

Rewriting the Zulu Past beyond the *Washing of the Spears*

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Introduction

Peter Davis, in a study of cinematic representations of the Zulu, utilised the word 'Zuluology' to describe how his subject has been treated. He defines 'Zuluology' as:

... the white myth of the Zulu; the equation of the Zulus with the wild animals of Africa; the domestication of these creatures; the Zulus as the prototypical 'African tribe'; the political uses of the Zulu image (Davis 1996:124).

This definition summarises the ways in which the Zulu have been portrayed by the media, in literature, film and political discourse. A consistently familiar image of the Zulu has been propagated in the space of almost two centuries. E.A. Ritter's *Shaka Zulu*¹, the 1964 film *Zulu* and the 1980s television series *Shaka Zulu* are better-known vehicles of such portrayals. These twentieth century portrayals were based upon the events and historical writing of Natal² in the nineteenth century.

The Zulu entered the European imagination in four phases in the nineteenth century (Martin 1982). It began with the arrival of the first permanent white settlers in the 1820s in Port Natal. The second phase developed out of the expansion of this settlement into a Colony. These two phases saw four of the first settlers - Francis Farewell, James King, Nathaniel Isaacs and Henry Fynn - publish material about the Zulu and about their relationship with the Zulu. An account of Shaka, apparently by Farewell, appeared in the *Narrative of voyages to explore the shores of Africa*, while King contributed two articles to the *South African Commercial Advertiser*. These were later published in *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*. More significant than these were Isaacs' *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa* and the writings of Fynn, reproduced in 1950 in *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn* but which appeared

¹ First published 1955.

² I use Natal and KwaZulu-Natal where chronologically appropriate.

earlier in *inter alia* Colenso's *Ten weeks in Natal* and Bird's *Annals of Natal*. These publications provided the basis for many of the histories of Natal that followed, including Theal's *Records of South-Eastern Africa*; *Natal: the Land and Its Story*; *Natal: the State and Citizen* and *The Cradle Days of Natal*.

The third phase was the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. This colonial conflict ensured that the Zulu would gain and retain worldwide fame as a military people. The fourth phase was introduced by the fiction of Rider-Haggard. Although his primary African characters are fictitious, they are based upon the Zulu. Haggard makes this clear, for example, when he states in *King Solomon's Mines* that the Kukuanas are a branch of the Zulu, and throughout the book he links them together (Haggard 1983:22,59 and 201). Serious fiction writers such as Joseph Conrad and more popular authors like J.R.R. Tolkien have drawn upon his imagery, as did Ritter's *Shaka Zulu* and the *Shaka Zulu* series. In addition, fictional films set in Africa, of which there have been some four hundred, have also relied on Haggard for their characters and settings:

Weird settings, erupting volcanoes, valuable treasures, unflappable hunter-heroes, demonic black witches, lost white civilizations, warrior tribes, white goddesses - all poured from Haggard as from a spring, watering blockbusters and serials alike ... (Cameron 1994:17f).

Such images of Africa helped to establish a fictional history for Africa and its inhabitants. Africa in these films became an extraordinary and bizarre place, a place of legend and adventure rather than reality.

The four phases of white writing about the Zulu reduced the latter's history to one of warriors and warfare - the rise of Shaka, the Battle of Blood River and the Anglo-Zulu War (Maylam 1986:vii). The purpose of this article is to examine academic³ interventions into this narrative of the Zulu past. Professional histories written by academics from the 1960s sought to change the above perceptions and to move the Zulu from a perspective that considered their society abnormal, to one that served to place them within the 'normal' history of KwaZulu-Natal. This rewriting has been approached from two areas, with a more recent third area being articulated. The article examines examples of this rewriting of history and then assesses the extent to which it has influenced wider perceptions of the Zulu.

³ By 'academic' I mean history produced by professionals in the academy. By contrast, I use 'popular' in the sense of amateur or non-professional, not in terms of 'people's history'.

A 'good year' for Zulu studies

The popular historian of the Anglo-Zulu War, Ian Knight, believes that 1965 was a 'good year' for studies of the War. Prior to this, he argues, accounts of the conflict had been poor and unreliable but the work that changed all of this was Donald Morris' *The Washing of the Spears*. Punch called *The Washing of the Spears* a magnificent book about the history of the Zulu (Morris 1992:1), but does it really deserve this accolade? Morris relied extensively on the writings of early colonists, such as Fynn and Isaacs. The problems with these authors have been alluded to above. *The Washing of the Spears*' success however depended not on its Zulu history but on its nature as a military history. *The Washing of the Spears* is significant in its contribution to the historiography of the British role in the war and only in this regard can it be said to be a 'bench-mark and essential reading' (Knight 1990:195).

Two academic historians at the University of Natal agreed with Knight as to the significance of 1965. Andrew Duminy and Bill Guest however looked to the publication of *A History of Natal* as their starting-point for professional histories of the region (Duminy & Guest 1989:xvii-xxvii). *A History of Natal* was the first general history of Natal written by professional historians. Its stated aim was to bring together African, Asian and European histories of the region (Brookes & Webb 1967:x). The text was based on the sources mentioned above and accordingly the familiar warrior and Shakan images are present. However, the authors Edgar Brookes and Colin Webb integrate the Zulu role in Natal's history by means of the chronological layout of the chapters. The rise of the Zulu monarchy and Cetshwayo are given separate chapters and therefore greater importance. In this way *A History of Natal* laid one of the foundations for an integrated history of the region.

