

# Letters from the Zulu War 1876-1879

by David McNamee

The *Anglo-Zulu War* lasted less than eight months in 1879, yet it has been an active collecting subject from the day hostilities ceased. British soldiers sent home great numbers of Zulu artifacts. However, the postal history of the war has not been comprehensively treated, primarily because there are less than 200 covers extant covering the period 1876-1879, and those are well dispersed among collectors. The war was brief, the numbers engaged were small, and therefore the postal history is scarce. From a rates and routes perspective, the postal history is dull: a concession rate for enlisted ranks of 1d and normal postage of 6d for officers, with campaign mail largely carried by courier to the nearest post office in Natal unless the troops were stationed within a town. Nearly all mail went to the British Isles by regular steam packet service. From the perspective of military history, this war comes at a time when tactics were changing from scarlet tunics in line abreast to mounted infantry in butternut, and arms were changing to breech-loading rifles and Gatling guns able to produce horrific casualties on native troops carrying spears and clubs. The study of individual battles and the personalities on both sides of the Zulu War is the story of extreme bravery and heroic sacrifice.

## The Gathering Storm: Friction and Forces 1876-1878

Southern Africa in 1876 was a mix of states. Cape Colony was a self-governing British colony while Natal was a Crown Colony governed by the British Colonial Office. The Orange Free State was independent, and the independent Boers gov-

erned the South African Republic (Z.A.R.) north of the Vaal River. The independent Zulu nation bordered the eastern frontier of Natal and the southern border of Z.A.R.

The discovery of diamonds in 1867 brought an influx of fortune-seekers to the northern frontier of the Cape, and the discovery of gold in the Transvaal in 1868 brought British miners to the Z.A.R. By 1876, the population of Natal was rapidly increasing and pressing the border with Zululand. Population growth and cultural differences meant that Boers, British and Zulus were constantly testing and provoking each other over land. Other independent native groups gave everyone trouble.

British miners in the Lydenburg gold district (Z.A.R.) were among the many outlying communities growing rapidly near traditional native lands. Bapedi Chief Sekukuni, an ally of Zulu King Cetshwayo, threatened the small Lydenburg community in early 1876, prompting Lt. Col. Vivian to send a plea to Natal for protection [*End Note 1*]. Lt. Governor Sir Henry Bulwer made his reply through his Private Secretary (Figure 1):

*Estcourt, Natal*

*April 27 1876*

*Sir:*

*I am directed by His Excellency the Lieutenant Governor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 18th inst. which has been forwarded to him from Maritzburg.*

*His Excellency learns with much concern that the English community at Pilgrims Rest are under apprehensions on account of the hostile attitude which you state the native chief Sicoconi has assumed toward the Government of the Transvaal.*

