

## *Isandhlwana and the Passing of a Proconsul*

When he arrived in South Africa in 1877, Sir Henry Bartle Edward Frere was the most illustrious of British proconsuls to wield the authority of Cape Governor. He had helped to preserve Western India during the Mutiny of 1857. He had been Governor of Bombay — a position far more important in the general reckoning than the Cape. He had guided the young Prince of Wales around the Indian Empire and had succeeded, remarkably, in winning the friendship of both youth and formidable parent — Queen Victoria. Finally, the suppression of the Zanzibar slave trade had invested Frere with the aura of Christian crusading that was dear alike to the romantically and philanthropically inclined circles of the Victorian élite. Why then did he accept seeming demotion to the mere Governorship of the Cape?

The answer lies in the fact that Lord Carnarvon, Secretary of State for the Colonies, had come to the conclusion in early 1877 that he could no longer continue to promote the cause of Southern African Confederation solely from Downing Street. A suitable man-on-the-spot with appropriate local authority was needed. Frere's name was mooted, but it took considerable powers of persuasion to convert him to the idea of a further tour of imperial duty. He was already over sixty; a recipient of parliament's thanks — an elder statesman in fact. But Carnarvon was importunate: Frere would be rewarded with a peerage; he would go out as far more than Cape Governor — as “High Commissioner for South Africa generally” (previous High Commissioners had theoretically been confined in this capacity to the north-eastern borders of the Cape Colony); and, third, the Secretary of State promised that confederation would only be the prelude to bigger things:

“. . . if, after having done this great work, you feel yourself able to stay on for two or three years to bring the new machinery into working order as first Governor-General of the South African Dominion, I shall hail the decision . . .”<sup>1</sup>

The prize was therefore a great one; in effect, Frere could make himself a second Durham, Wellesley or Clive — an architect of empire, revered, ennobled, remembered. Frere accepted.

In his photographs the clear-eyed Frere appears as deceptively direct and honest. But he was, in fact, a formidable, machiavellian personality. The outward disarming exterior concealed the devious strands that wrapped a core of steel. Yet there was a flaw; the strong self-confidence of experience and success had given the instrument great brittle strength, but supreme stress over a long period would cause it to snap rather than bend with the resilience of youth. Isandhlwana began the application of that supreme stress. It would end only with Frere's death five years later. This invests the South African phase of his otherwise great career with the quality of Greek tragedy.

The Battle of Isandhlwana disrupted — and in the long term destroyed — the British policy of confederation. So largely precipitated by Frere's driving desire to solve the "native problems" of South Africa as a prelude to confederation,<sup>2</sup> the Zulu War was converted by this single disastrous defeat into a recurrent nightmare for the High Commissioner. He had earlier shrugged off the restraints that Disraeli's distant government in London had attempted to lay on him, but when the general war account for £4½ million and the butcher's bill for Isandhlwana, in particular, came in for settlement, Frere found things very different. Quickly, he was transformed into the symbol of greedy expansionism — the man who had ". . . done much to deprave the conscience of the colonists . . . and to poison and contaminate the fountains of what might be a healthy national life in these new communities."<sup>3</sup> And then, not long afterwards, came news of the untimely death of the Prince Imperial. This double débacle — which Frere initially saw as a mere setback — laid up a store of tribulation that he would have to live with and through, day by day, during his long decline.

After Isandhlwana Frere's early communications with Disraeli's government in London showed his buoyancy. Unaware that he was acting the role of Job's comforter, he cheerfully reassured ministers that "only" three more regiments and supporting cavalry would be needed, for they ". . . must not think it would be a very difficult thing to bring the Zulu to reason"; and again, "The people are really docile and improvable."<sup>4</sup> But there was now no answering echo from Downing Street. In this quarter at least ". . . the defeat of Isandala [sic] had totally changed the case."<sup>5</sup> Neither Frere nor his military instrument, Chelmsford, seemed capable of rounding off the business of conquering and pacifying Zululand rapidly, or — as was now politically necessary — cheaply. Meanwhile, it was known that the former "Mr Fixit" of Natal troubles, Sir Garnet Wolseley, was champing to go out again. In May 1879 the 'model Major-General' was accordingly promoted to outrank Chelmsford and became High Commissioner in South-East Africa to boot. His supreme authority over Natal and the Transvaal was confirmed by his creation as Governor of each. Unfortunately, South Africa would prove much too small for two such High Commissioners as Frere and Wolseley.

Frere only slowly discovered that major portions of South Africa which he had been sent to confederate as an entirety, had been removed from his authority. Having calmed the panic that followed Isandhlwana in Natal, he proceeded to the Transvaal, where the fledgling British administration that Shepstone had established in 1877 was under pressure from rebellious Boers. But here Frere's bold but facile attempts at settlement were quickly superseded by news of the censure that Disraeli's ministry had laid upon him for his Zulu war policy and of the arrival of Wolseley a month later.