Another was being laid outside South Africa, as scholars based elsewhere infused their work with an Africanist perspective from the 1960s. The decolonisation process in Africa also served to stimulate a 'reorientation in South African history' (Saunders 1988:144). This reorientation included the work of anthropologists such as Max Gluckman and Monica Wilson, as well as the historian, J. Omer-Cooper. Gluckman saw South Africa as a heterogeneous society but believed that its various groups were inter-dependent (MacMillan 1995:64). Wilson's work emphasised the place of black history in South Africa, as did Omer-Cooper in his *The Zulu Aftermath*. Blacks were identified as agents of change within the South African past. Political developments were no longer the result of mere barbaric desire but were proactive responses to regional changes (Hamilton 1993:34). Out of these historiographical developments came Wilson and Thompson's *The Oxford History of South Africa*, the first synthesis of South African history to acknowledge the precolonial past (Smith 1988:139). *The Oxford History* was however criticised on a

number of grounds, including the lack of detailed empirical research. Its critics included, unsurprisingly, the government but also the ideological left⁴.

This group comprised scholars with a materialist interest in the past. The result was tension between the 'liberal' and 'radical' schools of thought. The liberal school, for example, in examining the Anglo-Zulu War, concentrated on the personalities involved in the War. The radical school, while not completely rejecting the liberal view, saw the need to understand underlying issues such as the role of capitalism (Duminy & Ballard 1988:xvii-7). The radical school arose out of research being carried out both overseas and in South Africa. Local stimuli for this research were provided by the desire to popularise history, the History Workshops held at the University of the Witwatersrand being an illustration of this, as well as work by materialist historians such as Jeff Guy and John Wright (Guy 1976 & Wright 1978).

While this academic work was being conducted, two new publications appeared at the end of the 1970s that seemed to offer the missing Zulu perspective of KwaZulu-Natal's history. *The James Stuart Archive* was drawn from the evidence collected by the colonial official James Stuart from numerous oral informants, while *A Zulu King Speaks* was based upon the 'most important surviving records of statements' by Cetshwayo⁵. There has been much debate over whether these two works, collected and mediated by colonial officials and interpreters, could effectively provide a dedicated Zulu view of the South African past. This debate involved arguments about the validity of oral sources generally. Although it seems to offer a view free of Eurocentrism, oral evidence is itself part of an ideological discourse. As a terrain of struggle (Hamilton 1987:74) oral testimony has numerous methodological problems and the sources in *A Zulu King Speaks* and *The James Stuart Archive* are no exception. Nevertheless, the evidence that these two sources provide has been utilised to revisit the Zulu past, to provide new ideas and to compare other sources with.

In 1979, the centenary of the Anglo-Zulu War was celebrated and academia responded with a conference at the University of Natal, 'The Anglo-Zulu War: A Centennial Reappraisal 1879 - 1979'. The conference was attended by some 250 delegates, of whom sixteen presented papers. While the focus was the War, a number of speakers addressed related issues such as Zulu politics and economy before the outbreak of war. Drawing upon *The James Stuart Archive* and *A Zulu King Speaks*, as well as Guy's and Wright's pre-1979 research work (Guy 1976; Guy 1977; and Wright 1978), Colenbrander reinterpreted the Zulu *amabutho* system as a labour

⁴ For more on the criticism, see Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past*, pp. 154-161.

⁵ For more on the James Stuart Archive, see Wright (1996). Four volumes have been published thus far.

force designed to uphold the state (Colenbrander 1988:80). The Zulu kingdom emerged as an entity with political and economic problems and concerns. Colenbrander also provided a more detailed image of Cetshwayo as a leader faced with problems which included insufficient cattle supplies, a population increase and the growing power of the *izikhulu* (chiefs) who often opposed the king (Colenbrander 1988:82-89). This suggested that there was a need for a multi-dimensional analysis of Zulu society, not mere emphasis on militarism or alleged 'bloodthirstiness'.

Various writers have offered a letter by Cetshwayo in 1876 as an illustration of the threat he and the Zulu posed. The letter for example was 'disturbing' (Clammer 1973:23). Colenbrander however offered a rebuttal of this image (Colenbrander 1988:81), basing it upon research by Cope in 1967 and Colenso and Durnford's 1880 publication. He suggested that Cetshwayo's 'outburst' in the letter may have been overly impetuous or that the king's words had been misrepresented. Both Cope's research and Colenso and Durnford's publication were available to Clammer, yet he does not utilise them. Clammer's portrayal is more negative. He does not attempt to place the letter in any sort of context and must be seen as part of his attempt to provide evidence of the legitimate need for war in 1879. In Colenbrander's view, Cetshwayo's outburst becoming far less significant than it has been made out to be.

