

## Charles Fripp's Painting 'The Last Stand at Isandhula'; A Curious Detail

By Ian Knight

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In 1885 the artist Charles Edwin Fripp exhibited a large oil-on-canvas painting at the Royal Academy in London. Originally catalogued under the title '*The Last Stand at Isandhula*', it depicts the final moments of a group of men of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment at the height of the battle of iSandlwana. Fripp had apparently been working on the subject for some time, and indeed had tested the public interest in the Anglo-Zulu War in 1881 when he had produced '*Dying To Save The Queen's Colour*', based on the last stand of lieutenants Melvill and Coghill, also at iSandlwana, which had been published as a coloured print by *The Graphic* illustrated paper, for whom Fripp worked as an illustrator.

'*The Last Stand at Isandhula*' was, of course, a much more ambitious work but Fripp's timing was unfortunate. Public enthusiasm for scenes from the war had been high during 1879 and the immediate aftermath but had gradually given way to a sense of unease about the justice of the British invasion. The British High Commissioner to Southern Africa, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, had been recalled at the end of the war to explain his policies, and in 1880 the Liberal Party leader, William Gladstone, had used the injustice of the campaign as a central plank of his tub-thumping election campaign which had seen the fall of the Disraeli government. Public disquiet had been further stoked when, in the summer of 1882, the defeated Zulu king, Cetshwayo kaMpande, had been permitted to visit London to discuss his political future; the King's dignified manner, and the ease with which he had taken to European dress, had both surprised and delighted the public, and large crowds had gathered outside his London lodgings every day in the hope of catching a glimpse of him. The King's image shifted from that of the savage tyrant presented in the press at the time of the war to that of a misunderstood patriot, the subject of a British wrong which needed to be righted.

This move in public attitude had occurred between the publication of Fripp's 'Melvill and Coghill' picture and his exhibition of '*The Last Stand*', and Fripp found little commercial or critical interest in his subject – the invasion of Zululand was not only old news, but distinctly uncomfortable news, and there was little appetite for his image of heroic redcoats struggling in the face of overwhelming Zulu odds. Although this must have been a disappointment to Fripp, it did not discourage him from painting further military pictures, and indeed the following year he exhibited a thematically similar painting of the battle of Tofrek, in the eastern Sudan; coming at a time when public indignation was still high following the death of General Gordon at Khartoum, this picture seems to have more acutely caught the public mood.

There is an irony in this, of course, because today Fripp's painting of iSandlwana, now displayed in the National Army Museum in London, is one of the most widely reproduced pictures depicting any British battle, and it has come to be regarded as not only a representation of iSandlwana, but as an iconic depiction of high Victorian military adventurism, an embodiment of the hubris and frailty of Empire. So popular is the painting that it recently underwent expensive conservation work which removed coats of old and yellowing varnish

and fully restored damage to details across the bottom of the painting, the result apparently of poor storage and damp in the past.

It is easy to see why Fripp's painting is so appealing now. Although the image of a small group of British soldiers heroically facing down overwhelming odds is today recognised as a trope of Victorian battle painting, in fact Fripp was one of the first to explore the concept as a composition. He may have been inspired by an engraving 'At Bay', which appeared in *The Graphic* in 1879, and similarly featured a group of beleaguered soldiers of the 24<sup>th</sup>, and Fripp's version seems to have influenced later examples in the genre, such as Allan Stewart's painting 'To Brave Men' – depicting the 'last stand' of Allan Wilson's patrol in the 1893 Ndebele campaign, exhibited in 1896 - and W.B. Wollen's 'The Last Stand of the 44<sup>th</sup> Regiment at Gandamak' (a scene from the Afghan War of 1842 which was painted much later and exhibited in 1898). Central to Fripp's composition is a very Victorian conceit, a young drummer boy (whose inclusion at iSandlwana is, by the way, fictitious), and a stalwart sergeant, standing upright despite a bandage around his head which suggests that he has already been heavily engaged in the fighting. Indeed, Fripp's sergeant is the fore-runner of another Victorian battle-painting trope, and is echoed by the figure produced by R. Caton Woodville to illustrate Kipling's poem 'The Absent-Minded Beggar' during the Anglo-Boer War – and can still be seen in the representation of NCO figures in feature films about the Anglo-Zulu War.

