

THE GLENELG-D'URBAN DISPUTE

In the course of collecting material for my doctorate thesis* in London in 1915, I came across a volume in the Public Record Office which contained a number of unsigned and unaddressed copies of letters, sharply critical of Sir Benjamin D'Urban's frontier policy. I laid my notes on these papers aside, since being anonymous, they were of doubtful evidential value.

When, however, I studied Lord Glenelg's famous (or notorious) despatch to Sir Benjamin dated December 26th, 1835, I came across a reference to these papers which showed that they were very important in their impact on events.

I therefore set about the task of identifying, as far as possible, the authors of these letters. As far as I know this small fragment of research has not been attempted by others.

The despatch of December 26th stated in very clear terms that Lord Glenelg relied very largely on these letters as justification for reversing Sir Benjamin's policy towards the Kaffir tribes. (In those days the word "Kaffir" was universally employed, and as I shall be giving verbatim quotations, I will not change the wording of the originals.)

This article is confined to the correspondence between Glenelg and D'Urban, and to the "confidential correspondence" which gave rise to it. It does not enter into the questions of frontier policy involved. (The references to the originals are those of the Public Record Office, Chancery Lane, London. The despatch of 26th January appears in C.O./49/26.)

In this despatch the Colonial Secretary replies to D'Urban's despatch of 19th June, 1835. He commends the Governor's vigour and decision and conveys His Majesty's high gratification at the courage, discipline and cheerful endurance of fatigue and privations manifested by the troops.

He regrets, however, that the Governor's manifold duties caused by the war have prevented him from giving a clear and comprehensive explanation of the causes which provoked the aggression of the Kaffirs. He had put off consideration of the matter as long as possible but was now forced ". . . in the deficiency of official intelligence to draw many conclusions from less authentic sources of information".

He had thus studied a large mass of documents of which some were accessible to the public while ". . . others have been brought under my consideration by the voluntary zeal of various individuals, who from many different motives interest themselves in this discussion. These researches have afforded me some advantages for forming a correct conclusion as to the causes and probable effects of the war, which I could not have found in the perusal of any Reports however minute and elaborate drawn up by any single writer, even though possessed of all the means of knowledge so peculiarly at your command".

* "The Prelude to the Great Trek". Unpublished, with the permission of the University of London, on account of the wartime paper shortage. It was accepted in full compliance with the requirements for the degree of D.Sc. (Econ.) and the Hutchinson Medal for research.

He continues: "The disadvantage of reposing my judgment on materials of this nature is too manifest to require any particular statement. While many facts are demonstrated to my own conviction, and to that of my colleagues so completely as to exclude all reasonable doubt, I am compelled to state them without the possibility of adducing the proofs by which they are supported. Those proofs could not be intelligently arranged within the compass of a Despatch, nor indeed within that of a considerable volume. To some of them I should be extremely reluctant to make a more particular reference, because it would involve the necessity of discussing the credibility of the different witnesses, and would lead me into personal topics totally unbecoming the present occasion".

He must therefore on his own responsibility state the conclusions to which he has come but he has had the whole series of documents, printed and written, carefully recorded in his office ". . . *for my acquittal hereafter*" (Italics added)

Theal states that the tenour of his despatch was known to members of Dr. Philip's party in South Africa even before the document itself reached the country, and that it was published in England shortly after it was written¹.

This unusual admission by a minister that he had been guided by back-stair influence led to a sharp duel between the two persons concerned. It also led to a curious retraction by Lord Glenelg of the reasons advanced in such specific terms in his original despatch, and to the dismissal by him of Sir Benjamin D'Urban as Governor.

The volume which Glenelg had preserved ". . . *for my acquittal hereafter*" is listed as C.O./48/165 in the Public Record Office. Before I deal with this volume the correspondence about it between the Governor and the Secretary of State calls for attention.

Sir Benjamin replied on June, 9th 1836². With studied politeness to his superior, but in trenchant terms, and with no attempt to pull his punches, the Governor writes: ". . . I must premise that your Lordship appears to have overlooked or disregarded some essential statements in my despatches, and to have withheld your belief from others and while you have put implicit faith in anonymous information, "drawn" as your Lordship avers "from the gratuitous communications of people zealous to afford it" but whose names you do not think proper to disclose from which your Lordship has deduced your opinions."

He will not enquire into the source of the information but will only remark that his Lordship's views, assumptions, arguments and inferences are the same as those which appeared last year in a Colonial Newspaper, the organ of Dr. Philip. to the influence of which publication a great deal of the evil has befallen the Colony is due. The Governor expressed his conviction that this support to the cause of the enemy, having been communicated to savage chiefs, caused additional resistance on their part. He continues: "Your Lordship asserts

1. *History of S.A. since 1795*, Vol. II, p. 143.
2. C.O./48/167.

and maintains in substance that the Caffres “(sic)” had ample justification in the conduct pursued to them by the Colonists through a long series of years of the war into which they entered with such fatal imprudence at the close of the year 1834; that the murders, and fires, and pillage, and devastation and ruin which overspread the border districts of the Colony in consequence, were but the results of a just though impotent endeavour on their part to resent and avenge a right which wanted nothing to its completeness except the power to render their exertion of it more effectual and that they were justified in hazarding the experiment, however hopeless, by extorting by force the redress which they could not otherwise expect to attain.

