

**Major the Hon. Gerald French, *Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War***

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The Anglo Zulu War was a controversial war. British forces invaded Zululand in January 1879 in an ill disguised rush for territorial aggrandisement. Three columns converged on Ulundi, the capital of Zulu king, Cetshwayo ka Mpande. All seemed to be going well as the columns, comprising imperial and colonial units, crossed the Thukela River. The central column halted at Isandlwana, while a reconnaissance in force went ahead to reconnoitre and locate the main Zulu army. However, executing a masterly outflanking manoeuvre and maximising strategic surprise, a Zulu impi of 24 000 warriors under the dual command of iNkosi Ntshingwayo ka Mahole Khoza and iNkosi Mavumengwana ka Ndlela Ntuli, struck the British camp beneath Isandlwana hill on 22 January.<sup>1</sup> Surprised and caught in the open, the British camp was overrun and the troops given no quarter. The battle, a shattering blow to British arms and imperial pride, was one of few reverses suffered by British forces in the that century and the most severe experienced at the hands of a technologically inferior African force equipped chiefly with the short stabbing assegai.

Recrimination followed immediately and as colonial Natal in panic braced itself for a general Zulu invasion, journalists and politicians in Pietermaritzburg and back in London sought the cause of the disaster and clamoured for a scapegoat. Attention turned immediately to the military commander, Lieutenant General Lord Chelmsford. Born Frederic Thesiger in 1827, Chelmsford was the son of a jurist turned politician who was raised to the peerage in 1858. Thesiger's family connections were colourful, but not impeccable. A great uncle was naval aide de camp to Nelson during the Battle of Copenhagen (1801); a brother in law commanded the British forces during the Siege of Lucknow (1857), and his father served briefly in Derby's cabinet as Lord Chancellor. His family connections meant the young Thesiger was accepted into Eton, but did not immediately secure him the much sought after breastplate in the Grenadier Guards. He purchased a commission in the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Laband, *Zulu Warriors: The Battle for the South African Frontier* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2014), pp 228 231.

Rifle Brigade and, transferring to the Guards, a long career in the military followed. He served in Ireland, first as aide de camp to the Lord Lieutenant and then to the command in chief, then in the Crimea, and then India, where he experienced the Lucknow Rebellion and most importantly, met Sir Bartle Frere, who was then the governor of Bombay. Thesiger was part of the expedition to Abyssinia in 1868 and after a term as adjutant general in the East Indies, he returned to Britain in 1874 and three years later was appointed, at the request of the high commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, to the command of Imperial forces in South Africa. A lieutenant general now, Thesiger brought the Ninth Cape Xhosa War (1878) to a conclusion and commanded the British forces at the beginning of the Anglo Zulu campaign (1879), a war contrived by Frere, his patron and mentor.

Thesiger, who inherited his father's title in October 1878, was in many ways a typical imperial soldier with reasonable colonial campaigning behind him. But crucially, he lacked command experience. Furthermore, he was haughty and arrogant and disparaged the fighting capabilities of the Xhosa, who had resorted to a guerrilla campaign during the Ninth Cape Frontier War. He also thought very little of other African armies, recklessly underestimating the strategic acumen, tactical nous and fighting ability of the Zulu. Perhaps as many as 30 000 shoulder arms were imported between 1875 and 1879, but these were not used in the conflict of 1879. The Zulu king, fearing the inevitable impact of technological change, at first resisted the introduction of European weaponry and he and other Zulu traditionalists continued to favour the old, trusted, short stabbing assegai and the tactics of frontal assault that would bring the *impis* close enough to their opponents to use rapid, shock action. The asymmetry of the coming battles, which would again array a traditional African military system against the armed forces of an industrialised European state, imbued confidence and encouraged complacency, despite the warnings Chelmsford received from General Sir John Michel and others who had real colonial campaigning experience in southern Africa (ch 1).

