

Investigating Burglary: Economic Motives for the Anglo Zulu War 1879

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In a recent TV documentary, the historian, Jeff Guy, described the British invaders of Zululand as 'burglars' attempting to rob the Zulus (1) and in doing so echoed a long line of commentators who saw economic gain or greed as the primary motive of Imperialism. As early as 1902, J.A. Hobson argued that the scramble for Africa was the result of a conspiracy of business elites, while Marx had condemned empire as the product of bourgeois capitalism in 1848 - before most of the empires were built.(2) On the other hand, Frank McDonough argued that capital was not patriotic and tended to go where the returns were best irrespective of any sentimental feeling for the Empire(3). while M. Edelstein calculated that if Britain had abandoned the Empire in 1850 the loss of trade would have been only 3% of the total and the savings made in defence expenditure would have more than justified such a move. (4) The debate as to whether the economic motive is dominant or a Marxist pipe dream is a vexed one and often relies on subjective interpretations of incomplete statistics. Probably the most that can be said is that whereas there are plenty of examples of fortunes made, it is impossible to say with any certainty the extent to which economic and financial considerations generally dictated the incorporation of territory within the British Empire. However, we can look at particular circumstances - Zululand - and assess the relative weight of the part that economics played in conquest.

In South African history it is tempting to point to the discovery of diamonds at Kimberley as a potent economic argument for the British desire to drive the various political units of southern Africa into a confederation under London's control, lest the trade be disturbed by war or rebellion. Certainly the income from the tariffs and trade associated with the diggings at the world's largest hole showed a marked increase between 1869 and 1871, as Governor Barkly was moved to exclaim in 1874.

In transmitting the Blue book of this colony for 1871, I commend my Despatch by stating that the year had been one of unprecedented prosperity. The returns for 1872, which I have the honour to forward, completely throw into the shade nevertheless those for 1871....The total receipts for the Treasury stand at £1,161,548 about double what they were in 1869! (5)

He also pointed to the increase in shipping at the Cape as a result of this bonanza, saying that visiting British ships had increased from 307 in 1871 to 375 in 1872, while foreign shipping visiting the Cape in the same period had increased from 80 to 107. There was a consequent increase of 40% in the coastal trade too.(6) Bernard Porter argued that these discoveries radically altered the South African position.

They made southern Africa what she had never been before: potentially an economic asset. Her trade nearly trebled in ten years; her debts melted away; and investment there from abroad boomed spectacularly.(7)

The key word here, however, is 'potentially'. Even with the diamonds, the economy remained too small to tempt the British government into a war to ensure that the Zulus did not disrupt it. Cape exports were valued at £7,710,000 and her imports at £7,662,000 in 1880, while those of Natal came to a meagre £890,000 worth of exports and a crushing trade imbalance of £2,336,000 of imports (8) (with no invisibles to cushion it). This was in comparison to total British merchandise exports of £286,400,000 and imports of £411,000,000 in 1880; receipts from goods traffic on the railways of £34,500,000; foreign investments of £41,700,000 made in 1880 alone; debt charges of £28,100,000; Customs and Excise duties of £44, 600,000; even the British government's income from Death Duties exceeded the value of Natalian imports by a factor of four. (9) Nor did the increase in shipping warrant too many fireworks in comparison - in 1871 no less than 76,791 British and 51,560 foreign ships had entered British ports (10) - while the figures for Malta - 2947 sailing and 1733 steam vessels visiting the port in 1871. (11) Despite the fact that diamonds tend to come in small packages rather than bulk loads, we might still expect a great increase in the number of ships importing machinery and luxury goods, but there was no such increase. Cape Town was a quiet place indeed. Atmore and Marks have attempted to argue that Britain intervened in the affairs of the Cape in order to facilitate the development of the British economy, but this overlooks the relative insignificance of the South African economy in the 1870s. (12) Whatever economic benefits might lie in the future, and even taking into account problems of statistical accuracy; in the 1870s they were not great enough to tempt the British government into a forward policy that involved war and conquest. And it is particularly important to remember that South Africa's gold and mineral wealth still lay largely undiscovered in 1879.

Economic interests at the Cape did however create a powerful pull for greater Imperial involvement, where competition for land and labour was fierce. The roots of the land problem lay in the Boer belief that South Africa was there for the taking and that farms of 6,000 acres or more (often two of them, one for winter grazing, one for summer) were the birth right of every young man with a horse, gun and wagon.

