ZULULAND: PART TWO

The Anglo-Zulu war

Zulu King Cetshwayo, left, and Lord Chelmsford at the time of the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879.

At the time of King Shaka's death in 1828 — 60 years before the first Zululand stamps appeared — the restive Boers to the south in Natalia were already a source of friction with the warrior Zulus. After the British moved into what became Natal, the Zulus signed a truce which lasted nearly 30 years — though the Boers who had migrated north to what became Transvaal and the Orange Free State continued harassing Zulus. By the 1870s, the British had fixed on the idea of uniting South African states along the lines of Canada's confederation. This meant joining British Natal and the Cape Colony with the Boer republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The mandarins in Whitehall determined that the militaristic, indigenous Zulu society was an impediment to this desired south African union. In 1878, Lord Chelmsford made his move, delivering an ultimatum to King Cetshwayo: either disband your army or we will do it for you. This of course was unacceptable to the proud Zulu king. Cetshwayo — one of the more reasonable of Africa's rulers of any time or race — had no quarrel with the British. It was his other neighbors, the Boers, who were seizing land and attacking his people. Indeed, Cetshwayo had just won a case before a British colonial commission that determined the Boers to the north were the real troublemakers. Cetshwayo had no desire to take up arms against the British. Even as the deadline passed and Chelmsford's troops crossed the Nugela River into Zululand, Cetshwayo was looking for a way to avoid hostilities. Facing an imminent threat to his nation, the Zulu king deployed his *impis* (regiments), emphasizing this was to be a defensive war to repel the invaders.

Not to get too far into military weeds of the Anglo-Zulu war here, I shall summarize three critical encounters: Islandlwana, Rorke's Drift, and Ulundi.

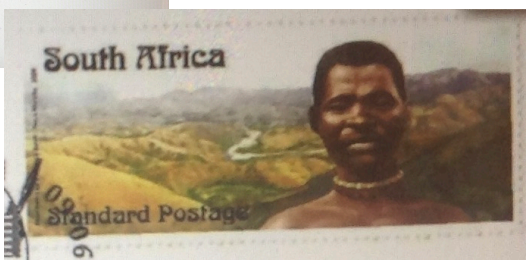
The first battle, at Islandlwana was the worst defeat of British forces in the history of colonial Africa. More than 1,000 English soldiers died (though the "victorious" Zulu side lost as many as 3,000). If you want more details, look it up.

Rorke's Drift was a rocky crossing of the Buffalo River on the border of Zululand. Defying Cetshwayo's orders to stay out of Natal, Zulu *impis* attacked the small station. A British force of about 150 held off as many at 4,000 Zulus. Casualties — British: 17; Zulus: hundreds. Here is a description of the battle — from the British soldier's point of view (source: "The Washing of the Spears," by Donald R. Morris):

"The men had lost all count of the furious charges and all sense of time. They existed in a slow eternity of noise and smoke and flashes, of straining black faces that rose out of the darkness, danced briefly in the light of the muzzle blast, and then sank out of sight. It was long after midnight before the rushes began to subside …" For more on this gruesome confrontation, largely from the Anglo perspective, watch the movie "Zulu" (1964), starring Jack Hawkins and a young Michael Caine. In the film, the role of Zulu King Cetshwayo was played by his great-grandson Mangosuthu Buthelezi, future leader of South Africa's Inkatha Freedom Party.

Shaken by their defeat at Islandlwana, the British regrouped for a decisive engagement, which occurred at Ulundi, the Zulu capital. It was a slaughter. The British lost a handful of soldiers, while the Zulu toll surpassed 1,000. The discipline, the training, the proud legacy of the Zulu warrior could not match British determination — and Gatling guns. As Morris described it: "Regiment after regiment surged forward, and the lines began to melt away in the hail of bullets scything the slopes. Succeeding waves charged over the contorted bodies that littered the grass, and the shining faces of the warriors, with gleaming eyes and set teeth, bobbed up and down over the rims of their shields. Raw courage had brought them that far, but bravery alone could not force a way though the crescendo of fire, and the warriors sank to their knees … Not a Zulu reached to within thirty yards of the British lines." In retreat, the Zulus continued to be hounded by lancers on horseback. "It was a riding-school exercise," wrote Morris. "The momentum of the horses spitted the warriors on the points, and as they passed, a strong outward flick of the wrist cleared the weapon, which swung back, up and forward again to point, with stained tip and dyed pennon, at the next victim." The victorious Brits rampaged on, destroying the king's *kraal.*

