

# AN IMPERIAL HIGH COMMISSIONER AND THE MAKING OF A WAR

by Peter Colenbrander

'... Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the shadow ...'

(T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men")

On 11 January, one hundred years ago, the British forces under General Chelmsford invaded Zululand. Thus began the Anglo-Zulu war, a war which was to prove a major turning point in the history of the Zulu people. For, though the hostilities did not terminate in as decisive a victory for British arms as has been claimed in traditional accounts; though it did not in itself lead to the extinction of Zulu independence, or the total disruption of Zulu social and economic traditions; it, and the political settlement which followed, set in train the civil strife that was to undermine the political and psychological cohesion of Zulu society. This internecine struggle in turn culminated in the annexation of Zululand to the British Crown in 1887, and ultimately in its incorporation into Natal in the following decade. Thus the process by which the Zulu were drawn into the world of the white man, and exposed to a barrage of new and often disruptive political and economic forces, had its most important origins in the war of 1879.<sup>2</sup>

A month before its outbreak the representatives of the British High Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, had presented to their Zulu counterparts an ultimatum, some of the terms of which had to be met within 20 days, the remainder 10 days later.<sup>3</sup> It may be supposed that these terms represent the gravamen of the British case against the Zulu, but a closer study suggests that the document is misleading and of relatively little worth in understanding why this fateful conflict came about.

In part the ultimatum comprised demands for the redress of grievances arising out of specific border incidents. Amongst these were clauses requiring the surrender of three of the sons and the brother of the Zulu chief, Sihayo, for trial in Natal, and the payment of a fine of 500 cattle for Cetshwayo's non-compliance with the earlier demands of Sir Henry Bulwer, the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal, for their surrender. These demands refer to the forcible retrieval on 28 July 1878 by the accused of two of Sihayo's wives who had recently fled to Natal, and their subsequent execution in Zululand. It has been argued that this was a serious breach of relations with Natal, and that Cetshwayo's offer of £50 as a solatium in lieu of the surrender of the culprits was an inadequate and unwise response. Some attempts must, however, be made to understand Cetshwayo's position. In part his failure to take a more serious view of the incident is explicable in terms of the official reaction to an analogous situation in November 1876; on that occasion Bulwer did not so much as issue a

protest. Moreover, it would have been politically imprudent of Cetshwayo to alienate so powerful a chief as Sihayo at a time when political power in Zululand had become more diffused. It would have been equally foolish to antagonise the younger generation of men (to which group Sihayo's sons belonged) who made up the bulk of his subjects and his fighting forces, particularly at a time when they, like their older compatriots and their king, had come to doubt the good faith of the British authorities on account of their unwarrantable tardiness in resolving the long-standing dispute between the Transvaal and the Zulu kingdom.

Moreover, after the delivery of the ultimatum, Cetshwayo strove determinedly to make amends by gathering up to 1000 cattle for the fine. However, the shortness of the time available, bad weather, and the promptitude with which the British began military operations (by instituting cattle raids, during the course of which Zulu blood was spilt) ensured that the herd never reached British lines. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that Cetshwayo probably had very little intention of surrendering the culprits as demanded. Given his preparedness to hand over more cattle than had been called for, can this reluctance really be regarded as a sufficient cause for war?<sup>4</sup>

A further clause called for 100 cattle as redress for the Smith-Deighton incident. In September 1878 These two men had been sent to survey a disused road on the Natal-Zulu border, and had been urged, in view of the tense situation then existing between Britain and the Zulu, to proceed with caution. Despite these injunctions they had foolishly strayed on to an island in the Thukela which the Zulu regarded as theirs and had been seized, hustled, and excitedly addressed by a group of Zulu for about one and a half hours before being released unharmed. This was a very minor incident, and in any case, was not sanctioned by Zulu authority. Indeed, Frere himself initially attached little significance to the affair. Only later was he to write,

"It was only one of the many instances of insult and threatening such as can not be passed over without severe notice being taken of them. What occurred ... seems to me a most serious insult and outrage and should be severely noticed."<sup>5</sup>

However, in making this claim Frere apparently had no fresh facts before him to substantiate his change of opinion.