Elaine Unterhalter investigated the residents of the Nquthu district before and after the War. The role they played in the causes of the War and its subsequent influence upon them is discussed at some length. She concludes that the 1879 War had a fundamental impact on the Nquthu district, altering the residents' way of life (Unterhalter 1988:115). This paper was built upon a number of sources including Guy's doctoral thesis, Parr, Montague, both of which were published in 1880 and contemporary documents (Unterhalter 1988:115-119). Using sources, many of which were available before the twentieth century, the author was able to develop a description of Zulu social, political and economic life during the War, to balance existing accounts which depicted the British circumstances. The political and social problems faced by the Zulu, emerge as integral therefore, to the study of the Anglo-Zulu War.

By the 1970s then, academic historians were producing research that showed that many of the views of the previous decades were either myths or complete fallacies or ignored documents and publications that had been in existence for decades.

A further context for this revisionist research was provided by South Africa's political situation. Opposition to apartheid was another stimulus for revisiting Zulu history. Apartheid aimed at compartmentalising people and thus their history. Revisionist authors opposed this. They placed the Zulu within the wider society of South Africa, emphasising that they were also worthy of historical

investigation. Paul Maylam's *A History of the African People of South Africa* focused on a black role in South African history. In his sections dealing with the Zulu, they are the 'main characters' of their history, not whites.

By the 1980s, the research work of the preceding decades led to a growing number of publications about the past. Works such as *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony* showed that there was much to investigate about the history of KwaZulu-Natal beyond the Anglo-Zulu War. Bringing together historical and economic issues, the book's articles focused on a number of different topics including trade in the Zulu kingdom. Colenbrander suggested that trade had a greater impact on Zulu society than was previously thought. Cetshwayo, Zibhebhu kaMpahita and Dabulamanzi kaMpande all engaged in high level trade with white traders. This promoted an image of the Zulu as not merely 'savage warriors' but businessmen, some of whom enjoyed extensive trade interests. Zibhebhu kaMpahita for example traded in Swaziland, the Eastern Transvaal, as well as Natal (Colenbrander 1985:115).

By the end of the 1980s, a successor to Brookes and Webb's *A History of Natal* was being planned by the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Natal. The result was Duminy and Guest's *Natal and Zululand - From Earliest Times to 1910: A New History*, a chronological account of the province from the Stone Age to the beginning of the twentieth century. It was hoped that 'Duminy and Guest' juxtaposed against 'Brookes and Webb' (would) generate 'the creative tension from which there will come ... a brave new synthesis of the history of Natal' (Duminy & Guest 1989:x). Most significantly, there was an attempt to re-examine the development of the 'Phongola-Mzimkhulu region' *sans* the now hackneyed concepts of the Zulu-inspired disturbances, the Mfecane and Shaka as the sole protagonists (Colenbrander 1985:57-74)⁶. Instead changes were viewed in terms of ecological factors, advocated earlier in the decade (Guy 1980), although Wright and Hamilton warned that there was much left to 'untangle' (Wright & Hamilton 1989:68). The image of the mysterious, threatening warrior hovering on Natal's border was replaced by one that fixed the history of the Zulu firmly within the context of the development of the province. Moreover *Natal and Zululand* clearly indicated that historians, using sources such as the *James Stuart Archive* and researching Zulu society in depth, could effectively dispel much myth and ultimately show that 'The ingredients that made up the various societies that inhabited Natal and Zululand were no different from those of other societies' (Duminy & Guest 1989:xxvii).

The idea of the Zulu as a normal society was taken further in *The Mfecane Aftermath*. This publication was drawn from papers presented at a colloquium, 'The Mfecane Aftermath: Towards a New Paradigm', held at the University of the

⁶ Ideas about the Mfecane have been developed further in Hamilton (1995).

Witwatersrand in 1991. Assessments of the Zulu, amongst others, were set out with a sense of their wider socio-economic and political history (Wright 1995). *The Mfecane Aftermath* also contained evidence of the second area of academic revision of Zulu history. Dan Wylie's contribution was a literary analysis that examined the extent to which early white authors had 'othered' the Zulu, deviating from the 'truth' in order to tell a story (Wylie 1995). It was part of a growing historiography that utilised the methodological tools of postmodernist analysis.

History as invention?

Following Edward Said, scholars examined the ways in which the past has been conceptualised and portrayed by various political, scholarly and literary agencies. The notion of 'invented tradition' began to receive scholarly attention. Martin, Wylie and Daphna Golan have examined perceptions of Zulu history and how it has been manipulated over the last two centuries⁷ (Martin 1982; Wylie 1997:2 and Golan 1994). Wylie argued that historiography has ignored earlier historian's lives and the subjective nature of their authorship (Wylie 1993). As already noted, literature about the Zulu has been very dependent on the writings of Isaacs and Fynn. Investigation of these individuals' lives⁸ has shown that the nature of their histories and the information later authors have derived from them, remains as problematic as the 'real nature' of the nineteenth century Zulu.

