

THE ROAD TO ULUNDI REVISITED

A classic of Anglo-Zulu War Africana featuring front-line sketches from a serving British officer has been revisited and republished with photographs of the actual sites as they are today. Stephen Coan reports.

THE ruin of many a poor bibliophile, the Abebooks website currently offers for sale three copies of *The Road to Ulundi* featuring the watercolour sketches of John North Crealock made during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. The cheapest will set you back around R3 500 plus postage; the most expensive is going for R5 400.

As those prices indicate, the book, published in 1969 with a print run of 1 000, has become a valuable item of Africana. Now Durban-based historian and battlefield guide Ken Gillings has produced *The Road to Ulundi Revisited*, both homage and a companion update to the original. Printed in a signed limited edition of 1 000 and utilising a “then and now” format, Gillings has matched his contemporary photographs to Crealock’s original watercolours.

In the late sixties when *The Road to Ulundi* was published by the University of Natal Press it represented a pioneering venture. “Interest in the Anglo-Zulu War was limited by-and-large to small groups of military history enthusiasts,” says Gillings. “I used to have to apply for a permit to visit some of the sites because they were in ‘Bantu areas’, and that probably discouraged many people from visiting them. Isandlwana was an exception because it was a national monument, but one was not allowed to stay overnight in the area.”

Nor was there much literature available on the subject. “C.T. Binns had published his outstanding *The Last Zulu King* in 1963. In 1964 the film *Zulu* resulted in increased interest in the war in Britain and then, in 1966, an American, Donald

R. Morris, produced the first definitive history of the Anglo-Zulu War, *The Washing of the Spears*.”

Since then the war has fuelled a niche literary industry while the battlefield sites have become major tourist attractions for both local and international visitors. “Now there are dozens of publications available,” says Gillings. “Authors and historians such as Ron Lock, Ian Knight, Saul David, Jeff Guy, John Laband and Paul Thompson have unlocked many secrets about the war and new material has made this aspect of South Africa’s history one of the most sought after amongst military historians all over the world.”

Back in 1969 that was all to come and the decision to publish *The Road to Ulundi* a prescient one. The modest credit on the book’s title page, “Edited and prepared for publication by R.A. Brown, M.A. (Oxon.)”, indicates to whom that foresight belonged.

Ronald Arden Brown was the Librarian at the University of Natal’s Pietermaritzburg campus from 1962 until 1973. Born in England in 1914, he came to South Africa shortly after gaining his Master’s degree at Oxford to teach at Michaelhouse in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands. Brown’s family had South African connections – Lawrence G. Green, the prolific author of popular anecdotal history books, was a cousin. During the Second World War Brown served in the British army and after being demobbed returned to South Africa, taking the post of Deputy Librarian at Rhodes University prior to moving to Pietermaritzburg. After his retirement in 1973 Brown returned to England, where he died in 2002.

Today Brown is remembered with affection and admiration by those who worked with him. “He was a truly cultured and well educated man, with wide-ranging interests and an eye for opportunity,” said his colleague Colleen Vietzen. “In addition to his foresight, Ron was a very hands-on man and caused things to happen. Among his passions was a deep interest in Natal history and social evolution and he built up a useful Nataliana collection ... He jumped at opportunities to enhance the collection.”

Another colleague, Natal settler authority Shelagh Spencer, and her husband Brian, became close friends of Brown and his wife, Win. “Shelagh was aware of Ron’s interest in the Crealock drawings from his first learning about them,” says Brian Spencer, “and we all spent a memorable weekend with George Bunting (a legendary expert on the war) driving from place to place where the sketches were done as Ron wanted better knowledge of the sites before the book was published.”

In the introduction to *The Road to Ulundi* Brown described how, in 1966, he had come across an article in the English newspaper *The Times* concerning the problems facing regimental museums which mentioned the Crealock album of watercolours in the Sherwood Foresters’ museum at Nottingham Castle. Brown’s interest was immediately piqued as he knew the regiment was a descendant of the 45th Foot, the first regiment to be stationed in Natal in the mid-nineteenth century.