While he smarted under the rebuke and partial demotion, Frere was initially stoical in his correspondence with Disraeli's new Secretary of State, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach:

"So I quite realise the necessity of the step you have taken and the advantages which I hope will follow it. But I cannot see why you could not have carried it out without putting any slight on me."<sup>6</sup>

Frere went on to warn — not once but repeatedly — of the danger that any permanent division of High Commission authority would bring. But he might

well have spared himself the paper, for the Colonial Office was even contemplating a complete abolition of the High Commission.<sup>7</sup> In any event they had decided that extra-territorial questions were now to be confined “within the narrowest limits”, and it had become “a fairly open question whether the Transvaal should not be retroceded”.<sup>8</sup> In these words was a clear confession that Isandhlwana had made the policy of confederation all but moribund. Frere’s metropolitan support had crumbled; and colonial support was being steadily eroded — as this comment by his enemies among Cape opposition politicians indicates:

“Although B [Frere] is patted on the back with a few oily words and well-turned phrases, it is as clear a smack in the face as one need care to see administered to their arch enemy.”<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile Wolseley had arrived and was soon drawing comparisons, to Frere’s disadvantage, between their relative situations as co-ordinate British High Commissioners in the sub-continent:

“. . . he [Frere] and I hold exactly equal positions in a civil line — indeed I was given powers that were expressly denied to him, the power of making peace [in Zululand] on such terms as I deemed proper — and in addition to all the ‘dignity’ of these civil honours I am in command of all the troops in South Africa. The Transvaal and Natal and the country north of it, over which Frere had some undefined authority, are now directly under me and he has no more to do with them than he has with Timbuctoo . . .”<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, with the example before him of how dangerous it had earlier been for Frere to employ all his plenary powers as High Commissioner in preparing Southern Africa for confederation, Wolseley was ultra-circumspect. If there were to be further errors along the road to what he believed to be the mirage of confederation, he was determined that these should be Frere’s and Frere’s alone:

“I believe that, if Sir B. Frere can have his fighting instincts calmed down, he will have a better chance of carrying out Confederation than any other man has had, or is likely to have. He is most popular with all classes from having identified himself with the Colonist view.”<sup>11</sup>

Leaving Wolseley to the really serious work of pacification in Zululand, Frere should therefore prosecute his efforts at union among the common colonial herd of “Grocers and Chemists”.<sup>12</sup>

This denigration of Frere was not confined to personal communications with the Secretary of State in London. As war correspondents of British newspapers, Wolseley’s staff officers had a convenient public platform for undermining Frere’s credibility. It was therefore small wonder that relations between the two High Commissioners became severely strained. This was especially true after Cetshwayo’s final defeat, when Wolseley produced what Frere called the “sadly aborted”<sup>13</sup> Zulu settlement upon the basis of “divide and don’t rule”. Before it, Frere had urged Wolseley to guarantee security for



SIR BARTLE FRERE

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SIR GARNET WOLSELEY

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Natal so that the Cape would consider uniting with the smaller colony under the confederation scheme. Yet with the Zululand settlement now a *fait accompli*, there still seemed no way open to Frere to bring home to the London authorities how much it had complicated the larger plan for consolidation in the sub-continent. Wolseley's arrangements in Zululand had staunch defenders among his so-called war correspondents, who naturally had a vested interest in discrediting any alternative that Frere might have had in mind:

"Sir Bartle Frere would probably have annexed the country, would have harassed it with missionaries, and would have compelled the Zulu children to attend school . . ." <sup>14</sup>

An outbreak of open hostility between old enemies in the Transkei, the Mpondo and Xesibe, brought further disillusionment for Frere. When asking for limited military support here, he explained politely to Wolseley that he did not want to be "at cross purposes with what is considered by you, from a Natal point of view, as desirable". <sup>15</sup> But Wolseley's reply was both rude and designed to put his co-High Commissioner very firmly in his place:

". . . I am Governor and *Commander in Chief* (besides being the military officer in direct and immediate command) in Natal and the Transvaal. I mention this because it would seem to me . . . that you think your Commission as [Cape] Comdr in Chief gives you some power over the troops in Natal." <sup>16</sup>

The Colonial Office in Downing Street duly backed Wolseley's view; so Pondoland became another point of divergence between the London metropole and the Cape High Commissioner.

