

Review

Rorke's Drift – By Those Who Were There

Authors Ian Knight and Lee Stevenson.

By Dr Adrian Greaves

As an established reviewer for Pen and Sword Publishing, I have been requested to review the two new volumes of *Rorke's Drift – By Those Who Were There*. The authors state this work contains 'more than 200 first-hand accounts and testimonies from those present at the battle' providing 'personal microscopic accounts of events'. I found this a curious statement given that co-author Ian Knight has previously stated in his '*Zulu Rising*' that there were only 120 defenders of Rorke's Drift, plus 30 casualties.

The authors concede this work includes accounts from participants 'who were not present' or were dated days, weeks, months, even decades after the event. This alerted me to the acknowledged and serious psychological phenomenon of 'false memory syndrome' which seriously haunts any researcher using 'original' written material, especially when composed long after the event. This is such a relevant and significant phenomenon that author Ian Knight has previously written about the perils of relying on the questionable process of giving credence to Anglo-Zulu War witnesses memories as fact. As a former police psychologist, I agree with Ian Knight that, as time passes following a life threatening incident, the more unreliable a witness memory naturally becomes.

The authors' own '*Introduction*' even quotes Penn Symons (2/24th Foot) to warn of the dangers of using such sources to concoct an account.

It was most remarkable how their accounts afterwards varied. Men forgot what they, amidst great excitement, saw and did and mixed up what others told them with their own experiences and reminiscences.

Having accepted the task of reviewing this work, and pondering how best to write a fair objective review, I decided the best and most appropriate review should instead come from Ian Knight's own accounts. For a start, Ian Knight wrote in the AZWHS Journal Edition 33. (November 2013) Article '*Limitations of memory*'

In the case of the Anglo-Zulu War there are strong suggestions that those who were frequently asked to describe their experiences steadily modified their accounts into forms which not only satisfied the curiosity of others but which also helped the participant better understand their own experiences themselves.

In the same article he strengthened his case by even challenging Colour Sergeant Bourne's impressions of his experiences at Rorke's Drift by asking...

Were Bourne's impressions of his own experiences at Rorke's Drift unduly influenced by knowledge acquired after the event?... adding, 'and was it a 'false memory' implanted by extra information later supplied by the Regimental history'?

He continues....

An awareness that all sources are, to a greater or lesser degree, subject to the influence of these forces - of memory damaged by trauma or distorted by 'false memory', of the natural tendency to smooth impressions into a cohesive narrative, to blot out painful recollections or, conversely, to attribute to them a narrative weight which, in the broader context, they do not deserve, to muddle questions of time, distance and sequence, or simply when remembering long after the event to become less certain of them - is essential to any historian trying to analyse them.

So who and what can we believe? But back to the authors' own *Introduction to Vol. 2*. As a qualified clinical psychologist, I could not have put it better.... they state:

In both volumes it will be clear that participants in these events sometimes, when they told their stories more than once, and perhaps over a long time, contradicted themselves, stressed the importance in one version of an incident that they left out completely in another, or even told the story in a way their audience clearly wanted to hear it. This is a natural process of which any student of history will be aware; the mind generally forms impressions of traumatic events in a jumbled way, and with time it sorts them into more coherent memories which are both easier to live with and to communicate to others, whilst at the same time often allowing itself to be unconsciously influenced by the impressions and opinions gleaned from others.

No paper survived at Rorke's Drift to record the event for the weeks following. Lt. Stanhope Bannister of the 24th, a Chelmsford Staff Officer, on arriving back at Rorke's Drift, found himself appointed as Assistant Garrison Commander. He later wrote in his first letter home;

No paper or pens or in fact any single thing. I managed to get some foolscap in my extra capacity as Garrison Adjutant; likewise, without paper, no camp orders could be issued until 28th January.

In this letter he included a vivid 'account' of the previous day's fighting at Rorke's Drift. But Banister was not there! So his version can only have been concocted from the verbal accounts of participants he subsequently met. (see p.187/8/9 of Vol. 2).

Some of these accounts may well have originated from 'those who were there' but all their accounts were necessarily based on memories, and in 1879 I wonder how many of these writers were sufficiently educationally advantaged to write 'personal microscopic accounts of events'.

I find the two authors' assertion 'this book offers an impressive, unique breadth of knowledge about one of the most awe inspiring battles in British history' is gilding the lily and difficult to accept. The implication that the two volumes are factual concerns me and could, I suspect, confuse students of Anglo-Zulu War studies who have faith in the bold title *Rorke's Drift - By Those Who Were There*'. As the war historian, Claus Von Clausewitz, wrote;

The difficulty of seeing things correctly, which is one of the greatest fictions in war, makes things appear quite different from what was expected.

Clauswitz, Claus von. *War*. Book 1, Chapter 6.

Instead, for serious Rorke's Drift students, I strongly recommend the well researched '*A Handful of Heroes – Rorke's Drift*' by Katie Stossel, Pen & Sword. 2022 (3rd Edition).

Footnote.

History is littered with famous examples of 'false memory syndrome'(1) where memories become beliefs - which serve as a warning to modern authors. For example;

Battle Abbey in Sussex was built between 1070 and 1094 on a hilltop next to a small settlement near Hastings. It was constructed at the alleged suggestion of King William to celebrate his 1066 victory. In the intervening decades following the battle, local monks wrote various battle accounts, perhaps to popularize their location. On completion of the abbey, the high altar was conveniently placed in the abbey on the 'exact spot where Harold fell'.(2)

However, by the end of the day-long battle, several thousand warriors from the two opposing armies had died amongst their discarded battle implements – but nothing has ever been found on the site, or nearby; not one arrowhead or bone of any French or English participant. So where are the estimated five to six thousand bodies, slaughtered horses and all the discarded battle accoutrements, and if buried, by whom and where? In 1066 the population was sparse and scattered and in the days before the battle the few nearby homesteads had been subject to mass Norman rape, pillage and slaughter. Electronic surveillance, particularly by new ground-penetrating Lidar equipment (satellite radar), has also drawn a blank and confirms the site has never been disturbed. (3)

We all accept England's most famous battle was fought in 1066 but it is odd no one knows where. The location's myth was possibly born from monks' faulty memories textually embellished over generations. The original myth continues to be strongly promulgated by English Heritage guides - that the battle occurred on a gently sloping Sussex hillside, today conveniently overlooked by their impressive Visitor Centre and tea rooms.

Perhaps the most famous single example of unintentional mass confabulation distorting history relates to the unexpected and sudden sinking of HMS *Hood* by the German battleship *Bismark* in the Second World War. The event was witnessed by many hundreds of officers on Royal Navy ships escorting HMS *Hood* and whose officers, during the following days, were required to submit written eye-witness reports. On examination by the Naval Board of Enquiry, the majority of these 'eye-witness' accounts were discounted being seriously inaccurate, confused and contradictory.

QED.

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References.

1. Trendily known as 'mis-remembering'.
2. '*See the Harold Stone in the abbey — the very spot where the Saxon king was killed*'. English Heritage web site.
3. For detailed information see *1066* by Livingston & DeVries. ISBN: 9781526751973