The notion of 'invented tradition' seemed to receive support from archaeological findings. Archaeologists examining the site of KwaBulawayo discovered that Fynn and Isaacs had exaggerated the size and number of inhabitants of Shaka's capital. Fynn claimed that it was two miles in circumference and when they first arrived at Shaka's homestead, they were reportedly met by a crowd of 80 000. He later refers to an assembled crowd of 30 000 (Stuart & Malcom 1955:71 and 86). Archaeologists however estimate it at between 250 and 350 metres in size, with no more than 1000 to 1500 inhabitants (*Sunday Tribune* 30 October 1994). This helped to bring the writings of these early English settlers further into question.

This questioning of such primary sources has brought forth the elucidation of a third area of academic revisionist thinking. It was noted above that using *The James Stuart Archive* and *A Zulu King Speaks* involved asking questions about their legitimacy in conveying a Zulu perspective. The Archive was vigorously criticised by Julian Cobbing in 1988. He saw Stuart's record as being 'tainted' by colonial involvement and therefore of dubious value (Cobbing 1988:135).

⁷ Other works which make use of the idea of 'invented tradition' are *inter alia* essays in Burness (1976) and Malaba (1991).

⁸ For Isaacs, see Wylie (1991) and (1992). For Fynn, see Pridmore (1996).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, historians made use of these sources despite this and with positive results. Carolyn Hamilton has been responsible for reinforcing the position that the limitations of colonial authorship do not outweigh their usefulness. In both her PhD and her recent publication *Terrific Majesty*, Hamilton has argued that such intellectual contentions as the distortion of the Zulu past by various agencies limits our access to this past. To decry all colonial writing as invention for example, simplifies the nature of the relationship between coloniser and colonised and with that, the nature of the former's writings about the latter (Hamilton 1993:77 and Hamilton 1998:29). For Hamilton, Zulu history is not merely about what white writers say but is much wider than this, involving other agencies such as politics and art (Kros 1998:199f). Moreover white settlers were not totally limited by their cultural prejudices but were influenced by indigenous perceptions (Guy 1998). Consequently their work has value, *The James Stuart Archive* being in Hamilton's view, 'the single richest source of evidence concerning the precolonial history of southeast Africa' (Hamilton 1998:164).

John Laband's work on the Anglo-Zulu War provides another example of the advantages utilising these sources can have. Histories of the War had received criticism from academic historians (Guy 1979:8). Images of the Zulu that emerged in these military histories were not positive ones. Guy observed that many of the publications about the War were sad distortions where many myths about the Zulu were well represented (Guy 1979:8). Despite this reaction to the military historian's point of view, there were indications that there was much that could be investigated about the War itself. Utilising the methodology of 'war and society studies' (Laband 1992:2), Laband pointed out that much less was known about the War than had been assumed. A broader approach was needed. War and society studies developed in Anglo-American historiography during the 1970s and were a reaction against examining the purely military aspects of conflict: instead socio-economic and political contexts gained in significance (Grunlingh 1982:1). Laband negated the image of the Zulu army as a professional institution. Indeed from Zulu testimony, it emerged as a militia, an informal organisation. To call it an army is a misnomer and to formalise it by listing its alleged components and strengths is to promote a fallacy. An example of a work which falls into this trap is Wilkinson-Latham's book, *Uniforms and Weapons of the Zulu War* (Wilkinson-Latham 1978:91f), in turn was based on Fynney's 1879 publication designed to provide intelligence for the British about their opponents. The latter was used to create an image which, Laband believes, was totally misleading.

Thus the formalisation of the military image of the Zulu was a process undertaken by writers with a particular motive in mind. During the war, the British exaggerated the numbers of their Zulu opponents to enhance their victories. Writers after the war continued this practice but in a context in which it was important to

promote the notion of attacking a nation or group with an organised force of arms. It was face-saving to argue that Britain had been defeated by an army with many regiments rather than by informal militia units. The Anglo-Zulu war then, emerges not simply as another 'colonial war' but as a historical tool. Its function was to establish a conceptual framework in which to understand an aspect of South African history from a Western perspective. The role of the whites and the role of the Zulu in the War has, to a very large extent, been defined by this paradigm.

In 1979, the centenary year of the War, Laband set about altering this conception of the past, by attempting to provide a Zulu perspective of the war. The aim was to bring the Zulu from their allotted place on the periphery of interest in the War, to centre stage. A significant step in this direction was the publishing of *A Field Guide to the war in Zululand 1879* in 1979. Making use of Zulu evidence from *A Zulu King Speaks*, the *James Stuart Archive*, as well as academic work by Guy and Wright (Laband & Thompson 1979:82-84), Laband's chapters on the Zulu military system and strategy offered an insight which was not available in many Anglo-Zulu War works. *The Field Guide* contained descriptions of Zulu military activities which were major improvements over any predecessors. The Zulu military system was placed in perspective and it became apparent that the Zulu did employ a strategy. They emerged as active participants in the war. Laband and Thompson also made the point that defeat for the Zulu was by no means inevitable. In fact, it was not so much the British who defeated them but rather it was they themselves who simplified the task for the British by adopting a conservative strategy (Laband & Thompson 1979:12). These were major changes to the image of the Zulu in war. For Furneaux in 1963, defeat had been inevitable because of European gunpowder (Furneaux 1963:7), and Zulu tactical ability was accordingly dismissed as being of little consequence. However, the *Field Guide* pointed to the fact that at the outset of war and contrary to popular opinion, the outcome was not definite. Even those activities which in the 1964 film *Zulu* appear frighteningly primitive and are the preamble to the attack on Rorke's Drift - that is singing and dancing - emerge as a form of exercise (Furneaux 1963:4). This aspect of Zulu life was not performed merely to act upon primeval desires nor only for enjoyment but it had a far more practical nature. Zulu society then, emerges as considerably more complex than the more simplistic earlier views allowed for.

