The Many Battles of Isandlwana: A Transformation in Historiography

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The Battle

The Battle of Isandlwana, 22 January 1879, was the opening battle of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. The battle is particularly remarkable because the Zulu army practically destroyed the opposing British force in a few hours. The British invasion of Zululand, which aimed to reduce the Zulu kingdom to a dependency, collapsed, and not until British reinforcements arrived in the next several months did it resume and succeed.

The battle is extraordinary because of its unusual circumstances and because of its fascination for British war buffs. It was most unusual for an imperial power to be defeated by an indigenous force, especially with such disparity in cultures and technology. To be defeated so completely was even more so. The psychological impact on the Colony of Natal and "at home" was tremendous. The fascination of the battle, while uneven over time, owes to the dearth of information from the battlefield, because of the death of most of those who might accurately have described the battle on the British side and the illiteracy or indifference to record on the Zulu side, compounded by a failure soon after the battle and the war to collect and record further information which would have shed light on the events. Thus there is a conundrum, as Ian Knight has written:

> It is one of the clichés of the military historian's art that the material with which to reconstruct the events he studies is essentially obscured by the fog of war ...
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> All of this is particularly true of Isandlwana, where to complicate matters still further, all the most valuable evidence is missing, and the earliest reconstructions are littered with omissions and contradictions ... It is like trying to discern the picture in a jigsaw puzzle when only a few pieces from the outside edges survive ...[1]

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1. I. Knight, *Zulu Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift 22-23 January 1879* (Windrow & Greene, London, 1992), p 72.

In this respect, the Battle of Isandlwana may be likened to the American Battle of the Little Bighorn.[2]

Interest in the Anglo-Zulu War, and consequently in the battle, was stimulated greatly by the now iconic 1964 film *Zulu*, which dramatizes (with considerable licence) the Battle of Rorke's Drift, the sequel of Isandlwana.[3] A 1979 film, *Zulu Dawn*, about Isandlwana, lacked the same impact. Between the immediate post-war publications (1879-1882) and the publication of Donald Morris' classic *Washing of the Spears* in 1965, only four books were published on the war, two of them on the Battle of Isandlwana. Since 1965 more than three dozen books have been published on the war and seven are just on the battle. The major battlefields of the war, most notably that of Isandlwana, have become the focus of a small but flourishing tourist trade.

The recent works vary considerably in scholarship. Most of the writers and especially those with the commercial presses, have tried to make a Victorian romance out of the conflict. In the case of Isandlwana mystery enhances romance. Even the sphinx-shaped hill adds to the effect. Few writers have sifted and sorted the sources methodically.

The core sources for a study of the battle are the recorded testimony of eight survivors of the battle and the written submissions of two others made to a court of enquiry appointed by the British commander Lord Chelmsford, which met five days after the battle.[4] The proceedings and other related official papers were widely published, and, with other relevant letters and reports which appeared in the press, provided the basis of the literature on the war.[5]

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2. A comparative history (which adds nothing to our knowledge of Isandlwana) is J.O. Gump, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke The Subjugation of the Zulu and the Sioux* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994). In *How Can Man Die Better* (Greenhill, London, 2005), pp 139, 158 and 241, Mike Snook likens Anthony Durnford to George Custer.
3. See J. McAdam, "Observations on the film Zulu", *Journal of the Anglo-Zulu War Historical Society*, 9, June 2001; S. Hall, *Zulu – With Some Guts Behind It* (Tomahawk, no place, 2005).
4. War Office Records Group 33/34, pp 27-31.
5. See Command 2260, pp 80-85, 95-106. For the earliest examples of their use, see D.C.F. Moodie, *The History of the Battles and Adventures of the British, the Boers, and the Zulus, in Southern Africa, From 1495 to 1879, Including every Particular of the Zulu War, with a Chronology* (George Robertson, Adelaide, 1879); E. Durnford, *Isandhlwana, 22nd January, 1879. A Narrative, compiled from Official and Reliable Sources* (King, London, 1879); E. Durnford & F. Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin* (Chapman Hall, London, 1880).

The proceedings and several other early reports were analysed by Lieutenant Walter H. James, R.E., of the Intelligence Branch, Quarter-Master General's Department, who then composed a judicious account, "The Isandlana Disaster", on 21 March 1879.[6] His is the first narrative of the battle, but because his printed report was confidential, it is difficult to determine what its impact was. Inevitably Captain J.S. Rothwell, the author of the later official *Narrative of the Field Operations*, would have used it. It is also of particular interest for its maps depicting the battle, as we shall see below.

The basic books on the war and the battle can be categorised in four chronological groups, each with a characteristic perspective based upon the accretion of more primary material and the appropriate interpretation. In the first place, there are those which take the official line as described in the documents, eked out by other, unofficial reports and personal observations. Secondly and contemporaneously, there are those which challenge and criticize the official line. In the third place, there are later books, by authors with no personal involvement in events, although some are certainly partisan, but they do seek to reconcile the differences. In the fourth and final place, there is the recent literature, published since 1965, in which authors purport to give an account of the battle *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, but most of these later accounts are in the genre of popular history, although a few of the works have a scholarly character.

The essential first source for all students of the war and the battle is the *Narrative of the Field Operations connected with the Zulu War of 1879. Prepared in the Intelligence Branch of the Quartermaster-General's Department, Horse Guards, War Office*, compiled by Major J.S. Rothwell and published in 1881. It is the official history, and remains the basic book for the British side. There is a detailed chapter on the Battle of Isandlwana and related events. In this Lord Chelmsford's point of view is tacitly accepted – the narrative contains practically no analysis. On 22 January 1879, he led over half the force of the Centre Column on a reconnaissance in force and selected a new camp about ten miles from the old camp at Isandlwana. He deemed the force left at the old camp – 1 200 officers and men – sufficient for its defence. He left instructions for a concentrated defence with the camp commander, Colonel Pulleine of the 1st Battalion of the 24th Regiment. Colonel Durnford, R.E., another column commander, was ordered up

6. W.H. James, "The Isandlana Disaster", 21 March 1879, *in* War Office Record Group 33/34.

from Rorke's Drift with a mounted force, rocket battery and infantry escort, to take command of the camp. Instead, Durnford dispersed his force there and left with part of it to go to the assistance of Lord Chelmsford's force, leaving Pulleine again in charge at the camp. The camp was not prepared for defence. As the Zulu, whose strength was estimated at 13 700, attacked, Pulleine formed a line of defence far out in front of the camp. The Zulu outflanked the British line, and when belatedly Pulleine tried to pull back and concentrate, they fell upon it, broke through, and destroyed the British force.

Among the first to write accounts of the battle were the staff officer Henry Hallam Parr, in *A Sketch of the Kaffir and Zulu Wars* (1880), and the newspaperman Charles Norris-Newman, in *In Zululand with the British Throughout the War of 1879* (1880) – both of whom were with the general's column. They were present with the column invading Zululand and were on the battlefield soon after the fight. Other, secondary works, drawing on the contemporary accounts, were D.C.F. Moodie's *The History of the Battles and Adventures of the British, the Boers, and the Zulus* ... (1879); W. Ashe and E.V. Wyatt-Edgell's *The Story of the Zulu Campaign* (1880); and J.P. Mackinnon and Sydney Shadbolt's informative and detailed (but also rather hagiographical) *The South African Campaign, 1879* (1880).

The official line was challenged by Colonel Edward Durnford, in *Isandhlwana* (1879), and, with his brother's friend Frances Colenso, in *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin* (1880), in defence of his deceased brother Anthony Durnford, whom, it had been stated, had been ordered to take command of the camp at Isandlwana and therefore was mainly responsible for the defeat. After a copy of the general's order to his brother was found on the battlefield and revealed that he had *not* been ordered to take command of the camp, Durnford came out with a stronger defence in a biography of his brother, *A Soldier's Life and Work in South Africa* (1882). Yet Major W.J. Elliott, in *The Victoria Cross in Zululand in South Africa* (1882), was highly critical of both Chelmsford and Durnford.

W.H. Clements' *The Glamour and Tragedy of the Zulu War* (1936) attacked Chelmsford from a "colonial" point of view. His account of Isandlwana was muddled, gossipy and anecdotal, based on old men's reminiscences, not entirely without value, but he should have recorded them fully and carefully, which he did not. Major The Honourable Gerald French's rejoinder, *Lord Chelmsford and the Anglo-Zulu War* (1939), was based on the general's papers and justifications, and it

retained the incorrect version of his order to Durnford. Sir Reginald Coupland subsequently reconciled the differences between the two historic camps in a judicious and thoughtful critique, *Zulu Battle Piece – Isandhlwana* (1949).

In a sense the books mentioned were meant to set the record straight, at least in so far as the British were concerned. The Zulu were no more than a foil. In the main the books were well-written, but lacked dramatic flair.

In 1965 the battle was "reconstructed" when the conventional approach to and interpretation thereof were drastically changed. In the matter of approach, the change was wrought by the first large and comprehensive popular history of the war by Donald Morris, aimed at an American readership. The reinterpretation of the battle in all its details was made in a series of scholarly articles on the battle by David Jackson, aimed at British war buffs, which, in comparison to the blockbuster book, seems rather like a piece of samizdat.

Donald Morris' *The Washing of the Spears: A History of the Rise of the Zulu Nation under Shaka and Its Fall in the Zulu War of 1879* dealt at great length with Zulu origins and expansion and with British machinations to bring the war on. Of course, the Battle of Isandlwana figured prominently. Morris intentionally sought the dramatic incidents, usually left out or related plainly by previous writers, and amplified the story-line with them. There was nothing new about his interpretation of the leading personalities, their strategy and tactics, nor was any particular care shown with sources, but it mattered little to the public. His book (published in Britain in 1968), along with the film *Zulu* (1964), featuring Stanley Baker and Michael Caine leading an exciting defence of Rorke's Drift, appeared to generate the wide interest in the Anglo-Zulu War which has continued to this day.

