonel Jack Vincent, head of the Board, were with me at the time. Killie was more than helpful, moved me in, and located all the material I needed.

The next year (back in Washington) I was suddenly sent to Australia to help the Australian internal security staff on the Skripoff case (a Soviet Illegal, and I was then on the Soviet Illegals Desk at the CIA); and I took another leave and came back the other way – giving me a second spell at the Campbell library and in kwaZulu to clean up details.

Q: When you were writing the book, Zulu history was an unknown quantity as far as commercial potential was concerned (the huge public interest having come afterwards - largely as a result of your book). That must have required a leap of faith, for both yourself and your publisher?

A; Practically no one in America knew anything about Rorke's Drift or the Zulu War when I started to work – or much about South Africa, for that matter. I knew it was a good story, and worked on that basis. My agent sent it to Simon and Schuster just after Sharpville broke, and there was a sudden demand for anything and everything about South Africa, especially native history, so S & S signed a contract on the basis of the first couple of chapters – they were a little stunned when the manuscript arrived, but went ahead gamely. (In the contract, I had secured rights over the cover, the photo section, and index).

I also told S & S I'd never speak to them again if they priced it at '\$something.95' – it came out at \$12 (I never knew if they added a nickel or subtracted \$.95!) at a time when most heavy non-fiction sold for about \$6.95. I was appalled – but Michael Korda explained, 'Look, if they want to read about Zulus, they'll pay \$25. If they don't want to read about Zulus, I couldn't give it away. And that's what it cost us to publish it.'

One problem was that very few reviewers knew enough about the subject to write an intelligent review. The best came from Shula Marks, the world's leading Zulu historian (and an avowed Marxist) in the *Journal of African History*. She was startled to find the author was an American naval officer (the CIA insisted I stick with that story, and I *did* hold a reserve commission when the book came out), but she was more than generous.

Q; The book has been hugely successful - as far as I can see it has been in print in one form or another ever since - at least in the UK. Were you surprised at this? Has it won any awards? It's a great title, by the way - I wish I could have used it!

A: The book, in the U.S. and the Commonwealth (and South Africa) has been in 17 different packages and hasn't been out of print in 35 years. No idea what the total number of copies out is; but it is over 200,000 – the bulk of the sales are in a very bad paperback edition in South Africa (no photos, maps illegible and end material butchered); that contract finally expired, and a very good edition is now available. I tended to agree with a Robert Benchley review of a history of the Navaho Indians – 'This book fills a long unfelt want, and will tell you more about the Navahos than you wanted to know'.

Q; Zululand must have been a very different place then, in the pre-tourist era. There can have been very little at Ulundi, for example. I have seen huge changes even in the last twenty years. Did you have a sense, then, of the past being more tangible than it is today?

A: Very much – on first visit, in 1960, there wasn't a paved road north of the Tugela, beehive huts were still to be found, women in native dress (many topless) and hair dressing, and the men barefoot in cast-off European khakis. No cars, few buses; wealthy Zulus rode horses. The battlefields were isolated, and the monuments in disrepair. At every battle site, there were small Zulu boys hawking souvenirs. And while there were few actual survivors of 1879, their children were still alive – a daughter of John Dunn, Harry Lugg's son – he showed me the Martini-Henry carbine and knife his father carried at Rorke's Drift.

Q: My personal feeling is that modern historians owe a debt - as yet largely unacknowledged - to those few individuals of the generation who kept an interest in Zulu culture and history alive at a time when it was deliberately undervalued by the government (1950s, 60s). I am thinking of men like SB Bourquin - who, paradoxically, was very much a part of the apartheid infrastructure in Durban - but who remains a huge repository of Zulu history and lore that would have otherwise been lost. Any thoughts?

A: Of course, South Africa (or even Kwa Zulu-Natal) has never acknowledged its debt to S.B Bourquin, or even Killie Campbell; her collection has been on the verge of being dispersed a half-dozen times since her death – only recently did it reach a reasonably sound footing. And what is known of early amaZulu history comes entirely from A.T. Bryant – who got what remained of the primary oral sources in the 1880s.

Q; The movies *ZULU* and to a lesser extent *ZULU DAWN* have had a huge impact on the way the war is remembered by the public at large in the UK. Have you seen them? Do you like them?

A: *ZULU*, despite liberties taken with the historical record (and a rather silly opening sequence at King Cetshwayo's homestead) is extraordinarily faithful to the spirit of what happened at Rorke's Drift, with tremendous dramatic impact. *ZULU DAWN* is actually more faithful to the historical record – but tends to be confusing, with troops and Zulus trotting and running over a large amount of real estate.

Q: What are your thoughts on the huge explosion of interest in Zulu history - both academic and popular - since the 1960s? It owes a great debt to *Washing of the Spears*, even though some historians - with the discovery of many sources that were presumably not available to you - might have reached conclusions different to your own. Do their different opinions bother you - or do you feel you started the whole ball rolling?