A third condition was the surrender of Mbilini, a senior member of the Swazi royal house living in exile in Zululand, who had made an armed incursion into the Transvaal in October 1878, killing about 50 of its African inhabitants and making off with their cattle. Serious though this occurrence was its significance to Anglo-Zulu relations should not be exaggerated, for if there was a political motive behind Mbilini's action it was probably related

to his aspirations to the Swazi throne, and was almost certainly not part of a movement on the part of the Zulu against the whites. Indeed it is doubtful whether Cetshwayo was implicated in the affair, since he exercised little effective control over the renegade chief. Moreover, the king had in the past permitted the Boers to take punitive action against Mbilini and on this occasion he dissociated himself from the chief's behaviour.<sup>6</sup>

In fine, one can reasonably question whether these events were in themselves important enough to warrant the British invasion of Zululand in January 1879. Indeed, one incident was almost ludicrously trivial, and in relation to the other two Cetshwayo showed himself to be not so much the irredeemable savage of the European popular imagination, but as amenable to negotiation and not unwilling to conciliate the British and even the Transvaal Boers, with whom relations had long been tense. Furthermore it is clear from the above that these events occurred at a time when Anglo-Zulu relations had already taken a turn for the worse. The suspicion that they are essentially irrelevant to the war is confirmed by reference to the correspondence in early 1878 of the British naval and military commanders in South Africa. As early as 12 April, Commodore Sullivan had remarked that he had been told by Frere that

"... it appeared almost certain that serious complications must shortly arise with the Zulus which will necessitate active operations ..."

and that HMS *Active* should remain on the Natal coast.

"... to co-operate with the Lieutenant General and his forces ... (to) cover a possible landing."<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, General Theisiger (later Baron Chelmsford) had in June turned his attentions to the 'impending hostilities with the Zulu'. On 1 June he wrote,

"It is still, however, more than probable that active steps will have to be taken to check the arrogance of Cetshwayo."<sup>8</sup>

It should be noted that these comments were penned before the first of the border incidents of which Frere made so much had taken place, and in the case of Commodore Sullivan's observations, preceded it by more than two and a half months. One must surely conclude that though these incidents may have been the occasion of, and the pretext for the war, they were certainly not its cause. Indeed it would seem that Frere, who assumed office in March 1877, was, almost from the outset, predisposed to an expansionist policy in relation to the remaining independent African chiefdoms in southern Africa. To some extent this policy was the product of his belief in the superiority of the white man, a fairly typical Victorian view, though he was no crude racist, and was conditioned also by his earlier official experience in India at a time when many of the princely states had been assimilated, into the imperial orbit. The concept of subservient 'native' states was thus very much part of his professional outlook. He had come to believe that stronger, more developed states would almost inevitably have to assume responsibility for weaker, and to him, less civilised communities, and he held that opportunities for achieving this by peaceful means should not be shunned, otherwise it would only have to be achieved later by means of war.<sup>9</sup> A letter of 10 August 1878 bears testimony to the influence of his Indian experiences on his general strategy in South Africa.

"You must be master as representative of the sole sovereign power, up to the Portuguese frontier on both east and west coasts. There is no escaping from the responsibility which has been already incurred, ever since the English flag was planted on the Castle here ...

I have heard of no difficulty in managing and civilizing the native tribes in South Africa, which I cannot trace to some neglect or attempt to evade the clear

responsibilities of sovereignty. Nothing is easier as far as I can see, than to govern the natives here, if you act as master, but if you abdicate the sovereign position, the abdication has always to be heavily paid for, in both blood and treasure ..."<sup>10</sup>

Despite Frere's preference for peaceful expansion it is clear from his official correspondence after May 1877 that he had come to accept the need for the forcible extinction of Zulu independence almost from the beginning of his tenure as High Commissioner.