David Jackson's series of articles, "Isandhlwana: The Sources Re-examined" appeared in three parts in the British *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* in 1965. Jackson analysed all the available sources on the battle known to him and worked out a new account of it in painstaking detail. He redrew the map and relocated units. His writing was clear and his criticism trenchant. Never before had there been manifested such a methodical inquiry into the source material on the battle, and among the cognoscenti Jackson, not Morris, carried the day. When his articles were revised and published as a book in 2002, Jackson pointedly disdained most of the recent literature. His bibliography

contained only eight works since 1965, and omitted those of Ian Knight and John Laband. He explained: "I have seen nothing that has significantly altered my previous interpretations."[7]

In the wake of the 1965 historiographical seism at least twenty-five books have been written which deal in some way with the Battle of Isandlwana. Many clustered around the centenary of the Anglo-Zulu War, but there has been a fairly steady flow since. The serial "military histories" include Rupert's Furneaux's earlier (and conventional) *The Zulu War: Isandhlwana and Rorke's Drift* (1963); then G. Clammer's *The Zulu War*; Alan Lloyd's *The Zulu War* (both 1973); and Michael Barthorp's *The Zulu War* (1980). Ian Knight's *Isandlwana* (2002); and Ian Beckett's *Isandlwana* (2003) are more recent and superior examples of the genre. Other monographs, more or less aimed to please popular taste *à la* Morris, are Philip Gon's *The Road to Isandlwana* (1979); Robert Edgerton's *Like Lions They Fought* (1988); Ian Knight's *Zulu* (1992); Robin Drooglever's *The Road to Isandlwana* (1992); Adrian Greaves' *Isandlwana* (2001); Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill's *Zulu Victory* (2002); Saul David's *Zulu* (2004); and Mike Snook's *How Can Man Die Better* (2005).

For a battle which is largely a conundrum, there seems little more that can be written; however, there are aspects of it which have been and some of which still are controversial, and in respect of these the literature bears examination. This examination forms the rest of this article. It will be selective. I shall deal with *secondary* literature, which entails some interpretation of the battle, but *not* that which has been privately published, personal memoirs and reminiscences, compilations from other accounts, catalogues and lists of units and casualties, guide books and other ephemeral booklets and pamphlets, although some exceptional ones are included in the list of sources at the end of the article and a few are mentioned in the footnotes.

British defeat

a. Chelmsford

The British commander Lord Chelmsford's own *Regulations for Forces in the Field* prescribed that a camp should have an entrenchment or a wagon laager, but Lord Chelmsford himself knowingly dispensed with

7. F.W.D. Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx The Battle of Isandlwana* (Westerner, London, 2002), p 1.

both at Isandlwana, considering them unnecessary impediments to the British advance. He knew that the main Zulu army was coming towards the British Centre Column, which he accompanied and in fact commanded; however, inadequate British reconnaissance and effective Zulu screening prevented his knowing just where it was, and he underrated Zulu military proficiency. In the aftermath of the battle, Lord Chelmsford had to justify his failures against a host of critics.[8]

"The one unquestionable blunder," Coupland wrote, was Lord Chelmsford's "omission to fortify the camp."[9] Colonel Glyn, technically the column commander, may have suggested forming a wagon laager, but Lord Chelmsford would not have it: the camp was a temporary one, it would take too long to make the laager, and many of the wagons were needed to bring supplies up from Rorke's Drift.[10] As for entrenchment, the ground was too hard and stony.[11]

All of the writers must deal with the (in)defensibility of the camp. Either the camp was defensible or it was not, and if it was defensible, then why had it not been rendered so by the laagering of the wagons or by entrenching or throwing up breastworks?

Only Durnford and Elliott (see below), and later, Coupland and Jackson, expressed doubt about the defensibility of the camp.[12] Many writers have recorded that certain officers of the 24th Regiment and the Natal Native Contingent questioned its location and particularly the lack of fortification of any sort.[13]

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8. See, for example, Lord Chelmsford's notes on the proceedings of the Court of Enquiry and letter to the Duke of Cambridge, respectively in: G. French, *Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War* (Lane, London, 1939), pp 146-150, 155-157; R. Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece - Isandhlwana* (Collins, London, 1949), p 119.
9. Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece*, p 66.
10. See especially C.T. Atkinson, *The South Wales Borderers 24th Foot 1689-1937* (University Press, Cambridge, 1937), p 334; E. Durnford (ed), *A Soldier's Life and Work in South Africa, 1872 to 1879. A Memoir of the Late Colonel A. Durnford, Royal Engineers* (Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, London, 1882), p 220; R. Lock and P. Quantrill, *Zulu Victory The Epic of Isandlwana and the Cover-Up* (Greenhill, London, 2002), p 134.
11. See especially Atkinson, *The South Wales Borderers*, p 334; Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece*, p 66.
12. See Durnford (ed), *Soldier's Life*, pp 217, 255; W.J. Elliott, *The Victoria Cross in Zululand and South Africa. Isandhlwana and Rorke's Drift* (Dean & Son, London, [1882]), pp 53-54; Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece*, p 63; Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, pp 56-57; French, *Lord Chelmsford*, p 144.
13. Notably Atkinson, *The South Wales Borderers*, pp 335-336; M. Barthorp, *The Zulu War A Pictorial History* (Cassell, London, 1980), pp 48-49; I. Beckett,

Lord Chelmsford believed that the force which he had left at the camp was strong enough to defend it successfully, if it were concentrated for the purpose and used its superior firepower to repel an enemy attack.[14] The subsequent successful defence of Rorke's Drift is a persuasive argument in favour of this view, yet it is still not clear if Lord Chelmsford envisaged the force sufficient with or without Durnford's force of 500 mounted men, rocket battery and escort.[15] Also, what reliance should be placed on the four companies of the Natal Native Contingent? Ill-trained, poorly armed with rifles, and intended for light infantry and a scouting role, how could they be fitted effectually into the defence?

Lord Chelmsford was thinking wishfully. It is agreed by all that he underrated the Zulu, and even though he knew they were in strong force in the vicinity, he did not expect them to attack the camp. Thus he made a second blunder: he divided the column in the presence of the enemy, inviting its destruction in detail. According to Elliott, Chelmsford's division of the column in the presence of the enemy practically assured disaster. Even if the force at the camp had fortified it and drawn itself up, it is questionable whether or not they could have held out against a sustained attack.[16] Elliott, Coupland, and later Jackson and Beckett noted that Chelmsford placed his advance force, as well as the camp's, in jeopardy.[17]

b. Durnford

If it is accepted that the British camp was defensible and the orders to defend it were explicit, then the British defeat becomes a question of why the force at the camp had not been drawn up in the manner ordered. The assumption is that if it had been, then surely the enemy attack would have been repulsed. Lord Chelmsford opined that both Colonel Durnford and

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Isandlwana (Brassey's, London, 2003), p 38; R. Furneaux, *The Zulu War Isandhlwana and Rorke's Drift* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1963), p 50; P. Gon, *The Road to Isandlwana The Years of an Imperial Battalion* (Donker, Johannesburg, 1979), p 217; Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 14; Knight, *Zulu*, pp 42-43; Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p 134; G. Paton, F. Glennie and W.P. Symons (eds), *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment* (Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, London, 1892), p 230.

14. See especially French, *Lord Chelmsford*, chapter 10 passim.
15. Compare H.H. Parr, *A Sketch of the Kaffir and Zulu Wars* (Kegan Paul, London, 1880), p 202; Elliott, *The Victoria Cross*, p 51; Durnford, *Isandhlwana, 22nd January, 1879*, p 31.
16. Elliott, *The Victoria Cross*, p 54.
17. Elliott, *The Victoria Cross*, p 53; Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece*, p 119; Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 56; Beckett, *Isandlwana*, p 76.

Colonel Pulleine were to blame for not defending the camp as ordered.[18] This opinion is generally accepted, and the concern here is to determine which had been responsible for what, and why. At first Durnford seemed the more culpable, but partisans of his cause have diminished this blame, and recently Pulleine has been made to shoulder much of it.

Lord Chelmsford's acting military secretary, Colonel Crealock, stated shortly after the battle that the general had ordered Colonel Durnford to take command of the camp. The implication plainly is that he should have remained there and made it defensible, in keeping with the orders given to Colonel Pulleine. Instead Durnford went off on a wild goose chase, ostensibly to help the general. Worse, he told Pulleine to support him if he got into difficulties. Pulleine did so, resulting in the dispersion instead of the concentration of his force, which then could not cope with overwhelming Zulu numbers. This line of argument, that Durnford disobeyed orders, was implicit in the official *Narrative* and lingered on to French, but thereafter was abandoned.

Let us look at the order sent to Durnford. According to Crealock, writing on 9 February 1879:

> Soon after 2 a.m. on the 22nd January I received instructions from the Lieutenant-General to send a written order to Lieutenant-Colonel Durnford, R.E., commanding No. 2 column, to the following effect (I copied it in my notebook which was afterwards lost): — "Move up to Isandula Camp at once with all your mounted men and Rocket Battery; take command of it. I am accompanying Colonel Glyn, who is moving off at once to attack Matyana and a Zulu force said to be 12 or 14 miles off, and at present watched by Natal Police, Volunteers and Natal Native Contingent. Colonel Glyn takes with him the 2/24th Regiment, four guns R.A., and Mounted Infantry.[19]

Crealock's notebook was later found on the battlefield, and Crealock copied the actual order to Colonel Edward Durnford on 18 May 1882:

> 22nd, *Wednesday*, 2 a.m., the following order sent to Colonel Durnford.
> You are to march to this camp at once with all the forces you have with you of No. 2 column.

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18. As quoted in French, *Lord Chelmsford*, pp 145-157 passim; J.P.C. Laband (ed), *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign, 1878-1879* (Army Records Society, Stroud, 1994), pp 92-98 passim.
19. Command 2260, p 98.

> Major Bengough's Battalion is to move to Rorke's Drift as ordered yesterday.
> 2-24th Artillery and mounted men with General and Colonel Glyn move off at once to attack a Zulu force about ten miles distant.
> [Signed] J. N. C.
> If Bengough's Batalion has crossed the river at Eland's Kraal, it is to move up here.[20]

The question whether or not Durnford had been ordered to take command of the camp was thus settled early on, but before then the official *Narrative of Field Operations* had been published, in which Durnford is stated to have been ordered to take command of the camp,[21] and William Penn Symons (in the *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment*, 1892) and Gerald French accepted this,[22] though afterwards none did. Much can be made of Crealock's not revealing the order until pressed to by Durnford, for the appearance that Durnford had disobeyed orders to defend the camp was convenient to the general's defence of his reputation. Drooglever,[23] Quantrill,[24] and David[25] have extended the story line of the battle with an elaboration of this "cover up".

Durnford had not been ordered to take command of the camp, but when he arrived, he did so automatically because he was the senior officer there. What is really at issue is why he did not comply with the orders given to Pulleine. No copy of these orders has survived, and there is some question whether they were written or verbal. The recollection of them by Colonel Glyn's chief of staff, Colonel Clery, is usually taken at face value:

> Before leaving the camp I sent written instructions to Colonel Pulleine, 24th Regiment, to the following effect: — "You will be in command of the camp during the absence of Colonel Glyn; draw in (I speak from memory) your camp, or your line of defence – I am not certain which – while the force is out; also draw in the line of your infantry outposts accordingly, but keep your cavalry videttes still far advanced." I told him to have a wagon ready loaded with

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20. Durnford (ed), *A Soldier's Life*, pp 222-223.
21. Durnford, *Isandhlwana, 22nd January, 1879*, p 31.
22. Paton, Glennie & Symons (eds), *Historical records*, p 239; French, *Lord Chelmsford*, p 90.
23. R.W.F. Drooglever, *The Road to Isandhlwana Colonel Anthony Durnford in Natal and Zululand, 1873-1879* (Greenhill, London, 1992), chapter 11 (Aftermath).
24. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, part 3 (The Cover-Up).
25. S. David, *Zulu The Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879* (Viking Penguin, London, 2004), chapter 10 ("The Cover-Up"); epilogue.