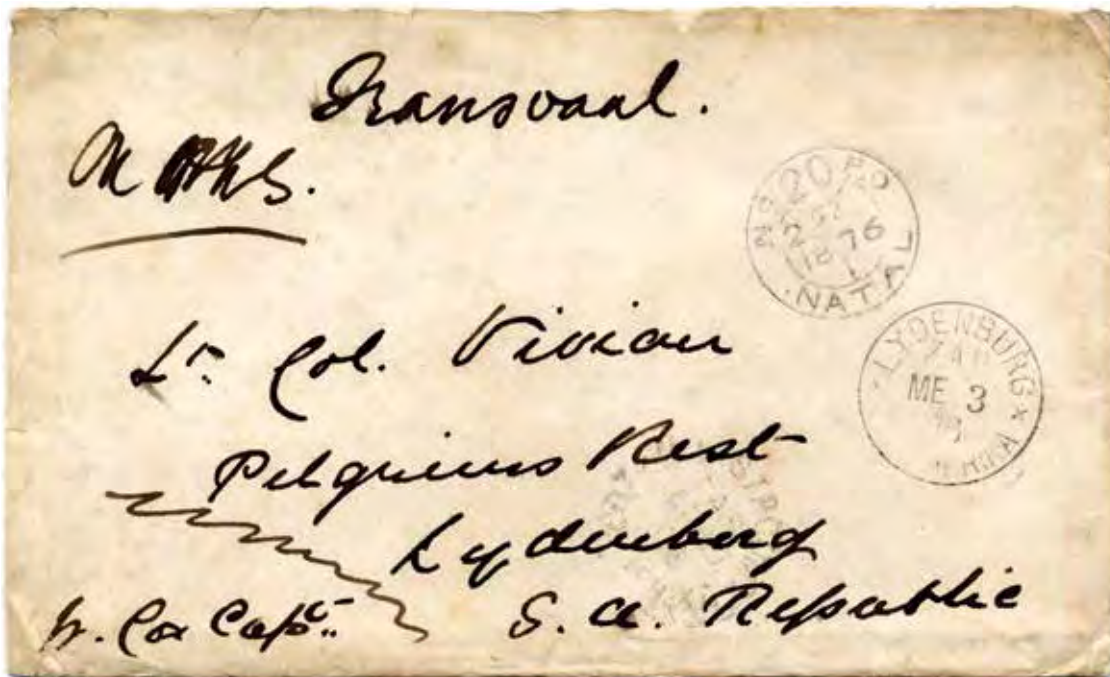


Figure 1. The cover of the 1876 OHMS letter which traveled from Estcourt via Newcastle, Natal, to Lydenburg, Z.A.R., arriving May 3. The letter was a plea for British troop protection

*The District in which you are is in the territory of the Republic, and His Excellency cannot of course interfere in any matter that concerns the Government of the Republic; nor has he the power to appoint any person to represent Her Majesty's Government at the gold fields, as you request. He would advise you to place yourself at once, if you have not done so, in communication with the Government at Pretoria that it may take such measures as may appear to it necessary in the condition of affairs which you report to exist.*

*I have the honor to be  
 Sir your Obedient Humble  
 Servant  
 William Cox Capt.  
 Private Secretary*

Following the above rebuff by Bulwer, the miners apparently obtained Z.A.R. Government action. Z.A.R. forces attacked Chief Sekukuni on May 16, 1876, initiating the *First Sekukuni War*. The campaign was concluded with a peace treaty in February 1877, but the campaign was a financial disaster, and the nearly bankrupt South African Republic Government was left with chaos. The British intervened to stabilize the situation, followed quickly by formal annexation of the Transvaal April 12, 1877, much to the displeasure of the Boers. Almost at once, Sekukuni ignored the treaty with the Boers and again harassed the area near his territory.

The Zulus and Boers had a history of conflict and mutual mistrust. The annexation of the Boer Republic brought the Brit-

and the construction of a string of forts near the Sekukuniland border, the British began a Second War on Sekukuni in October 1878.

Two companies of the 90th Regiment (Perthshire Light Infantry) arrived at Luneburg, Z.A.R. on October 18, 1878, building Fort Clery just north of Zululand to defend British subjects along the Pongola River from Swazi Prince Mbilini, another Zulu ally. Figure 3 shows a cover mailed by an officer attached to the 90th Regiment addressed to London.

In January 1879, these forces suspended operations against the border tribes to participate in the British invasion of Zululand.

**The First Invasion: Disaster and Defeat Jan.-March 1879**

The personal ambitions of the British High Commissioner for South Africa Sir Henry Bartle Frere and the military commander Lt. General Lord Chelmsford created a pretext for war with the Zulus in 1879 with the primary aim of eventual annexation of the independent Zulu kingdom into a confederation of British South African colonies.

British forces available to Lt. General Lord Chelmsford were experienced regiments that had just concluded the *Ninth Kaffir War* against the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape Province. They were joined by the Natal Mounted Police and local militia units. The local units were invaluable for their knowledge of the terrain and the Zulu language. Several regiments of the Natal



Figure 2

ish into direct conflict with the Zulu kingdom and its allies. The militaristic Zulu kingdom was viewed as a major threat to stability and development in both Natal and Transvaal.

Settling the *Ninth Kaffir War* (1877-1878) in the Eastern Province of the Cape released a number of Imperial troops, some of which were transferred to the Transvaal-Natal border region. Figure 2 shows a convenience use of an OHMS envelope by Lt. Thomas Fenn of the Frontier Light Horse posted at Newcastle, Natal on September 8, 1878, to London. Lt. Fenn was among the forces deployed in Transvaal. After the arrival of reinforcements from the 2/80th and the Frontier Light Horse

Native Contingent were formed, with Zulu-speaking white officers.

