

## Popularising History

*The Sun Turned Black: Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift—1879.*

by Ian Knight

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One hundred and sixteen years later, the Anglo - Zulu War continues to attract enormous attention. Recent press reports have suggested that its tourist potential is set to expand<sup>1</sup> and plans were being prepared to cultivate this interest<sup>2</sup>.

It is this which provides a ready 'popular' market for publications about the War and since the latter 1980s, Ian Knight has contributed a considerable number of books to this particular market<sup>3</sup>. His most recent publication *The Sun Turned Black: Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift—1879* is a reworking of his *Zulu, Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, 22-23 January 1879*, which appeared in 1992. This edition was in a folio format with numerous illustrations, an aspect which characterizes Knight's books. *The Sun Turned Black* does not have these features, and is presumably an attempt to make the book more affordable.

As is clear from the title, the book concerns the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, which occurred between 22 and 23 January 1879. In this sense *The Sun Turned Black* is firmly placed within the 'popular' framework of understanding the War.

'Popular' literature about the War, has its origins in the 1960s when the War of 1879 was once more brought to the fore by the film *Zulu* (1964) and Donald Morris' *The Washing of the Spears* (1965). Ian Knight readily

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<sup>1</sup> See for example 'On the threshold of a dream' in *The Sunday Tribune* 24 July 1994.

<sup>2</sup> See for example 'Strategic plan for Zululand tourism has big potential' in *The Natal Mercury* 21 July 1994.

<sup>3</sup> These include *Brave Men's Blood* (1990), *Nothing Remains but to Fight* (1993) and *The Zulu War Then And Now* (1993).

admits that *Zulu* initiated his fascination in Zulu history<sup>4</sup>, while Morris' book spawned a series of clones<sup>5</sup> and is still being published. These clones were mainly written during the 1970s and early 1980s and represent little more than market-orientated descriptions of the heroics of British units. The Zulus, if they were fortunate enough to be included in the discussions of the various battles, appeared as 'primitive' and frighteningly 'savage'. Zulu Warfare was simply a series of bloody encounters<sup>6</sup>.

In addition this paradigm's main focus on the War was not the entire campaign but more specifically it emphasised the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. Morris for example was so obsessed with the Isandlwana battlefield that he insisted on being sent there as an election monitor during the national elections in April 1994<sup>7</sup>.

The two battles have achieved almost mythical status, Isandlwana was a 'great and glorious tragedy' where several hundred British troops were eliminated, while at Rorke's Drift 'a handful of men' defended themselves in a primeval struggle with hundreds of Zulu 'warriors'. It is the 'popular' literature of the 1970s and 1980s which delved deeply into this mythology discourse and created a series of images about the War which were sensationalized, if not fictionalized.

Features of this discourse can be found in *The Sun Turned Black*. Knight uses the testimony of British officers and men, who for various reasons looked upon Isandlwana with superstition (e.g. p. 2 and p. 45), to create a sense of the supernatural. The battlefield therefore receives a pejorative connotation. The author seems to overlook the possibility that the benefit of hindsight has given these comments a more sinister interpretation, than that which might originally have been intended.

Furthermore the title of this book is a reference to the eclipse of the sun which occurred during the battle. Mentioned by Knight on several occasions (e.g. p. 72 and p. 76), this aspect is also seen to suggest an unnatural quality about the 22 January 1879.

*The Sun Turned Black* would also be attractive to those interested in British heroics as well as regimental histories and the careers of individual officers and men, for the book has much on all three topics.

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<sup>4</sup> See the Preface.

<sup>5</sup> Examples are *The Zulu War* by D Clammer (1973), *The Zulu War* by A Lloyd and *Rorke's Drift: A Victorian Epic* by M Glover (1975)

<sup>6</sup> See *The Zulu War - A Pictorial History* by M Barthorp (1984-18) and published by Bok Books International and Blandford Press, Dorset.

<sup>7</sup> 'At Isandlwana for the 'most important day', see *The Natal Mercury* 5 May 1994

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the book is the same as the Morris clones mentioned above. On the contrary, Knight's books are well-researched with attention to detail and accuracy. Most significantly he has taken heed of the academic research on the War which has been produced in the last two decades, as well as Zulu oral testimony<sup>8</sup>. One of the leading contributors to the former is John Laband of the University of Natal, who has produced a number of works aimed at investigating the Zulu perspective of the War<sup>9</sup>. It was such research which indicated the differences between 'academic' and 'popular' views of the War, going beyond the mere adventures of British soldiers to more substantial analyses of the War as a whole.

Drawing upon this research and Zulu testimony, Knight has produced a sound discussion of the two battles. The eleven chapters provide much information about the individuals and units, both British and Zulu, involved in them and the physical terrain of the two battlefields. The Colonial and Irregular units for example have often been ignored but Knight discusses them at some length (see Ch. 1). *The Sun Turned Black* also addresses areas of controversy, such as the role of Durnford in the Battle at Isandlwana (see Ch. 5) and makes it clear that the recreation of the events of a battle is distorted by fragmented evidence and faulty testimony (p. 107). The book's maps are clear and concise and are helpful in following the events of the battle, while the text is uncomplicated. Accordingly the publication should be accessible to both the enthusiast and the general reader.

On the one hand, the book's strength is the contribution it makes to explaining British activities during the two battles—it is aimed at a 'popular' market, a point emphasised by its focus on Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. On the other, *The Sun Turned Black* does not contain a comprehensive understanding of the Zulu in the War, something which, at this time, seems to be the sole realm of the academic historian.

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<sup>8</sup> These are *inter alia* extracts from *A Zulu King Speaks* by C. de B. Webb and J. Wright (eds.) (1978) and *Through the Zulu Country. Its Battlefields and Its People* by B. Mitford (1883).

<sup>9</sup> See for example *Fight Us in the Open* by J. Laband (1985) and *Kingdom in Crisis* also by J. Laband (1992).