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John Laband, *Zulu Warriors: The Battle for the South African Frontier*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. viii, 345. ISBN 978-0-300-18031-2.

Review by Lindsay Frederick Braun, The University of Oregon (lfbraun@uoregon.edu).

John Laband's body of work is well known and highly regarded among historians of South Africa, including military historians. He is a prolific author with extensive knowledge of southeastern Africa and, more importantly, of Zulu society and culture. His earlier books¹ and essays, consistently written in an accessible style, are essential reading for anyone interested in the complex workings of Zulu society. The same may be said for his latest book, but *Zulu Warriors* ranges far beyond the Zulu War in its analysis of the effects of culture on military performance, and in the process it builds an integrated narrative of a formative moment of conflict in South African history.

While the Zulu soldiery and notions of heroic, masculine combatants figure prominently up through the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, Laband seeks to explain why the battles fought during a larger series of wars unfolded as they did. The result is an interlinked history of the many wars and smaller conflicts that wracked the subcontinent in the late 1870s. Although he does not express the same sense of mission that drives other proponents of integrative history in the new South Africa, his book is part of a larger trend of detailed and discerning histories of the South African colonial encounter: "My intention in this book, then, is to examine and attempt to explain the wars whites unleashed against African states in southern Africa between 1877 and 1879 primarily in terms of African military culture. I shall apply this approach to African warriors defending their lands as well as to African levies and auxiliaries in British and Boer service" (11).

The author therefore also shows that British, British colonial, and Boer military cultures were themselves neither monolithic nor immune to pervasive social forces. His presentation of colonial wars from the perspective of military cultures draws out the distinct notions of honor and heroism within both African and colonial societies. Thus, rather than remaining compartmentalized by colony or ascribed African identity, the conflicts of 1877-79 emerge as parts of a larger whole when set against a backdrop of imperial ambitions.

Laband analyzes in roughly chronological order the three major Pedi wars (1876-79), the War of Ngcayecibi or Ninth Frontier War in the Kei watershed (1877-78), the Northern Border War (1878), and the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Each of these was at the center of various smaller conflicts, for which Laband duly identifies the peculiar local origins, yet he keeps an eye on broader developments across the subcontinent. In so doing, he manages to illuminate the maze of confrontations at the edges of colonial states ranging from the southeastern part of the South African Republic (present-day Mpumalanga) through KwaZulu to the Eastern Cape. His careful exposition of the backgrounds of these conflicts rarely feels belabored; the narrative flows well between areas and eras.

A succinct, engaging prologue on the British colonial war against Langalibalele and the amaHlubi in late 1873 introduces certain key events and themes in South African history during the 1870s. The author's stress here on the concepts of honor and masculinity sets the stage for his later discussions. Further, his commentary on colonial and African militaries of the time addresses the sources of African states' firearms, their simmering grievances, and the changing economic conditions that accompanied growing racial anxiety.

The book examines in detail the Boer-Pedi War of 1876-77 (chapters 3-6) and the two Anglo-Pedi engagements of 1878 and 1879 (chapters 15 and 22). It also plots the shifting relations between the Pedi king Sekhukhune I and successive governments of the South African Republic and the British Transvaal Colony in the course of the other conflicts Laband describes. The Pedi conflict involved two inconclusive wars before the British victory of 1879. Laband reveals the difficulties the colonial powers faced in fighting the

1. E.g., *The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation* (1995; rpt. NY: Sterling, 1997).

kingdom as well as the desire of British authorities for confederation and their suspicions about resistance and alliances among African states. In the Pedi case, contemporary reports contain many observations about new cattle and Sotho-speaking strangers visiting various courts around the region. The ultimate triumph of the British over Sekhukhune I followed wide-ranging regional pacification efforts, in which political developments were inseparable from the operational details of the military campaigns.

Chapters 7 through 12 treat the last of the so-called “Frontier Wars”—the 1877–78 War of Ngcayecibi—which enabled the Governor and High Commissioner in Cape Town, H.B.E. Frere, to remove independent and semi-independent kings and chiefs around the Kei River, free up lands for hungry European settlers, and ensure that friendly African allies insulated them from threats to their security. Laband shows how the history of settler vs. Xhosa encounters and the practices of the many Xhosa nations dictated military actions in this last formal conflict. Although historians often characterize this war as a rather cursory affair, it had serious repercussions long after 1878. Particularly welcome here is Laband’s discussion of the technical details of colonial war-making, specifically with African allies like the Fingoes (Mfengu), whose position made white settlers uneasy, because the structural problems on all sides made outcomes less certain than they might appear in hindsight.