The map of Figure 4 shows the planned lines of advance in red. Lord Chelmsford initiated a three-pronged attack on January 12, 1879, converging on the Zulu capital Ulundi and Zulu King Cetshwayo's army of 40,000. Against the Zulus, Chelmsford mustered 5000 British troops and approximately 6000 Colonials and native auxiliaries. The Zulu response to the invasion is in blue.

The Right Flank Column was commanded by Colonel Charles Knight Pearson of the 2/3rd (the Buffs) and included



Figure 3. Cover from Captain Aubrey B. Maude with the detachment of the 90th Regiment at Fort Clery written November 20, 1878, to his father Col. George Maude, CB, Crown Equerry at the Royal Mews, Buckingham Palace, London. The letter was carried by military courier back to Newcastle, Natal, and placed in the postal system there

Figure 4. Map of the invasion plan of three converging forces. Chelmsford held reserves near Luneburg in the north and along the Tugela River near Greytown to protect against an attack on the colonial population



the 99th Regiment as well as various other units of mounted infantry, artillery, engineers, and five troops of the Natal Volunteers and other forces. The route taken was from Fort Pearson near the mouth of the Tugela River and along the coastal plain toward Eshowe and the road to Ulundi in central Zululand. Figure 5 is a cover from Lt. H. R. Knight of the Buffs on the eve of the march to Eshowe January 18 endorsed "Lower Tugela, Zululand."

Refer to Figure 4, the map of the first invasion. (1) Pearson's Right Flank Column crossed the Tugela River mouth, and on the morning of January 22, the column was attacked in the first battle of the war at Inyezane River. Following the battle at the Inyezane River, Pearson's Right Flank Column dug in at the abandoned KwaMondi mission station at Eshowe and remained besieged by Zulus from the end of January.

(2) Colonel Richard Glyn led the Center Column across the Buffalo River at Rorke's Drift and camped near a butte known as Isandlwana, 20 miles inside Zululand. Lord Chelmsford, in overall command of the Imperial Forces, accompanied the column. Early morning January 22, Lord Chelmsford initiated a reconnaissance in force with Col. Glyn and the 2/24th, based on inaccurate rumors of a large Zulu force nearby, effectively splitting his forces in two. The main Zulu army then attacked the weakened encampment at Isandlwana midday January 22, and over 1300 of the 1700 British forces in camp were killed in the battle, including all of the officers and men of five companies of the 1/24th.

There are a very few pieces of mail directly connected to these early events. Perhaps the finest cover discovered was written by Col. Glyn to Captain Harrison stationed in the rear area





Figure 5. Cover from Lower Tugela January 17 as the Right Flank Column began its march to Ulundi via the coastal plain



Figure 6. Cover of letter from Col. Glyn to a brother officer Captain Harrison. Partial transcript: “. . . On the 22nd the five companies of the 1/24 and six companies of the 2/24 were totally destroyed by the Zulus and our (unreadable). We have lost everything and 10 officers and 350 (unreadable) before they retired. The Batt lost 5 officers (lists the 5 names). . .”

as Assistant Quartermaster General. The letter is dated January 29th, a week after the massacre at Isandlwana.

(3) Honor was salvaged by the British with their stubborn defense of the depot at Rorke's Drift from an attack by another Zulu force the afternoon of the 22nd to the morning of the 23rd of January [End Note 2].

(4) A third Zulu force engaged Colonel Evelyn Wood and the Left Flank Column in northern Zululand at the battles of Ntombe on March 12 and Hlobane Mountain near the Transvaal border on March 28, inflicting significant British casualties. These early Zulu successes were wasted by a disastrous attack

on the Column's fortified laager at Kambula on March 29. The effect, however, halted the British advance on all fronts while Lord Chelmsford sought reinforcements.