Cetshwayo was captured and briefly exiled to Cape Town. His unlikely story included a trip to London in 1882, where he met Queen Victoria. Afterwards he was reinstated as "king" of the Zululand "protectorate," where he died in 1884, age 41, from a wound, or poison, or both. Cetshwayo's son and heir, Dinuzulu, was an able military leader, though without much of a mandate. He was accused — though later exonerated — of being part of a violent uprising in 1906 led by a Zulu chief named Bambatha, in protest of a new hut tax imposed by the British. (Casualties — British: 36 or so; Zulus: circa 3,000). It was to be Zululand's last military campaign.



Left is a stamp and cover from 2006 commemorating the Zulu uprising of 1906 led by Bambatha; Zulu King Dinuzulu, right, was accused of helping to lead the uprising but later was exonerated.

Cast of characters

The many-storied drama of Zululand has a colorful cast that encompasses the extremes and the nuances of pre-colonial and colonial culture in southern Africa. Just savor the names of Victorian paladins — Sir Bartle Frere, Theophilus Shepstone, Lord Chelmsford, Sir Garnet Wolseley — who played key roles in the imperial "scramble for Africa." Here is a sampling:

Andries Pretorius, (1798-1853) the charismatic scion of Dutch pioneers, avenged the death of early Boer leader Piet Retief by defeating the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River in 1838. (Casualties — Zulus, 3,500; Boers: none). He founded the short-lived Republic of Natalia and when the British took over, moved north across the Vaal River to form the new Boer republic — Transvaal — where he died at age 52. One admirer described Pretorius as "the ablest leader and most perfect representative of the Emigrant Farmers." Pretoria, still South Africa's executive capital city, is named for him — an odd holdover, since the Boers historically were implacable foes of racial equality and, later, architects of apartheid.

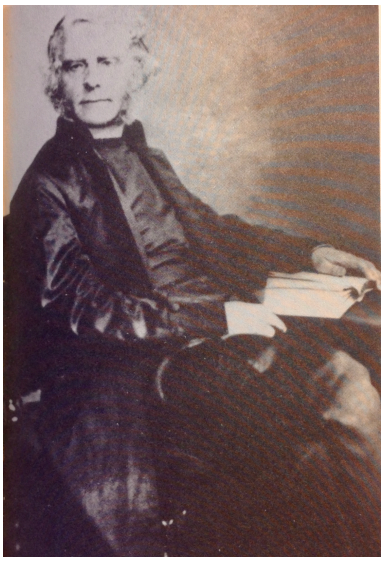
Cetshwayo (1827-1884), independent Zululand's last king, was a product of his violent, militaristic culture, and all the more remarkable for it. Like his father, King Mpande, and his uncle, the earlier king Dingane who was Shaka's assassin/successor, he shared a genetic propensity to fat, along with a tall, muscular frame and regal bearing. Historian Morris describes him as "sensitive" and "intelligent," with "a considerably better grasp of political reality than his father." Morris continued: "If Cetshwayo lacked Shaka's manic energies, he was both free of Dingane's weak cruelty and the apathy that had marked his father Mpande. … (W)thin the limits of his background he was reasonable, responsible and forbearing."

Among the most fascinating characters of this era is **John Robert Dunn** (1834-1895) — *Jantoni*, to use his Zulu name. The resourceful son of early settlers in Natal, Dunn was orphaned in his teens, but already was a skilled hunter and familiar with the Zulu. He traveled freely, learned the language and

Here is Dunn, the country squire of Zululand, in his earlier days.

befriended local chiefs. He set up house with an Anglo wife and eventually, dozens of Zulu wives. (He fathered as many as 171 children). Dunn clashed early with Zulu chief Cetshwayo, but quickly reconciled and signed on as his advisor. After Cetshwayo became king in 1872, Dunn's fortunes rose. Granted his own chiefdom, *Jantoni* was a respected leader, known by some as the "white chief of Zululand." Now a wealthy farmer, hunter and trader, Dunn ruled a Zulu population of 10,000. He tried to stay neutral leading up to the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879, but eventually sided with the British. Afterwards he continued to carry out diplomatic missions. Dunn was an odd combination of qualities that defied his times. He dutifully paid the *lobela* or dowry of cattle for each of his Zulu wives. He reportedly had two of his wives put to death for adultery. His compound or *kraal* was strictly segregated, even between his colored (mixed-race) children and their black counterparts. Historian Morris credits *Jantoni* with encouraging moderation in the Zulu royal court. Dunn lived the life of an English squire in a frame house at the center of his *kraal,* and often visited neighboring Natal. Morris writes that in visits to Durban, Dunn would stay at the Royal Hotel, "and if no single drawing room in the colony would receive him, his life was the scandalized envy of most of the male population." What a character!

