

COL. ANTHONY WILLIAM DURNFORD (1830-1879)

From Manorhamilton to the Anglo-Zulu war

Dominic Rooney

Family Background & Early Life

Anthony Durnford's father, Edward, a native of London, was commissioned into the Royal Engineers in 1825 at the age of twenty-two. Two years later the young lieutenant joined the Ordnance Survey of Ireland which was then in the process of mapping the whole country. Early in 1828 he was assigned to County Leitrim, where the survey was just beginning. For the next four years he headed a team of five British soldiers, six Irish labourers and a 'measureman' named Bernard McTiernan which operated throughout the county.

While surveying the parish of Cloonlogher, south of Manorhamilton, in June 1829, Edward Durnford was given a month's leave of absence to go to Cardiff to get married to Elizabeth Rebecca Langley. Elizabeth came to live in Manorhamilton and a first child, Anthony, was born to them on 24th May 1830. He was baptised in the local Church of Ireland parish church on 19th June.

When the initial stage of the survey in Leitrim was completed in 1832, Edward was transferred to the Ordnance Survey headquarters in the Phoenix Park in Dublin. His wife Elizabeth and young Anthony then left Manorhamilton and joined him there. Five more children were born to the Durnfords in Ireland, where Edward remained until transferring to the English Ordnance Survey in 1842. He later went on to become a distinguished general in the British army and died in Southsea in 1889.

Anthony's early schooling took place in Ireland, but at the age of twelve he was sent to an uncle in Düsseldorf in



Anthony William Durnford

Germany to pursue his education for the next four years.

Early military career

On arriving in England in 1846, Anthony entered the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. Like his father, he obtained a commission as a second lieutenant in the Royal Engineers. In 1851 he was posted to Ceylon. While there he was appointed assistant commissioner of roads and civil engineer to the colony, in addition to his military duties.

Anthony returned to Britain in 1858 and was promoted to the rank of captain. Two years later he accepted command of the 27th company, Royal Engineers, which was stationed in Gibraltar. In 1864 he sailed for China with the intention of serving under Charles Gordon who was reorganising the Chinese army, after having suppressed the Taiping uprising. However, his health broke down and he was invalided back to Britain. He

spent the next six years on home postings in England and Ireland.

Character and domestic life

Anthony Durnford stood six feet tall and was of slim build. He was becoming bald by his late thirties and sported a distinguished moustache that drooped to his collarbones. Anthony was high-principled and committed to social issues, especially showing a great concern for the underprivileged. But he was also ambitious for military glory and prone to be over-enthusiastic and even impetuous.

While stationed in Ceylon in 1854, he married Frances Tranchell, the youngest daughter of a retired colonel who had served in the Ceylon Rifles. Of three children born to the Durnfords, two died in infancy, causing both parents huge distress. Their marriage, already under strain due to Anthony's modest wages, gambling habits and transfers overseas, came to an end in 1860. His own family took care of their surviving daughter, to whom he remained devoted for the rest of his life.

Posted to southern Africa

Durnford was sent to the Cape colony early in 1872. While there he was favourably impressed with the African people, describing them as honest, chivalrous and hospitable. He was promoted to the rank of major and ordered to neighbouring Natal in May 1873. There he became friendly with the Anglican bishop, John Colenso, who shared his humanitarian views and sympathetic attitude towards the



King Cetshwayo of the Zulu nation

natives. He also formed a deep friendship with the bishop's daughter, Frances. As a British army officer, however, Durnford could not divorce his wife, and so could never marry Frances Colenso.

In his capacity as senior British officer in Natal, Anthony attended the coronation of the new monarch, King Cetshwayo in neighbouring Zululand in September 1873. While there, he took the opportunity to familiarise himself with the Zulu way of life. Two months later Durnford was ordered to prevent the departure from Natal of the Hlubi tribe, who had refused to register their firearms with the British authorities.

In the skirmish that followed at the Bushman's River Pass, Durnford's force of white colonist volunteers panicked and fled. He himself was twice speared by the Hlubis, resulting in the permanent disablement of his left arm. His subsequent criticism of the white troops angered the colonist population of Natal. However, in

recognition of his personal courage during the event, he was promoted lieutenant-colonel.

Durnford further antagonised the local white population by championing the cause of the Putini tribe which had been unjustly punished because of their alleged co-operation with the Hlubis. In May 1876 he returned to Britain to seek medical treatment for his disabled arm. This wasn't successful, and after a short posting to Cobh in Co. Cork, he was reassigned to Natal the following year.

The Anglo-Zulu war of 1879

When Anthony returned to Natal in 1877, Britain was attempting to bring about a confederation of states in southern Africa under its own control. In April of that year the Boer Republic of the Transvaal was annexed as a British colony. The British High Commissioner for southern Africa, Sir Bartle Frere, saw the independent Zulu kingdom as an obstacle to the confederation policy, and began to try and force a confrontation with the tribe. A boundary commission was set up in 1878 to adjudicate on a border dispute between the Transvaal and Zululand. Although the commission's report, drafted by Durnford, favoured the Zulus, Frere continued his war preparations.

In December 1878 Frere complained against minor border violations by the Zulus in Natal and the Transvaal. He then issued a thirty-day ultimatum to King Cetshwayo to disband his army and submit to British control. The Zulu monarch, ruler of 300,000 natives, and with an army of 40,000 warriors, could not accede to such demands. When the ultimatum expired without a response, the British prepared to invade Zululand.