During a pause after the battle at Kambula, Lt. Col. Redvers Buller, V.C., of the 60th Rifles and commanding the Frontier Light Horse of the Left Flank Column wrote to Viscount Gort (Figure 7). The letter was about the heroic death of Viscount Gort's son at Isandlwana, Lt. the Hon. Standish Pendergast Ver-e-ker, who was serving as a British officer with the 3rd Regiment of the Natal Native Contingent.



Figure 7. During a pause after the battle at Kambula, Lt. Col. Redvers Buller, V.C., of the 60th Rifles and commanding the Frontier Light Horse of the Left Flank Column wrote to Viscount Gort. The letter was about the heroic death of Viscount Gort's son at Isandlwana, Lt. the Hon. Standish Pendergast Vereker, who was serving as a British officer with the 3rd Regiment of the Natal Native Contingent

Telegraphic communications with London meant that Queen Victoria heard of the disastrous start of the Zulu War soon after it happened. The telegraph was also used to divert troops from other posts to reinforce Chelmsford quickly, as well as inform loved ones of those missing and dead (Figure 8).

**The Relief of Eshowe March-April 1879**

Figure 9 is a cover from Commander J. W. Brackenburgh in command of the *HMS. Shah* unit of the Naval Brigade to his fiancée posted March 28 from Fort Pearson via Stanger and

Durban. The *HMS Shah* Naval Brigade was 16 officers and 378 men. The *HMS Shah* also brought troops of the 88th Regiment diverted from St. Helena to join in the attack on the Zulus.

In a heavy rain on March 27, Lord Chelmsford began to ferry 5600 troops across the Lower Drift of the Tugela River to begin the relief of Col. Pearson at Eshowe only 37 miles away. On the march, Chelmsford inflicted a stinging defeat of the Zulus at Gingindlovu on April 2, and his column reached Eshowe the next day. By April 6, the fort at Eshowe was abandoned, and Chelmsford led his column back across the Tugela River.



Figure 9. The Naval Brigade played an important role in the order of battle. The Naval Brigade brought a Gatling gun and two 7-pounder artillery pieces with experienced crews to handle them



# CAPE OF GOOD HOPE TELEGRAPHS.

No. of Message.

If the accuracy of this Telegram is doubted, it will be repeated on payment of half the amount originally paid for its transmission; and, if found to be incorrect, the amount paid for repetition will be refunded. When the cost of a reply to a Telegram has been prepaid, and the number of words in the reply is in excess of the number so paid for, the Sender of the reply must pay for such excess.

Dated Stamp of

**N.B.—This Form should accompany any inquiry made respecting this Telegram.**

Charges to pay £.....s.....d.

Handed }  
in at the }

Office at 1014

Received }  
here at 9 55 a

Delivering Office.

From

Capt Parr  
Mil Sec  
Parrburg

To

Miss Maclean  
Drontray

His Excellency has received your letter of Feb 9<sup>th</sup> and directed me to make necessary enquiries. I regret very much that there is no doubt that Henry Pearse was killed in action on 22<sup>nd</sup> ultimo one of the Natal Police is here who was at Isandhlwana & was close to Henry Pearse when he fell. If I can be of any further service pray command me.—



Figure 8: 23 Feb 1879 Telegram to Cape Town from Captain Parr, Military Secretary to Sir Henry Bartle Frere, responding to a query and confirming a soldier reported killed at Isandhlwana on 22nd of January.  
 Transcript: "His Excellency has received your letter of Feb 9th and directed me to make necessary enquiries. I regret very much that there is no doubt that Henry Pearse [Natal Police Trooper Henry T. Pearce] was killed in action on 22nd ultimo [January]. One of the Natal Police is here who was at Isandhlwana and was close to Henry Pearse when he fell. If I can be of any further service pray command me."

Figure 10 is a cover to Bookers town, Ireland, via Durban posted April 21, 1879, to Viscount Gough. This is likely a condolence letter on the death of the Viscount's third son, Capt. H. Rudolph Gough, a British officer serving with the Natal Native Contingent. In spite of illness, Captain Gough fought bravely at Gingindlovu on April 2. He died of dysentery at the Base Hospital in Herwen, Natal, on April 19, two days before this letter was mailed.