In the Transvaal, too, certain earlier doubts that Frere had about Wolseley's abilities outside his military calling were confirmed by the latter's high-handed treatment of the sullen Boers. After his visit of mid-1879 Frere had felt he had laid the foundation of some sort of an understanding in that quarter. He was therefore worried to see Wolseley's mailed fist replace his own velvet glove in relations with the fractious Boers (a year later Majuba would prove him right). In a mediatory capacity he felt he could still have done something with the Transvaal, but no official correspondence from that territory or Natal passed any longer through his hands; and he was consistently denied ". . . the fullest information necessary for any co-operation." <sup>17</sup> The crucial impulse towards concerted action that had once been transmitted through Frere's High Commission, especially as it had given him surveillance over the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal and the Administrator of the Transvaal, had been decisively interrupted. For the desperate Frere this division and dissipation of authority seemed to run against the established imperial policy of the last forty years — of maintaining "some representative, such as the High Commissioner, of the inherent authority and prerogatives of the Crown." <sup>18</sup> As he put it:

"Since Wolseley came out every act of the Government at home has been to disintegrate and separate, instead of combining and uniting. Some day, no doubt, the pendulum will go the other way, and the authority of government will be concentrated again in one pair of hands . . ." <sup>19</sup>

In the circumstances it is surprising that Frere did not resign. One explanation for this is to be found in the private representations to stay on that were made by the Prince of Wales, by Hicks-Beach (the Secretary of State for Colonies), and by Frere's other political supporters and admirers. And yet even these personal factors tended also to work against him. As a member of the Prince of Wales's circle and as a favoured adviser of the Queen herself, Frere was also associated in the minds of Wolseley and his acolytes with the Queen's cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, whose long-term grip upon the British Army, as Commander-in-Chief, they were determined to break in the interests of modernization.

The other — and undoubtedly the main — explanation for Frere's decision to hang on grimly was his determination to carry confederation through, come what might. Again, it is a measure of his personal obsession with this overriding purpose that he could not perceive that Isandhlwana and its sequel in the Zululand settlement had really put this beyond even his remarkable capacity to achieve. In particular, the truncation of his authority had now left him with only one narrow base from which to operate — the Cape. And here all his power rested upon the support of the ministry of the "Easterner", J. Gordon Sprigg.

Sprigg's own position was, in reality, precarious. The main forces of Cape politics were still to be found in the western districts, but they had been temporarily thrown into disarray by the powerful combination that Frere and Sprigg, in unison, had been able to deploy against them. Frere's gamble in dismissing Molteno's and Merriman's "western" Cape ministry in February 1878 (because, basically, they opposed the more forceful aspects of his policy of confederation) had paid off — but only temporarily. As soon as Frere's star had begun to wane, the forces that he and Sprigg had momentarily dispersed began to coalesce once more. This regrouping took time, but Sprigg and Frere both saw that, unless the Cape could be convinced that the security position in the black territories of the Transkei, Basutoland, and, especially, in distant Zululand had been stabilized, the colony would not consent to confederate with outlying entities like Natal, which would more than likely prove to be a long term liability. To rush the colony on the issue of confederation would, moreover, encourage the very movement toward the coalescence of opposition forces that they were determined to avoid. As Frere put it:

"They are shrewd critics and will not be content to confederate with any part of S. Africa, pacified or ruled to suit Colenso and the Aborigines Protn. Socy. — a settlement which might satisfy John Bull, for the moment, will not satisfy them, either Dutchmen or English."<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately for Frere, these warnings fell on deaf ears in London. With the House of Commons breathing down his neck on the question of South African expenditure, Hicks-Beach wanted some definite moves towards confederation to take place. Frere was now clearly unprepared to rock the boat of Cape politics, but the Secretary of State felt he could do this himself by using the issue of the Transkei for leverage. Here Frere's original idea had been to establish a great consolidated black "reserve" which would ultimately be

incorporated as a separately identifiable and ruled entity in the future confederation. But the malaise after Isandhlwana had undermined this scheme; and Frere — as he explained to Hicks-Beach — found himself obliged to align with Sprigg's and the Cape's old-established policy of "absorbing" outlying frontier territories piecemeal.<sup>21</sup> Hicks-Beach himself was hesitant about consenting to allow the colony *carte blanche* in the Transkei, but he intimated that he would be prepared to connive at a process of "creeping annexation" by the Cape — provided the latter would move positively toward confederation.<sup>22</sup>

But the reaction at the Cape was negative: hostile colonials merely stigmatised Hicks-Beach's despatch of June 1879 as a sordid metropolitan "bribe":

"There is something humiliating in the thought that an adviser and minister of the British Crown is not ashamed of having recourse to a threat so childlike and immoral."<sup>23</sup>

Frere's own reaction betrayed his exasperation. He had begun to feel that he may have been making some headway with the Cape Dutch, but Hicks-Beach had then spoilt it all:

". . . they were beginning to feel much confidence in our management of the proposed union, when this ill-timed Dispatch, following on what they interpret as an intended slap-in-the-face to me, alarms them. Merri-man is assiduous in his attempts to get them to trust him . . . this confederation dispatch has been a godsend to him . . ."<sup>24</sup>

When Gladstone's second ministry took office in Britain in April 1880, the new Secretary of State for Colonies, Lord Kimberley, took an even stronger line than his predecessor, Hicks-Beach, on the issue of the Transkei. Unless Sprigg's Cape ministry could reassure the British government that adequate legal codes would be established in the territories, there would be an imperial veto upon any colonial moves to annex.

