BEYOND THE WASHING OF THE SPEARS

by John Wright

This month sees the one hundredth anniversary of the British invasion of the Zulu kingdom in January 1879. It also sees the beginning of a series of well-publicized 'celebrations' organized by descendants of Natal's colonial settlers to commemorate what most of them would unquestioningly regard as the victory a century ago of British civilization over Zulu savagery. Though most of them will not consciously recognize it, one of the main functions of their coming together for these occasions will be communally to reaffirm this view, and thus to reinforce the ideology of white superiority which the white-skinned ruling classes of South Africa have long used, and continue to use, to justify their political repression of the country's black-skinned working classes.

The survival of this ideology, which is basic to the reproduction of the whole system of labour repression variously known as apartheid, or separate development, or plural development, demands as one of its preconditions the perversion of southern African history-writing. It demands that those elements of the southern African experience which do not fit in with the image of a beneficent white (read capitalist) leadership gradually civilizing (read proletarianizing) the black peoples under its authority should be eliminated from public consciousness. In the case of the Anglo-Zulu war this means among other things typecasting the Zulu as a primitive warrior people who were prevented only by the British army's intervention of 1879 from destroying the progressive colony of Natal. Savage and bloodthirsty though they were in war, the Zulu after all proved noble and honourable in defeat, and when their country was eventually annexed, first to Britain and then to Natal, settled down as trusted retainers of their new masters.

This, the popular text-book view of the war and its aftermath, does not concern itself over much with the realities of the causes of the war, nor with the realities of the Zulu experience in the hundred years since. It does not concern itself with the greed and hypocrisy of the British officials who manoeuvred the Zulu into war, it does not concern itself with the subsequent reduction of an independent people to the position of an impoverished peasantry and underpaid wage-labour force. It propagates rather, a view of Zulu history which had its origins far back in the history of European penetration into south-east Africa but which is still, for political reasons, preserved today.

European writing on the Zulu begins after 1824 with the diaries of the traders, Henry Francis Fynn and Nathaniel Isaacs, but it was not until the middle of the 19th century, when the colony of Natal was established, that literate Europeans were able to observe the Zulu at some leisure and to speculate at greater length on their pre-documentary history. By the time of the Anglo-Zulu war, officials and chroniclers in Natal could feel that they knew most of what there was to know about the historical background of their opponents. The literary image of the Zulu that was emerging by this time was intimately linked with scientific opinion as to the origins and significance of race differences.

Strongly influenced by the ideas of Charles Darwin, the Victorian founding fathers of the discipline of anthropology had refined the medieval idea of a 'great chain of being' to produce the concept of the development of a hierarchy of races, with the Anglo-Saxon gentlemen at the pinnacle. It was firmly believed that the 'primitive' peoples at the bottom of the hierarchy represented earlier stages of Anglo-Saxon man's development, frozen, as it were, at the maximum level of attainment that their innate capabilities permitted. Thus by the comparative study of races the Anglo-Saxon could learn something of his own past. It also followed that once these 'primitives' had reached their maximum potential their societies assumed a changeless character, remaining in a fixed state, without history. Where the nature of these societies had clearly changed through time, the change was explained as the result of the external influence of a superior race.

Given the existence in the mid-19th century of this intellectual climate, it is not surprising that the British defeat at Isandlwana in 1879 came to the late Victorians as a great shock. It was not to be expected that a people comparatively low on the scale of races, and thus considerably limited in intellectual ability, could outwit the British aristocracy and defeat a British army. Although the blow was not sufficiently heavy to make an impression on the monolith of racist theory, the shock waves are preserved in the literature of the later 19th century. Earlier writers looked down from the top of the tree of life with patronizing restraint – primitive man was quaint in his carefree existence, but not dangerous. Thus Rider Haggard could evince a certain envy for the 'idyllic' life of the native, although at the same time seeing the white man's moral duty as being to uplift him. But later British authors clearly felt that their native subjects were shaking the lower branches of the tree. Thus in Buchan's **Prester John** the native is a sinister character who is a threat to white civilization; and in the emergent southern African historiography of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Theal, Cory, and other writers were at pains to demonstrate what they saw as the chaos of the African past and the lack of restraint in the African character. The effect was to convey the impression that danger from the native was ever-present, and that it was commendable and proper for the European settler to 'civilize' him (i.e. make him work).