> ammunition ready to follow the force going out, at a moment's notice if required. I went to Colonel Pulleine's tent just before leaving camp, to ascertain that he had got these instructions, and I again repeated them verbally to him. To the best of my memory I mentioned in the written instructions to Colonel Pulleine that Colonel Durnford had been written to, to bring up his force to strengthen the camp.[26]

And then again:

> I have a very distinct recollection of the different points on which they dwelt. The essence of them was as follows:—
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> "You will be in Command of the Camp during the absence of Colonel Glyn. Draw in your line of defence. Draw in your Infantry outpost line. Keep your Cavalry videttes far advanced. Act on the defensive. Keep a wagon loaded with rifle ammunition in readiness to start at a moment's notice for the General's force should it be required. Lieutenant-Colonel Durnford has been ordered up with his men to reinforce you."[27]

Why did Durnford not comply with the orders given to Pulleine? There is no evidence that Durnford expected an attack on the camp, but he knew he was in the presence of the enemy, and, like Chelmsford, he divided his force notwithstanding. He sent two troops with his political officer, George Shepstone, to scout the hills to the north on which several bodies of the enemy had been seen, and took two troops, the rocket battery and its escort to the east, ostensibly to succour the general. Another troop and company were escorting his wagon train to the camp – no farther.

Durnford's sallying forth to assist his general is represented as an impulse based on a misconception, but it is not inexplicable. Edward Durnford argued in *A Soldier's Life* (1882) that Durnford had not been ordered explicitly to take command of the camp and the thrust of the general's earlier orders to him had been that he should cooperate with the column advancing. It was not his intention to remain there, and he naturally proceeded to assist the general. He was responsible for the dispersal of his own force, ordering troops to go forward and to scout and secure his own wagons, but Pulleine was responsible for the subsequent dispersal of the force already at the camp.[28]

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26. 27 January 1879, in War Office Records Group 33/34, pp 27-28.
27. 7 February 1879, in War Office Records Group 33/34, p 92.
28. Durnford (ed), *A Soldier's Life*, pp 222-227 passim.

Durnford's brother argued that Lord Chelmsford's orders to Durnford heretofore had been about his column's cooperating with Glyn's in the advance into Zululand[29] – note that Bengough's battalion was already approaching a junction with the force in advance.[30] Jackson, Drooglever, Gon, Knight and Snook have so rationalised Durnford's sally.[31] Durnford may well have expected to receive further orders to go forward when he reached the camp, and in their absence he proceeded to act on the inference of the earlier ones. He asked Pulleine to support him when he left, but Pulleine would not, and Durnford did not press him. Durnford asked for support if he got into difficulties, and Pulleine agreed to that.

c. Pulleine

As much, if not more blame for the loss of the camp then attaches to Colonel Pulleine for not concentrating his men and consolidating his position, and for sending out companies to support the two troops of Durnford's column scouting on the hills. Pulleine sent a company of British infantry to the hills to replace one of the Natal Native Contingent, which was on outpost duty there but accompanied Durnford's two troops. There is no evidence that Durnford explicitly ordered him to do so.[32] The two troops then discovered the Zulu army, the beginning of many difficulties indeed, but Durnford was not with them. Durnford was nowhere about at the time. Pulleine directed companies to their support. Evidently he misread the signs just as Chelmsford and Durnford did. Knight, Beckett, David and Snook have pointed out that Pulleine's disposition of his companies to meet the Zulu who were advancing over the hills was a line similar to that prescribed by Chelmsford's pre-

29. Durnford (ed), *A Soldier's Life*, pp 223-224.
30. Durnford (ed), *A Soldier's Life*, p 7.
31. F.W.D. Jackson, "Isandhlwana, 1879 - The Sources Re-examined", *The Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 43, 1965, p 41; Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 19; Drooglever, *The Road to Isandhlwana*, p 205; Gon, *The Road to Isandlwana*, p 226; Knight, *Zulu*, pp 60-62; I. Knight, *Isandlwana 1879. The Great Zulu Victory* (Osprey, Oxford, 2002), p 67; I. Knight, *The National Army Museum Book of the Zulu War* (Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 2003), pp 90-91; Snook, *How Can Man Die Better*, pp 155-158. Snook is very derisive of Durnford here and throughout his book.
32. See Beckett, *Isandlwana*, p 54; Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece*, p 85; Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 28. Compare Knight, *Zulu*, p 62; Knight, *Isandlwana*, p 47; Knight, *The National Army Museum Book*, pp 14, 91; Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p 195; D.R. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears A History of the Rise of the Zulu Nation under Shaka and Its Fall in the Zulu War of 1879* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1965), p 359.

invasion instructions to column commanders for combat with a native enemy in the open. Pulleine was going to fight by the book, and realised too late the folly of it. Again, Durnford had nothing to do with that.[33]

Therefore Pulleine is left with a predicament largely of his own making. By the time Durnford, retreating before the left horn of the Zulu army, came in sight of camp, Pulleine had practically guaranteed the destruction of the British force there. Not that Durnford tried to rectify the situation: he remained with his two troops on the right of the line, and only returned to the camp, whether or not to take charge no one knows, when organised defence was falling apart.

Zulu victory

a. Reflex action

Until quite recently the Zulu attack was portrayed in literature as a great whiplash response of massed automatons to the British discovery of their hiding-place. Most accounts have ignored Zulu generalship. There was the traditional Zulu battle formation – horns, chest, loins – for the envelopment and destruction of the enemy in a pitched battle. This was bred into the Zulu *amabutho*, who apparently moved automatically into positions and advanced to battle. The Zulu were geared to fight offensively, not defensively.

Very little evidence is found on the Zulu side. Ron Lock complains that the British made no attempt to debrief Zulu commanders after the war.[34] Some legends of heroic exploits exist, but John Laband warns against the dangers of oral history long after the events.[35] In respect of Isandlwana, we are thrown back on the few recorded statements of prisoners and veterans made during and immediately after the war. They are valuable, but they have not always been analysed critically and are not very reliable. None of those making statements was of great importance, and the statements pertaining to matters of strategic and tactical importance are usually hearsay.[36]

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33. Beckett, *Isandlwana*, p 175; David, *Zulu*, p 130; Knight, *Zulu*, p 76; Knight, *Isandlwana*, p 65; Knight, *The National Army Museum Book*, pp 96, 98. Snook even says in *How Can Man Die Better*, p 205, that Durnford's taking position in the Nyogane watercourse was to protect Pulleine's right flank.
34. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p 288.
35. J. Laband, *Kingdom in crisis The Zulu response to the British invasion of 1879* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992), p 72.
36. It is curious that none of the writers has provided a comprehensive and up-to-date list of recorded Zulu witnesses.

The battle of Isandlwana, on the Zulu side, reads like a soldier's battle in the older accounts. Once committed, the Zulu army extended its horns and the chest moved forward. It came on in thousands, making an enormous impression on those opponents who were in any position to see the unfolding battle and survived to tell of it. The Zulu commanders Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana did little more than oversee the battle. According to some accounts – notably James Gibson's *The Story of the Zulus* (1903) and Morris' *Washing of the Spears* (1965) – the commanders seem to have lost control of the army.[37]

The Zulu were reported to be in large force in the vicinity, notably to the east and the southeast, and these forces were what attracted Lord Chelmsford's attention; however, there were indications that the Zulu were also moving to the north, but the British failed to reconnoitre there. All writers agree that the Zulu army had moved to a position near the British camp by the evening of 21 January 1879. British mounted patrols failed to detect its presence.

The older histories suggested a degree of cunning in Zulu strategy. The suggestion that Lord Chelmsford had been deceived into dividing the column and decoyed away from the camp may have originated with his own staff, and the idea enjoyed some currency, perhaps as an anodyne of defeat: the Zulu must appear clever in order to make the general appear less stupid. Yet this inference – it is nothing more – of planning ignores the question why the Zulu army did not react more quickly and decisively when presented with a golden opportunity. Indeed, it had to be provoked into action by Durnford's troops scouting on the hills.

Lieutenant James wrote in "The Isandlana Disaster" (1879) that the Zulu king Cetshwayo had ordered the army to proceed from his great place at Ulundi to the vicinity of the enemy by easy marches in order to conserve strength, then to attack during the day and to invade the Colony of Natal as far as the Drakensberg. Zulu spies visited the camp before the battle. There was no attack on 22 January 1879, because it would be "religiously unpropitious". The attack was precipitated by Durnford's scout on the hills. James says nothing about the Zulu commanders, nor about their tactics.[38]

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37. J.Y. Gibson, *The Story of the Zulus* (Davis, Pietermaritzburg, 1903), pp 176, 179; Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, p 163. Also see Drooglever, *The Road to Isandhlwana*, pp 209, 221.
38. James, "The Isandlana Disaster", pp 1-2, 5.

