The causes of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879


The Anglo-Zulu war is perhaps the most well known colonial campaign of the Victorian or any other era. We know more about it than many other wars and it has generated an enormous amount of excellent scholarship. My particular interest in this subject, however, is driven by the wider context of the Anglo-Zulu war, of why it started and what its results were. It has often been assumed in the popular imagination that this war was little more than an unprincipled land grab driven by greed and instigated by a maverick, but the aim of this paper is to challenge some of these assumptions and to put forward a more radical and, I think, a more plausible answer to the question of why there was an Anglo-Zulu war in 1879.

Economics
Let us begin by laying the ghost of capitalist greed. In economic terms, South Africa was simply not worth the effort of conquest; individual fortunes might well have been made in South Africa (but not many), but before the discovery of gold in 1886, the region was poor and unpromising – total Cape imports and exports were valued at £7.5m in 1880 (and that includes the diamonds) while Britain’s exports alone came to £286m. Hopes of future mineral wealth were just that – gold, along with the unicorn, had been regularly reported since the 1790s. The Colony of Natal contained around 18 000 European settlers, not all of whom were British, and its two main towns of Pietermaritzburg and...
The causes of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879

Durban were really only villages of 2,000 European souls – during the 1880 election campaign Gladstone spoke to a crowd of 25,000 people at Waverley Market in Edinburgh on one day alone. The ability of the settlers to shape imperial policy into dispossessing the Zulus of their land was also therefore very limited.

Other theorists have argued that Zululand was conquered to turn the Zulu warriors into miners and farm labourers, but again this does not stand close examination – the Zulus had a lucrative business in supplying Tsonga labour to Natal, while it would always be far easier and cheaper to import Indian indentured labour than fight a war. Indeed, farming opportunities throughout Southern Africa in this period were both risky and rare and there are few businessmen who prefer the uncertainties of war as a business strategy. And we should take pains to point out that the major forward moves in southern Africa took place before the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886 and into areas that were very marginal economic prospects. What economic interests were at stake were offshore in the £190 million per year’s worth of trade that went around the Cape – and that did not include the shipping it was carried in – but the security of this trade would not be enhanced by the occupation of Zululand.

Geopolitics

The reality is that Cetshwayo and the Zulu people were unwittingly caught up in a much wider ideological struggle being fought out within the British establishment during the mid-Victorian period over the question of Empire and it really is impossible to understand why there was a Zulu war without placing southern Africa very firmly within a global context.

Before 1860, Britain had had no serious rivals for her easy dominance of trade and empire expressed in the idea of Pax Britannica but with the emergence of the USA, the unification of Germany and the expansion of Russia towards the north west frontier of India after 1870, Britain faced several new challenges to her position as an imperial power which could not be ignored.

There was also a growing belief among military men that the traditional British war fighting strategy of naval blockade and the ‘Third Campaign’ was no longer a viable one. (The Third Campaign was the idea that Britain could afford to accept reverses in war for two successive years in the sure knowledge that the enemy would collapse under financial strain while Britain could still pay for new armies and fleets.) War fighting strategy was no longer viable as a result of the new Prussian military system which emphasised the rapid mobilisation and deployment of large conscript armies for a pre-planned knockout blow before an enemy could properly respond. It was also the result of the rapid advances in naval design that held out the possibility of the Royal Navy’s command of the seas being fatally undermined.

Much commented upon at the time, the Austrian and Italian fleets had met at Lissa in 1866 and battered each other for most of the day without causing significant damage to each other because the guns were simply not powerful enough to defeat the armour carried – a matter of no small concern to naval observers.

Similarly, a fictional but rather well informed pamphlet published in 1871 entitled ‘The Battle of Dorking’ held out the serious possibility that a surprise Prussian invasion could succeed in capturing London before Britain could assemble her forces. It sold 80,000 copies at sixpence apiece. In India there was a corresponding increase in anxiety as the Russians got nearer to the north west frontier and in 1873 a tidal wave of alarm over the security of the frontier was caused by a certain
The causes of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879

Sir Bartle Frere and his allies in the Indian establishment.

