

Obituaries

David Grey Rattray (1958–2007)

An enduring memory I have is of a youthful David Rattray, eagerly bent on luring tourists to his newly-established Lodge above Fugitives' Drift, running helter-skelter along the hazardous Fugitives' trail from Isandlwana to welcome a fresh party of visitors to the Lodge. This action epitomises the energy, determination, commitment and enthusiasm which characterised his approach to his life and work. His untimely and senseless murder, at the age of only 48, by intruders to his now famous Fugitives' Lodge, brought a tragic end to the life of this remarkably talented man.



David Rattray

David Grey Rattray was born on 6 September 1958 in Johannesburg. Educated at St Alban's College in Pretoria, he went on to the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg to read entomology, graduating in 1982.

His interest in the history of the Zulu people was kindled by his childhood visits to the battlefields with his father Peter, a former lawyer, and discussions with legendary pioneer farmers like George Bunting. More importantly, his contact with Zulu inhabitants in the areas close to Fugitives' Drift and Isandlwana, armed with their oral evidence of the battles, enthralled and fascinated him. With the help of his lifelong friend and mentor, Mzunjani 'Satchmo' Mpanza, he became a fluent Zulu linguist.

In the 1960s, his father had bought 10 000 acres of land on the banks of the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) river, part of which was above Sothondose's, or (as it was then known), Fugitives' Drift, across which British survivors of the Isandlwana battle had fled.

After graduating, Rattray took up the position of manager of Mala Mala game reserve but was soon lured by investors to Namibia where he was tasked with establishing a new game reserve. Opportunity turned to tragedy when his young son was killed in a freak accident and the investors vanished leaving David to pick up the pieces. Having paid off the staff of the reserve, David, now aged 30, his wife Nicky, and remaining child, all but penniless, moved to the remote farm on the Mzinyathi river.

In its original state, the guest house had been the home of John Potgieter and family. Rattray's mother Gillian, a well-known writer and artist, had immortalised 'Mr Pot' in her award-winning book *The Springing of the Year*. During his early days on the farm, when he was still honing his rhetorical skills and refining his interpretations of the battles of the Anglo-Zulu War, Rattray came under the scrutiny of local academic historians, some of whom were somewhat scathing of what they perceived as his 'simplistic' approach to the events he was so eloquently describing. Rattray remained undismayed and determined as an untrained historian to make his mark in the competitive arena of interpreters and narrators of the military campaigns in the KwaZulu-Natal region. It was not too long before he was able to marry his impressive knowledge of oral testimony with extensive reading of written sources and fieldwork on site. Increasingly, he began to collaborate with academics and more popular authors of military history to investigate some of the intriguing mysteries clouding the actions of participants in the conflicts.

I recall spending a stimulating morning with him some way along the Fugitives' trail, close to Isandlwana, where we explored his tentative theory that some of the officers who had hastily left the battlefield on horseback had deserted the ordinary ranks leaving them unsupervised to erect hastily-formed defensive lines. He based this assertion not only on oral and written evidence, but also on a meticulous study of the terrain and the position of stone redoubts and graves along the trail towards the Mzinyathi river. This exercise in historical interpretation is testimony to his growing sophistication in the field of historical analysis. As to the soundness of his theory, we came to no conclusion on that day.

Rattray is, however, remembered more (perhaps unjustifiably) for his incomparable skills as a dramatic narrator of battles than for his competence as a serious historian. He was often to be found on the battlefield, clutching his beloved knobkerrie, surrounded by enthralled visitors, dramatising events with war cries, songs, shouts and screams, softened in a lower tone of voice by his empathetic appreciation of the horrors of war and man's inhumanity in the face of combat. Few who listened to him did not shed tears. He spoke, too, of valour and of pride and the love that can exist between men. He spoke of respect for those who had died on the battlefields, respect for our elders and for each other. Significantly, over the years his presentations were also attended by 94 generals and two field marshals, many of whom it is said were similarly reduced to tears.