Charles Norris-Newman wrote in *In Zululand with the British Throughout the War of 1879* (1880) that Zulu auxiliaries were ordered to draw off as many of the British column as possible, which they did to perfection, while the main Zulu army moved into position to attack the camp. They did so in silence and without fires. They also sent a force to watch the British line of communication to Rorke's Drift. This reflected the Zulu commanders' strategy, and the tactical execution was precise. Norris-Newman presumed this; however, he recorded at length only the statement by Mehlokazulu, a subordinate commander in the left horn, who said practically nothing about the commanders' decisions.[39]

Mehlokazulu did say that the Zulu intended to attack on 23 January 1879, because of the new moon.[40] Henry Hallam Parr, in his *Sketch of the Kaffir and Zulu Wars* (1880), also mentioned that the Zulu did not plan to attack on 22 January because of the "dead" moon.[41] The importance of the new moon was remarked also by Gibson, in *The Story of the Zulus* (1903).[42]

The official *Narrative of Field Operations* (1881), after describing the Zulu movement to the front, states: "It is asserted there was no intention of attacking ... on the 22nd, as the state of the moon was considered unpropitious, and that the ceremonies which usually preceded an action had not been performed."[43] One of the regiments rose at the sound of firing to the Southeast, but it returned to its position. Then Durnford's mounted men fired on another regiment; it sprang to the attack, and the others followed.[44]

In *The Victoria Cross in Zululand and South Africa* (1882), Major Elliott strongly suggests that the Zulu decoyed the British away from the camp and then seized upon their division to strike the camp.[45] There was no love lost between the 24th and Lord Chelmsford, and a historian of the 24th Regiment, C.T. Atkinson (1937) made much of the decoy thesis.[46] Clements, in *The Glamour and Tragedy of the Zulu War* (1936), repeated

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39. C.L. Norris-Newman, *In Zululand with the British Throughout the War of 1879* (Allen, London, 1880), pp 68-69, 79-84.
40. Norris-Newman, *In Zululand*, p 79.
41. Parr, *A Sketch*, p 200.
42. Gibson, *The Story of the Zulus*, p 174.
43. Durnford, *Isandhlwana, 22nd January, 1879*, p 48.
44. Durnford, *Isandhlwana, 22nd January, 1879*, p 48.
45. Elliott, *The Victoria Cross*, pp 49, 52.
46. Atkinson, *The South Wales Borderers*, p 336. Compare with Paton, Glennie & Symons (eds), *Historical records*, who did not.

a colonial tale that Cetshwayo had ordered his armies not to oppose the Centre Column's advance seriously, but rather to decoy it forward, then get behind it and raid Natal.[47]

The decoy thesis necessitates the construction of an intelligent agency at work, and thus an operational strategy of some sort has to be imputed to the Zulu commanders. However, in the early works there was no concern with it beyond explaining Lord Chelmsford's blunders. Trooper Symons' reminiscence in *The Later Annals of Natal* was entitled "How Lord Chelmsford was decoyed from Isandhlwana",[48] but it is counterbalanced by an extract from the reminiscences of the quondam Acting Secretary for Native Affairs, John Wesley Shepstone, entitled "The Isandhlwana campaign from the Zulu angle".[49] Zulu chiefs present at Cetshwayo's deportation from Zululand after the war told him: "You gave us the battle that day, for you dispersed your army in small parties all over the country."[50]

Sir Reginald Coupland was the first to analyse Zulu activity in *Zulu Battle Piece – Isandhlwana* (1949). He granted that the Zulu intelligence system was superior to that of the British. He remarked on the Zulu elusiveness in the presence of Lord Chelmsford's expedition on 22 January 1879, and noted the conjecture of Lieutenant Milne (the navy aide on Lord Chelmsford's staff) that it was part of a deception; however, the new moon put off an attack. Beyond this, Coupland, like his predecessors, could only infer Zulu strategy and tactics. The Zulu were prepared to flank the Centre Column and invade Natal to the south, but because of the intervention of the British reconnaissance in force on 21 January 1879, they shifted to the north. Of course, they would have been aware of the opportunity to destroy the divided British forces on 22 January 1879.[51]

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47. W.H. Clements, *The Glamour and Tragedy of the Zulu War* (Lane, London, 1936), p 53.
48. A.F. Hattersley (ed), *Later Annals of Natal* (Longmans, London, 1938), pp 143-149.
49. Hattersley (ed), *Later Annals of Natal*, pp 159-163.
50. Hattersley (ed), *Later Annals of Natal*, p 161.
51. Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece*, pp 77-79; D. Clammer, *The Zulu War* (Purnell, London, 1973), pp 67-68; and A. Lloyd, *The Zulu War* (Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, London, 1973), p 69, would not speculate further, but G.A. Chadwick, *The Battle of Isandhlwana and the Defence of Rorke's Drift* (Natal Provincial Administration, Pietermaritzburg, 1964), p 9, declares: "The Zulus had been following a well-thought-out plan of action" – which he never explains.

In 1978, Cetshwayo's account of the war was (re)published in *A Zulu King Speaks*. In a letter to the Governor of the Cape Colony, originally printed in a British parliamentary paper in 1881, the Zulu king stated that he told Ntshingwayo, the commander of the army, not to go against the British straightaway, but to confer with his subordinate commanders and then to send some chiefs to negotiate. They were consulting when the battle was precipitated by Durnford's scout and they hastened to rejoin their units.[52]

Cetshwayo's account in this instance was, of course, a self-serving one. Otherwise his orders to his commanders have been related with many variations in the literature. It is generally accepted that he ordered the army to march to the front in a leisurely manner in order to conserve their strength (Barthorp, Binns, Jackson, Lloyd and Morris).[53] Alan Lloyd makes the interesting suggestion that the leisurely march also gave time for the army to accustom themselves to campaigning and units to sort themselves out.[54] They were to attack only in daylight (Barthorp, Binns, Lloyd and Morris)[55] – Taylor adds his caveat against attacking fortified positions[56] – and not to invade the Colony of Natal (Barthorp and Morris),[57] but to threaten and negotiate (Beckett),[58] or drive the enemy back (Binns and Clammer)[59] and then to "play for time" (Taylor).[60] Only the earliest sources, James and Moodie, say that Cetshwayo ordered his army to invade the Colony.[61]

Zulu command was a shadowy entity in the early literature. The *Narrative* states that Ntshingwayo was the commander of the army.[62]

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52. C.d.B. Webb and J.B. Wright (eds), *A Zulu King Speaks Statements made by Cetshwayo kaMpande on the history and customs of his people* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1978), p 57.
53. Barthorp, *The Zulu War*, p 44; C.T. Binns, *The Last Zulu King - The Life and Death of Cetshwayo* (Longmans, London, 1963), p 122; Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 25; Lloyd, *The Zulu War*, p 67; Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, p 361.
54. Lloyd, *The Zulu War*, p 67.
55. Barthorp, *The Zulu War*, p 44; Binns, *The Last Zulu King*, p 122; Lloyd, *The Zulu War*, p 55; Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, p 361.
56. S. Taylor, *Shaka's Children A History of the Zulu People* (Harper Collins, London, 1994), p 217.
57. Barthorp, *The Zulu War*, p 44; Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, p 361.
58. Beckett, *Isandlwana*, p 21.
59. Binns, *The Last Zulu King*, p 122; Clammer, *The Zulu War*, p 66.
60. Taylor, *Shaka's Children*, p 217.
61. James, "The Isandlana Disaster", p 6; Moodie, *The History of the Battles*, pp 41, 69.
62. Durnford, *Isandhlwana, 22nd January, 1879*, p 48.

French and Furneaux, *The Zulu War* (1963), said that the commander was Dabulamanzi, the king's half-brother.[63] C.T. Binns, the king's biographer, said in *The Last Zulu King – The Life and Death of Cetshwayo* (1963) that it was Ntshingwayo, a chief and a member of the king's council.[64] Jackson at first said it was the one or the other,[65] but then that there were two, Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana.[66] Morris said that Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana, another important chief, were the joint commanders,[67] and John Laband settled the issue.[68]

The question of their relationship with Matshana kaMondisa, the putative decoy, whose chiefdom lay in the path of the column's advance, is a perplexing one. Binns drew on local hearsay in which Matshana aspired to command of the army, proposed guerrilla warfare as opposed to direct attack, argued with Ntshingwayo and took his men off home. When he became embroiled with the column's advance, Ntshingwayo left him to his own devices, saying that he hoped Matshana would be "soundly thrashed"![69] Donald Morris, in *The Washing of the Spears* (1965), implies that there was some disagreement over command and the Zulu commanders moved to get away from Matshana.[70] Alan Lloyd in *The Zulu War* (1975) makes the argument out to have been over whether to make the main effort against the British force in his front or at the camp.[71]

b. John Laband and the Zulu perspective

While Binns and Morris touched on Zulu strategy, they, like previous writers, did so incidentally. Lloyd also said that Ntshingwayo was great by reputation. It sufficed for the earlier writers that the Zulu served as a foil to British initiatives. It was a professional historian, John Laband, who provided a narrative of the Zulu at war, balanced with analysis and criticism. His *Kingdom in crisis: The Zulu response to the British invasion of 1879* (1992) and *Rope of Sand: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century* (1995) had chapters dealing with the battle of Isandlwana in which Zulu strategy and tactics received particular attention garnered from the meagre factual evidence.

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63. French, *Lord Chelmsford*, p 94; Furneaux, *The Zulu War*, p 73.
64. Binns, *The Last Zulu King*, p 122.
65. Jackson, "Isandhlwana", p 114.
66. Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 25.
67. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, p 361.
68. Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, p 73.
69. Binns, *The Last Zulu King*, p 126.
70. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, p 362.
71. Lloyd, *The Zulu War*, p 69.

In both books Laband traced the progress of the Zulu army from Ulundi to the Ngwebeni valley, some six miles from the British camp. Cetshwayo ordered his commanders to avoid British positions and to threaten the British rear and the lines of communication in order to draw the British out into the open: under no circumstances were they to attack entrenched positions.[72] Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana were commanders of distinction – but their military record is unknown.[73] The original plan was to outflank the British column to the south, but this was changed and the army moved to the north.[74] Matshana's engagement seems to have stemmed from the original strategy. Laband also states (the italics are mine):

> The intriguing question is whether the British had inadvertently presented the Zulu with an irresistible temptation, or whether the Zulu had successfully manoeuvred the British into their vulnerable position. *On balance, it seems* the latter was the case, and that the dispersal of the British forces was of the Zulu making.[75]

And yet:

> What strategic objective ... lay behind Matshana's move toward the hills surrounding the Mangeni stream ...? A plan initially considered by the Zulu commanders had been to fall upon the British from behind when they pushed into Zululand, cutting them off from their base. But the movement of the main Zulu army to the Ngwebeni valley showed that option to have been abandoned. So another construction should be placed on Matshana's mission. The British were subsequently to have few doubts that it was a deliberate ploy, devised by the Zulu high command, to split the British forces. *If so,* it was conducted to perfection.[76]

Thus there remains a degree of ambiguity.[77]

Laband expressed doubt about the Zulu commanders' efforts to negotiate: just as likely they met to plan the battle, knowing full well that

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72. J.P.C. Laband, *Rope of Sand The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1995), p 215.
73. Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, p 73; Laband, *Rope of Sand*, p 217.
74. Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, p 78; Laband, *Rope of Sand*, p 220.
75. Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, p 76.
76. Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, p 78.
77. Laband almost imperceptibly edges towards the intentional decoy in his books – see *Kingdom in Crisis*, pp 76, 78; and *Isandlwana* (1992), pp 25, 31, 35; then *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign* (1994), p xxxvii, and *Rope of Sand* (1995), pp 220-221 – giving the Zulu leaders greater benefit of sparse and sometimes doubtful evidence.

the enemy had divided his force. Nor should one make too much of the new moon. Whatever the custom about not fighting on the day, it did not inhibit Matshana in his fight that day – and at the coast another Zulu commander attacked the British Right Column without regard to it.[78]

Nor did Laband credit Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana with any display of military skill in the battle; they lost control of all but the army reserve at the outset of the battle, then looked on the battle, and urged the army forward only when the British were retiring.[79] "Zulu warriors were only prepared to obey their commanders if their inclinations coincided."[80]

After Laband, no writer could afford to ignore the Zulu side and fail to comment on Zulu operations.