Figure 10

### The Second Invasion: Revenge for Isandlwana April-May 1879

After the relief of Eshowe, the British withdrew to defensive positions in Natal in a string of forts along the Zululand frontier. Although there were a number of alarms during April and May, the Zulus had adopted a policy of defending their territory and did not intend to attack Natal. The attack at Rorke's Drift was against Chetshwayo's instructions.

Figure 11 is the front of a Soldier's 1d concession rate cover posted at Greytown April 12, 1879, to England from Pvt. Lewis of the 2nd Battalion/4th Regiment (King's Own). A detachment of three companies was detailed to build fortifications at Greytown to defend central Natal against Zulu attack.

England sent seven new regiments, plus artillery, engineers, and supplies to Durban, during April and May as Lord Chelmsford organized a second invasion of Zululand. The second invasion would be a two-pronged attack with the Second Division

in the north led by Chelmsford, and the First Division led by Major General Crealock coming up from the coast via Eshowe. The cover in Figure 12 is a July 1879 Artillery Officer's letter sent 6d due from Fort Tenedos at the mouth of the Tugela River via Durban to England. The letter was from Lt. John Henry Jervis-White-Jervis of "M" Battery 6th Brigade to his father, a retired Colonel of the Royal Artillery and at the time serving in Parliament as the Member for Harwich. Lt. Jervis-White-Jervis



Figure 11. The front of a Soldier's 1d concession rate cover posted at Greytown April 12, 1879, to England from Pvt. Lewis of the 2nd Battalion/4th Regiment (King's Own). A detachment of three companies was detailed to build fortifications at Greytown to defend central Natal against Zulu attack





Figure 12

and his unit landed in Durban March 22 and moved up to Fort Tenedos April 16 to join the First Division for the southern arm of the second invasion.

#### Toward the Climax: The March on Ulundi May-June 1879

The map in Figure 13 shows the movements of the troops in the second invasion. (1) The Second Division, supported by Colonel Wood's Flying Column on its left flank, moved out of northern Zululand on May 27 to strike for the Zulu capital of Ulundi. Along the way, Chelmsford's troops destroyed as many Zulu homesteads as they could find. On June 27, the combined force reached the edge of the White Mfolozi valley near Cetshwayo's royal homestead at Ulundi. (2) The First Division moved up the coast, serving as both a threat in Cetshwayo's rear and a blocking force.

Figure 14 is an officer's letter headed June 19, 1879, bearing Durban, Natal, datestamp of 23 June and 6d in circle postage due marking to Leamington, England, endorsed "On Active Service/ No stamps available/ A.V. O'Brien Capt." Capt. A. V. O'Brien was in charge of one of the companies of the 3rd Battalion/60th Rifles, part of the forces converging on Ulundi. The letter was sent by courier to the post office at Durban for packet service to England.

Figure 15 is an officer's letter of June 26, 1879, bearing a Natal 6d stamp overprinted POSTAGE to Buckingham Palace, London, from Captain A. B. Maude of the 90th Foot, part of Col. Evelyn Wood's Flying Column. The envelope is endorsed by the recipient "Recd 12th Augt/ Zululand 26th June/ near Ulundi." The letter entered the post at Dundee, Natal evidenced by shield-type circular date stamp with the numeral "34."

On July 4, 1879, Cetshwayo led 23,000 Zulus against Chelmsford's troops formed in a hollow square in open country near Ulundi. The massed rifles, cannons and Gatling guns put up a withering fire against the enveloping Zulu army. The Zulus retired from the field pursued by the 17th Lancers. Total British casualties were 10 killed and 53 wounded, and the Zulu army lost 1500 killed. Cetshwayo fled Ulundi with a small personal bodyguard, and the British troops burned the King's homestead.



Figure 13. Chelmsford approached from the North with the Second Division supported by Wood's Flying Column serving as a screen and as scouts. Crealock's First Division approached from the south and served as a blocking force

#### Winding Up the War July-December 1879

The defeat of the Zulus at Ulundi was not the end of all conflicts. Cetshwayo had escaped, and pockets of resistance continued for several months with casualties on both sides. Natal remained on an active war footing. Cetshwayo was captured finally on August 28, 1879, and by October, all organized resistance was suppressed.