In 1985, Laband produced *Fight Us in the Open*. The second volume in a series co-produced by the KwaZulu Monuments Council, its subtitle and theme was the 'Anglo-Zulu War through Zulu Eyes'. The idea of non-existent Zulu sources is shown to be quite wrong. While there may be neither Zulu regimental histories nor written orders, there is sufficient testimony to provide a Zulu insight into the War. Based on material from *The James Stuart Archive* and *A Zulu King Speaks*, amongst others, Laband provides details of political disagreements among members of the

king's council, Cetshwayo's orders and the Zulu strategy involved in various battles. When discussing the Zulu decisions before Isandlwana, Laband uses the word 'conference' to describe senior Zulu's activities (Laband 1985:3-10). Gone is the concept of the headlong savage charge at the British. Replacing it is a view of normality; the Zulu held 'conferences', discussions and took decisions based on gathered intelligence. Thus Zulu warfare was not a series of bloody encounters; planning was involved at all times. Defeats occurred since command and control systems broke down at a tactical level, resulting in uncoordinated and unsuccessful attacks, as at Gingindlovu (Laband 1985:29-31).

What is the result of the use of this testimony? Does the book succeed in 'seeing the Anglo-Zulu War through Zulu Eyes'? Can a historian successfully hope to do this one hundred years later, using material which has colonial interpreters acting as intermediaries between the past and the present? *Fight Us in the Open* certainly succeeds in moving a step nearer the Zulu perspective of events. It does this, firstly, because primary material about the British view of the War is equally problematic, and secondly, because works such as *A Zulu King Speaks* and *The James Stuart Archive* offer detailed sources of primary Zulu eyewitness accounts. With the assistance of these, Laband's Zulu are emotional, proactive deliberators who show normative responses to conflict and crisis.

The most important work to emerge was his *Kingdom in Crisis*, published in 1992. Based on Laband's doctoral dissertation, the book proved that there was much to be stated and concluded from the Zulu participation in the war. For those who advocate one of two extremes, either that the Zulu state responded in a coherent, unified manner to the British threat (authors such as Endfield, Clammer and Barthorp and the producers of *Zulu* and *Zulu Dawn*) or alternatively that Cetshwayo was totally confused and disorganised, being dominated by his 'warlike regiments' (Morris 1992:273 and 282), *Kingdom in Crisis* has very different images to offer. It becomes apparent that the Zulu were not superhuman, nor were they suicidal extremists. Their tactics were not totally antiquated (they had learnt from the Battle of Blood River in 1838 for example), but morale did decline, they were shocked at their casualties and when defeat was obvious, they were prepared to negotiate with the British. Cetshwayo did procrastinate at times but there were logical reasons for this (Laband 1992:2-252).

Laband also reaffirms the importance of the war itself, as opposed to merely concentrating on the causes and repercussions. It assumes a new significance, in that *Kingdom in Crisis*' analysis shows how the Zulu polity gained and lost from the War. It assisted various senior officials to gain greater autonomy and brought Cetshwayo's senior council into disagreement with him and among themselves (Laband 1992:29-252). Indeed Laband overturns the notions that the war was 'an epic of

misunderstanding' (Edgerton 1988:5), that the conflict is simply explained and that in-depth analysis is unnecessary.

In 1995, Laband published *Rope of Sand*, a history of the Zulu kingdom in the nineteenth century. He drew on the sources referred to above amongst others, as well as the praises of the Zulu kings. *Rope of Sand* aimed at providing a context for the political situation in KwaZulu-Natal in the mid-1990s and to 'make history accessible' by writing for a wider audience (*Sunday Tribune* 5 November 1995). Indeed, it was being argued that the consumer market for academic history was small, while the desire for more popular, public history was growing (Maylam 1995:10f). Prior to *Rope of Sand*'s publication, a non-professional historian utilised the academic research of the preceding decades to write about the Zulu in the twentieth century. Taylor's *Shaka's Children* made use of *The James Stuart Archive*, as well as ideas of representation drawn from Golan and Martin. Notably it also examined a period of the Zulu past that has often been ignored, namely the mid-twentieth century.

Rope of Sand and *Shaka's Children*⁹ were attempts to bridge the divide between academic history and popular history. Drawing a distinction between these two approaches, making a judgement about who or what produces the 'best history', is not easy. It involves placing academic history in a positive light which implies that professional historians are immune to ideological and other subjective influences. Charles Ballard's *The House of Shaka* provides an illustration that this is not the case. A professional historian, his publication was regarded by some as an example of a 'royalist history' concerned with the partisan treatments of Buthelezi and Inkatha¹⁰ (Wylie 1995:73f and Hamilton 1990).