The Zulu army, its commanders and its battles, were specially dealt with and were even the subject of several books by Ian Knight, probably the most prolific writer on the war. According to Knight little was known about Ntshingwayo's early career, and he owed his appointment as commander of the Zulu army to his political status.[81] Perhaps taking cognisance of prevailing political correctness, Knight later added that he was a natural leader and skilled tactician,[82] at best an attribution from inference. The Zulu army's taking position "so close [to the British camp] without being detected was perhaps their greatest master stroke of the war,"[83] which he attributes to Ntshingwayo.[84] On the other hand, "to suppose that he [Chelmsford] had been deliberately misled by a careful Zulu plan to decoy him away from Isandlwana credits the Zulu commanders with a better understanding of British practice than they at that time possessed".[85] Zulu victory owed to "a combination of skill, courage and good luck".[86]

The Zulu did not plan to attack on 22 January 1879, but on 23 January, because of the new moon,[87] although Knight allows that there

78. Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, pp 79-80; Laband, *Rope of Sand*, p 222.
79. Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, pp 81, 84; Laband, *Rope of Sand*, pp 203, 225.
80. Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, p 99.
81. I. Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders* (Arms & Armour, London, 1999), pp 78, 79.
82. Knight, *The National Army Museum Book*, p 83.
83. I. Knight, *Great Zulu Battles 1838-1906* (Cassell, London, 1998), p 111.
84. Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, p 81.
85. Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, p 80. See and compare with Knight, *Great Zulu Battles*, p 112; Knight, *The National Army Museum Book*, p 88.
86. Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, p 81.
87. I. Knight, *Brave Men's Blood The Epic of the Zulu War, 1879* (Greenhill, London, 1990), p 60; Knight, *Zulu*, p 71; Knight, *Great Zulu Battles*, p 112;

might have been a plan of a sort for battle on 22 January,[88] for "the success with which they [the regimental commanders] imposed some order on the initial chaos suggests that a contingency plan for attacking the camp was at least widely known among the *izinduna*. Indeed, the Zulu movements spotted by Pulleine ... that morning may have reflected their preparations".[89] But: "If Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana had conceived a plan to attack the camp, they had no chance to implement it. The best the senior commanders could do was to restrain those regiments [in reserve] ...," and "[t]his lack of discipline in the face of provocation cost the Zulu dear ..."[90] In other words, Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana lost control of the army. They became spectators to the battle. Ntshingwayo only recovered a measure of control when the attack of the chest stalled under British fire. The horns were about to complete the encirclement of the camp, and he ordered the *induna* Mkhosana to urge forward one of the regiments in front. The attack was resumed and succeeded, as it fell upon the retiring British.[91]

Knight got as much out of the sources as they could give, and yielded little to political correctness, striking a nice balance:

> Despite the spontaneous nature of the attack, Ntshingwayo must be considered the main architect of Zulu victory. Working within a traditional framework which his men instinctively understood, he had made the best possible use of his numbers and of the terrain, and had fully exploited the British weaknesses.[92]

The popular historian Stephen Taylor wrote in *Shaka's Children* (1994) that the two commanders owed their position to social status, not to military ability. He also said that the Zulu army lacked military experience at this stage. Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana lost control at the start. Citing Dabulamanzi's disastrous disobedience of orders not to invade Natal, Taylor stated that it typified the lack of discipline and command control in the Zulu leadership.[93]

Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, p 81; Knight, *Isandlwana*, p 51; Knight, *The National Army Museum Book*, p 92.

88. I. Knight, *The Anatomy of the Zulu Army from Shaka to Cetswhwayo 1818-1879* (Greenhill, London, 1995), p 188; Knight, *The National Army Museum Book*, p 93.
89. Knight, *Isandlwana*, p 55.
90. Knight, *The Anatomy of the Zulu Army*, p 188. See also: Knight, *Zulu*, p 72; Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, p 82; Knight, *Isandlwana*, p 55.
91. Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, p 83; Knight, *Isandlwana*, p 71.
92. Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, p 84.
93. Taylor, *Shaka's Children*, pp 218, 225, 228.

Ian Beckett, a professional military historian with a more detached interest, writing a Brassey's book on *Isandlwana* (2003), remained impervious to the post-revolutionary tide of South African political correctness. He saw only political significance in the appointment of Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana as commanders, discounted Matshana's role, rejected any premeditated plan to get Lord Chelmsford to divide his force and any serious attempt or intention to negotiate. He said the new moon was of little consequence, and indicated that the disposition of the Zulu army in battle was *ad hoc*, reflecting its aggressiveness rather than intelligent direction or effective control by its commanders.[94]

c. Ron Lock and the great Zulu victory

Following the political revolution in South Africa in 1994 and the intensely nationalistic Inkatha Freedom Party's nine-year hold on power in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, there was an inevitable shift in contemporary historiography. We have noted already the gestures towards the Zulu commanders on the part of Ian Knight and John Laband. Ron Lock gave Ntshingwayo near Napoleonic stature. The battle of Isandlwana should no longer be thought of primarily as a British defeat, but as a Zulu victory.

There are some good things to be said about Lock's work, notably his care with maps (which many writers have tended to neglect), and there are problems with it as well, but the matter of Zulu agency concerns us here. If the Locks of the future have their way, the Anglo-Zulu War and much more history await reconstruction.

"Isandlwana was indeed a victory for the Zulu generals," wrote Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, in a very fulsome foreword to Lock and Quantrill's *Zulu Victory* (2002):

> It is thus refreshing to note that the authors Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill have now, for the first time, described the battle of Isandlwana for what it is: a magnificent Zulu victory against an invading army with superior arms. On the basis of meticulous research, they have demonstrated that the British generals and their intelligence departments were simply no match for the commanders of the Zulu army and its people-driven intelligence of the day.

94. Beckett, *Isandlwana*, pp 56-58, 76.

> Undoubtedly, some may find the dispelling of long-held myths uncomfortable and even unpalatable, but that should not unduly concern those of us who believe that it is high time that the writing of African history sheds the legacy of colonial romanticism. While it might be a truism that the truth is the first casualty of war, history itself should not be debased by sacrificing the truth.[95]

Of course, Lord Chelmsford was decoyed,[96] although Matshana appears to have had little to do with any plan.[97] Ntshingwayo "necessarily" made two momentous decisions: to stop trying to negotiate and to fight on the day of the dead moon. At the same time he probably decided not to attack the British by the left but by the right.[98]

Far from losing control of the army, as other writers suggest, Lock tells us that at some point early in the battle (exactly when is not clear):

> Ntshingwayo gave the order and his warriors rose up ...
>
> All were eager in their anticipation of the fight to come and in their rivalry to be the first regiment into the British camp. The commanders watched and as Ntshingwayo gave the signal the army let out a great pent-up cry of "uSuthu". It was followed by an ominous silence that was maintained as the warriors jogged forward, spreading out into skirmishing order, creating the illusion of doubling and trebling their numbers, making their thousands appear as tens of thousands ...[99]

This is an example of Lock's licence, for he cites no source whatsoever, and also of his purple prose.

Ntshingwayo was in "no hurry" in the deployment of his forces, and flung the horns wide to deceive and confuse the British in the camp. It was "spectacularly efficient".[100] Once the battle had started, "the great generals of the Zulu army, led by Ntshingwayo," had little to do but watch it.[101] Indeed, Mavumengwana did not really figure in the operations at all.

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95. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p 14. Lock is responsible for the narrative history in the book, Quantrill for the section on the "cover-up".
96. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, pp 151, 158, 183. See also pp 146 and 148.
97. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, pp 131-132, 137.
98. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p 151.
99. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p 184.
100. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, pp 170 and 199, respectively.
101. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p 210.

Adrian Greaves in *Isandlwana* (2001), has the Zulu commanders on the hills just before the fighting began in earnest, reconnoitring the British camp and planning their attack. Next they were directing their "superbly disciplined" troops from a hilltop overlooking the battlefield. At one point they sent a chief (incorrectly identified) to rally a wavering *ibutho*, and this proved decisive.[102] This is also typical of the new writing, in which lesser heroes emerge from oral histories and throw themselves into the breach when the battle seems in doubt.[103]

Saul David, in *Zulu* (2004), refers to "Ntshingwayo's stunning victory".[104] "He owed his appointment to his deserved reputation as a military tactician" – as well as to his political standing with the king. He decoyed the British into a false position and moved in a leisurely manner to attack the force left at the camp. He and Mavumengwana took position on the hill and directed the battle, but in what manner is not stated.[105]

We may discount David's book as a potboiler and Greaves' as light-weight and muddled, but Lock's pretensions to being a serious historian require serious attention. Lock's methodology is unsound. He makes a Zulu general great by attribution *post hoc, propter hoc.* If something happened, then someone had made it happen, and in the case of the British defeat, the Zulu general had made it happen. Lock even has access to his thoughts:

> It was a glorious opportunity, one that no general worthy of the name would not seize, and no doubt Ntshingwayo recalled King Shaka's famous exclamation when he had outmanoeuvred the Ndwandwe army: "A partridge is about to settle in my hand."[106]

Thus the interstices of evidence may be filled by imagination. Lock also tends to accept oral tradition and old men's stories as though they were fresh and true. It is just the sort of thing Jackson deplored:

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102. A. Greaves, *Isandlwana* (Cassell, London, 2001), p 100; and A. Greaves and D. Rattray, *David Rattray's Guidebook to the Anglo-Zulu War Battlefields* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2003), p 48, respectively.
103. For the proliferation of these stories over time see Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece,* p 90; Furneaux, *The Zulu War*, p 87; Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, p 374; Jackson, "Isandhlwana", p 127; Knight, *Zulu*, p 85; *Isandlwana*, pp 71, 75; J. Laband and J. Mathews, *Isandlwana* (Centaur, Pietermaritzburg, 1992), p 49; Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, pp 84-85; Laband, *Rope of Sand*, pp 225-226; Greaves, *Isandlwana*, p 112; Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, pp 209-211 passim; David, *Zulu*, p 133.
104. David, *Zulu*, p 189.
105. David, *Zulu*, pp 108-109, 124, 137.
106. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, pp 151, 154.