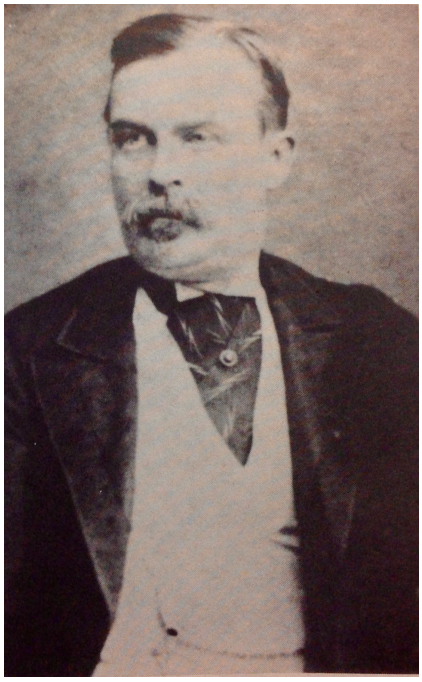
The leading imperial solons displayed a remarkable diversity of views on the Zulus. **Theophilus Shepstone** (1817-1893), a key British diplomat and administrator, spoke fluent Xhosa and Zulu, as well as Afrikaans. Morris writes that "he could think in native terms and see the complex world of European civilization through Bantu eyes." **John William Colenso** (1814-1883) first bishop of Natal, was a champion of justice for the Zulu, earning the Zulu name *Sobantu*, "the Father of the people." Shepstone



Colenso

Shepstone

and Colenso were allies before they clashed on Zulu policy. Caught in the middle was **Sir Henry Bulwer** (1836-1914), the able governor of Natal, who had no serious quarrel with Cetshwayo and the Zulus on his northern border. The two leaders respected each other, for the most part. Once Cetshwayo delivered an intemperate message to Bulwer over a minor dispute, without first running it past his adviser, John Dunn. The Zulu king's reserved words are remarkable for their candor and insight: "… I shall not go without having acted. Go back and tell the white people this, and let them hear it well. The Governor of Natal and I are in like positions: he is Governor of Natal, and I am Governor here." Bulwer recognized this harmless outburst for what it was, even as his imperial colleagues were searching for pretexts to neutralize the Zulu army. Bulwer adamantly opposed going to war, though in the end he was forced to accept the fateful ultimatum to Cetshwayo: disband the Zulu regiments, or else.



Bulwer

Don't let me forget **Major Redvers Henry Buller** (1839-1908), not to be confused with Gov. Henry Bulwer. Major Buller seemed an exemplary British officer and gentleman. To paraphrase Morris, he displayed personal courage that bordered on rashness; a force of personality that enhanced his powers of command; enthusiasm that was infectious; a manner stern but not harsh; demands that were high but no higher than what he asked of himself. "He was, in fact, one of that small and fabled band of leaders men cheerfully follow to hell," wrote Morris. Indeed, Shaka himself might have approved of Buller, had their lives overlapped. Buller's heroism, courage, derring-do and *esprit the corps* make riveting reading in Morris' book. The swashbuckling major clearly was a factor (along with those Gatling guns) in the British victory in the Anglo-Zulu war. To be sure, Buller had his faults: he was a drinker with a temper, showed contempt for civilians of all colors (especially reporters), was bad at strategy and even worse at administration. "He made a superb major, a mediocre colonel, and an abysmally poor general," Morris observed.