Figure 16 is a cover dated August 7, 1879, [Contains 2 letters dated 19 and 20 July 1879] from the First Officer of a Union Steamship Co. vessel waiting at Durban to his wife, commenting on the hardships of a civilian serving in a war zone, Lord Chelmsford, and the recent defeat of the Zulus at Ulundi. The letter was sent from Durban, Natal, to Liverpool, the 6d stamp paying the contract packet rate to England.

Figure 17 is a cover dated August 18, 1879, from Captain Maude to his father, Col. Maude at Buckingham Palace, Lon-



don, endorsed "On Active Service No Stamps Available." The 90th Foot was part of the mopping up force after the battle of Ulundi. Capt. Maude was killed February 27, 1881, at Majuba Hill, Natal in the final battle of the First Anglo-Boer War.

Lt. General Sir Garnet Wolseley succeeded Lt. General Lord Chelmsford in mid-July. After Cetshwayo's capture, Wolse-

ley compelled all Zulu chiefs to come to his camp and offer their formal submissions. This process took up the remainder of 1879.

**Epilogue (1880-1906)**

The British won the Anglo-Zulu War, but peace was not assured. The defeat at Ulundi broke the power of the Zulu military system, and the British divided the territory into 13 districts with Chiefs nominated and affirmed by the British Resident Agent (a governance model used successfully elsewhere). The Chiefs ruled with the advice and consent of the Resident Agent.

Real pacification took nearly three more decades. From 1880 to 1906, there were two major wars between the British and the Boers that involved Zulus or Zulu territory to some extent, and several civil wars among rival Zulu chiefs. The final chapter was written in 1906 when native resistance to poll taxes erupted in armed conflicts in Natal and Zululand. Colonial militia units were called up, and within six months the ring leaders were captured or killed, and the rebellion put down. The 1906 rebellion was the final organized struggle of the Zulus. After 30 years, the conquest was finally complete.



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17

**End Notes**

1. The spelling of Zulu names and places varies from source to source because there are some sounds in Zulu that are difficult to render in English. "CETEWAYO" appears as a signature on a letter during the deposed king's visit to London. Other sources render the name as Cetshwayo and as well as other variations.
2. The defense of Rorke's Drift was portrayed in the 1964 film *Zulu* written by John Prebble, starring Michael Caine and Stanley Baker. The 1979 film *Zulu Dawn* written by Cy Endfield, starring Bob Hoskins, Burt Lancaster and Peter O'Toole, portrayed the disastrous battle at Isandlwana and some of the weaknesses of British planning.

**Selected Bibliography**

Caswell, Mark. *The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879* (High Halden, UK: Debair Publishing, 2005). Comprehensive listing of every British unit and every officer in those units and their responsibilities, including British officers seconded to militia and native contingents.

Kinsey, H.W. "The Sekukuni Wars," *Military History Journal*, Vol. 2 No. 5 (June 1973) and Vol. 2 No. 6 (December 1973). Available

also from the South African Military History Society web site at [www.samilitaryhistory.org/vol025hk.html](http://www.samilitaryhistory.org/vol025hk.html) and [www.samilitaryhistory.org/vol026hk.html](http://www.samilitaryhistory.org/vol026hk.html).

Labland, John, *Historical Dictionary of the Zulu Wars* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009). Concise and comprehensive accounts of all battles and all major persons involved on both sides.

Morris, Donald R., *The Washing of the Spears* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965). The history of the Zulu Nation from its rise under Shaka to its fall in the Zulu War of 1879.

Thompson, P.S., *An Historical Atlas of the Zulu Rebellion of 1906* (author, 2001). Hard to find, but comprehensive treatment including maps of every skirmish and battle of this final Zulu rebellion.