Almost from the beginning the lack of defined and policeable frontiers in South Africa had been a central cause of conflict. It is possible to talk of a culture or tradition of encroachment developing throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as different peoples, polities and individuals used their various skills, talents and vices to establish an ownership of 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. "Stock-farming communities...faced each other across poorly defined or non-existent boundaries, each acknowledging governments whose ability to control them was minimal, and therefore relying on their own resources for offence and retaliation." (13) Elicit grazing, cattle rustling, homestead building and petty vendetta became the small change of the frontier, with explosions of full-scale conflict occurring at depressingly frequent intervals. The British authorities at the Cape were no more able to regulate this inherently unstable situation than any other authority (14) largely because the central government in London was often reluctant to sanction either the expense, troops, or increased responsibilities that might result – although it was certainly capable of decisive force when it chose. Consequently, the established authorities, chiefdoms or governments of southern Africa tended to be forced into making policy in a reactive manner. This situation had not changed very much by the time Sir Bartle Frere arrived in the Cape, armed with Carnarvon's new solution to the frontier problem - the policy of Confederation - but the perceived strength of the Zulu army gave an added impetus to the search for a solution.

During the 17th century, the Boers had expanded only slowly. It was 1679 before they founded Stellenbosch, a mere 30Km from Cape Town and it was a further eleven years before an influx of French Huguenots pushed a further 30Km on to found French Hoek and Paarl. By 1699, the furthest settlement, at Weveren, was still only 90Km from Van Riebeck's original settlement. Even after 1700, when the third generation of Boer farmers began to turn to cattle ranching, rather than continuing with the less certain arable farming that had been the norm before, the pace of expansion remained steady rather than rapid. The Hottentot Holland mountains were only crossed in 1709; by 1730 the Olifants and the Great Brak Rivers were the boundaries; Swellendam was founded in 1746; the Gamtoos Valley and the Karroo Basins were being settled by 1756. By 1778, they had reached the Fish River where they made their first contacts with the Xhosa who had been coming the other way. (15)

There things might have stabilised over time (16) but the arrival of the British with their liberal attitudes to native peoples, their Ordinances, their taxes, and above all their abolition of slavery in 1833, made life for many Boers seem onerous. This desire finally expressed itself in the Great Trek when, for the first time, the Boers lit out northwards for the seemingly endless freedom of an empty veldt. And empty it was, if only temporarily, as a result of the disruptions related to the rise of the Zulu polity, known as the *uMfecane*. (17) The question of the *uMfecane* has given rise to some very bad tempered exchanges. In essence, some historians have tried to absolve the Zulus of responsibility for the *uMfecane*, saying that it was in fact white slave traders at Delagoa Bay who sparked this desperate series of conflicts off. As usual in South African history it is difficult to separate out the facts from the political standpoints of the various protagonists. As B.A le Cordeur put it in 'The Reconstruction of South African History' in the *South African Historical Journal*, 17 (November 1985), "For a variety of reasons...South Africans of all racial and ethnic groups, academic and lay, are either sceptical about current versions of their history or alienated by their irrelevance." Still, the net result was that while it had taken the Boers nearly 190 years to cover the 500 miles from the Cape Town to the Fish River, it would take them only 15 years to cover the 600 miles northwards to the Limpopo.

The colonisation of the interior was justified in a number of ways. Firstly, the Boers claimed right of conquest in respect of their defeats of Mzilikazi and Dingane, both of whom were engaged in the conquest of land in particular areas. Secondly, they claimed formal written title, of which Retief's agreement with Dingane provides an example, however dubious. (18) These agreements were misunderstood on both sides, and sharp practice a feature of both sides' negotiating techniques. (19) While the settlers claimed that these agreements gave them ownership of the land, the Zulus claimed that they only conferred the right to use the land for a period. Critics have focussed on settler sharp practice in this respect, arguing that the Zulus were unaware of the true nature of a signed piece of paper. However, is also possible that the Zulus recognised that these papers were important to the settlers and had enough *savoir-faire* to use them as bargaining counters. Certainly, Shaka signed documents relating to Port Natal with several different parties without ever intending to give up his claim to the land there. Thirdly, the Boers claimed squatters' rights to the land on the grounds that the original

occupants had vacated it wantonly and it should therefore be granted to those who would make it fruitful. Fourthly, they claimed a moral right to the land, on the basis that the Zulus were savages who did not deserve consideration after the massacres in 1838 of Retief's party and of the Trekboers encamped at the foot of the Drakensberg. Where the Boers led, others followed and settlers of different European descents headed off for the opportunities of the frontier.