One reason for Kimberley's intransigence on the issue of the Transkei was his anger at the way Frere and Sprigg were co-operating to put pressure upon the BaSotho to give up their rifles. This Cape policy of disarmament would, he predicted, lead to inevitable hostilities. In the event, he proved correct, though the BaSotho "Gun War" broke out just after Frere's own departure. The ominous prelude to it was, however, instrumental in further undermining his reputation in British government circles.

After Gladstone's magnificent moralising on the shortcomings of Disraeli's and Hicks-Beach's South African policy during his electoral campaigns in the Midlothian in 1879 and early 1880, it is surprising that his incoming Liberal ministry did not immediately dismiss the main object of their wrath, Sir Bartle Frere. The reason for this omission was their belief that Frere was still the only man-on-the-spot in South Africa who might yet be able to do something to revitalise the policy of confederation. With this achieved, it was still vaguely conceivable that a political entity strong enough to look after itself and reduce British imperial expenditure — the main plank of the Liberal electoral campaign — would still emerge in the sub-continent.

Frere had meanwhile been pressing Sprigg to move on the issue — and in-

deed the small, consequential Cape Premier did prove true to his promises and his mentor. In June 1880 he duly brought resolutions forward in the Cape Assembly for a consultative conference of sixteen delegates on the question of confederation. But it was a forlorn hope; Isandhlwana and its sequel had virtually ruined all practical possibilities of success. In particular, Paul Kruger and Piet Joubert had come down from the Transvaal to lobby the Cape Opposition caucus on the vagaries of recent British policy in the northern and eastern parts of the sub-continent. They found a willing ally in Merriman, whose dismissal at Frere's hands two years before had made him an implacable enemy of the whole genus of "prancing proconsuls". This combined influence upon the Cape Opposition alliance proved too strong for Sprigg. He was obliged to accept the "previous question" during the debate — which effectively vetoed the whole question of confederation. Excepting Frere, who could still talk euphemistically of a "postponement",<sup>25</sup> no one — least of all the British government — deluded themselves that confederation was any longer practicable.

The new British Liberal ministry had never really been committed to confederation. The Cape's verdict was therefore accepted. Its consequence, the recall of the Cape High Commissioner, followed logically. With more than half the British ministry actively pressing for his dismissal, there were now no longer any good arguments for retaining Frere. In August 1880 the announcement was made to a cheering House of Commons that Sir Bartle had been sacked. Three and a half years after departing with high hopes and sublime self-confidence to South Africa Frere found himself eating the Dead Sea fruit of defeat and denigration.

Within a further three years he was dead. During the remainder of his lifetime his own attempts and those of his friends to rehabilitate his reputation had proved vain. It is true that the Queen had him come up to Balmoral, that the Prince of Wales ostentatiously paraded his friendship, and that Carnarvon, also in retirement, commiserated with him. But this flurry of sentiment could not obscure the stark reality of failure. Frere's health rapidly declined and in early 1884 he died (allegedly, in some quarters, of a "broken heart").<sup>26</sup>

It is a cliché that South Africa was a "graveyard of governors' reputations". But the fall of Bartle Frere has a drama and an inexorability that makes it more than normally arresting. About it there is, as was earlier pointed out, an aura of high, classical tragedy. Frere embodied all the qualities that make for success — except one. He was charming, cultivated, academic, clever, experienced, ruthless — but he was too self-confident, too accustomed to having his own way, too used to ignoring the magnitude of the obstacles that confronted him. The strange concatenation of military errors that led to disaster at Isandhlwana in January 1879 cannot be directly attributed to him, but indirectly there is a causal connection. Moreover, the blithe way in which he launched upon the Zulu War reminds the observer of his cavalier dismissal of the Cape ministry, his slick half-promises to the Transvaalers, his careless promotion of the Cape's Transkeian schemes and his unqualified support for BaSotho disarmament. Sooner or later a reckoning had to come — and it came sooner, rather than later — at Isandhlwana. In the long term this disaster and the fatal over-confidence that it symbolised assured the passing of the most highly acclaimed imperial proconsul who had yet ruled Southern Africa.

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