What, apart from his general views on expansionism, led him to adopt this course? We must once again refer to the ultimatum which also embodied demands for the permanent reform of the traditional Zulu order. Among these were calls for the readmission of missionaries to Zululand and observance of certain undertakings made by Cetshwayo to the Natal Government in 1873, shortly after his accession, relating to the administration of justice in his kingdom.

The missionaries had long been active in Zululand, but early in 1877 reports reached Natal that attacks had been made on converts living on some stations and that several had been killed. In the ensuing period many converts and some of the missionaries fled the country. It is certainly the case that the Zulu authorities had long disapproved of missionary endeavour, partly perhaps on the grounds that Christianity, with its belief in a transcendent God, eroded the ideological basis of royal power; more palpably because those Zulu the stations attracted, who were often misfits and miscreants, were thus placed beyond the authority of the state. Despite this antipathy and the impression Frere later fostered that **many** converts had been sacrificed as part of a deliberate campaign against the missionaries, contemporary reports refer to the execution of only three converts, two for criminal activities. Bulwer, moreover, attached little political significance to these occurrences.

Nonetheless by mid-1878 no missionaries remained in Zululand. Distressing though their plight was to the personal feelings of a man as devout as Frere, it was not a legitimate ground for plunging Britain into war. Zulu relations with the missionaries were almost entirely a domestic concern, though in 1873 Shepstone had arranged with Cetshwayo that missionaries should not be expelled without official consent from Natal. This agreement did not, however, cover African converts. Since the missionaries had voluntarily departed on the advice of the same Theophilus Shepstone in expectation of a political crisis over the Zulu-Transvaal boundary dispute, Cetshwayo had not violated this arrangement. Manifestly Frere had no technical grounds for resurrecting this issue, and his action in doing so is peculiarly at variance with the views of the Earl of Carnarvon, his political mentor, and the Secretary of State for Colonies at the time of the missionary crisis. At the height of the affair he strongly reaffirmed the policy of non-responsibility for the missionaries; their pleas notwithstanding, if they could make no headway without British intercession, they should leave. Carnarvon was certainly not intent upon making an issue of this question.<sup>11</sup>

Frere in his correspondence was also to expatiate upon Cetshwayo's alleged atrocities against his pagan subjects and was wont to describe him as a 'ruthless savage' with a 'faithless cruel character', whose 'history had been written in characters of blood'.<sup>12</sup> It is indubitably true that executions without trial occurred during this period, and in an unprecedentedly angry message sent to the Natal authorities in late 1876 Cetshwayo renounced their prerogative to prescribe to him how he should govern, and expressed his determination to continue these traditional practices which were, he claimed, a precondition of political stability and social discipline. This communication was, however, little more than an impetuous and probably inaccurately reported outburst. Furthermore, a number of the deaths for which the king was blamed seem to have been instigated by



subordinate chiefs without royal approval or knowledge. Even so it is questionable whether there was an increase in the incidence of executions so dramatic as to justify Frere's lurid characterisation of Cetshwayo's reign.

What is indisputable is that the information which reached the colonial officials was highly exaggerated, for it emanated from the missionaries who had an interest in blackening Cetshwayo's reputation in the hope of thus provoking the intervention of the British which they so desired. Certain of their reports were closely scrutinised by Bishop Colenso, and found to be singularly unreliable. Indeed Cetshwayo's dislike of the missionaries had increased after mid-1877 very largely because of their role as purveyors of distorted information, and because he suspected the motives behind their reports.<sup>13</sup> In any case the governance of Zululand was of no concern to the British since, despite Frere's claims to the contrary at the time of the ultimatum it was not regulated by treaty agreement. The 'promises' made by Cetshwayo in 1873 were envisaged at the time as mere guidelines, for as Shepstone himself wrote,

"... it cannot be expected that the amelioration described will immediately take effect. To have got such principles admitted and declared to be what a Zulu may plead when oppressed was but sowing the seed which will still take many years to grow and mature."<sup>14</sup>

Any more than the other issues had done, this question did not make a major war with the Zulu in 1879 unavoidable or even justifiable.