David enjoyed colouring his descriptions of conflict with anecdotes gleaned from both oral and written sources. I recall how delighted he was, aided by his entomological background, to read of the exploits of Lieutenant Henry Harford, who, fighting for the British at the attack on Sihayo's stronghold prior to the Isandlwana battle, dropped to his knees as the action began. His comrades feared for his life but he had only dropped to his hands and knees to transfer a rare beetle into a tin box! Rattray's descriptions were richly enhanced by anecdotes such as this one.

Indeed it was David's ability to empathise with the personalities who fought in military conflicts which added a vital dimension to his lively presentations. These insights enabled him to place the military campaigns he described in the wider context of his vision of the future of South Africa in which an understanding of bitterness and conflict could be woven into a cord to bind people together.

During his early years at the Lodge, David spent many hours, accompanied by his Zulu friends, combing the terrain in the vicinity of Isandlwana, Rorke's and Fugitives'

Drifts, to challenge the prevailing interpretations of the battles and to search for abandoned or lost relics. He was particularly excited when an old Zulu informed him of an oral tradition which claimed that a great number of British firearms, uniforms and other items had, soon after the Isandlwana battle, been hidden in a cave near Fugitives' Drift. Even though the cave was not located, David's infectious excitement at the possibility of finding such treasure never abated.

As Rattray's fame as an incomparable raconteur spread, visitors from far afield began to visit Fugitives' Drift Lodge. Many left so moved and inspired, that they returned again and again to partake of the intellectual and emotional stimulation provided by Rattray's tours. Evenings spent enjoying Nicky's superb meals were invariably followed by animated discussion with the Rattray family about topics as diverse as fishing, snakes, insects, birds, trees, ecology and of course, history!

Rattray welcomed many dignitaries and influential people to his farm (the Lodge was now incorporated into a game farm), including the Duke of Edinburgh, the Openheimers, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Ian Player, Cyril Ramaphosa and Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, with whom he established a close friendship.

In 1997 Rattray met the Prince of Wales when Charles and his two sons took a short holiday at the Lodge following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Rattray was subsequently invited to Balmoral as a guest of the Prince. Rattray also became involved in outreach projects amongst the local communities and was supported by Prince Charles in fundraising efforts to modernise a local school.

In the United Kingdom, Rattray addressed capacity audiences at the Royal Geographical Society on a number of occasions and in 1999 was honoured by that society by the Ness award in recognition of his work in widening popular understanding of Zulu culture in southern Africa. The following year he delivered the inaugural lecture in the Laurens van der Post memorial lecture series at St James's Palace. In 2002 he returned to London to receive a *Tatler* travel award for 'Vision in Tourism'.

Rattray often experienced problems with his vocal cords as a consequence of incessant presentations on the battlefields, yet never considered stopping. Instead, to supplement his on-site presentations, he produced a series of his narrations on tape and CD which allow enthusiasts to listen to them at leisure. As his confidence and expertise in his ability to interpret and explain aspects of the Anglo-Zulu War grew, Rattray turned his attention to writing. His *Guidebook to the Anglo-Zulu War Battlefields* (in collaboration with Adrian Greaves), was published in 2004 and a second publication, *A Soldier Artist in Zululand*, was launched shortly after his death.

Rattray leaves his wife Nicky and three sons, Douglas, Andrew and Peter. His legacy will live on, for his family have vowed to continue his work at Fugitives' Drift Lodge where tour guides, expertly trained in the style of presentation David made famous, still welcome visitors. Indeed, instead of his demise sounding the death knell of Rattray's endeavours, the famous Lodge has recently become a place of pilgrimage attracting those who remember or have heard of the gentle, caring man who with his knobkerrie aloft and his eyes fixed on the battlefield, passionately recounted tales of the exploits of men locked in conflict.

JEFF MATHEWS