This book, written so "that justice may *at last* be done to Lord Chelmsford's memory" (p x, emphasis original), predictably places Chelmsford at the centre of the story. The book commences with a chapter that sketches Chelmsford's background and family connections and his previous military service. This provides the necessary stage for the succeeding chapters that address the battles of the Anglo Zulu War in painstaking detail. These chapters take the reader chronologically from London and Cape Town in late 1878, to Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and then, with the three columns of Chelmsford's invasion force, across the Tugela River on 11 January 1879 and on to the defeat of the central column at Isandlwana on 22 January and the investment of the southern column at Eshowe. Colonial commanders, often hamstrung by poor intelligence, tended to underestimate or exaggerate enemy strengths and the problems of terrain. Almost invariably, colonial campaigns began with a small reverse while colonial forces adapted to local circumstances and, with improving intelligence, adjusted strategy and tactics and brought the weight of

technology to bear.<sup>2</sup> The British Army suffered several reverses but generally excelled at colonial warfare. The scale of the disaster at Isandlwana and the hysteria in Natal and war mongering in Britain placed the disaster at Isandlwana at another level (chapter 10).

London reacted quickly. Sir Garnet Wolseley, with large reinforcements, left for Natal to take command of the operations and bring the war to a speedy and successful conclusion. Chelmsford, while reorganising his forces in Natal for a second invasion, was immediately placed in the dock and his actions and conduct during the campaign were investigated and publicly criticised. Politicians and pressmen sought the existence of "a fatal conjunction of circumstances; a devil's brew of incompetence, unpreparedness, mistaken and inappropriate tactics, a brash understanding of the enemy, a difficult terrain, raw recruits, treacherous opponents, diplomatic hindrance and bone headed leadership".<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, following the action at Rorke's Drift which was used to salvage some British honour, Chelmsford received news that he was to be replaced by Wolseley, a veteran colonial campaigner. Chelmsford immediately ordered a general advance into Zululand and before Wolseley reached the battlefield, the main encounter had been fought at Ulundi and the war had effectively ended. Chelmsford then left for England to face growing criticism of his leadership and command in a war conducted against the wishes of London and largely without its knowledge. Queen Victoria remained a stout supporter of Chelmsford, who was awarded a GCB in August 1879. A succession of other honours and posts followed at her behest. Chelmsford died in 1905 at the age of 81.

The bitter disagreement between Chelmsford's adherents and those against them did not subside. It culminated in 1938 with a very critical book produced by two journalists. The following year, as a riposte and to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the war, Major Gerald French produced this defence of Chelmsford.<sup>4</sup> The men associated with it were all connected to Chelmsford and keen to save his reputation. General Sir Bindon Blood (1842-1940), who had served in India under Chelmsford and was "a friend and a devoted admirer of Lord Chelmsford", wrote the foreword. Blood endorsed it as a "full account - of the occurrences in regard to which he was unjustly accused" (p vii). French, in turn, had seen service during the Zulu Rebellion of 1906 and was the son of another much criticised general, Field Marshal Lord French, the first commander of the British Expeditionary Force in France during the first part of the First World War. Gerald French meticulously collected letters and maps and personal accounts, investigated them and used these to show "that Lord Chelmsford was not really to be blamed in any way" (p viii). As a result, the book at times takes the form of a source publication.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, H. Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Routledge, London and New York, 1993), pp 76-88.

<sup>3</sup> D. Judd, *Someone has Blundered; Calamities of the British Army in the Victorian Age* (Arthur Barker, London, 1973), p xx.

<sup>4</sup> Major the Hon. Gerald French, *Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War* (The Bodley Head, London, 1939).

## Book Reviews

This is a fascinating story dealing with a controversial "foreign campaign" and postwar reputations, and Pen & Sword are commended for making this rare book available once again. It is finely reproduced and makes a handsome volume. However, it must be said that the book would have benefited greatly from a sound introduction presenting the historiography, and particularly the excellent work published recently by John Laband, and placing this book in its historical context. Notwithstanding, it makes a worthy addition to the bookshelf, although one is reminded yet again that "every history can only present a partial reconstruction of the past".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> P. Safi, "An Interview with Prof Georg G. Iggers: Every History can only Present a Partial Reconstruction of the Past", *Kilavuz*, 52, December 2014, pp 36-49.