**Sir Bartle Frere, High Commissioner for South Africa from 1877 to 1880.**

Yet all these incidents were coupled in the ultimatum with other clauses demanding a restructuring of Zulu society so fundamental that hostilities were indeed made inevitable. Thus, among other things, Frere called for the disbanding of the Zulu army and the abolition of restrictions on marriage, reforms which would have exposed the Zulu to external aggression and struck at the very foundations of the Zulu political edifice. He must have known that these terms could not be met within the stipulated time, and would in any event prove to be totally unacceptable. Truly it has been said of Frere that irrespective of the rights and wrongs of the case, and no matter how conciliatory Cetshwayo's behaviour, he was bent upon war and annexation at any price.

In laying such emphasis on the events discussed above, Frere was probably attempting to appease his own highly developed Christian conscience; he needed to convince

himself of the moral rectitude of his belligerent policy. He was also trying to vindicate that policy in the eyes of his superiors, who did not share his enthusiasm for the task of destroying Zulu independence. Carnarvon had contemplated a protectorate and possession of the coastline, but not forcible annexation, and in late 1878 his successor at the Colonial Office, Sir Michael Hicks Beach, expressed the Cabinet's strong aversion to the prospect of war. Thus Frere, in bringing about hostilities, was acting largely on his own initiative; and in circumstances which are singularly suspicious. The Colonial Office was only to receive a copy of his ultimatum on 2 January 1879, by which time it was too late to avoid hostilities.<sup>15</sup>

The real motives for Frere's policy remain to be established. In part its origins are to be found in his oft-repeated conviction that the Zulu military state, of its very nature, posed a fundamental threat to the peace and security of South Africa. The validity of his fears is, however, belied by the history of relations between the Zulu kingdom and its white neighbours. It is undeniably true that relations between the Zulu and the Transvaal had been embittered by long-standing boundary dispute between them, but it is doubtful whether Cetshwayo ever had any serious intention of invading the republic. Until 1876, at least, a close accord had subsisted between the Zulu and Natal; and Bulwer, the man most intimately concerned with the security of the colony, was able to characterise Anglo-Zulu relations till that date as 'friendly', and wrote favourably of Cetshwayo's 'moderation and forbearance'.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the warfare that frequently broke out along the eastern frontier of the Cape had no counterpart in Natal, even though the often fordable Thukela and Mzinyathi (Buffalo) rivers were all that separated that colony from the Zulu.

Frere did, however, cite further factors to validate his belligerent policy. One was the acquisition of between eight and twenty thousand firearms by the Zulu during the course of the 1870s. Though contemporaries underestimated the ability of the Zulu to use the new weaponry effectively, it was widely held that the possession of guns would boost the confidence of the Zulu warriors and incite them to try conclusions with the Europeans. Moreover, by late 1877 Sir Bartle had become convinced that the initial successes of the Bapedi in their recent war with the Transvaal had wrought a similar effect and, further, had encouraged the formation of an inter-tribal alliance against the white man. Late in the following year he expressed the opinion that Cetshwayo was its chief architect. At least initially, Frere may have been sincere in his fears. Nonetheless one can justifiably question the accuracy and reasonableness of his interpretation of the situation, for as late as 23 December 1878, when a British invasion of Zululand was clearly imminent, the following report was received.

"The King has, however, declared and still declares that he will not commence war but will wait till he is actually attacked before he enters on a defensive campaign."<sup>17</sup>

These are certainly not the utterances of an inveterate warmonger. Frere was moreover in possession of the views of Bulwer who concluded that neither the Transvaal nor, by implication, Natal, was in any danger of attack and that a clash could be avoided.<sup>18</sup>

One cannot help feeling that there is something perverse and even wilful about Frere's adherence to his views on the Zulu question, an impression reinforced by his failure, or perhaps refusal, to understand the origins of the problem; the intense dispute already mentioned between the Zulu and the Transvaal over valuable grazing land in the vicinity of the Ncome (Blood) and Mzinyathi rivers in particular, and also the Phongolo river.<sup>19</sup> This issue, and the British initiatives to achieve a confederation of white states in South Africa after 1874, with which it became intimately

associated, dominate the history of Anglo-Zulu relations in the second half of the decade. These two questions give colour and meaning to the actions and statements of British and Zulu alike during this period, and it is against this background that the Anglo-Zulu war must be understood.

