



Custer and the Sioux, Durnford and the Zulus: Parallels in the American and British Defeats at the Little Bighorn (1876) and Isandlwana (1879)

by Paul Williams.

Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015. Pp. vii, 210. ISBN 978-0-7864-9794-2.

Review by James O. Gump, The University of San Diego (gump@sandiego.edu).

Custer and the Sioux, Durnford and the Zulus explores the many parallels in the battles at the Little Bighorn in southeastern Montana and at Isandlwana in present-day KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. In these encounters, the Lakota Sioux and their Cheyenne allies and the Zulu kingdom shocked the governments and publics of, respectively, the United States and Great Britain. Williams, a television and film writer, focuses principally on the careers of Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and Col. Anthony Durnford, both controversial figures whose actions still generate acrimonious debate. Williams has combed through relevant archival sources¹ in writing his book. He proceeds chronologically, placing each battle in its historical context.

The Lakota Sioux, by refusing to stay put or even come near the Great Sioux Reservation, complicated the US imperial agenda on the country's western frontier. As a result, the Interior Department, in charge of Indian affairs since its establishment in 1849, essentially handed the matter over to the War Department in late 1875. Indian inspector Erwin C. Watkins put the matter bluntly in a report of 9 November 1875:

In my judgement, one thousand men under the command of an experienced officer, sent into their country in the winter, when the Indians are nearly always in camp, and at which season of the year they are helpless, would be amply sufficient for their capture or punishment.... The true policy in my judgement, is to send troops against them in winter, the sooner the better, and *whip* them into subjection.
(24)

Williams comments, "it is hard to believe that an Indian inspector was the author of what was to be the nation's recommended military strategy." Yet, Watkins's directive in fact ignited the Great Sioux War of 1876.

In South Africa, the Zulus presented an obstacle to another imperial power, but for different reasons. In the minds of British colonial officials, an independent Zulu kingdom would bottle up abundant supplies of labor and land and frustrate Britain's quest to meld its southern African territories into a white-dominated confederation. For Bartle Frere, the Colonial Office high commissioner sent out to South Africa in 1877, the Zulu kingdom's very existence set a dangerous precedent for other black Africans who might want to join a "native combination" to oust the white colonizers. As a result, Frere maneuvered the British into a preemptive war against the Zulu kingdom in 1879 to eliminate this perceived threat and advance Britain's economic goals in southern Africa. When the Colonial Secretary Michael Hicks Beach learned that Frere was contemplating "ultimatums" and "final solutions," he dispatched the following memorandum: "As you will see from my dispatch, we entirely deprecate the idea

1. At, e.g., the Library of Congress, the Nebraska State Historical Society, the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban, South Africa, and the Library of Billings, Montana.

of entering on a Zulu war in order to settle the Zulu question” (36). The letter arrived after the war had already begun.

Williams’s subsequent chapters explore in depth the parallel strategic shortcomings of the US and British military forces. In each case, three columns marched into enemy territory overconfidently determined to punish their foe. The Americans and the British both divided their commands before ascertaining the size and disposition of their enemy’s forces. On 25 June 1876, Custer split his command into three battalions to facilitate an attack on a village he had not even seen. The British commander, Lord Chelmsford, divided his center column in the early hours of 22 January 1879, relying on sketchy intelligence that the main Zulu army had been sighted. Such hubris and lack of foresight resulted in the calamities at the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana—“it was an embarrassment of international proportions that the world’s preeminent [powers] could suffer such a defeat. Public and politicians alike would be outraged that mere savages could shatter their modern, sophisticated army. So who was to blame?” (155).

The author painstakingly details the historical controversies concerning the actions of Custer and Durnford. Each was the target of fellow soldiers’ recriminations, Custer for abandoning Maj. Joel Elliot at the Washita Battle in 1868 and Durnford for failing to capture Hlubi rebels at Bushman River’s Pass in 1873. In the aftermath of Little Bighorn and Isandlwana, each man was blamed for disobeying orders—Custer for striking the Lakota camp without waiting for additional support and Durnford for moving out from the Isandlwana camp instead of defending it.

The two commanders were driven by contradictory impulses. Custer, who fancied himself an expert on the “Indian problem,” considered the Sioux and other Indians to be noble savages doomed to extinction. He also imagined himself to be an accomplished Indian fighter, even though his main claim to fame was an attack on a defenseless Cheyenne village in 1868. In contrast, Durnford harbored doubts about the justice of the Anglo-Zulu War and worked tirelessly in the late 1870s to preserve peace. Nonetheless, when the war broke out, he felt it his soldierly duty to serve. He commanded the Natal Native Horse, a regiment of over five hundred Sotho and Ngwane soldiers, to whom he was a beloved figure.

In reaction to these controversies, women in the lives of Custer and Durnford worked hard to restore the reputations of their fallen heroes. Libbie Custer, George’s wife, spent the rest of her life defending her husband in a series of popular books.² She lashed out at her husband’s critics and fashioned a romanticized version of her life with him on the plains. Durnford’s confidante Frances Colenso ardently defended him in a book published under the pseudonym “Atherton Wylde.”³ In it, she praises Durnford’s actions at Bushman’s River Pass in a romantic vindication of her fallen friend.

Paul Williams is to be commended for marshaling relevant sources and identifying key parallels between commanders and battles in his suggestive comparative study. But, although his lively prose and ironic insights will appeal to a broad audience, his narrative lacks rigor and any overall analytical structure. Aside from the inherent interest in two stunning battles, we are not told the broader purpose of the book. The “so what?” question gets lost in the details. Nonetheless, those details are, in and of themselves, endlessly fascinating. As Williams well puts it, the “Government and general public alike would be shocked and awed, and all the world would wonder how ‘stone-age’ men could inflict such a blow.... But mistakes had been made. Three columns of troops had invaded in an unjust and unprovoked war, misjudging the fighting capacity of the so-called savages who, it was thought, would not stand against a modern army” (1).

2. Including *Boots and Saddles* (New York, 1885), *Following the Guidon* (New York, 1890), and *Tenting on the Plains* (New York, 1895).

3. *My Chief and I* (London, 1880).