In tandem with these changes a ‘Defence Establishment’ of military, naval, imperial and colonial figures began to emerge with some very particular ideas and attitudes towards what they saw as new, grave challenges. They made up an interlocking network of institutions and thinkers based around particular regiments, like the scientific officers of the RA and the RE, the Institute of Naval Architects, the War Office Intelligence Branch and in India, the Scinde Horse. Probably pre-eminent within this movement was the Royal United Services Institute, which we might identify as the first defence think tank. Many of these often well educated men had extensive experience in the empire and believed themselves both competent and duty bound to act with energy and decision. They also believed that in a dangerous world, Britain and the empire needed to be adequately armed – ‘if you want peace, prepare for war’ was their unfailing motto. They believed that the empire was dangerously ill-prepared for war but also that the empire could provide the platform on which Britain could retain her great power status in the face of the bigger continental powers of Germany, Russia and the USA. They also doubted the ability of politicians, easily swayed by the new democratic public opinion created by the 1867 Reform Act, to conduct an effective foreign policy in a crisis. As Sir Garnet Wolseley put it in 1892:

There is no decline in the manly powers of our soldiers and sailors...it is only the quality of our rulers, the fibre of our ministers that has undergone a change for the worst: they have conformed to the democratic system of the day...We want rulers but are told to look for them in some howling fellow who for the time being is in the front rank of the most ignorant of our people.

Lord Lytton was even more forthright; he thought the average MP was an ‘exceedingly foul bird’ while Frere publicly lambasted Gladstone as unfit to be in office for his public campaigning oratory. The net result of all this thought and discussion was a conviction within the defence establishment that a more active approach to imperial defence matters was essential and an increasing distrust of the willingness of politicians to take the necessary steps. More importantly, they believed that they had the right to ignore political direction if they considered it necessary and that forward moves were acceptable if they improved the strategic security of the empire. And at the tip of this iceberg was Lord Carnarvon, whose first act as Colonial Secretary was to order a thoroughgoing imperial defence review. The first visible sign of this review in Natal was the building of Fort Durnford at Estcourt and Fort Amiel at Newcastle.

When Disraeli and the Tories came to office in 1874, many of these soldiers and statesmen read the new, more positive approach to the empire as a green light for their own ideas on how the empire should be run. As a result, over the next 15 years there would be repeated instances of disobedience to political authority by members of the defence establishment. In 1875 Governor Andrew Clarke RE disobeyed his instructions and established British paramountcy in Malaysia through armed mediation. Clarke was sacked but his successor, Colonel William Drummond Jervois, went further and started the Perak War without permission. Lord Lytton stretched his instructions to breaking point by starting the 2nd Afghan War in 1878. George Colley did likewise at Majuba in 1881. General Gordon was virtually ordered to disobey his instructions to evacuate the Sudan in 1883. St Lucia Bay in the north of Zululand was annexed in 1886 without the knowledge of the
Colonial Secretary while Zululand itself was finally annexed in 1887 by Melmoth Osborn on his own initiative.

We are used to thinking of Sir Bartle Frere as a maverick but he was not. He was part of a powerful political lobby.

Which brings us to the man himself. There is no doubt at all about the immediate responsibility for starting the Zulu war – it was the work of Sir Bartle Frere, British High Commissioner, who ignored repeated orders and warnings to desist from starting the war. Make no mistake – Frere started the war; he could have stopped it or delayed it but chose to go ahead, even though he knew that it was a step too far and beyond any acceptable discretion he could expect to wield.

But why? Why did he disobey? And who was this man anyway? He has been stereotyped as ‘a bully in a black hat caught with a smoking gun in his hand’ but even a cursory reading of his career to that point would discount such a judgment. This was a man who rebuilt the cities of Karachi and Bombay, freed slaves, who founded universities, initiated irrigation schemes that put millions of acres of desert under the plough; a man whom Florence Nightingale hailed as ‘the best of men’ for giving Bombay a lower death rate than London through his sanitary reforms.