*Thanks to Alex Haimann for sharing the Col. Glyn letter and cover (Figure 6).*





ISSN 1076-2612

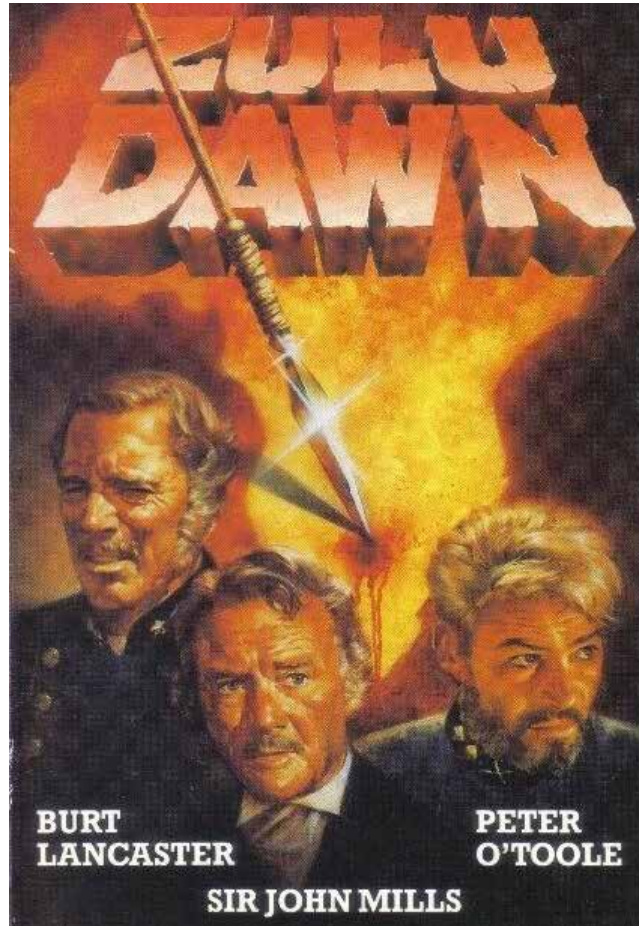
# \*\*\*\*\**FORERUNNERS*

*JOURNAL OF THE PHILATELIC SOCIETY FOR GREATER SOUTHERN AFRICA*

*Affiliated with the American Philatelic Society and the Philatelic Federation of South Africa*

Volume XXXII, Number 3, Whole Number 94

March - June 2019



Movie Poster for *Zulu Dawn* from 1979. Read McNamee's Article on Page 67 for Philatelic Aspects of the Conflict

## **Highlights**

Zulu War Letters

Pan-Africa at MILCOPEX

South Africa Postal Orders

Interprovincial Usage

*Milcopex, PSGSA, and Pan-African Convention*



Civilian Boer War letter addressed to York, England (OHMS crossed out). It is endorsed "On Active Service / No stamps available." It received a November 20, 1899, marking by a Macloutsie dated canceller and transit marked on the reverse at Palapye on November 23 and Bulawayo on 29th. In 1899, the Bechuanaland postal agency of Macloutsie was an office on the telegraph sideline between Palapye and central Rhodesia via the two border posts of Macloutsie and Fort Tuli. It is thus plausible that the letter originated at Tuli, passing by Macloutsie to reach Palapye where it was sorted to Bulawayo, received a tax mark, and eventually reached its destination via Beira of Mocambique. The sender may have been associated with Col. Plumme's reinforcement of the Tuli garrison in October 1899. The cover was part of the 'Koi' collection sold by Feldman in December 2018 (lot 30480).

## Membership Application

*Membership includes a subscription to the Society's journal Forerunners. The membership fees are \$20 for an electronic version of Forerunners. To obtain also the print version add US\$5 to US mailing addresses, US\$10 to Canada addresses, and US\$15 to the rest of the world. Those that join before July 1 will receive the complete back issues for that year. Thereafter annual renewals occur in August and are due by September 1. If sending in dues by mail, please provide funds in US\$ either in currency or a check on a USA bank account made out to "PSGSA." Mail all payments to David McNamee, PSGSA Treasurer, P.O. Box 37, Alamo, CA 94507 USA. PayPal to "dmcnamee@aol.com" is also acceptable, but please add US\$ 1 extra to cover part of the PayPal fees we must pay to use the service. For some overseas members, it might be more advantageous to send in dues for two or more years to avoid the annual currency conversion fees.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

APS No: \_\_\_\_\_

Collecting interests and Comments: \_\_\_\_\_