Yet there is much else going on in Fripp's painting besides a conventional last stand image. For one thing – unusually for the time, and in contrast to 'At Bay' - there is no officer figure in the foreground. In the mid-Victorian period the markets for military paintings were limited, only the middle and upper classes having the interest and funds to buy them, and many artists hedged their bets by arranging a composition around a recognisable officer figure, whose family or even Regiment might then be persuaded to purchase the artwork. The only officer figures in Fripp's painting are mounted figures struggling in the general melee in the background; indeed, the NCOs white chevrons mark him out to be not even a full sergeant but a lance-sergeant (full sergeants had gold chevrons). To modern eyes it is difficult not to see Fripp making a point, perhaps that the incompetence of higher ranks has left the ordinary soldiers to bear the result of their actions.

Also, despite the essentially static nature of the central group in the painting – an image which continues to influence modern artists envisioning the scene – there are details in the background which suggest Fripp knew that the final stages of iSandlwana were chaotic and brutal. To the right a group of Zulus cluster triumphantly around a fallen redcoat in the act of removing his equipment and uniform as a trophy – and presumably prior to disembowelling him. Nearby a soldier bayonets a wounded Zulu through the throat – but is himself about to be stabbed in the back. On the other side of the painting a young Zulu is about to deliver a coup de grace to a crawling, and presumably wounded, soldier.

Where did Fripp gain so graphic an impression of the realities of the Anglo-Zulu War? In fact, unlike almost every other artist who painted big canvasses representing scenes from the war, Fripp had seen something of it in person. He had been born in 1854 to a family of Quaker artists from Bristol, and in 1878 he had begun working for *The Graphic* as a war illustrator. He had cut his artistic teeth in southern Africa during the closing stages of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cape Frontier War but had been back in London when the invasion of Zululand began. The start of the war had largely caught the Victorian press corps by surprise but when the news of

the defeat at iSandlwana broke in February 1879 the major London papers had hurried their best journalists to the front. At a time when photographs could not be easily reproduced in print, war artists – who produced sketches on the spot, then hurried them home to the UK where they were engraved for publication – were a staple of the best-selling illustrated papers. Fripp left London on February 19<sup>th</sup>, and arrived in Durban almost exactly a month later, on 20 March.

By the time Fripp arrived the strategic situation in the war was already evolving. Despite British fears of a Zulu invasion of Natal colony King Cetshwayo had made the strategic decision not to fight beyond his borders – the attack on Rorke’s Drift had taken place against his wishes – and in any case the Zulu army had needed time to recover from iSandlwana. This had allowed the British to hurry reinforcements to Natal, and by the time Fripp arrived Lord Chelmsford was ready to begin a new offensive. His first objective was to relieve Col. Pearson’s Right Flank Column, which had been cut off within Zululand at Eshowe. Chelmsford had begun his advance at the end of march, crossing into Zululand by the Lower Thukela Drift – and Fripp had accompanied him, producing a series of lively and well-observed sketches of the expedition’s progress. On 2<sup>nd</sup> April Fripp had been present when Chelmsford dispersed the Zulu forces investing Eshowe at the battle of Gingindlovu, and he had accompanied the detachment sent out the following day. Fripp had returned to Natal with the evacuated Eshowe column, and had then moved up to the area around Dundee, along the central border, where Chelmsford was assembling a new column to re-start his invasion. The invasion began on 1<sup>st</sup> June and was immediately met with a fresh disaster – the Prince Imperial of France was killed in a skirmish whilst scouting ahead of the advance. Fripp was among those who were present when the body was recovered the following day, and he was present, too, to witness and sketch various skirmishes on the advance towards King Cetshwayo’s principle royal homestead at oNdini. On 3 July he was busily sketching British troops retiring from across the White Mfolozi river when he had an altercation with Lord William Beresford which nearly ended in a punch-up; Beresford, who had been involved in the thick of the skirmish (indeed, he was awarded a Victoria Cross for his part in it) had curtly ordered Fripp to withdraw. Fripp, caught in in his drawing, had refused, and the two had squared up to one another, Zulu bullets striking the ground around them, until Fripp was dragged away by his fellow journalists. The following day he had been present at the battle of Ulundi, and the heroism of the Zulus, hopelessly trying to charge through a curtain of fire, had left a lasting impression on him. He referred to the Zulu casualties as ‘dead patriots’ and observed that ‘*The smoke from the burning kraal hung like a pall over the plain to conceal hundreds of...dead [Zulu] warriors from the great moon which stood calmly and gloriously in the eternal heaven above. Whatever the rights and wrongs which brought on the war, these same brave Zulus died resisting an invasion of their country and homes*’ (1). This sympathy undoubtedly informed the accuracy with which Fripp represented the appearance of the Zulus, their fighting style, dress and weapons, in his iSandlwana painting.