> While some problems arise through quasi-history, and even fake documents, others are created by the invention of details to fill out popular historical accounts. This is such a common thing in popular history that it has come to be regarded as a legitimate practice in that kind of writing, but it does not help at all if one is really anxious to establish the truth.[107]

The British line

a. Battle of the maps

The British line, as constituted when all the units in camp and Durnford's column were committed to battle, has been the subject of much debate. In his March 1879 report on the court of enquiry's and other evidence to hand, Lieutenant James drew a map with a straightish line just in front of the camp, behind a water course, which angles back on the left and is anchored on Isandlwana Hill. Durnford's troops are a little off to the right and obviously being outflanked. There are two versions of the map in the Chelmsford Papers. One shows the Natal Native Contingent fleeing from the angle in the line, the other shows the Zulu breaking through there. Peter Quantrell, in *Zulu Victory*, maintains that there was one version, but French's tampering made two.[108]

James' map (see Map 1), seems to have influenced the maps of the battle in the books by Durnford,[109] Mackinnon and Shadbolt,[110] as well as Parr,[111] although they are not exactly alike. Since James' report was not published, it is not clear how it came to do so. Its conformance with the

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107. Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 2. For example, consider the Zulu on the hills north of the camp during the morning of the 22nd. Evidently all of the army was not waiting placidly in the Ngwebeni valley while negotiations were ostensibly being planned. Knight mentions it (*Isandlwana*, p 55) but does not speculate (p 16). Ron Lock says in *Zulu Victory*, pp 169-170, that Ntshingwayo was deploying earlier than hitherto has been supposed because his army had been discovered by vedettes from the camp and not by Durnford's troops scouting on the heights. Mike Snook says in *How Can Man Die Better* (pp 150-151) that the Zulu right horn had taken up a position in advance of the rest of the army preparatory to an attack on the 23rd. They began to move to attack prematurely on hearing the firing in Chelmsford's engagement to the southeast, and were recalled with some difficulty. Both authors pass off their hypotheses as though they were factual.
108. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, pp 256-261.
109. Durnford, *Isandhlwana*, p [24]. See also the Royal Engineers' *Journal* map reproduced in David, *Zulu*, inside cover.
110. J.P. Mackinnon and S. Shadbolt, *The South African Campaign, 1879* (Hayward, London, 1880), frontispiece.
111. Parr, *A Sketch*, pp 205, 209, 215.

simple sketches of the battlefield attributed to the survivors Captain Gardner[112] and Interpreter Brickhill[113] suggests a common origin.

There are two other early maps, one by the survivor Captain Essex[114] and the other by Captain Symons, 2/24th,[115] who was with Chelmsford's expedition. They differ in the placement of units, but both show the line as an arc rather than an oblique angle. The line is close to the camp on both, but Symons' map (see Map 2) also shows it behind a water course which has a fork about mid-front.

Norris-Newman also drew a map, which shows two water courses in front of the camp. He did not actually depict units, but noted on the map where some of them were. He places the defence of the camp at the nearer water course.[116]

The map (Plate IV) in the official *Narrative of Field Operations*, which appeared in 1881, showed a very different arrangement (see Map 3). The line was far from the camp, beyond the water course in front of it and behind another, larger water course to the east (the two water courses join to the southeast). It resembles an upside down, inverted L. The line is straight, but has a perpendicular angle at the centre, where the Natal Native Contingent is placed a little forward to it, rather like a cap. Durnford's troops are placed well forward of the line on the right, at the larger water course. There are large gaps between the units in the line.

The difference between the official map and the earlier ones is quite remarkable. The official map is based on one or possibly two careful topographical surveys, dated November 1879 (one by Captain Anstey, R.E., and Lieutenant Penrose, R.E., and the other by Lieutenant Mainwaring, 2/24th),[117] and presumably the placement of units

112. In the Chelmsford Papers (CP 8-39) – reproduced in Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 34.
113. Command 2252, pp 74/75.
114. In the Chelmsford Papers (CP 8-26), reproduced in Drooglever, *The Road to Isandhlwana*, p 215; Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 32.
115. Paton, Glennie & Symons (eds), *Historical records*, pp 344-345; reproduced in Beckett, *Isandlwana*, p 53.
116. Compare his earlier map in *The Times of Natal*, 7 February 1879, and the derivative ones in W.C. Holden, *British Rule in South Africa* (Wesleyan Conference Office, London, 1879); R.W. Leyland, *A Holiday in South Africa* (Samson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, London, 1882); and the reproduction in J. Young, *They Fell Like Stones* (Greenhill, London, 1991).
117. Anstey's map is in *Narrative*; Mainwaring's is in Command 2676, pp 70-71.

is based on the then relatively many reports to hand, including Lord Chelmsford's, and a reassessment of the earlier maps.

The official map dominated the literature for almost a century, although there was some changing of units in its adaptations. Morris used it (see Map 4). Clammer and Lloyd used it in the 1970s, and Adrian Greaves was still adapting it in 2001 and 2003. Only Coupland differed, favouring a curve in the line in the manner of Essex and Symons (see Map 5).[118]

It should be noted that all of these maps showed units put the Natal Native Contingent at the centre of the line, and all of the ones that showed the right angle put them there.

The official map created some problems. The *Narrative* states that Durnford was at the water course in front of the camp, but on the map he is at another one, fully 1 600 yards to the right front of the camp, twice as far out as on any previous map. This affected any description of events which would be based on or linked closely to the map. Henceforth Pulleine would always be straining to support Durnford on the right. The gap between Durnford's force and the infantry was not in dispute, but the manner in which the proximate units coped with it could never be satisfactorily resolved, not even theoretically. And in a battle of such short duration, could they really have moved back and forth over the distance in the various ways different authors have suggested within the limited time? Yet only Knight,[119] Beckett,[120] and Thompson[121] have questioned which water course Durnford's troops occupied.

Jackson tore up the official map. His reconstruction left the line well advanced, between the two water courses, but it was a gentle arc (see Map 6). He removed the Natal Native Contingent from the centre, but was not quite sure where to put it in 1965.[122]

All subsequent writers, except those mentioned above, fell in with Jackson's alteration – Emery, Barthorp, Drooglever, Lock, Beckett,

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118. Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece,* pp 80-81.
119. Knight, *Zulu*, p 83. Compare with Knight, *Isandlwana*, pp 61, 68; and Knight, *The National Army Museum Book*, p 97.
120. Beckett, *Isandlwana*, pp 56, 67, 71.
121. P.S. Thompson, *Black Soldiers of the Queen The Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War* (University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 2006), p 60.
122. Compare with the maps in Jackson, "Isandhlwana", pp 37, 119, 125; and in Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, pp 13, 30, 39.

Laband, Knight, David, Snook and Thompson – but, except for Snook, they did not accept his tentative proposal of an improvised company in the British line.[123] They all, except for Thompson, struggled to find new positions for the contingent. The difference between Jackson in 1965 and 2002 exemplifies the confusion. The map in his book (see Map 7) places the improvised company at the centre of the line on his map, but he is even more speculative about it in the text. He also put two companies of the contingent on its right.[124]

Since 1965, no two authors have agreed on the full placement of units in the line. There are no two maps of the battle completely alike.[125]

b. Destruction of the line

The British infantry was doomed because it was fighting on an extended front far from camp and was being encircled. Sooner or later it would be enveloped, but before this could happen, the British line collapsed. Was it overwhelmed by the Zulu rush? Was it broken through when the Natal Native Contingent at the centre fled? Was it turned on the right and rolled up? Or was it the result of a combination of these events?

Confusion surrounds the climax of the battle. Suddenly coherent defence ended and the battle degenerated into any number of small group combats, in which the British were destroyed.

It was obvious that the Zulu tactics of encirclement made an outflanking of the British linear defence inevitable. On the right Durnford withdrew his mounted men and tried to reform at the camp when he saw that the Zulu left horn was getting in his rear. There is general agreement on this point, but not on the others. When Durnford's men retired on the camp, they exposed the British line to the left. Durnford's withdrawal would have made the withdrawal of the rest of the forces in line necessary, and a

123. Jackson, "Isandhlwana", p 117; Snook, *How Can Man Die Better*, pp 190, 253.

124. Compare p 31 and the map on p 39.

125. It should be noted also that there is little agreement with the placement of the Zulu *amabutho* in the battle maps. Parr was the first to show any at all, and Coupland was the second, followed by Clammer and Lloyd. Morris (perhaps indebted to Chadwick), Jackson, Laband and Drooglever have devised their own maps, which are decidedly unalike in their details. Beckett follows Morris, yet Knight, without being derivative, seems to favour Drooglever. Greaves cannot agree with himself, while Barthorp and Gon, and surprisingly, Lock and David do not indicate the *amabutho* at all.

withdrawal took place, probably on Pulleine's command, but manifestly it fell into disorder and the line fell apart.

According to the official *Narrative*, the orderly withdrawal of the British infantry on the camp was disrupted by the flight of the companies of the Natal Native Contingent at the centre and angle of the British line. These companies fled in panic at the Zulu onslaught and exposed the flanks of the British companies on either side of the gap they left in the line, and the Zulu poured through it, enveloped the companies to the right and left and cut them down. The other companies that had been in the line, retired and fought in isolation.[126]

The early works, beginning with James' confidential report and proceeding through Durnford, Ashe and Wyatt-Edgell, Mackinnon and Shadbolt, Elliott, and the *Narrative*, as well as the later ones by French, Coupland and Morris, and derivatives by Furneaux, Clammer and Lloyd, all, while recognising other dangers to the line, ascribed the collapse in the first instance to the contingent's flight and Zulu breakthrough.

Then Jackson stated that there were no companies of the contingent at the angle, that, indeed, there was no angle. Jackson's removal of the Natal Native Contingent also meant that the breakthrough described in the *Narrative* never occurred.[127] Jackson's explanation of the collapse of the British line was that it, or parts of it, was overrun as it withdrew towards the camp.[128] This is substantially unchanged in his book forty-three years later.[129]

Every recent author seems to have his own version of what happened. Morris, Clammer, Lloyd, and Greaves[130] have followed the *Narrative*. Knight says that the British line retired, the contingent fled and created a gap, into which the Zulu penetrated, and the line was overrun.[131] Beckett allows for this possibility, but, with Barthorp, Edgerton (who is muddled) and Lock (who is not quite clear), says that the line was overrun when it was retiring.[132] Jackson, Laband, Taylor,

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126. Durnford, *Isandhlwana, 22nd January, 1879*, p 36.
127. Jackson, "Isandhlwana", p 122.
128. Jackson, "Isandhlwana", p 127.
129. Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, pp 35, 41, 46.
130. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, p 374; Clammer, *The Zulu War*, p 84; Lloyd, *The Zulu War*, p 79; Greaves, *Isandlwana*, p 116.
131. Compare with Knight, *Zulu*, pp 84-85; Knight, *The National Army Museum Book*, p 100.
132. Beckett, *Isandlwana*, pp 65, 72; Barthorp, *The Zulu War*, p 62; R.B. Edgerton, *Like Lions They Fought The Zulu War and the Last Black*

and David say that the line was outflanked on the right, retired and was overrun.[133] Thompson agrees and says that the gap occurred and the line was broken into just as it retired.[134] Curiously, Drooglever says it was flanked on the right but broken into on the left,[135] and Gon (who is also muddled) tends to agree.[136]

One would expect something definite in Lock's *Zulu Victory* (2002), but here the line fragments under the Zulu onslaught just after the bugle sounds retreat. There is nothing at all on the contingent breaking. Lock also has the Zulu breaking in on the left.[137]

Ian Beckett, the most judicious of recent writers, in *Isandlwana* (2003), states that the line was overextended and disintegrated. He says that the flight of the contingent probably was a result and not a cause of Pulleine's retirement, but he is not clear on the placement of the contingent unit(s) in question in the line.[138]

Mike Snook's *How Can Man Die Better: The Secrets of Isandlwana Revealed* (2005) is a fanciful work, in which the British line does not break at all. The company on the right flank is destroyed in its hopelessly exposed position, but the other companies fall back in good order to and through the camp (where another company becomes exposed and is destroyed) and make last stands in squares or clusters at the southern end of Isandlwana.[139]

One factor inhibiting an accurate placement of units in the line is the difficulty all of the writers have with the black troops on the British side. Most of them are really interested in the British troops anyway.

