

## “Scouts and Skirmishers, Stalkers and Harriers”

**Paul S. Thompson, *The Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879***

Revised edition, P.S. Thompson, Pietermaritzburg, 2003

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16 maps, bibliographical essay

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Paul Thompson is a well-known military historian and has published extensively on the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, often in collaboration with John Laband, another well-known authority on the same war. *The Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879* is a revised edition of his monumental work on this subject published in 1997. Though the original work addressed an important aspect of the War that had not been extensively researched before, it was published privately in a limited edition, because publishers felt that “white readers were not interested in blacks outside the simplistic British-Zulu confrontation, and black readership such as it was was an inefficient market” (p iv). The small stock was, however, sold out almost immediately and the author received numerous requests for copies since. Hence this new edition.

The text of this new edition is essentially the same as that of the original work,<sup>5</sup> since, in Thompson’s words, “what has appeared to be relevant in the more recent literature on the war is in the main inadmissible for being hearsay evidence or oral history of doubtful substance” (p iv). Though the text has not been changed significantly, the quality of the (very informative) maps has been improved and several of them have been redrawn. The book has also been reformatted from its original A5 to A4 size. Although the larger size makes the book perhaps a bit less manageable, it undoubtedly contributed to the enhanced quality of the maps. Still lacking in the new edition, is an index at the back of the work to allow easy reference to specific subjects.

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<sup>5</sup> For a review of the first edition of *The Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879*, see J Lambert, *South African Historical Journal*, 37, November 1997, pp 235 - 237

Approximately half of the British forces that invaded Zululand in 1879 were African soldiers levied by the British. Yet political and cultural considerations, Thompson argues, have denied these black warriors their rightful place in the abundance of literature on the Anglo-Zulu War. At the peak of the British Empire Europeans had no inclination "to glorify the feats of indigenes, unless they were the reflective ones of a foe" and following the decline of the Empire, Africans had "no desire to glorify them, unless they were feats of resistance" (p v). Serving on the side of the white colonial power, the black levies of the Anglo-Zulu War would, in popular historical perspective, represent collaborators in a white-black conflict and thus "egregiously incorrect politically and best forgot" (p v). From a cultural perspective, the role of the Natal Native Contingent was neglected because of racialist factors: the predominant white readership of the war literature "has evinced practically no interest in what non-Europeans, except for the enemy, did in the war" (p v); on the other hand, the aforementioned political considerations would probably "pre-empt" the potential African readership.

In 1879, almost 90 per cent of the inhabitants of the British Colony of Natal were Africans. The history of the Anglo-Zulu War is thus, in Thompson's view, incomplete without a full account of the role that the African majority played. The lack of literature on the role of the Natal Native Contingent in fact prevents a full understanding of the War, both from a military and a political perspective.

The book comprises seventeen chapters, commencing with the origins of the Anglo-Zulu War and the mobilisation of the three regiments of the Natal Native Contingent, followed by an extensive coverage of the operations in which they participated, including the infamous British defeat at Isandlwana, the relief of the besieged British forces at Eshowe and the final British victory at Ulundi. The book concludes with chapters on the capture of the Zulu king, Cetshwayo kaMpande, and the destruction of the Zulu kingdom through the British peace settlement.

The African majority in Natal supported the white colonial power against fellow Africans, Thompson argues, because they "owed much to the British and little to the Zulu ... the British had brought peace to a land ravaged by warfare, the source of which had been Zulu expansion" (p 1). The majority of the Africans in Natal were loyal to the British Crown and, furthermore, saw the Zulu as a threat to their own security. The Chiefs thus responded favourably to the British call for levies and the men reported for duty willingly. A total of approximately 8 000 Africans eventually served on the British side during the War mostly as foot soldiers, but also as mounted infantry, pioneers, scouts and auxiliaries.

The small mounted element of the Natal Native Contingent, well-trained, well-equipped and well-led, performed well throughout the war. On the other hand, their comrades on foot received very little training before the war and were not yet fully accustomed to the British military organisation by the time they went into battle. They were also ill-equipped, with only one foot-soldier in ten issued with a firearm. It is exactly to these shortcomings that Thompson ascribes the fact that a substantial portion of the Natal Native Contingent broke and fled during the Battle of Isandlwana on 22 January 1879. In his estimate, contrary to popular belief that they were useless and cowardly in battle, these men "had stood in line to fight while there was some point to it, then they had fled ...[they] failed because of inadequate European leadership and training in extraordinary circumstances, not because of lack of courage or determination" (pp 76, 77).

After the disaster at Isandlwana, the incompetent white leadership of the Natal Native Contingent were “weeded out”, while all men were issued with firearms and received some musketry training. Better trained, better equipped and better led, these soldiers participated in every battle during the second British invasion of Zululand and performed better. Yet, Thompson admits, most of them could still not use their firearms properly and remained nervous under fire. The British commanders continued not to trust them completely in the line and they never achieved the level of efficiency that would have made them self-reliant. These weaknesses Thompson ascribes to the fact that the European way of war “remained a mystery to them, and in dangerous and doubtful situations they lapsed into the Africa way” (p 171). African tradition, training and tactics were to fight on the offensive, not the defensive; when they were defeated, they fled. But, in the final analysis, Thompson stresses, “there was never a question about the *personal* bravery of the men”. The men did panic at times, but so did Europeans - fear and nervousness affect all newcomers on the battlefield.

Politically, Thompson concludes, the Natal Native Contingent was “the greatest manifestation” of the “loyal support” of the black population of Natal for the British Crown. Militarily, he argues, the Natal Native Contingent was “indispensable to British victory”. Serving as “scouts and skirmishers, stalkers and harriers”, they were the “eyes and ears of the British army in the field” (p 171). The British would probably have been unable to supply sufficient men for these duties from elsewhere, and those that might have been mobilised, would have lacked the all-important knowledge of local conditions.

Thompson’s book remains the only comprehensive, thoroughly researched work on the role of Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. It is indeed a great comfort to all students and readers of the War to have it back on the shelf.

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