Buller

Louis Napoleon in England, before leaving for Africa in 1879

Finally, we come to the absurdist tragedy called "Zululand and the **Prince Imperial."** In 1879, Louis, the ill-starred son of France's deposed French emperor Louis Bonaparte (Napolean III), was 23 and living with his mother in England. Louis's father, the ex-emperor, had died six years earlier, turning the young man into Napoleon IV. It was a hollow title, since the French had abolished the monarchy/empire in 1870. Nonetheless, young Louis carried the sword of his great-uncle, Napoleon Bonaparte, and had champions on both sides of the English Channel. The young prince was restless, after training in maneuvers, riding and fencing at the Military Academy at Woolwich. The popular cadet persuaded British authorities to let him join Lord Chelmsford's staff in the campaign against the Zulu. In a letter of reference to Chelmsford, the Duke of Cambridge wrote: "He is a fine young fellow, full of spirit and pluck …"

As you may suspect, all did not go well. Somehow, the dashing Prince Imperial maneuvered himself into a perilous position in the remote, rocky bushland of Zululand. He was set upon by members of a Zulu *impi* (regiment). He is said to have met his end bravely. There isn't room to go into detail here, but the story could be a movie. In the account by historian Morris, Lt. Jahleel Brenton Carey, returning from the slain prince's side, encounters Major Redvers Buller (described above), who asks what's the matter. "The Prince Imperial is killed!" Carey cries. … "Where are your men, sir?" Buller asks. "They're behind me. I don't know," came the plaintive reply. Buller: "You ought to be shot, and I hope you will be. I could shoot you myself." Contemporaneous sources reported the Zulus would not have killed the prince, had they known who he was. The international uproar caused by this unnecessary sacrifice of France's last Napoleon was immediate and sustained. Applying the stiff upper lip, Gen. Sir Garnet Joseph Wolseley praised the Prince Imperial as "a plucky young man, and he died a soldier's death. What on Earth could he have done better?"[

The Prince Imperial in full regalia after joining Lord Chelmsford for the Zulu campaign. Is that Napoleon's sword at his side?

The death of the Prince Imperial — an artist's rendition.

Conclusion

Shaka Zulu has been called the Black Napoleon. His military and civil reforms were transformational, imposing codes of discipline and public order, instilling pride and loyalty. The Zulu footprint expanded over a vast swath of southeastern Africa. Yet Shaka's empire lasted barely 70 years, and was accompanied by appalling violence and cruelty that was inherent in Zulu culture. Central to Shaka's mission was to extend his influence, and he would stop at nothing. As he and his successors subdued or overwhelmed one tribe after another, the mass killing, disruption and dislocations helped to precipitate a human catastrophe of continental proportions. The term *Mfecane* (annihilation), describes the chain reaction of mass killing, enslavement, destruction, rootless migration and death that beset indigenous populations in the high plains beyond the Drakensberg range between 1815 and 1840. The genocidal nature of the violence was established early, with a description cited by historian William Rubinstein of a "vast artificial desert" Shaka created around his domain — hundreds of miles to the north, west and south. "(T)o make the destruction complete," wrote Rubinstein, "organized bands of Zulu murderers regularly patrolled the waste, hunting for any stray men and running them down like wild pig."

Historians do not lay all the blame for the *Mfecane* on Shaka, though he surely played a role in starting the disastrous chain reaction. Morris paints an apocalyptic picture of living in the midst of it, far beyond the boundaries of white settlement and colonial exploration:

An artist's reconstruction of a scene from the *Mfecane* — where numberless masses of uprooted people streamed through southeastern Africa between 1815 and 1840, some fleeing, some pursuing, with no safe haven or home,

What occurred now … passed virtually unnoticed by … the white civilization south of the Orange River. Only on occasion did the seething cauldron of humanity fling a spatter of wreckage up over the rim that gave a hint of what was going on in the interior. … (T)he rest is chaos. As each clan was shaken loose, it attacked a fresh area … until something over two and a half million people were stumbling back and forth over the land, sometimes running away from something, and sometimes striving to reach something, but always in search of food and a security that no longer existed. Over scores of thousands of square miles, not a single permanent kraal existed, nor a single clan staunch enough to avoid being sucked into the maelstrom. Cannibalism, which was fully as repugnant to Bantu civilization as it is to our own, became common, and reached the point where entire clans depended on it and nothing else to feed themselves. Nameless, formless mobs coalesced and began to move, acquiring strength from individuals who saw the only hope of safety in numbers, and these mobs rolled across the blighted country and stripped it of everything edible. For decades their aimless tracks were marked by countless human bones.