Yet there is in the painting one curious anomaly. For all its accurate detail, Fripp has represented a physical feature of the mountain which simply is not there. To the right of the painting, on the skyline, he has shown a detached pillar of rock, standing some distance behind the northern tail-end of the mountain. It is quite prominent in the picture, and it is curious that it has aroused little comment among analysts before. No such detached pillar in fact exists.

Why, then, did Fripp think it did? One clue can be found in the fact that, despite the obvious newsworthiness of the site, Fripp does not appear to have personally visited the

battlefield. In his account of his time in Zululand he gives a good impression of his movements, but at no point says that he visited iSandlwana. Whereas a number of journalists accompanied the expedition to retrieve wagons from the battlefield and cover over some of the dead on 21 May, including Fripp's rival war artist Melton Prior of the *Illustrated London News*. Fripp's name is noticeably absent. In his own account Fripp mentions being present at Ladysmith on 5 May, on reaching Dundee on the 12<sup>th</sup>, and of visiting a number of camps along the borders over the following days until he refers to the renewed British advance on the 12<sup>th</sup>. If he did visit the iSandlwana battlefield with the others on the 21<sup>st</sup>, it seems curious that he neither mentioned it, produced sketches, nor was referred to by his colleagues; it is possible that he had deliberately avoided the site, with all its melancholy associations.

If he did not visit iSandlwana personally, he was then faced with recreating the scene from the distance of his English studio several years later. Why then did he include the mythical rock pillar?

One clue can perhaps be found in one of the early photographs of the site. In March 1880 the Natal photographer, George Ferneyhough, had accompanied an expedition led by a Major Henry Stabb, 32<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, which had been directed to prepare the site where the Prince Imperial had been killed for an impending visit by his mother, the Empress Eugenie. Stabb's party had crossed at Rorke's Drift and passed through the iSandlwana site, where at least two photographs were taken, before pressing on to the Tshotshozi river, where the incident had occurred. Here they camped for several days, erecting a memorial on the spot, constructing a wall around it, planting saplings and altering the course of a donga to prevent future erosion.

Ferneyhough's photographs were made available for public sale. One of them depicts a large cairn on the nek at iSandlwana, constructed by burial parties under the command of Major C.J. Bromhead – Gonville's brother – in the previous September. At first glance, this photograph appears to show a similar rocky pillar standing out at the tail-end of iSandlwana, much as Fripp had painted it.

Was this Fripp's source? There is no record of the reference material he used in his paintings, but it is unlikely he did not consult some, and Ferneyhough's photograph would have been available for several years before the painting was completed.

If it was, however, his search for authenticity has, in the end, misled Charles Fripp – because the position of the pillar in Ferneyhough's photograph is a trick of perspective. It is not standing, as it appears, at the far end of the mountain – but is in fact another of the large cairns built by Major Bromhead. It was constructed on the shoulder of the hill, where Captain Younghusband's company had made a stand during the battle, and it remains there today, albeit a little shorter due to parts of it having fallen and been rebuilt in the years in between. Because of a lack of definition in the photograph the shape of the shoulder is lost against the mass of the hill behind – and the cairn looks like a natural feature in its own right, standing clear at the back of the mountain.

Whether anyone ever drew Fripp's attention to his error is unknown, and indeed, as he continued his career as a war illustrator, he no doubt had plenty of other work to distract him if they did. Viewed today the extraneous pillar is little more than a curiosity, largely unnoticed by most who look at it; that the anomaly might in fact be connected to a historic photograph of the site, however, gives it an interest all of its own.

NOTES.

1). *'Reminiscences of the Zulu War, 1879'*, by Charles E. Fripp, The Pall Mall Magazine, 1900

REFERENCES.

*'British Artists and War; The Face of Battle in Paintings and Prints, 1700-1914'* by Peter Harrington, Greenhill Books, London, 1993.

*'The War Correspondents; The Anglo-Zulu War'* by Professor John Laband and Ian Knight, Alan Sutton Publishing, Suffolk, 1996.

*'With His Face to the Foe; The Life and Death of the Prince Imperial, Zululand 1879'*, by Ian Knight, Spellmount Books, Kent, 2001.

ILLUSTRATION CAPTIONS;

George Ferneyhough's photograph of iSandlwana, taken in March 1880; note how the 'Younghusband cairn' in the background appears to be a detached rock pillar at the far end of the mountain.