Their commander-in-chief, Lord Chelmsford, had at his disposal an

army of some 17,000 men, comprising regular British forces, white Natal volunteer units and black African troops. Although his army was much smaller than that of the Zulus, Chelmsford was supremely confident of his men's military superiority, and expected a short, sharp and successful campaign against the natives. He decided on a three-pronged invasion of Zululand, with all three armies due to converge on the Zulu royal capital at Ulundi, fifty miles from the Natal border. Durnford, who had recently been promoted colonel, was given command of a reserve column which was to remain at the border until needed.

Chelmsford travelled with the main invasion force of 5,000 men which entered Zululand on 11th January 1879 at Rorke's Drift, a river crossing named after an Irishman, Jim O'Rorke, who had established a trading post nearby. Leaving behind a small force to guard the post, Chelmsford started out for the Zulu capital, but was hampered by wet weather and swampy wagon trails. He had only progressed ten miles in over a week when he set up camp at Isandlwana Hill. He neglected however to fortify the camp, either by encircling it with his numerous supply wagons or by digging a protective trench around it. On 21st January Chelmsford sent out a reconnaissance party. On hearing that it met with some resistance from a party of Zulus ten miles from the camp, he set out early the following morning with over half of his remaining force to assist it. Before leaving, he sent orders to Durnford to come and reinforce Isandlwana in his absence.

Durnford's party of 500 African troops arrived at Isandlwana later that morning. He immediately took command of the camp as he was four years senior to Colonel Pulleine whom Chelmsford had left in charge. Following reports of Zulu sightings in the nearby hills, Durnford took several hundred of his



Isandlwana Hill & Battle Site

African troops to investigate. One of his lieutenants suddenly came across the main Zulu army of 24,000 men crouched in silence in a concealed valley. Once discovered, these now gave chase to Durnford's men who began retreating towards Isandlwana. The Zulus, armed with throwing and stabbing spears, as well as obsolete muskets, also descended swiftly from the hills and began to surround the camp itself.

Durnford's men managed to hold up part of the Zulu advance for a while, but were eventually forced to make for the camp. At the same time some of the African troops within the camp began to flee in disorder. The Zulus then rushed the British lines and the battle dissolved into a brutal struggle for survival. Two groups of British soldiers in particular were seen by survivors making a final stand against the Zulus. One of these was led by Durnford who had rallied a hundred men at one end of the camp. When their ammunition ran out they fought with swords and bayonets before being eventually killed.

The attack, which lasted two hours, resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Zulus. Over 1,300 men of the 1,700 strong British garrison had been massacred. Only fifty British regulars and three hundred African soldiers escaped. Although the Zulus lost 3,000 warriors in the battle, Isandlwana constituted one of the greatest single disasters of Queen Victoria's reign and

was a major blow to Britain's military self-confidence.

The aftermath of Isandlwana

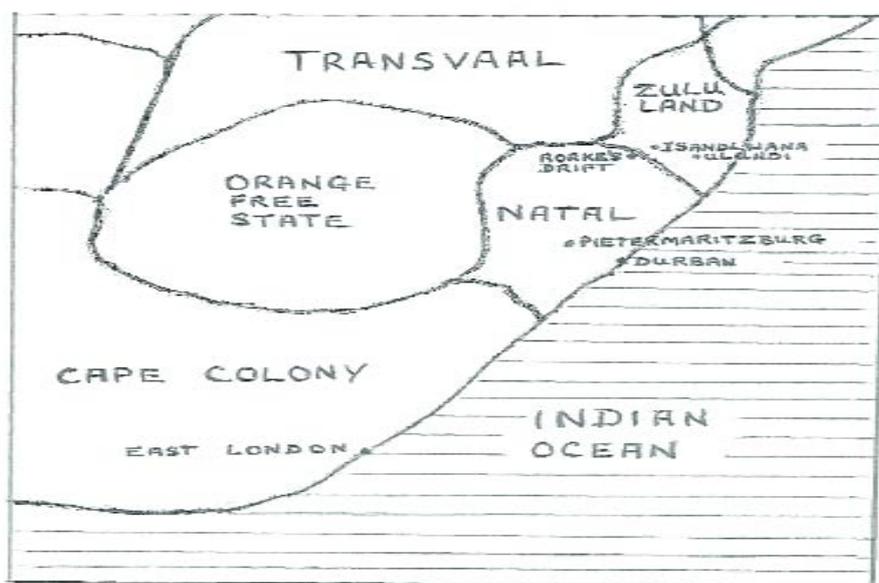
Some hours after the massacre, a reserve force of 4,000 Zulus attacked the British position at Rorke's Drift. Here, after a heroic defence, the one-hundred strong garrison eventually repulsed the enemy. Seventeen defenders and five hundred Zulus were killed in this engagement. In the following months a reinforced British army had several victories over the Zulus, before finally capturing King Cetshwayo's capital, Ulundi, in July 1879. Zululand then came under British control and was annexed to

Natal in 1887.

Both Chelmsford and Frere were severely criticised in the British Houses of Parliament and in southern Africa itself over the Isandlwana disaster. Prime Minister Disraeli was furious with both men, although Queen Victoria stood by them. Chelmsford, who was relieved of his command some months later, never accepted any responsibility for the catastrophe. A court of inquiry, convened by him shortly after the event, attributed most of the blame to Durnford for having left the camp poorly defended.

A British patrol visited Isandlwana in May 1879. Durnford's body was identified and buried at the site, but was later re-interred in the military cemetery in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal. A commemorative window to Durnford in Rochester Cathedral in Kent was donated by Durnford's brother officers in the Royal Engineers in 1880. Colonel Anthony William Durnford died many miles from his birthplace of Manorhamilton in a war with black Africans, a people for whom he had often shown both sympathy and concern.

All photos are courtesy of John Young, Chairman, Anglo-Zulu War Research Society.



SKETCH MAP OF SOUTHERN AFRICA IN 1879