Brown travelled to Nottingham to look at the paintings, and the regimental authorities agreed to lend them to the University of Natal Library with a view to publication. The album consisted of 189 paintings and drawings of the Eastern Cape and Natal depicting “landscapes, camp sites and scenes, battlefields, mili-

tary and civilian personalities”. Brown noted: “The artistic quality is good and the excellent detail has been praised by botanists, geographers and historians who recognise in them an authentic pictorial record.”

The collection reflects the time Crealock was in South Africa as military secretary to Lord Chelmsford, commander of the British troops in South Africa. Born in 1836, Crealock had seen service in India during the Indian Mutiny Campaign of 1857–8, being mentioned in despatches three times. Promoted to captain in 1859 he served in India until 1870. On his return to England, Crealock served as Deputy Assistant Adjutant General and later Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General Aldershot and was promoted to Major in 1875.

In 1878 Crealock was selected to accompany Chelmsford to southern Africa. At Chelmsford’s side, Crealock, now a Brevet Lieutenant Colonel, sketched his way through the Ninth Frontier War followed by the war against the Zulus. He was present during the Isandlwana campaign – where a British force was all but annihilated by the Zulu army – as well as at the battle of Gingindlovu, where he was slightly wounded, and at the Battle of Ulundi that ended the war with a British victory.

Good artist he may have been but Crealock was probably a difficult personality. He was described by Sir Garnet Wolseley (who replaced Chelmsford) as an “arch-snob” and accused of “governing Chelmsford and keeping him in ignorance of all going on about him”. Wolseley concluded with the ultimate *coup de grâce*: “He was not a gentleman.” However, it should be pointed out that Wolseley in his highly entertaining diaries rarely said anything good about anyone other than himself. Crealock later commanded the 95th Regi-

ment, and a subsequent regimental history was kinder than Wolseley: “There can have been few in the battalion who did not feel they were better soldiers for having known so progressive and appreciative a Commanding Officer.”

Crealock died in 1895. After his death his paintings were given to the Regimental Museum in Nottingham Castle, where Brown subsequently selected 67 of the Natal scenes for publication.

An eager purchaser of *The Road to Ulundi* on its appearance in 1969 was a young Ken Gillings. “I bought a copy and drove up to Pietermaritzburg from Durban to ask Ron Brown to autograph it,” he says. “He was somewhat bemused; I don’t think many people had asked him to autograph their copy.” And so a book was signed and, unknowingly, a baton passed on. Gillings’s interest in the Victorian campaign was kindled at Westville Boys’ High School. “I had a history teacher named Ron Warner, who kept the class mesmerised with his teaching of South African history. He took us on our first battlefield tour in 1963 and I was hooked.”

In 2010 it occurred to Gillings “that matching the Crealock sketches to photographs would make for a fascinating PowerPoint presentation”. “While it was a relatively simple matter to photograph the popular sites, such as Isandlwana and Rorke’s Drift, most of the other locations are off the beaten track. I started photographing those about four years ago” with some help from his wife Heather. “She would hold the original book aloft as I tried to line up the sites in the middle of nowhere.”

Where Gillings clicked a Fuji Finepix 5 Crealock had once sat with sketchbook, pen, pencil and watercolours. “Crealock rode with his artist’s materials carried in his saddle-bag.”

“In Victorian times, it was to an officer’s advantage to be good at sketching. The subject was not only on the syllabus at Sandhurst but also at the Army Staff College at Camberley until the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, and later. The British Army seldom had properly surveyed maps of wherever it was fighting, and so an important part of the duties of a junior officer and of a trained staff officer in particular was to be able to produce a good sketch map and panorama for his commanding officer.”

Gillings had already realised the presentation had the potential for a “then and now” style publication. “But it was felt the new publication should include accompanying descriptive text. Nonetheless, we felt that it would be unwise and unnecessary given the existing literature to make the text too detailed, so my mandate was to make it as succinct as possible.” Accordingly each of Crealock’s watercolours is presented with its original title accompanied by a photograph of the site along with detailed explanatory notes. There is also a brief background to the war and a map locating the sites of the sketches. “By visiting some of the more remote sites, I was able to enhance the military history information with local content which I believe has made the end result almost a coffee table book as well as a potentially valuable item of Africana.”

NOTE

The Road to Ulundi Revisited – The Zulu Sketches of an Artist on the March: John North Crealock by Ken Gillings is published by 30° South Publishers.