These justifications were powerfully reinforced by the precedents set by the wars and settlements visited upon the Xhosa. The fact was that few settlers, Boer, Briton (or for that matter, Zulu), believed that they would not be backed up by British troops if things got too dangerous – even though this certainly did not negate the immediate risks of living next door to the Zulus. Thus, when the settlers started moving into the Disputed Territories along the Ncome (Blood) and Mzinyathi (Buffalo) Rivers during the 1860s and 1870s they carried with them the reasonable expectation that they would, eventually, gain some part of them. “Would you be kind enough to let me know,” asked one hopeful missionary, “if the English will take the Zulu country in this year, or in the next year, if you have any knowledge of that?” (20) The Natal Police meanwhile were discussing the possibility of annexing Zululand two years earlier in 1875. (21)

The labour shortage in the Cape was another underlying cause of increasing Imperial involvement in the conflicts of South Africa. One of the roots of the Boer ideas on race was the labour shortage that the Cape Colony faced from the start. Arable farming needs a supply of seasonal workers to help with the harvest and a pool of helpers at other times, whether they be family, neighbours or hired, and as the numbers of settlers was very small, this demand could not be met. The change of emphasis to cattle ranching at the end of the 18th Century eased the problem at first, but did not solve it. Seasonal workers and occasional helpers were still needed, and the very size of the farms that the Boers claimed actually increased the demand for labour. Furthermore, the Boer farmers were, for the most part, poor and could neither afford to pay for labour, or invest in what labour-saving machinery was available. In the late 17th and early 18th Centuries, the answer to such problems lay in the import of slaves.

The first slaves were bought from Indonesia and then later from the Portuguese slavers in the Congo and Angola. The figures were significant and around 300 per year were introduced to the colony, but even this did not satisfy the demand for labour, especially as slaves still had to be purchased with the limited capital that was available. It was far cheaper, the Boers found, to actually capture their own, and to this end Khoi and Saan children were often kidnapped or taken in raids to be used as slave labour on the farms and ranches of the Cape.

The abolition of slavery in 1833 brought a crisis to the economic viability of many Boer farms and was a direct cause of the decision to trek out of British control, but even this theoretical (22) freeing up of the supply of labour did not increase it. The opening up of the diamond fields in 1869 further increased the demand for labour and it was recognised that this shortage was a major obstacle to full economic development. (23)

In Natal, labour was also needed for the new sugar plantations, where speculative development had put 12,746 acres under cane by 1866, up from 862 acres in 1855. (24) The opening up of the diamond fields in Griqualand West in 1869 further increased the demand for labour in Natal by diverting the migrant labourers away in search of better wages. (25) Throughout the whole of South Africa it was recognised that the labour shortage was a major obstacle to full economic development. (26) Attempts to remedy this shortage included the improvement of links with Delagoa Bay whereby men from the African interior could be assisted in their passage south, the cultivation of contacts with John Dunn, Cetshwayo's British born induna, and by encouraging the import of freed slaves from Zanzibar after Sir Bartle Frere (in a previous appointment) had imposed an anti-slavery treaty there in 1873. (27) There were also attempts to bring in Indian indentured labourers beginning in 1860 (28) and by 1872 there were 5,993 such workers engaged in the colony (29) although many Natal sugar planters preferred to employ Tongas from Swaziland who were transiting Zululand at a rate of 3-4,000 per month in 1874. (30) Still, the demand for labour remained high and unfulfilled and this has led some writers, such as R.L. Cope, Shula Marks and A. Atmore to argue that this was the primary motive behind first, confederation, and then the war of 1879. (31)

Again though, the idea of the British government starting a war to provide labourers is not really credible. Atmore and Marks' contention that “the demand for indigenous labour – in the greatest possible numbers at the lowest possible cost – was to become the predominant concern of every colonial interest – Imperial officials, Cape liberals, Natal segregationists as much as Afrikaner farmers and ‘cosmopolitan’ capitalists and Chartered Company directors” (32) and that “the war of 1879 was undertaken in the first instance largely to destroy the power of the Zulu king and thus release the resources and manpower of the tributary state for white exploitation” (33) is a gross exaggeration. While many parties felt that there would be great benefits for all concerned if the Zulu polity could be tapped as a source of labour, it is another huge leap to say that this was the rationale behind Frere's decision to go to war, especially as it was not by any means certain that the Zulus would actually

work for wages even if coerced. As late as 1879 few if any Zulus had been sufficiently tempted by the attractions of the Kimberley mines to abandon their “pre-capitalist” lifestyle (34) while Keletso Atkins has pointed out the considerable cultural difficulties in employing Zulu labour in the sugar plantations.(35)