A: Until the 1970s, African and 'native' history were 'infra dig' at South African English-speaking universities; graduate students were all turned loose on Charles II and the English Civil War. Only with the 'Africanization' of the history departments was attention finally focused on the material at hand – with a new generation of historians – Colin Webb, Jeff Guy, Philip Gon and many others. *The Washing of the Spears* was a bit of a pioneer and may have helped to get the ball rolling. (Mr Griffiths, who ran a London shop selling Stadden military figurines, once told me 'You were responsible for the sale of at least 150,000 figurines of the 24th and Zulus – and six divorces that I know of.')

I'm not sure of any 'conclusions different to my own' (other than 'yours, mentioned below) – although these are often mentioned these days. One or two factual errors – Colours carried at Ulundi for the last time – were corrected in later editions. The only differing 'conclusion' is your and F.W.D. Jackson's, that there were Mark IV 'quick opening' boxes at Isandlwana, and that 'there was no failure of ammo supply'. (1) I stand by my view that there isn't a shred of evidence for Mark IV boxes in the field (there were some in Natal, but the British, being British, were using the old ones first), but that there are several references to the difficulties of opening the boxes – which my ammo strap (now on loan to David Rattray) confirms. And even if all the half-million rounds had been in open piles beside the wagons, the ammo supply *still* would have failed – there is no way drummer boys could have carried enough in their helmets a half-mile each way through the camp to keep the companies supplied when the Zulus sprang to their feet. And of course Durnford's contingent was refused ammunition by the 24th's Quartermasters.

Q: *Washing of the Spears* is your only historical book. Have you never been tempted to return to the subject of Zulu history - to rework that book, to tackle another aspect, or even to write about some other aspect of African history?

A: I had no idea *The Washing of the Spears* was going to take eight years (during which I couldn't work on anything else) when I started it. Never again! And since 1972 I've now written some 5,700 columns on current events and foreign affairs, and perhaps 500 book reviews, plus a number of short stories and magazine articles. I may yet finish a rather anecdotal autobiography.

Q: You've written novels - ever been tempted to write something fictional about the Zulus?

A: I did write a short story about the Zulu War – it appeared in *Argosy* and a British magazine.

Q: You've had a very varied career - Naval officer, CIA agent, novelist, historian, journalist, and political analyst. How do you feel about the fact that you are best known for *The Washing of the Spears* - just one small part of this?

A: The book represented eight years of my life. I'm happy to rest on it. One of the novels made much more money (movie rights, Reader's Digest Condensed Book Club), but it's all forgotten today. *The Washing of the Spears* isn't.

Q: Do you keep in touch with events in Zululand today?

A: On my first two visits to RSA, my interests were entirely historical. By the early 1970s, they had shifted to political. Since then I've been back just about every other year – and wrote about South Africa frequently. People I'd met in the 1960s as young men – such as Mangosuthu Buthelezi – were moving into interesting positions, and looked on me as an old friend and an historian rather than a journalist. I was a monitor for the Lesotho elections in 1993, and the Lord was kind in 1994 – I was a U.N. monitor in the Nqutu district, and on election morning in pitch blackness was on the field at Isandlwana waiting for my first polling station, the Gadeleni High School under the Nqutu ridge, to open. I was standing where Cavaye's A. Co. stood, and the school, a long, low concrete block, was surrounded by a horde of voters, with many young bucks in amaButho dress – as the sun rose, it must have looked just like the uNodwengu corps pouring over the lip 122 years ago. I wept.

Q: Tell me about your Zulu name - and how you got it.

A: My Zulu name is 'Ntshebe', 'The Bearded One'; it came from either Ian Player or Shenge (Dr. Buthelezi).

Q: Finally, what do you think about Zululand in the tourist age, when lodges are springing up all around Isandlwana, and there is a steady pilgrimage of tourists from all over the world to the sites of these extraordinary incidents?

A: I only know of David Rattray's Fugitives' Drift Lodge, and its unsurpassed 1879 collection of documents and artefacts (Charlie Pope's last letter home from camp, two days before the slaughter!) – not to mention the unsurpassed kitchen and David's tours. Both of the sites are in good shape; Rorke's Drift Museum is excellent. Isandlwana was always hard to get to, especially from Rorke's Drift, so the new bridge across the Drift is a Godsend to visitors – although I find the huge bridge itself a bit unsettling.

Reference.

1. Donald Morris and David Jackson debated the ammunition question in the Summer 1982 edition and July 1983 issues of *Soldiers of the Queen*, the Journal of the Victorian Military Society. Ian Knight outlined his view in his book *Zulu; The Battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift* (1992).

Donald Morris *Washing of the Spears*