Empire in South Africa (Free Press, New York, 1988), p 87; Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, pp 209, 211.

133. Jackson, "Isandhlwana", p 127; Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, pp 41, 46. Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, pp 84-85; Laband, *Rope of Sand*, p 225; Laband & Mathews, *Isandlwana*, p 47; Taylor, *Shaka's Children*, p 222; David, *Zulu*, pp 137, 139.
134. Thompson, *Black Soldiers of the Queen*, pp 55-56.
135. Drooglever, *The Road to Isandhlwana*, pp 222, 226, 228.
136. Gon, *The Road to Isandlwana*, pp 235-238.
137. Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, pp 206-211.
138. Beckett, *Isandlwana*, pp 72-74.
139. Snook, *How Can Man Die Better*, from p 217. Snook rejects contemporary survivors' accounts of the battle; juggles the numbers, location, and identities of the dead found on the battlefield, and trusts largely to professional military intuition (he is a Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Regiment of Wales) and inference in his reconstruction of the last phase of the battle.

The Natal Native Contingent, which made up over half of the invading British army and just under that in the battle, has always been given bit parts in the drama. The placement of the companies of the 3rd Regiment of the Natal Native Contingent, rather than Durnford's mounted troops, present the main problem. Jackson wrote them out of the climactic scene. Later, he, Knight, and Lock worked them back in, but none of the authors has been able to do so with certainty.[140] Thompson, who focuses on the contingent in his *Black Soldiers of the Queen* (2006) puts them squarely back into line – at the centre and on the flanks – and accounts for every unit throughout the battle.[141]

c. The ammunition crisis

One factor in the collapse of organised resistance that had to be reckoned with was whether or not the British units ran out of ammunition, or ran so low that the slackening fire enabled the Zulu to charge. When the British infantry fell back on the camp, they could not maintain the same steady fire as when they had been stationary, and the Zulu rushed forward. As Beckett points out: "Once the line collapsed ... so would have the organisation of the ammunition supply to the regulars."[142]

Captain Essex told the court of enquiry that the companies of the 1/24th first engaged on the left, ran low on ammunition, but he organised their resupply at the camp.[143] Lieutenant James remarks that only Durnford's troops ran out of ammunition,[144] as did Edward Durnford and Frances Colenso.[145] Charles Norris-Newman, in his *In Zululand with the*

140. Snook denies that any companies of the contingent were in the line, but then allows that small parties of riflemen might have fitted into it at intervals (see *How Can Man Die Better*, pp 188, 214-215). Adrian Greaves simply wrote the NNC out of the battle in *David Rattray's Guidebook to the Anglo-Zulu War Battlefields.*

141. Thompson, *Black Soldiers of the Queen*, pp 52-58, and notes on pp 60-62. Unfortunately, he does not give the positions of the other imperial and colonial units in similar detail. Ingrid Machin deals briefly with the contingent at Isandlwana in *Antbears and Targets for Zulu Assegais The Levying of Forced African Labour and Military Service by the Colonial State of Natal* (Howick, Brevitas, 2002), pp 209-211, relying on the *Narrative*; Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*; Knight, *Zulu*.

142. Beckett, *Isandlwana*, p 70.

143. War Office Records Group 33/34, p 30.

144. James, "The Isandlana Disaster", p 4.

145. Colenso & Durnford, *History of the Zulu War*, pp 285, 295. Colenso suggested (pp 294-295) that if there was no immediate and general shortage of ammunition in the line, then there would have been soon, for the reserve ammunition was said to be packed on wagons filled with stores!

British Throughout the War of 1979, referred to them as well, but vaguely mentioned two companies on the hill which ran out of ammunition and were destroyed.[146] Mackinnon and Shadbolt, Parr, and Elliott indicate that there was a problem with distribution, but that it was overcome by improvisation (Essex's?) at the camp.[147] French stuck to the thesis that the shortage was overcome.[148] Coupland wrote that the distribution was not organised, but that only Durnford's troops ran low.[149]

Then, in 1892, William Penn Symons wrote in *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment* that failure of the ammunition supply was a cause of defeat. When firing ceased, the Zulu attacked.[150] In 1937 C.T. Atkinson, in *The South Wales Borderers 24th Foot 1689-1937*, repeated that the failure of ammunition supply was a cause of defeat.[151] John Wesley Shepstone, in the reminiscence in Hattersley's *Later Annals of Natal* (1938), said that the Zulu chiefs told him that they did not attack as long as British ammunition lasted, but when it failed they did so.[152]

In 1963 Rupert Furneaux wrote in *The Zulu War: Isandhlwana and Rorke's Drift* that the ammunition ran out before the contingent fled and the line retired, and the infantry then fought with bayonets.[153]

Donald Morris, in *The Washing of the Spears* (1965), states that the Natal Native Contingent at the centre of the line and Durnford's mounted troops ran out of ammunition and the British infantry ran low, because of the difficulty with opening ammunition boxes in the camp and the time taken to get the ammunition out to the firing line far in front of the camp. This was echoed by Clammer and Lloyd (1973).[154]

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146. Norris-Newman, *In Zululand with the British*, pp 63, 83.
147. Mackinnon & Shadbolt, *The South African Campaign*, pp 12, 82; Parr, *A Sketch*, pp 212-213; Elliott, *The Victoria Cross*, p 64.
148. French, *Lord Chelmsford*, p 150.
149. Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece,* pp 87, 89.
150. Paton, Glennie & Symons (eds), *Historical records*, p 244.
151. Atkinson, *The South Wales Borderers*, p 345.
152. Hattersley, *Later Annals of Natal*, p 161.
153. Furneaux, *The Zulu War*, p 87. Furneaux's imagination evidently got the better of him – he was also the first writer to mention the partial solar eclipse in the afternoon, saying that it plunged the battlefield into darkness for three hours (p 79); however, he returned to conventional interpretation by stating that the flight of the contingent and the Zulu breakthrough were decisive (p 88). The eclipse is mentioned by many subsequent writers, usually for dramatic effect. Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 47; and Beckett, *Isandlwana*, p 70, rightly regard it as a non-event so far as the battle is concerned.
154. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, p 372; Clammer, *The Zulu War*, p 83; Lloyd, *The Zulu War*, pp 78-79.

Jackson insisted that there was no reliable evidence that the British infantry ran out of ammunition – only that Durnford's mounted troops ran low.[155] His view has prevailed since.[156]

Conclusion: The Want of Historical Methodology

The narration of the battle has obviously changed over 125 years. It began with a painful analysis of the British defeat and has come to an imaginative synthesis of Zulu victory. Initially it was British error that accounted for the result, now it is Zulu genius. Meanwhile the battle has been taken apart and put back together again so many times and in so many ways that there is less clarity than before about what happened. So the battle continues, and the literature differs in matters of interpretation, as well as in detail. Will there ever be an authoritative, if not a definitive, account of the battle?

Jackson, like Knight earlier, writes of a jigsaw puzzle:

> Isandlwana is a jigsaw puzzle of which most of the pieces are missing. There are still enough to make sense of the picture and to fill in some parts in great detail, but many of the surviving pieces have been worn out of shape by overhandling or by being forced into places where they do not fit. Some sections, wrongly reconstructed with new pieces, have been accepted as original.[157]

Much of the difficulty with reconstructing the Battle of Isandlwana – to the extent that it can be reconstructed from the available sources – lies with the writers who have their own agendas. Only a few are professional historians. Scarcely a dozen of the writers have used footnotes or endnotes, and of these only Jackson, Laband and Thompson have done so adequately and properly! The amateurs, for the most part, have been interested principally in a dramatic story line. In the course of

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155. Jackson, "Isandhlwana", p 123; Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, pp 38-40 (also see appendix 8). Durnford's troops had left camp before their wagons arrived, and therefore, with the exception of those who escorted the train, they did not know where to get their ammunition when they needed it. This was serious, but not decisive for the withdrawals on the left and the right.
156. See especially: Beckett, *Isandlwana*, chapter 5; Laband & Mathews, *Isandlwana*, p 50; Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, appendix C; Snook, *How Can Man Die Better*, pp 208-211.
157. Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p 5. Snook also uses the metaphor in *How Can Man Die Better*, p 12.

telling and retelling it, strange subplots and imaginative embellishments have appeared.

Is an authoritative history of the battle even possible? It is difficult to imagine what it would be like. It would have to resist political correctness. The synthesis would have to be transparent, and above all, unsparing and precise in the citation of sources, which has not been the case in a single work by a popular writer. It would have to stick to hard facts. Later reminiscences and oral evidence should be duly noted, and, with a very few exceptions, be relegated to an appendix of interesting curiosities.[158]

In short, the authoritative study will require the simple and sustained application of rigorous historical methodology. There must be no preconceived framework into which facts (and factoids) are fitted or not, depending upon convenience or taste. The determination of facts must follow the rules of probability. Interpretation must follow fact. It is work for a professional historian,[159] who can contextualise the war and battle and will take all the evidence in hand and apply to the documents the rules of internal and external analysis.

Popular historians will protest their knowledge and integrity, and a few will do so on solid ground. They will also argue that the constraints of commercial publishing preclude precious technical operations which would have the effect of "spoiling" history for mass consumption. They may have a point, for no academic press is likely to publish an authoritative history, in large part because the topic is "military" and, quite apart from that, there are the constraints of political correctness.

Addendum: Sources (in chronological order)

James, W.H., "The Isandlana Disaster", 21 March 1879, *in* War Office Record Group 33/34.

158. Recent sponsored archaeological "digs" of the battlefield have not (yet) produced sufficient evidence to alter the interpretations based on the written evidence substantially.