Martin, in discussing Curtin's *The Image of Africa*, makes the point that Curtin attempted to provide a respectable pedigree for professional historians, to show that their work had greater legitimacy and truth than popular representations (Martin 1982:7f). Clearly such generalisations about academia are impossible to make. Academic knowledge was the basis of European representations of the 'other'. The sciences, biology and anatomy were complicit with the various institutions of colonial power (Young 1990:127). Challenging popular views of the past also leads to accusations that academics indulge in 'ivory-tower theorising about what people know, what is in their blood' (*Mercury* 1 March 1994). Guy has been criticised for arguing with 'old and mouldy facts' and ignoring emotion (*Daily News* 30 March

⁹ See Lambert (1996) for a comparative review of both books.

¹⁰ In 1924 Inkatha was founded to pay off the Zulu royal family's debts. It later took on a more political function but lost momentum in the 1930s. Inkatha was re-established in 1975 to promote Zulu ethnicity. In 1989 it formed itself into a political party, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).

1994). Another analyst was attacked by the editor of the Inkatha-owned *Ilanga* newspaper for writing about the Zulu hierarchy when he was in fact an 'outsider' and could therefore not understand it (*Daily News* 23 January 1995). In assessing images of the Zulu in the twentieth century however, historical material produced by certain professional historians has attempted to investigate and understand the Zulu past, apart from the oft-used signifiers of violence and bloodshed. Academic research from the 1960s provided a major impetus for moving 'beyond the washing of the spears' (Wright 1979) but to what extent did it make academic history 'accessible' and influence popular history?

Anticipating a brave new synthesis?

Popular histories continued to make contributions to KwaZulu-Natal history and South African history. Their success needs no other measure than the fact that a number of these texts - including Morris' - provided the sources not only for the *Shaka Zulu* television series but continue to be quoted as sources of fact¹¹. *A History of Natal* had been superseded, but works such as *The Washing of the Spears* have maintained a constancy over the decades. Indeed a mere six years ago, a newspaper article declared Morris to be an expert on Zulu history (*Daily News* 23 June 1994).

Throughout the decade of the 1980s the Anglo-Zulu War continued to attract attention. The 1982 edition of the journal *Soldiers of the Queen*, was devoted to a debate between two views of one of the War's major engagements, the battle of Isandlwana. Differences of opinion notwithstanding, this debate really concerned itself with the reasons for the British defeat at Isandlwana. Much was written about the positions of the British units (Knight 1982:4 and Knight 1983:16f), British rate of fire (Knight 1982:6 and Knight 1983:15) and so on, questions which tend to overshadow the Zulu triumph. Morris and Jackson were concerned with searching for reasons for this victory but the place they looked was the British role in the battle. Langley (1983:22f) did offer a more practical view of matters pointing out that the Zulu won on the day as their tactics, abilities and courage stood them in good stead, particularly when combined with British mistakes and failures.

The fact that the Zulu had no literate historians at the time of the War is no excuse for ignoring Zulu participation. Certainly it may make the gathering of Zulu evidence more difficult, yet the methodological problems of oral evidence are not worse than historiographically problematic literary material about the British which appeared after the War. Knight (1983:20) has written that the *umPunga* unit typifies the problems 'besetting a serious study of the Zulu Army'. Confusion over its proper

¹¹ See for example Wylie (1993:98) and *The Grolier Multimedia Encyclopaedia* on CD-ROM.

name and its location during the battle, make it difficult to describe its composition and activities. Yet Knight seems to have overlooked the fact that such problems are also found on the British side. Despite the literature that deals with the British at Isandlwana for example, there remains a debate about British unit dispositions, strengths and respective leaders. Indeed, an archaeological dig at Isandlwana is being planned in order to resolve these issues (*Sunday Tribune* 3 September 2000). Anything definitive in nature remains difficult to arrive at however, as much for the British as the Zulu. Nevertheless the inadequate coverage of Zulu participation is explained away by such difficulties and problems. This can only be understood as a persistent inability to come to terms with the Zulu view of the War. The image of the Zulu 'warrior' as victor or as worthy opponent continued to be a difficult one.

This was evident in two other publications of the 1980s. They represented the inability of some to see the Anglo-Zulu War in any other context than that of an 'African adventure'. Furthermore, their respective sources were based mainly on secondary material and thus the myths which appeared in these, were perpetuated.