Henry Bartle Edward Frere was born at Bath in 1815, joined the East India Company in 1834 and went to work in the Bombay presidency, where he rose rapidly through the ranks – it helped that he married the governor’s daughter – to become the Chief Commissioner of Sind on the North West frontier, member of the Viceroy’s Council (1859–62) and ultimately, the legendary Governor of Bombay (1862–7). For a short period after the mutiny he was, de facto, Viceroy of India as everyone else on the Council had died or was in England. On his return to England he served on the India Council heading up the Political and Secret Committee (a fact that was carefully omitted from his tombstone biography) and shepherded the Prince of Wales on his tour of India in 1876 – no mean feat, given Bertie the Boundah’s extra-curricular interests. He was also a leading defence thinker who had written on Indian, naval and imperial defence. Indeed he was the first man to write a really comprehensive theory of how the north west frontier should be defended and which proved to be the basis for both Lord Lytton’s and General Colley’s campaigns in Afghanistan.

On the face of it he was an ideal candidate for the South African posting, but in reality he had two major flaws in his approach. The first was complete faith in the doctrine of the ‘Man on the Spot’; once a commission was given, the Man on the Spot should not be subject to interference from on high and only judged on his results. The second was that he, along with many others in the defence establishment, had severe reservations about the competence of politicians to conduct effective foreign and imperial policy in the new post-1867 democracy where appeals to popular opinion were becoming more important.

The background to the decision to post Frere to South Africa is important. Lord Carnarvon wanted to join together all the weak states and colonies of South Africa into one Confederation in the hope that together they would make up one, large pro-British bastion, like Canada, but up to 1876 the policy had foundered on colonial opposition and Boer hostility. However, between 1876 and 1879 a major international and imperial crisis developed which drove Carnarvon to a renewed and urgent attempt to revitalise the policy.

This crisis began with a revolt in the Balkans when the Bulgarians revolted against their Turkish overlords in the Ottoman Empire. The Russians, eager to turn
this to their own advantage and use it as an excuse to gain their age-old dream of capturing Constantinople, threatened to intervene with their armies. For the British this would mean disaster. The vital imperial lifeline between London and India passed through the Eastern Mediterranean and Suez and if the Russians captured Constantinople then this life-line could be cut by the Russian navy. At the same time, the advancing Russian influence in Afghanistan brought them closer and closer to the North West Frontier of India. To the defence establishment, it looked like Britain would face a major attack on her empire in the very near future and, when the Liberal leader, Gladstone, launched his ‘Bulgarian Horrors’ campaign to prevent Britain threatening war with Russia, they were incensed at the paralysis of foreign policy that had resulted.

Every subaltern knew that the vital ground in any scheme of imperial defence was the Cape of Good Hope because it provided the only secure route to India – Suez could be closed or dynamited – but like most of the other colonial ports, the defences of Cape Town had been left to rot. In 1866 the Director of Ordnance reported that ‘the fortifications are generally in bad condition and quite unfit to resist attack by heavily armed ships of war,’ while at Simon’s Town they were in equally ‘bad condition, and quite unfit to resist the projectiles now in use’. The guns available were plentiful but outdated and ‘quite insufficient for defence’; Simon’s Town, lacked a magazine dry enough to store gunpowder in.1 In 1874, the coal stocks were ‘quite open to attack’2 and the Admiralty’s Cape and West Africa Station, which consisted of a meagre two corvettes, one sloop and five gun vessels, was two gunboats short of complement.3

Under Gladstone’s administration the troops in South Africa had been reduced from five battalions in 1867 to two and a half by 1872,4 while the Cape Mounted Rifles were disbanded by him on grounds of cost in 1870,5 leaving the regular forces to be supported by police units and militia alone.

But did this neglect matter? Wouldn’t distance protect the Cape from the Russians? It is a pleasant fact that there wasn’t a hostile shot fired on the Cape Peninsular between 1806–1914. Not through all the Xhosa, Zulu or Boer wars did Cape Town once experience the sound of battle and, given the dominance of the Royal Navy during this century, we might be forgiven for overlooking the possibility of a Russian invasion force disturbing its long peace. However, the military architecture tells a different story. The star fort in Cape Town is the most obvious landmark and the remains of a battery in Hout Bay; scratch around outside the Camps Bay High School and it looks like there may be the remains of another one there. Later insecurities put a warship turret on the North Shore battery outside Simonstown. Look at little closer, however, and, curiously enough, one quickly realises that the foundations of the North Shore battery are very definitely of late Victorian vintage; the Hout Bay battery, too, consists mainly of Victorian buildings. Why? Who were they designed to defend against? Walk down into Simonstown and on the wall of the dockyard there is a clue; a plaque commemorating the visit of the Confederate States Ship Alabama in 1863.