159. By "professional historian" I mean one who by training, vocation and experience has acquired a reputation which depends in the profession largely on research and publications which have been creditably reviewed by peers. In this case, the professional historian would have to be a military historian with a good working-knowledge of nineteenth-century warfare. A desideratum would be adequate maps – and the narrative must correspond to maps so that all movements and units are accounted for.

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Abstract

The Battle of Isandlwana was a dramatic turning-point in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, and has become an icon of South African heritage because of the crushing defeat inflicted on the invading imperial British army by the indigenous Zulu one. In the historical literature of the war, the official British account of the battle held sway till 1965. In that year

Donald Morris' *Washing of the Spears* and the movie *Zulu* awakened a popular interest in the war which has endured to this day. More important for the battle itself, David Jackson's *Isandlwana 1879 - The Sources Re-examined* took apart the official account and reassembled the known facts in new account. Thanks largely to Morris, since 1965 the war has averaged a new book a year, most of them (and several exclusively) dealing with Isandlwana. Thanks to Jackson, a revolution has taken place in the interpretation of the battle, sustained by new sources and perspectives, most notably ones which focus on the Zulu victory, rather than the British defeat. The great majority of the writers are popular (and amateur) historians. Unfortunately their knowledge of historical method varies greatly and their handling of source material often is weak. As a consequence of this, we are still without a comprehensive and reliable account of the battle.

Opsomming

Die Vele Slae van Isandlwana:
'n Transformasie in Historiografie

Die Slag van Isandlwana was 'n dramatiese keerpunt in die Anglo-Zulu-oorlog van 1879. As gevolg van die verpletterende neerlaag wat die invallende imperiale Britse weermag daar onder die plaaslike Zululeër gely het, het die slag 'n ikoon van die Suid-Afrikaanse erfenis geword. In geskiedkundige literatuur oor die oorlog, het die amptelike Britse weergawe van die slag tot 1965 die botoon gevoer. In dié jaar het Donald Morris se publikasie *Washing of the Spears*, asook die rolprent *Zulu* openbare belangstelling in die oorlog aangewakker wat tot vandag toe voortduur. Van meer belang vir die slag self, was David Jackson se publikasie *Isandlwana 1879 - The Sources Re-examined*. Dit het die amptelike weergawe van die stryd ontleed en die bekende feite in 'n nuwe vorm hersaamgestel. Veral danksy Morris, het die oorlog sedert 1965 gemiddeld tot die verskyning van 'n boek per jaar aanleiding gegee. Die meeste hiervan het aandag aan Isandlwana gegee – sommige het dit selfs as eksklusiewe onderwerp behandel. Jackson het daarvoor gesorg dat 'n rewolusie in die vertolking van die slag plaasgevind het. Dit is onderhou deur nuwe bronne en perspektiewe, veral dié wat eerder op die Zulu-oorwinning as die Britse neerlaag fokus. Die grootste meerderheid van die skrywers hiervan is populêre (en amateur) historici. Ongelukkig wissel hulle kennis van historiese metodologie en dikwels benut hulle die beskikbare bronne op onoordeelkundige wyses. As gevolg hiervan beskik ons nog steeds nie oor 'n omvattende en betroubare weergawe van die slag nie.

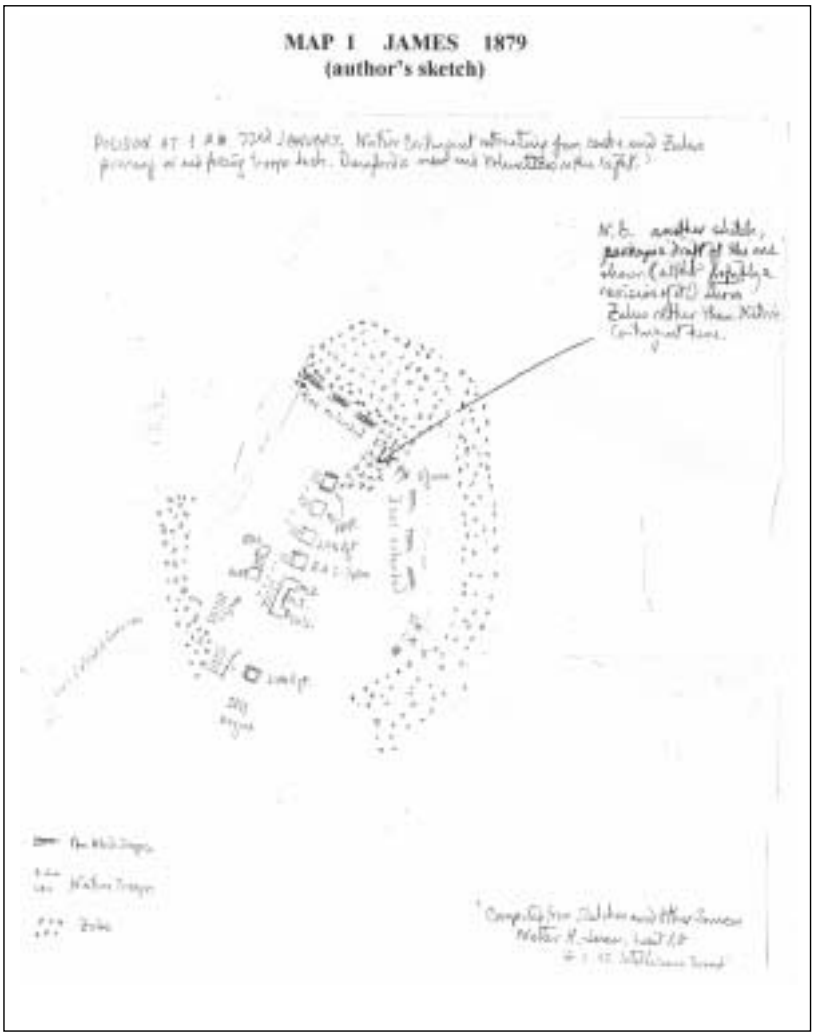
Key words

Anglo-Zulu War; Cetshwayo; Chelmsford; Durnford; Isandlwana; Natal; Zulu; Zululand; Zulu War.

Sleutelwoorde

Anglo-Zulu-oorlog; Cetshwayo; Chelmsford; Durnford; Isandlwana; Natal; Zulu; Zululand; Zulu-oorlog.

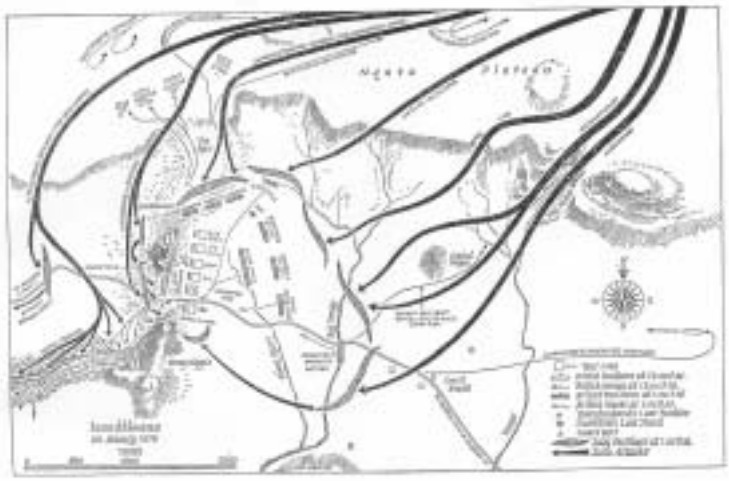
MAP 1 JAMES 1879
(author's sketch)



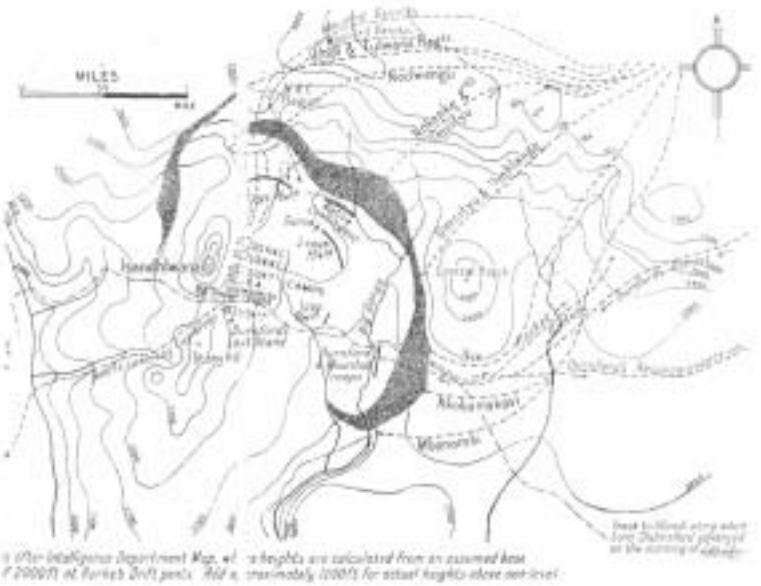
MAP 2 SYMONS 1879


MAP 3 NARRATIVE 1881
MILITARY SURVEY
of the
BATTLE-FIELD OF ISANDHLWANA

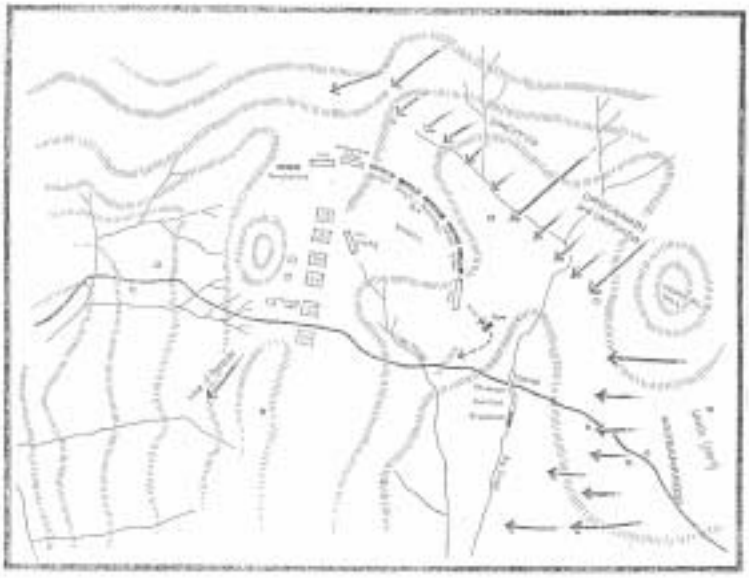
MAP 4 MORRIS 1965



MAP 5 COUPLAND 1949



MAP 6 JACKSON 1965



MAP 7 JACKSON 2002