Barthorp's *The Zulu War - A Pictorial History*¹² and Bancroft's *Rorke's Drift*¹³ were able successors of this tradition. Zulu military tactics were to all intents and purposes non-existent. They had not learnt lessons from their defeat at Blood River forty-one years before, implemented no deception plan nor did they exploit their victories. In fact a planned campaign was unknown and Zulu warfare was simply a series of bloody encounters (Barthorp 1984:18). As a leader and tactician, Cetshwayo's orders were 'simple in the extreme' (Barthorp 1984:44). After such comments, one is left to wonder how the Zulu managed to fight at all or indeed how they earned their military reputation. In Barthorp's estimation they appear as little more than street hoodlums. These descriptions are however significant, in that they again underlie an ambiguous aspect of Zulu imagery. On the one hand the Zulu 'warrior' is the perfect fighting machine, on the other he is disorganised, inflexible, intent on hacking and stabbing. Again on the one hand he is brave and fearless, on the other he retreats in disarray, not bothering to resist pursuers. This lack of resistance is explained by suggesting that those who fled were either cowards or feared execution by Cetshwayo for their misconduct. Not considered is the point that retreating Zulu may have been exhausted or felt that it was futile to flee cavalry on foot. Instead the concept of a brutal Zulu system of justice is invoked (Emery 1977:51). Barthorp (1984:118) also finds it curious that the Zulu attack with great courage but retreat with little resistance. Far from trying to understand this, Barthorp seems happy to accept the idea of inflexible, simple tactics and inadequate skills.

¹² Originally published in 1980.

¹³ Originally published in 1988.

Furthermore, what emerges is the concept that the Zulu were brave fighters, but only when confronting an opponent of a similar capacity, that is to say a 'native foe'. Against 'modern civilisation', the Zulu 'warrior' is seen as being at a disadvantage. Their courage and bravery - for this is all they are alleged to have, their weapons being of no consequence - are insufficient to defeat sophisticated Western armaments as *Zulu* so clearly shows. Apart from the British 'catastrophe' at Isandlwana, Khambula, Gingindlovu and Ulundi are seen to show the futility of attacking British troops.

Insofar as learning from Blood River is concerned, not taking heed of previous battle experience cannot be attributed to the Zulu alone. Twentieth century European armies have also failed to do this (Hart 1992:20). At the same time however, evidence suggests that the Zulu did learn from experience. Firearms provide a useful example. Morris, a source Barthorp used, points out that Cetshwayo was already procuring firearms from John Dunn before the 'Coronation' in 1873 and by 1879 had acquired a large number (Morris 1992:209 and 293). The quality may have been questionable, but the Zulu had clearly realised the value of guns. If any of these authors had bothered to consult the February 1880 edition of *Macmillan's Magazine*, they would have found that Cetshwayo was displeased that captured British rifles from Isandlwana had not been brought to him (Webb & Wright 1987:35). This is an indication of the significance the Zulu placed on firearms. Admittedly they were not used to their full potential, nor were they properly integrated into the Zulu battle plan but this is related to problems within the Zulu units themselves.

It is more useful to note that there were times when firearms were used efficiently by Zulu marksmen. There is evidence of this in the many letters of *The Red Soldier* (Emery 1977:23 and 169) but neither Barthorp nor Bancroft acknowledge this ability. Even the secondary works of Morris and Clammer give examples of Zulu firepower being utilised successfully (Morris 1992:404 and 494 and Clammer 1973:107 and 162), but these episodes are overlooked or ignored in favour of a stereotyped view of the Zulu.

Bancroft unashamedly celebrates the British activities, highlighting 'the fighting spirit of the British soldier'. Both authors also provide legitimacy for the British invasion. Barthorp (1984:vii) considered that, although unjustified by modern standards, the attack was undertaken as a protective measure for both black and white since the Zulu threatened the stability of Natal. Terms like 'powder keg' are used to describe the Zulu kingdom (Barthorp 1984:12). This colonial attitude was aggravated by Zulu raids into Swaziland and restlessness among the 'impis' (Bancroft 1991:17). Sir Bartle Frere, one of the architects of the War, by contrast is presented a naïve European civil servant out of place in volatile Africa (Barthorp 1984:8). Even logical behaviour by the Zulu is denied. Bancroft sees Cetshwayo's attempt to avoid a

quarrel with the British by showing no hostility towards them, as an indication of the king's failure to understand 'European law' (Bancroft 1991:17). This makes little sense since not showing hostility could be considered logical in the face of such a threat. Yet Bancroft portrays this in a negative light.

Publications working within the 'popular' framework, continued to generate the types of images which had been introduced in the 1820s and 1830s. At best the Zulu were the stereotyped 'warrior', at worst the cruel tyrant. Even among more serious studies, such conceptions remained. Ian Knight's *The Zulus* (1989:10) saw Shaka's birth as having 'all the elements of a dark fairy story'. For a book published in 1989, this comment is hopelessly inadequate as history. The fact that Shaka's existence is myth-bound does not mean that it is mythological. In addition, the series of which the book was a part, was designed to examine famous fighting units of the past and present. The Zulu are in the company of, amongst others, the United States Marine Corps and the Israeli Defence Force. It is strange to rank the Zulu alongside professional army units. There was no edition in the series dealing with 'the Americans' but rather their military units, to which a percentage of the population belongs. 'Zulu' however implies militarism and consequently all Zulu people take their place in the company of regular fighting units (Knight 1989:53).