Chapters 13 and 14 provide a brief but engrossing account of the Northern Border War against Tlhaping forces in 1878, which pitted colonial columns against a persistent enemy that used broken terrain to their advantage. Charles Warren, who later faced withering criticism of his command at the battle of Spion Kop during the South African War, even called his opponents’ irregular tactics “treacherous,” while defending himself against charges of atrocity (181). Victory was not the entire story.

Laband brings his decades of research and writing to bear on the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 (chapters 16–21). His explication of the nuances of the Zulu and settler cultures makes his account a pleasure to read despite its introduction of many new concepts and terms; he explains these things, but a glossary might have helped further. Laband moves deftly from the buildup to war through the events of early 1879 and the political and strategic developments that precipitated the eventual outbreak of hostilities. The following passage on the reluctant Zulus’ decision to accept war in 1879 typifies the author’s evocative, detailed descriptions:

In its debates the *ibandla* had been divided. *uMntwana* Hamy kaNzibe, the king’s deeply ambitious brother, had undoubted designs on the throne and always opposed [king] Cetshwayo, while his chief *induna*, *iNkosi* Mnyamana kaNgqengelele of the Buthelezi, and his powerful cousin, *iNkosi* Zibhebhu kaMaphitha of the Mandlakazi, wished to maintain good relations with Britain and realistically feared the consequences of going to war with them. Yet so draconian was the British ultimatum, so fatal was it to Zulu independence, that even they could see no alternative but to fight. In early January 1879 the *amabutho* mustered at oNdini where they were “doctored” for war and readied themselves to affirm their masculinity and prowess through the death of the invaders. (207–8)

Moving outside Zulu-related matters, Laband refers to the other conflicts and common elements of culture to fill in the broader context; he notes, for example, whether an officer was involved in another campaign, the importance of cattle and climate, and the relevance of military operations to achieving political goals in Ulundi, Pietermaritzburg, Cape Town, and London. In the process, he demonstrates that, despite a daunting disparity in technology and firepower, the high tactical capacity of disciplined Zulu soldiers and commanders fighting the British enabled them to inflict one enemy casualty for every three of their own (262). This most welcome nuanced perspective on African military history within its sociocultural contexts applies throughout the book. The final British defeat of the entrenched Pedi polity—using African allies and imperial troops with artillery—provides a fitting terminus to Laband’s narrative (chapter 22).

In the book’s conclusion, Laband considers (too briefly) the aftermath of British imperial ambitions in the collapse of the revolutions of 1877–79, the armed re-establishment of the South African Republic in 1881, and the death of the wider South African confederation scheme. But beyond brief bits on the critical Sotho Gun War of 1880–81 and the fates of Pedi king Sekhukhune and Zulu king Cetshwayo after the 1879 wars, he barely mentions the revolts that often overlapped the wars he describes—the Griqualand East rebellion of 1878, the second Griqualand West rebellion, Moorosi’s rebellion, and the major Transkeian rebellions of

1880–81, among others. A little fuller treatment of these would not have materially deflected the basic thrust of the book and could have added to the reader's sense of the anxieties that prompted the wars themselves.

This well-edited book features a full index and beautiful illustrations. The detailed endnotes and list of "Printed Works Cited in the Notes," too, are valuable, but they also attest to the book's heavy reliance on published primary and secondary sources, rather than the archival material the author has tapped so effectively in his previous works.

These minor reservations aside, John Laband has produced a thoughtful, evenhanded treatment of a series of wars that shaped the history of the South African subcontinent. As an experienced social and cultural historian familiar with the technical and operational details on all sides of the conflicts of 1877–79, he provides an integrated view of a critical period in South African history that will, one hopes, prompt historians to revisit these topics through other thematic lenses. In short, *Zulu Warriors* is a valuable addition to South African history in general; it will make both academic and casual readers think about the remarkable inequalities of Victorian colonial warfare in a new light.