Thus at one level the war is simply a dimension of the wider struggle between black and white over access to land. In this case the dispute had its most important origins in the alleged land cession of 1861 in terms of which the Boers laid claim to large tracts of Zululand. The Zulu were much aggrieved at the subsequent Boer encroachments, and not without reason, for the so-called treaty of cession is of largely dubious authenticity. Between 1861 and 1876 they had addressed eighteen requests to the Natal Government to arbitrate, pleas which had been in vain. The crisis deepened in 1875 when the Transvaal tried to give effect to its claims by levying taxes on the Zulu resident in the disputed area, and continued to deteriorate in the ensuing years: sustained drought intensified the competition for grazing, as did the probable increase in the Zulu population; the dislodgement of the Boers in the north of the republic as a result of the continuing difficulties with the Bapedi, speculation in land and its unequal distribution among the Transvaal burgers, and the republican president's policy of signing away land as security for his development projects.

Bulwer quickly perceived the causal inter-connection between the land question and the deterioration in Anglo-Zulu relations, and argued that its just resolution was essential to the preservation of peace in South Africa. Thus in February 1878 he took the initiative in appointing a boundary commission to investigate the dispute, and in their findings the commissioners substantially upheld the Zulu right to the area. In view of Frere's charges that the Zulu were habitually warlike, it is appropriate to observe, at the risk of repetition, that they accepted the establishment of the Commission, as also its final award, though this was less favourable than they had anticipated. Frere took or chose to take, the diametrically opposed view; Zulu intransigence over the territory did not, he opined, point to the source of the wider problem, but served as further verification of his claims about the grave threat they posed to peace. In some measure this assessment is understandable, for until he received the commissioners' report he believed that right was on the side of the Transvaal, and he had supported Bulwer's initiative on the assumption that the results would completely legitimise his plans for war.

Frere's handling of the situation after he had received the report is, however, inexcusable. To the High Commissioner had been given the responsibility of taking the final decision on the land question and of making it public, but Frere made no move for more than five months after receiving it. Indeed he made his decision known to the Zulu only on the day he presented his fateful ultimatum. In the interim he pressed for further reinforcements, citing as justification the growing tension with the Zulu, for which, in fact, his own tardiness over the land question and his policy of building up troop strength in Natal were largely responsible. He also sought new pretexts for war, and it will be recalled that the border incidents which he gave such prominence in the ultimatum all post-date his receipt of the boundary commissioners' findings. Moreover, though he accepted Zulu claims to sovereignty over the disputed land, he upheld the private property rights of the Transvaal farmers living there, thereby effectively perpetuating the territorial question. It can truly be said that from Frere's point of view, the war was a self-fulfilling prophecy; by his actions he gave effect to that which he both feared and wanted, hostilities with the Zulu.

No matter what or how sincere his other reasons for wishing to destroy the Zulu kingdom, that which in the final analysis

made this course unavoidable lay in the British policy of confederation, the achievement of which was to be the grand finale of his long and distinguished career. Lord Carnarvon had sought after 1874 to federate South Africa under the Crown so as to stabilise and ensure British paramountcy in the sub-continent, with the ultimate aim of securing the sea-route to the Orient and of consolidating the British empire at a time when Britain's world hegemony was beginning to be challenged by the emergence of powerful, new industrial states. In the light of subsequent events it is ironic that Carnarvon had hoped that political rationalisation would end both the boundary disputes, and the 'native problem' that had hitherto been the bane of the imperial factor in South Africa. By 1876, however, his plans had made no appreciable headway and in that year Shepstone was detailed to annex the Transvaal in the hope of breaking the logjam.