In adopting scientific racism and its associated tenets, these writers were acting in accordance with the beliefs of their

age. Their approach is parallelled in the historiography of other areas which were reached by the tentacles of European colonialism. However, the historiography of southern Africa is given a twist of its own by the manner in which the racist approach of the 19th century has persisted well into the second half of the 20th. Thus in the case of recent Zulu historiography, even Donald Morris's highly regarded **The Washing of the Spears**, first published in 1965, contains evaluations reminiscent of those made by 19th-century commentators. 'The Bantu', the author writes, were 'an aimless people, happy and careless, with little sense of time and less of purpose'. The Anglo-Zulu war was brought about by the 'irresponsible power' of the Zulu, power which 'caused a considerable threat to the continued existence of the European civilization in its vicinity'. Similarly, C. T. Binns's **The Warrior People** reproduces the 19th-century view that the 'Zulu' originated from a group of slaves belonging to Jewish masters in Ancient Egypt, who were driven south by alien forces and whose sensibilities were damaged by the heathen hordes of central Africa. The evidence consists of a few superficial cultural similarities between the Zulu and the Hebrews. Other typical Victorian prejudices are present. For instance, we are told that the 'Bantu' have 'simple but retentive minds', and their potential is limited because of a lack of contact with 'more progressive peoples', It is significant that rubbish such as this could be published in South Africa as recently as 1974, but one assumes that the publisher had an eye for a profitable market. It is presumably the same market which will sustain the film **Zulu Dawn** and other popularizations of 1979.

Since the late 1950s, however, scholars have been developing a view of southern African history which expressly rejects the racist assumptions that came into vogue in the later 19th century. From this more recent perspective, the Anglo-Zulu war can be seen as having been instrumental in setting in motion the historical processes that created the conditions of economic and political repression in which South Africa's five million Zulu people live today. It has also become clear that the way in which the history of the war has been presented in most of the literature has served to inform the ideology used today to maintain this repression.

It is fitting that in this anniversary month **Reality** should, from this newer perspective, address itself to an examination of how the popular western image of the Anglo-Zulu war came into being, of why the war occurred at all, and of how its effects are felt today. It is also fitting that the first of the articles that follows is a reprint of a sermon given two months after the outbreak of the war and the Zulu victory as Isandlwana by the then Bishop of Natal, the courageous and outspoken John William Colenso. Virtually alone among the white colonists, Colenso was prepared publicly to defend the Zulu cause and condemn the policies of the men who had instigated the war. But he was more than the champion of what he saw as a wronged people; in his impassioned address of a hundred years ago he was saying things about the causes and conduct of the war that historians have only recently again come to accept.

The range of the other articles published in this issue is not as comprehensive as was originally envisaged, but the themes which they cover remain the same. Jeff Guy reveals how the myths about the Anglo-Zulu war which have been disseminated by generations of western writers were in the first instance deliberately manufactured by British politicians and military leaders anxious to further imperial policies on the success of which their own professional and personal reputations were closely dependent. As he emphasises, these myths were not of the Zulu's making, nor of the rank and file of the British army's – essentially they were the product of a capitalist class pursuing a policy of imperial expansion. Thus the war was the result, not of Zulu militarist aggression, as it is so often portrayed in the literature, but of deliberate provocation on the part of highly placed British officials. Thus the Zulu did not in fact lose the war, as apologists for the British officer caste would have it, but, by forcing the British to come to terms, were able to hold on to the political and economic independence which the British had gone to war to destroy.

At the same time, the deposition of the Zulu king, Cetshwayo, by the British, and the concomitant destruction of centralized political authority in the kingdom, began a process of internal feuding that weakened the Zulu to the point where, in the late 1880s, their enemies were able to partition the kingdom among themselves. Thus began the exploitation by alien peoples of Zulu land and labour that has continued to the present. The function of myth-making historians, Guy argues, has been to disguise the realities of the Zulu experience and so enable this pattern of exploitation to continue.

Peter Colenbrander's paper focusses on the immediate origins of the Anglo-Zulu war, and in particular on the role of the senior British official in southern Africa in the late 1870's one Sir Bartle Frere Colenbrander examines in detail each of Frere's arguments that the war was provoked by Zulu aggression and intransigence, and finds them without substance. Instead, he cites as prime causes of the war Frere's policy of territorial expansionism, and his successful manoeuvring of his superiors into a position where they would have no option but to back the use of military measures against the Zulu. These conclusions are not new, but it seems that they cannot be argued too often.

Dick Cloete tackles perhaps the most difficult task of those faced by the authors of these papers – that of summarizing in a short space the main features of that almost totally neglected period of Zulu history, the period from the destructive civil war of the 1880 s to the implementation of the National Party's 'homeland' policies in the 1960s. He has produced what is in many ways a pioneering piece of work. His two main themes are, first, the gradual disintegration of the Zulu agrarian economy under the impact first of mining and then of industrial and agricultural capitalism; and second, the search of the Zulu people for new forms of political expression, given the removal or subversion of their traditional leaders by successive white governments, and given the existence of violent state opposition to any kind of popular political movement.

This issue of **Reality** is published to encourage all South Africans to take a sober and critical look at the import of this year's commemorations of the war of 1879.□

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