The employment of Zulus and Natal Africans - mainly Zulu refugees - was an activity fraught with difficulty, and the particular demands made by this labour led in some ways to the development of the myth of the ‘lazy kaffir’. In fact the relationship was characterised by mutual incomprehension about the terms and manner in which a man’s labour was exchanged for money. Africans tended to be more likely to abscond from work, frustrate their contracts, or make demands seemingly at variance with the terms of their contracts and this led their European employers to regard them as very much a second rate work force. In reality, however, it was a combination of the European violation of African work norms and African incomprehension of European norms that was at the root of the problem.

In essence, this was a feature of the change from peasant work modes to those of the industrial era and which had previously been observed when the rural workers of England were driven off their smallholdings by the enclosure movement to seek new employment in the factories and mills. A life governed by the movements of the sun, the moon and the response of the crops to the seasons was about to be replaced by one regulated by the clock and the imperatives of industry. A colonial employer bought labour by the hour and demanded that, once purchased, that labour should complete the required number of hours. He demanded, in short, a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay; would take more if he could, and complain if the bargain was not adhered to. The problem was that Zulus and Natal Africans measured time in a completely different manner to their European employers.

The Zulus measured time by a lunar calendar. Sowing began when the Pleiades - isilimela - came over the horizon and harvest took place in umasingana. Other months were indicated by new moons and usually named after agricultural events, such as the uncwaba, or the time of the new grass. This meant that there were thirteen months in a year of twenty-eight equal periods, the dark of the moon being the inyanga ifile - the ‘dead moon’. Thus, when a Zulu hired himself out for a twelve-month period, he meant that he would work for twelve twenty eight-day months. For their European employers, however, a twelve-month period was 365 days, or the equivalent of thirteen lunar months work. When disputes arose, therefore, both sides felt themselves to be the victim of sharp practice from unscrupulous negotiators.

This situation was made worse by the halting attempts of the Europeans to learn the Zulu language that resulted in the development of an imprecise patois called Fanagalo, which led to further confusion through imprecise translations. Thus, unyaka was translated as ‘year’, yet to the Zulus it denoted only the growing season and not the dry season. This meant that hiring a Zulu for one ‘unyaka’ might well mean losing your hired help after only six months. Similarly, the Zulu for ‘day’ was ilanga and was used to denote the period of one hour (or thereabouts) after sunrise to one hour (or thereabouts) before sunset, rather than the European notion of a twenty-four hour period between midnight and midnight (or in the Royal Navy, between noon and noon). This definition of ‘day’ had a crucial impact upon the suitability of Zulu labour for the sugar cane plantations.

To begin with, Zulu mythology was plagued by abathakathi - witches and evil spirits - who inhabited the darkness, brought disease and misfortune to those who strayed abroad at night, and frightened the Zulus into staying inside during the hours of darkness. This caused a major problem for the planters because sugar cane has a relatively short period of ripeness and must be harvested at speed and over a relatively short period of time if sufficient quality is to be achieved. This means that it is necessary to work through the day and long into the night, and this the Zulus were most unwilling to do. In the summer, this was not so much of a problem, but in winter, when the cutting and crushing of the cane was done, it caused major difficulties. Nor were the Zulus asked to do an excessive amount of work - ten hours, a reasonable day for Victorian times - and the planters pointed to the Asian labour employed in Mauritius who performed a customary 15 hour day as an example of what was needed. The fact that Zulus refused to work such hours, or in darkness, or even in cold weather, meant that sugar plantations would never be profitable, secure investments as long as they relied on Zulu or Natal African labour.