In 1988, Robert Edgerton published *Like Lion's They Fought*. An American, his aim was to improve on his fellow countryman's *The Washing of the Spears* and include a Zulu perspective of the War (Edgerton 1988:ix-xi). Utilising the work of professional historians (Guy 1975; Webb & Wright 1976; Laband & Thompson 1979; Webb & Wright 1987; and Duminy & Ballard 1998), Edgerton incorporates the Zulu role in the battle of Isandlwana (using *inter alia* *The James Stuart Archive* Volume III and Zulu accounts from Mitford¹⁴) and even goes some way in mentioning the role of Zulu women. Nevertheless Edgerton chose to write about the Zulu in a simplistic manner. Issues such as bodily functions enjoy the same emphasis as political and economic matters. He also provides details of the apparent role of body parts in Zulu society (Edgerton 1988:40,42 and 45) including cannibalism. According to Edgerton, human flesh was a potent part of the ritual preparation for War and before the battle of Isandlwana, the flesh of a certain O'Neal was eaten. Edgerton acknowledges Krige's *The Social System of the Zulus* here. Krige's source (1965:270) for this information is Stuart's *A History of the Zulu Rebellion 1906*. Tracing this back to Stuart, it becomes clear that Krige has made an error, something that Edgerton compounds. Stuart (1913:377f) discusses the murder of an Oliver Veal, not O'Neal, in July 1906, not 1879.

¹⁴ Bertram Mitford travelled extensively throughout South Africa and Africa. From the 1880s, he produced numerous stories and novels.

The War is described in these terms. It is said to be an 'epic of misunderstanding', which is simplistic to say the least. The attack on Sihayo's *umuzi* at the beginning of the War is discussed as if it were a humorous event. In Edgerton's view much of the 'frolicsome fracas', as he calls it, involved the antics of a Lieutenant Harford. There is no serious interpretation of this event and the destruction of 'jolly' Chief Sihayo's home is dismissed as being of anecdotal importance.

While Edgerton was critical of Haggard's romanticised view of the Zulu, his contribution to Zulu history was influenced by fictional accounts. The influence of the *Shaka Zulu* series can also be seen in the section where the exaggerated role of Princess Mkabayi in Zulu society, is discussed (Edgerton 1988:5 and 214). As a result *Like Lions They Fought* fails to comprehensively deal with the Zulu. The image of the Zulu society as savage and/or primitive is replaced by one which shows it to be peculiar. In addition the book is reductionist, simplifying the Zulu to the level of a group of people who behave according to ritual and tradition. They are not seen as creative or proactive in any way. They merely react to events, be they rituals, the British invasion or battle. Perhaps the author thought this style would assist in the book's commercial appeal but it merely serves to submerge Edgerton's attempt to understand the Zulu in a mass of trivialities. *Like Lions They Fought* really reflects little more than the primitive ethnography of the early American films about the Zulu¹⁵.

Ian Knight's publications however, are quite different. *The Zulus* notwithstanding, Knight's subsequent books have acknowledged that popular histories have neglected much of the source material about the war, as well as academic research (Knight 1990:6 and Knight 1992:6). Consequently he has endeavoured to produce analyses of the War and the Zulu which offer the perspective of both sides (Knight 1990:9). *Brave Men's Blood* for example, is a general work about the Zulu with a focus on the Anglo-Zulu War. Knight avoids beginning with Shaka; rather he alludes to the arrival of the first inhabitants in the region and the importance of land and resources. In addition Knight (1990:18-166) offers a revised, less romanticised view of Fynn and his colleagues, includes the names of various Zulu participants in the war and the Zulu arrival at the battle of Hlobane in March 1879 is told from the Zulu perspective. In *Nothing Remains but to Fight* an entire chapter is devoted to the Zulu and Knight offers a sound discussion of Zulu tactics (Knight 1993:Chapter 5 and 63-105). At the same time however, features of earlier popular discourse can be found in Knight's work. He has been criticised for attempting a balanced assessment of both the British and Zulu sides but neglecting

¹⁵ See for example *A Zulu's Heart* (1908), *Rastus in Zululand* (1910), *Zululand* (1911), *A Wild Ride* (1913) and *The Zulu King* (1913).

Zulu political and strategic options (Laband 1992:1). Moreover there are continued allusions to the more mythological aspects of the Zulu. Shaka continues to be dealt with as the 'great man' (Knight 1990:Chapter 17 and Knight 1992:6), while Isandlwana retains its sinister connotation in the eclipse of the sun which occurred on the day of the battle and to the premonitions of various officers and men (Knight 1995:72 and 76). These aspects of Knight's work suggest that the more mythical conceptions of the Zulu will continue to play a role in the production of South African history. Nevertheless, Knight does acknowledge the developments in South African historiography and consequently his work becomes part of the 'brave new synthesis' of the history of Natal envisaged by Colin Webb in 1989 (Duminy & Guest 1989:x).

Part of this new synthesis will be the necessary and important development of African academic historians adding their accounts to the research and publications set out above. Naturally the latter will be perceived by some as merely white accounts and it will be argued that an African approach or more specifically an African-authored approach will pay greater dividends in uncovering the Zulu past (Maphalala 1997). Caution is necessary here, lest such history operate only as a new universal paradigm, which is merely an antithesis of a white-centred perspective (Ashcroft et al 1989:21). Moreover, an African-authored approach will ignore the academic research discussed above to its detriment.

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