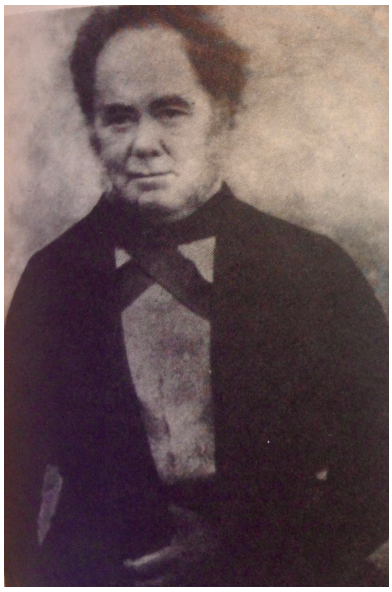
Among the heroic tales to come out of this horrific event is that of a band of Griquas, a mixed-race culture descended from early Boers and indigenous tribes, that rescued a settlement and turned back the horde; also the young chieftain Mshweshwe, who climbed the table hill Thaba Bosiu with his 2,000-

member clan, thwarted all attackers, and began building the Basuto nation. (For more on the Griquas, see the FMF Stamp Project blog post of September 2020; for more on Basutoland, see the blog post of 1/19/2017.)

Other historians dispute the monstrous tales — though there is plentiful evidence of the raids, villages destroyed and populations slaughtered. Revisionist historian Julian Cobbing, for example, argues that the demonization of Shaka was the work of apartheid-era historians more interested in protecting the racist status quo than the truth. Rubinstein sees shifting motives among the demonizers as well as the revisionists: "Western guilt over colonialism … accounted for much of this distortion of what pre-literate societies actually were like, as does the wish to avoid anything which smacks of racism, even when this means distorting the actual and often appalling facts of life in many pre-literate societies."

That indigenous Zulu society could be cruel and oppressive does not mitigate the racism, exploitation and violence that came with colonialism. Sifting the evidence of Shaka's atrocities and the mass slaughter of Chelmsford's Gatling guns does not mean favoring one side or another — it's all part of the story. To borrow a phrase from Charlene Carruthers, this is not an "oppression olympics," where the most wretched victims and pitiless oppressors win the gold. In this "woke" modern era, history's heroes are tottering on their pedestals. In judging them, one must remember what "normal life" was like, particularly in southern Africa during the 19th century. Death was everywhere — from disease, injury, infection, violent confrontation, summary execution and slow torture. Yet for most, life went on. Promising young colonial leaders in Africa succumbed to disease in the "white man's graveyard." By the 1870s quinine provided some protection from malaria, but there were still parasites, fevers, pestilential swamps, poisonous insects — and no antibiotics. Some colonial officers died in battle, like Anthony Durnfield and George Shepstone (son of Sir Theophilus) at Islandlwana. Others, like Major Redvers Buller, adjusted to the bush, soldiered on and retired peacefully to England. The fate of Zulu kings was as likely assassination as veneration — or in Shaka's case, both. Life in Zululand could be brutal — and short. The Zulu empire remained bound to militarism throughout its trajectory. The fearsome Zulu army may have stayed the hand of the colonialists, who moved earlier and more boldly to subdue other indigenous clans. Still, it seems inevitable that Zulu and Brit would come to blows eventually — and that the imperialists would prevail with their superior arms and resources.

There is no denying the grandeur of Shaka's vision, his fearless leadership, the magnitude of his accomplishments.



Henry Fynn (1803-61) was one of Shaka's few European contacts.

He was a flawed human being, yet he displayed personal qualities that made him great. There was vision on the other side as well. A few colonial officers stood up for the Zulus, sought understanding and accommodation, but were overwhelmed by the empire-builders and their visions of conquest, dominion, exploitation and extraction. There are poignant episodes of the two cultures engaging without hostility, socializing, consulting, even joining in mutual support and alliance. Among the earliest what-ifs was Shaka's failed mission to King George in the 1820s; also his encounters with British adventurers Nathanial Isaacs, Henry Fynn, John Ross and others; and his ultimately futile quest for a bottle of Rowland's Macassar Oil ("London's leading hair dressing"). By the 1870s, Zulu King Cetshwayo had proved himself an able leader and diplomat. Years of peaceful relations and comity between Zulus and Anglos suggest there was an alternative to war, violence and racial domination; space for other choices, plans and outcomes; a route that could have led out of the dead end of colonialism to a very different destination, one defined by mutual respect and equity.

Zulu King Cetshwayo photographed after his capture following the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879.

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