In bringing the republic under British control in April 1877 Shepstone vindicated his actions largely in terms of Boer vulnerability to African aggression. In particular he made much of the unusually tense situation that existed on the Transvaal-Zulu frontier in late 1876 and early 1877. Indeed, he was especially careful not to discourage Cetshwayo in the threatening stance he had adopted. As it had been in the past, the military power of the Zulu kingdom was at this time an invaluable instrument in the hands of the British for exercising leverage over the Transvaal. The annexation was a decisive turning point in the history of south-east Africa since it transformed the Transvaal-Zulu border question into a direct and pressing imperial responsibility. In the main the Transvaalers had at no stage actively favoured annexation, and as time progressed they had become increasingly opposed to the British presence, largely because of Shepstone's failure to establish peace on the disturbed Zulu frontier; the prospect of armed Boer resistance became increasingly real.

At the time of annexation Shepstone had effectively committed Britain to the maintenance of the territorial integrity as well as the security of the Transvaal, thus predisposing himself in favour of the Boer land claims. This commitment was to harden in the face of the mounting opposition, so that after late 1877 he had become an ardent advocate not only of the Transvaal's claims to their full extent, but also of the necessity for war against the Zulu.<sup>21</sup> He now spoke of, 'the explosion that must come', and declared that, 'had Cetshwayo's 30 000 warriors been in time changed to labourers working for wages, Zululand would have been a prosperous peaceful country instead of what it now is, a source of perpetual danger to itself and its neighbours'.<sup>22</sup> Shepstone's stance had, however, nothing to do with the rights and wrongs of the territorial dispute and, at least in the immediate sense, little to do with the perennial need of the European settlers for labour,<sup>23</sup> but much to do with political expediency and personal ambition; to reject the Boer case would provoke that hostility which would destroy the prospects of federation and ruin his reputation.

Frere was decisively influenced by Shepstone's dilemma. Thus, though the boundary commission had made possible a peaceable resolution of the crisis besetting Anglo-Zulu relations, the situation in the Transvaal made such a course unthinkable. In short the annexation of the Transvaal in pursuit of federation had from Frere's vantage point effectively transfigured the Zulu kingdom into a political anachronism and obstacle, where before it had been a useful ally of the British. More than anything else the need to prevent hostilities in the Transvaal, and to win the goodwill of its inhabitants as well as the support of the Cape, which was reluctant to assume responsibility for the defence of its weaker neighbours, led Frere to adopt a policy of war against Cetshwayo, with the aim of destroying his power, and his claims to the disputed territory.<sup>24</sup>

The impact upon the Zulu of Shepstone's approach to the



territorial question after 1876 was immediate and profound.<sup>25</sup> For years Shepstone had taken the part of the Zulu who had looked to him to settle their difficulties with the Transvaal, and his *volte face* after the annexation had totally destroyed their confidence in him, and was, moreover, by far the most important reason for the decline of the Anglo-Zulu accord in the late 1870s. It quite rightly seemed to the Zulu that the British had rejected them, their old allies, in favour of the Boers, and they were filled with feelings of 'surprise . . . resentment and apprehension'.<sup>26</sup> It was precisely these feelings, of which Frere's handling of the situation was in part the cause, that played such a large role in convincing him of the need for war, and had served as an important pretext in bringing it about.

In fine, though the Zulu were not blameless, they were essentially the victims of the policy of confederation. However, by one of those peculiar ironies of history they were not the only casualties of the war; for the disaster at Isandlwana forcefully revealed to an acutely discomfited Cabinet the extent of Frere's insubordination and exposed it to hostile criticism for having launched the forward policy in South Africa which had *ipso facto* given rise to the unwanted war. In response Frere was chastised, his authority curtailed, his plan to annex Zululand repudiated, and the policy of confederation effectively abandoned. The war had thus discredited Frere, and destroyed the cause both he and it had been intended to serve. □

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