“From this train of your Lordship’s impressions, I am naturally led to account for the evident inclination of your Lordship’s mind, to lavish all sympathy upon the enemy in the late war, and to consign H.M.’s unfortunate subjects to reprobation, as well as to destruction and destitution. These are indeed the tends of the party whose “zealous and gratuitous communications” appear to have guided your Lordship’s judgment . . .”

He refers him to Despatches No. 29 and 30, and continues: “Whatever the completion of the experiment of invasion might have been, incomplete as your Lordship seems to consider it, it must, I think be admitted, from all these documents, to have been as extensive, as desolating and as bloody a one as the advocates of the Caffre cause could well have desired . . .”

He doubts whether he can supply Glenelg with any information not already in the Colonial Office except as far as his opinion goes “which it appears to me next to useless to offer, since I have abundant proof before me that your Lordship allows no weight to it, and since you even question the truth of my direct assertions, when they are opposed to your private information.”

Nonetheless he gives his opinion, such as it is, and supports it by documents which in regard of an unbiased judgment will, he thinks, be conclusive.

The Governor then goes into a long dissertation on the cause of the war of 1834, which goes beyond the purpose of the article. (Nearly eleven months elapsed before Lord Glenelg replied^s.) Lord Glenelg’s reaction to D’Urban’s pointed criticism on his reliance on anonymous sources of information is truly remarkable. He claims that the information was not anonymous, as he knew where it came from. He admits that on one occasion he had appealed to Dr. Philip and that he had received information from certain missionary Societies and several communications from Dr. Philip to private friends and to the London Missionary Society.

Then follows his remarkable recantation. Disregarding all that he had written on December 26th. 1835 and his reference to “my acquittal hereafter” he writes: “After reading the papers thus submitted to me I deliberately laid them aside as documents on which it was not fit

3. Glenelg to D’Urban, May 1st 1837.

that the measures of His Majesty's Government should to any extent be founded; yet, having so read them, I thought it right to make a general allusion to that circumstances in my despatch of the 26th December."

As if this reversal of his own confession relieves him of further responsibility he proceeds to dismiss the Governor. He notes that in the Governor's despatch of 9th June there are several passages which involve imputations on him which carry their own refutation. He regrets that deliberation of six months had not induced the Governor to withdraw them. He had hoped that he could enjoy the Governor's assistance on account of the honour in which he held the Governor's name and services. But the Governor has left him no alternative and His Majesty has been pleased to approve the Secretary's request to dispense with D'Urban's services as Governor.

D'Urban's reply closed this acrimonious correspondence. In his reply Lord Glenelg had yielded much ground on the facts in dispute and D'Urban replied: "It is a satisfaction to me to know that the vindication is essentially complete, and cannot be refuted although I am informed by your Lordship's despatch that I am doomed to a heavy penalty for having written it."

He continues by saying that by imputations in his Lordship's despatch ". . . I, and those justly entitled to my protection have been held up to the execration of the world, while all sympathy has been denied to the cruel sufferings of the colonists — they were published without awaiting any answer from those whom they so extremely censured — they prejudged us without hearing our defence — and condemned us — so to say without conviction".

When it became clear to me that Glenelg's "Confidential Information" had exercised a material influence on the course of events, I set about the task of identifying the authors of the letters contained in the volume CO/48/165. In this task I was materially assisted by the permission I had obtained from the London Missionary Society to study their records.

Apart from certain office papers, the volume contains copies of 37 letters. The names and addresses of the writers and addressees, with a few exceptions, do not appear in the copies. A number of them, including all the most important bear indisputable internal evidence of the identity of the writers. I found some of the originals in the Archives of the London Missionary Society. Ten were without any doubt written by Dr. Philip.⁴ Five other were probably from his pen. Four were written by the missionaries James Read and three others were probably also from his pen. One each can be traced to the following: John Ross, James Clarke and F. Kayser (missionaries); the astronomer Sir John Herschel, Dr. A. G. Campbell, a Grahamstown physician, and the Xhosa convert and interpreter Jan Tshatshu. One letter, dated 2.11.33, was

4. Those dated Jan. 23, Feb. 17, May 1, 23 and 26, June 4, 20 and 29, and July 11 and 18 — all 1835.

written by James Clark to the dictation of the Chief Makomo. Some of these were sent to London by Philip, in support of his views.

All the most important letters were written by Dr. Philip, who indubitably exercised the greatest influence on the origins of the Glenelg-D'Urban controversy and in the reversal by the former of D'Urban's frontier policy.

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