Fighting a war to provide unwilling Zulu labourers would also be a costly option when cheaper alternatives – such as an expanded effort to introduce labour from Zanzibar or Delagoa Bay, or introduce more indentured labour from India or Mauritius – were available.(36) Indeed, Cain and Hopkins argue that rather than Zululand, it was central Africa and Mozambique that were to be the “labour reserves for the mines and farms of the south” in Carnarvon’s confederation scheme. (37) Neither was the sugar industry sufficiently important to justify the employment of troops for its benefit, however favourably it was regarded. As P. Richardson has argued, between 1854 and 1904, London refused to “subsidise or partake directly in sugar production” to the extent that they would not even allow the Natal Legislative Council to give financial backing to a mill.(38) Certainly, in July 1877, the Port Elizabeth Chamber of Commerce put the labour question, and all other economic matters, as

secondary to that of the threat of an effectively armed collection of African polities.(39) It is also fair to point out that Sir Bartle Frere, High Commissioner and instigator of the war, specifically ruled out the sugar industry as a motive for war when he stated that he “would not have attempted to force the Zulu ruler against his will to permit...a sugar mill to be erected”. (40)

It was also true that the British government often showed a great deal of unwillingness to get involved in any systematic colonial expansion during the early and mid 19th Century. (41) The settlers on the frontier might have desired Imperial intervention (42) but it is a great leap to say that the British government either approved or encouraged it. Official parsimony alone acted as a very effective brake on expansion (43) and the decisions of British administrators could not always be relied upon to produce comfortable solutions for the settlers, as in 1878 when the Boundary Commission, set up to settle rival Boer and Zulu claims in the Disputed Territories, and dominated by the pro-Zulu Colonel Durnford, reported in the Zulus’ favour. (44)

Whatever economic benefits might lie in the future, and even taking into account problems of statistical accuracy, in the 1870s they were not great enough to tempt the British government into a forward policy that involved war and conquest and we must look elsewhere for the reasons for the invasion of Zululand. They certainly weren’t great enough to tempt the nearby Indian merchants of Mauritius looking to revive their fortunes after the disastrous malaria epidemic and slump of 1875 on that island – by 1880, there were still only eight of them in Durban, five years after they had begun exploring the possibilities of Natal.(45) On the charge of burglary as a motive for the invasion of Zululand, therefore, we have to acquit Sir Bartle Frere and the British government on the grounds of insufficient evidence.

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3. M. Edelstein, *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, (1981) quoted in F. McDonough, *The British Empire 1815 – 1914*, (London, 1994) p108.
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10. BPP Vol LV p44 Appendix.
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14. See G. Parker and P. Pfukani, *History of Southern Africa*, (Unwin Hyman Ltd.: London 1975) p32.
15. The relations between Boers, Britons and the Xhosa are a subject in themselves. Suffice it to say that the Xhosa remained a barrier to easy, relatively unopposed expansion until the end of the 1850s. The presence of the Xhosa meant that the Boers were forced to head north rather than east to find new lands.
16. See also Hamilton C (Ed). *The uMfecane aftermath*. Reconstructive debates in Southern African History. (Witwatersrand University Press 1995).
17. Mostert N. *Frontiers*, (Pimlico: London 1992) p816.
18. See Morris D.R. *The Washing of the Spears*, (Jonathan Cape; London 1968) pp81 – 82.

19. F. Weber to Bishop of Capetown 29th July 1877, PRO CO 959/1 Frere Correspondence.
20. In the file PRO CO959/1 Frere Correspondence there is a rough draft of a report on Colonial Defence drawn up in July and August of 1875 under the aegis of the Commandant of Police, Natal. Among these papers is a separate sheet marked "General Suggestions" at the top of which list are the words 'annexation of the Zulu country'.
21. Many of these slaves accompanied the Trek Boers when they left the colony. The Zulus massacred 250 of them on the Blood River in 1838. Mostert N. *Frontiers*, (Pimlico: London 1992) p815.
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34. Keletso E. Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give us our Money!* (Portsmouth NH, 1993), pp 83 - 86 for a discussion of the difficulties sugar planters had in employing Zulu labour.
35. The numbers of such labourers increased from 5,993 in 1872 to 29,828 in 1886. See Vishnu Padaychee and Robert Morrell, "Indian Merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal Economy c.1875 – 1914", Journal of Southern African Studies, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 1991), p. 76.
36. P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism. Innovation and Expansion 1688 – 1914*, (London, 1993), p. 372.
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39. Frere to Hicks-Beach 2nd December 1879. Reproduced in J. Martineau, *The Life and Correspondence of the Rt. Hon. Sir Bartle Frere* (London, 1895), Vol II, p. 358 hereafter cited as *Martineau*.
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