The impact of the Confederate States Navy on imperial defence thinkers was profound. The global reach of the Alabama and the Shenandoah indicated to many of them that the easy dominance of the oceans enjoyed by Britain was not as complete as might be supposed. The fact that Britain had built cruisers for the Confederacy had provided a precedent for the USA to build cruisers for the French or Russians in wartime and thus defeat a blockade of French
ports or the choke points at the entrance to the Baltic or the Straits. Commerce raiding and privateering, outlawed in theory at the Treaty of Paris 1856, was back with a vengeance. Indeed, the first foreigner to address the Whitehall-based defence think tank, the Royal United Services Institute, was a Confederate naval officer. If this wasn’t bad enough, the Russian navy then developed a ‘Volunteer’ Navy which was kept constantly at sea to avoid any chance of a blockade and which included a substantial number of marines. These forces were tasked with raiding British colonial ports in the most audacious fashion possible. Cruisers would rob the banks, destroy shipping, coal stocks and dockyard facilities and then disappear into the ocean wastes to attack the food supplies and commerce that Britain depended on. The possibility, therefore, of a Russian cruiser squadron leaving a string of burning ports from ‘Cape Town…to Trincomalie, Singapore and Hong Kong; in fact almost any British port abroad’ behind it was regarded as a very real one. If this was rather an alarmist view, it was one that was sincerely held within the ADM, CO, WO, Cape, Canadian and Australian governments and inside the Cabinet.

Remedying this situation was, therefore, a high priority for Carnarvon and he thus turned to Sir Bartle Frere, a man at the height of his fame, an imperial big hitter, a troubleshooter, a man who could be relied upon to accomplish difficult things, a good man in a crisis and not least, a leading defence thinker. In short, Frere was sent out to South Africa not to tame the Zulus but to get ready to fight the Russians.

When Frere arrived at the Cape in April 1877, he brought with him a blueprint for the defence of the colony that he had worked on between his appointment in October 1876 and February 1877. Uppermost in his mind was the question of the cruiser and privateering threat, something that he had given thought to for more than a decade. In October 1866, for example, Frere woke up one morning to find the USS Shenandoah riding at anchor off Bombay which emphasised rather vividly… that she might have dropped upon us quite as unexpectedly in time of war as of peace; that we have nothing to meet her within a thousand miles distant and not in telegraphic communication.

This experience echoed in the weakness of the Cape station where ‘there seems rarely to exceed a single ship at Simon’s Bay, some hours distant from Cape Town, which contains the principal Government buildings and the largest mercantile community in the Colony.’ Simon’s Town was ‘entirely incapable of defence even against…a privateer armed with long range ordnance’, and there were ‘no useful land defences, nor the means of constructing them, except at great cost.’

Frere would spend a great deal of time over the next two years in constructing batteries, organising colonial forces and putting the Cape into a state of defence. The pressure was all the greater because he would get no advanced warning about a raid because he had no telegraph to London, despite his repeated requests for one. And three weeks after he arrived in Cape Town the Russians duly declared war on Turkey and sent their armies into the Balkans. Under these circumstances, the last thing that Frere wanted was a war with the Zulus – indeed, he had started to form plans for an African Imperial army into which Zulus would be actively recruited. However, Frere never really got control of the situation all the time that he was in South Africa and a series of frontier crises left him reacting to events rather than controlling them.

There was other news waiting for him in Cape Town when he arrived. Without
his knowledge, Sir Theophilus Shepstone had annexed the Transvaal after it had been defeated in a war with the baPedi. This was important for two reasons. The first was that the Boers of the Transvaal were very unlikely to accept this state of affairs for long and would be very likely to revolt as soon as they felt strong enough. The second reason was that the Zulus and the Transvaal were locked in a border dispute and Shepstone told them that the situation had changed now that the Transvaal was British. Previous to this, the Zulus had looked on the British as allies against the Boers and now, feeling completely betrayed, began to take a much more robust attitude to both the Boers and the British.

Frere saw the danger immediately and he began to have nightmares about a Zulu war and a Boer revolt at the same time as having to cope with a Russian naval attack. Putting in hand plans for the upgrading of the defences of Cape Town, he quickly determined to go up to the Transvaal and see what he could do to calm the situation. In the meantime he also put in hand measures to annex any port along the South African coastline that might be used as a toehold either for another European colony or as a Boer outlet to the sea – thus the annexations of Walvis Bay and Port St. Johns.

And if this was not bad enough, the Xhosa revolted in August 1877, one of a series of disturbances among African peoples in 1877–80, and Frere was forced to spend most of the next year putting it down. And no sooner had this been done when in July 1878 a series of border incidents occurred near a little mission station on the border with Zululand called Rorke’s Drift that was to seal the fate of the Zulus. There has been some speculation that Frere and Lord Chelmsford spent June and July of 1878 cooking up a dastardly plot to attack the Zulus and circumvent the findings of Bulwer’s boundary commission; in fact they were engaged on a survey of the possible measures for the defence of the Cape peninsula from a Russian attack. Furthermore, Hicks-Beach did not reply to Frere’s query about the Boundary Commission report for the whole of July, August, September and October. He finally got a reply on 3rd November.

With organised banditry on the Orange river, a digger revolt at Kimberley, Boer encroachment in Bechuanaland, a collapsing Basutoland, disturbances among the Mpondo of the eastern Cape and in Griqualand East continuing, discontent in the Transvaal, and a still unresolved Pedi war, the border violations committed by Mehlokazulu in July 1878 came as a final straw for Sir Bartle. The Empire in South Africa could never be safe if Cetshwayo was unable to prevent his warriors – and there were 40 000 of them – from violating its borders whenever they chose. If Britain was to hold South Africa in the event of a Russian war then it was time that she made her intention plain to everyone in the region.

‘The essence of the whole business,’ [of empire building] he had written in 1865, ‘is first to put down all violence with a strong hand; then, your force being known, felt and respected, endeavour to excite men’s better nature, till all men seeing that your object is good and of the greatest general benefit to the community, join heart and hand to aid in putting down or preventing violence.’

Frere felt that it was now time for Cetshwayo, King of the Zulus, to feel the strong hand and he began making preparations for war.

Were the Zulus a danger to the British? The issue has been hotly debated and it is fair to point out that there was a strong pro-war party among the younger Zulu warriors. At the same time, however, Cetshwayo was definitely against going to war with the British and hoped to maintain his friendship with them as an ally against the
Boers. We can probably say that the Zulus as a nation had no intention of going to war with Britain in 1879 but that they were a potential threat for the future. However, the war happened in 1879 because Sir Bartle Frere made it happen.

But Frere could not start a war without soldiers and for this he had to send a request back to the Colonial Office in London, to the Colonial Secretary, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, who had replaced Lord Carnarvon in January 1878. Hicks-Beach was to become a very powerful politician in the future but in 1878 he was young, inexperienced in colonial affairs and this was the first time he had been a minister. His attitude to Sir Bartle and South Africa was simple: you are a famous and experienced man and I will back any decisions you make in South Africa. Frere was given a free hand.

Hicks-Beach did, however, need the permission of Prime Minister Disraeli and the Cabinet to give Frere the troops he wanted, but when he asked for them on 12th October 1878, the Cabinet refused.

Although in July 1878 a peace conference, the Berlin Congress, had ended the Balkan crisis and ordered the Russians to leave the Balkans, the Russian army had refused to leave and were still within striking distance of Constantinople until August 1879 – for every gung-ho, forward school officer with a cavalier attitude to orders in Britain and India, there was a corresponding empire builder in St. Petersburg. It is, therefore, impossible to ignore the fact that the Russian army was within a day’s march of Constantinople throughout the period of the Anglo-Zulu war. And Frere was the old India hand par excellence.

At the same time – in September 1878 – a Russian diplomatic mission had arrived in Afghanistan and it looked like there would be war with the Russians there soon. Faced with the possibility of war on two fronts, Disraeli was doubtful as to the wisdom of diverting troops to a third theatre of war. This turn of events immediately sent Hicks-Beach into a panic as he realised that Disraeli and Salisbury, the leading men of the party, did not share Frere’s fears that the immediate global nature of the Russian threat extended to an immediate threat to South Africa, and that he was thus dangerously out of political step. He had so far agreed ‘with all that was said and done by Frere’ but, despite his inexperience in colonial affairs, he was an experienced enough politician to know when to tack with the prevailing wind and immediately changed his mind and ordered Frere not to attack the Zulus – although he still sent the troops.

But for Frere, these orders came too late. He only got a definitive ‘no’ on 13th December, although a partial telegram had arrived on 30th November. He did not manipulate the communications; for this to happen the communications system would need to be predictable and this was absolutely not the case. He was the Man on the Spot and it was up to him to make the decisions; how could Whitehall possibly know what was going on here? If the war with Russia that he confidently expected was going to happen broke out, then it would begin in April or May 1879 when the Balkan passes opened; that left him a very tight time frame to bring the Zulus to battle before he would need to be back on the vital ground at the Cape; he had to fight soon or he could not fight at all.

He had ordered that an ultimatum be presented to the Zulus on 11th December 1878 to disband their army or the British army would come and disband it for them. To pull back from a confrontation now would simply convince the Zulus that the British were afraid of them, he thought, and that would encourage them to solve their border dispute with the Transvaal by sending their armies in. He guessed that Hicks-Beach had changed his mind out
of political expediency. Going through the options Frere thought that the best way to resolve the situation was to ignore Hicks-Beach and rely on the British army to deliver a quick victory, which no doubt, Hicks-Beach would be happy to claim the credit for. A quick success would make British control of South Africa certain and secure the Imperial lifeline and everyone (except the defeated Zulus) would be happy.

And so he took the fateful decision to disobey the government and invade Zululand in the reasonable hope of a quick victory that would establish British paramountcy. What he got was Isandlwana and a war that should have lasted a month stretched out into six. What the Zulus got was eight years of war, civil war and eventual ruin.

So, to sum up. The Anglo-Zulu war was not the work of a maverick, hoodwinked into a land grab by wily colonists but a by-product of the imperial insecurities of a defence establishment doubtful of the ability of a democracy to run policy in a crisis. His patience stretched to breaking point and beyond by a series of border crises, Frere started the Anglo-Zulu war because he feared that the alternative would be much worse – Boer revolt, widespread African rebellion, perhaps a new mfecane, and the severing of the imperial lifeline by a Russian attack. And he did not trust the ability of the politicians of the new democracy to avoid this. As Lord Salisbury said, Frere thought he had a mission to save a short-sighted government from the consequences of its own folly and acted accordingly.

DAMIAN O’CONNOR

NOTES
1 WO 33/19 General report of Director of Ordnance 1866–7.
2 PRO 30/6/115 Carnarvon papers. Remarks by Admiral Sir A Milne, 18 April 1874.
3 Ibid. Her Majesty’s Fleet. November 1875 [by] GWH (Hornby?).
5 Ibid. p. 149.
7 Ibid. See also J.C.R. Colomb (ed), The defence of Great and Greater Britain (London, 1880), p. 58.
8 PRO CO 30/6/33 Correspondence with Governors: Cape: Sir Bartle Frere 1876–7. Frere to Carnarvon 24 August 1877, Frere to Carnarvon, June 1877. See also ADM 1/8869 General outline of possible naval operations against Russia, Admiralty Foreign Intelligence committee 14 March 1885 pp. 31–3. See also CAB11/81 Report on the general scheme of coast defence for India, November, 1879. Also PRO30/6/122 Defence of commercial harbours and coaling stations.
9 PRO 30/6/33 Correspondence with Governors: Cape: Sir Bartle Frere 1876–7. Frere to Carnarvon 8 March 1877. Carnarvon papers.
12 Carnarvon Commission.
13 PRO CO 885/4 Sir Frederic Thesiger, Memorandum on defence of Table Bay, 7th July 1878.