

ZULUS

THOUSANDS OF THEM!

A LOOK AT THAT FAMOUS MOVIE AND ITS INFLUENCE, AND AT A FEW LESS WELL-KNOWN FILMS ABOUT THE ANGLO-ZULU WAR

Scratch the surface of any enthusiast or collector with an interest in the history of the Anglo-Zulu War and the chances are you won't have to dig very deep before you discover the influence of the iconic 1964 film, *Zulu*. And, if I'm honest, I'd have to include myself in that category; I was seven or eight when it first came out in the UK (OK, please don't do the maths to work out how old I am!) and my parents took me to see it as it was regarded very much at the time as a family adventure movie, just the sort of thing to keep small boys occupied on a wet Saturday afternoon in a rainy English seaside town. I can still remember both the impact it had on me, and something of my initial impressions of it, skewed now by time and by the fact I was small in my seat; it seemed to tower above me and overwhelm me with the claustrophobic nature of the fighting – only much later did I realise this was a deliberate effect, all those low-angle camera shots intended to induce exactly that effect.

I can remember, too, the very moment it exerted its fatal grip on my imagination; it's right at the beginning, as Richard Burton's doleful narration of Lord Chelmsford's curt report about the battle of iSandlwana fades away to the devastated scene on the battlefield itself, dead redcoats sprawled across burning wagons or lying in the tawny grass, the camera lingering on the

bloody hand of a man draped over a gun-carriage. And then, silently, mysteriously, in walk the Zulus, collecting up the fallen redcoats' rifles, until one turns to the camera and brandishes his shield and trophy aloft in a gesture of triumph. Even at the time this struck me as inexpressibly exotic and dramatic, and painfully at odds with how we were taught in Britain about our history at the time. "What on earth has happened here?" I remember wondering and, in a sense, I've been trying to answer that question ever since.

by Ian Knight

ABOVE
The moment it started for me; the opening iSandlwana sequence from *Zulu*

BELOW
A scene from the lost silent epic about the Anglo-Zulu War, *Symbol of Sacrifice* (1918)





More than 50 years after its release, *Zulu* is still widely regarded as a classic, both as a war movie and as an example of British film making.

Yet it may come as a surprise, even to those who love it, to discover that the first film made about the Anglo-Zulu War was actually made long before – right at the beginning, indeed, of the history of cinema epics.

In 1918 a company called African Film Productions released a film shot in South Africa called *Symbol of Sacrifice*. Used as we are to the idea that Hollywood has always dominated the international movie industry it's easy to forget that in the early days there were attempts to establish large-scale cinema industries elsewhere in the world, and indeed some of the first documentary footage ever filmed was shot during the Anglo-Boer War. The dramatic landscape, light, space, and cheap labour and facilities made South Africa an early contender for movie world-domination. In 1916 African Film Productions filmed *De Voortrekkers*, an epic about the Boer Great Trek of the 1830s. This is a national foundation trope very similar in some respects to the move west in American history, and likewise *De Voortrekkers* concentrated on the physical hardships endured by settlers during their journey and included a reconstruction of the war between the Boers and the Zulu King Dingane.

The appeal of a follow-up featuring the Anglo-Zulu War was a direct result of South Africa's involvement in WW1. With the Anglo-Boer War not long past, white South Africa remained deeply divided, and the theme of the film was to stress common alliances against the background of a greater threat. In the case of *Symbol of Sacrifice* the Zulus are portrayed as the threat and settlers; English soldiers, Boer farmers and even the Prince Imperial of France all come together to defeat them. It is, of course, a silent movie, and incorporates many of the narrative threads of the time, particularly in a pair of love stories on both sides of the divide (cue fainting maidens, dastardly moustache twirling villains, and the timely arrival of the upright hero, be it the manly English

ABOVE
Zulu Dawn (1979) surpassed *Zulu* in terms of superficial accuracy, but lost out as a drama. Here's the crossing at Rorke's Drift – filmed on the real spot, but from the Zulu to the Natal side!

CENTER
Zulu Dawn recreated the battle of iSandlwana – that's Bob Hoskins in the middle, about to come to a sticky end

LEFT
The most stunning scene in *Zulu Dawn* – the Zulus burst through the British line and storm the camp

settler or the noble Zulu warrior); it is interesting to note, however, that in giving Zulu characters a storyline of their own it was more than half a century ahead of its time, and it would be a long while before anyone even attempted to do so again. Interspersed between these incidents are a series of epic set pieces which recreate a truly remarkable range of Anglo-Zulu War battles –



Great scene, beautifully acted – but, sadly, almost everything about this image is historically inaccurate, except maybe the rifles, and the mealie bags!

iSandlwana, Rorke's Drift, the battle of Hlobane, the death of the Prince Imperial, the battle of Ulundi, and the destruction of the Zulu royal homestead at oNdini. All of these employed hundreds of extras – Zulus, infantry, artillery, even lancers. Rather than film these battles in Zululand – still a difficult place to access at the time – they were in fact shot on the outskirts of Johannesburg, much closer to the studio facilities. The real war was, of course, within living memory at the time and indeed the role of the British commander, Lord Chelmsford, was played by an adventurer named Johan Colenbrander who, as a young man, had served in one of the colonial units during the war. Sadly, Colenbrander did not survive the film, which managed to do what the Zulus had not; in one scene he was required to enter a river on horseback, with his staff, and swim to the other side. The river was full and flowing fast and the director expressed some concern about the safety of the shot but Colenbrander, the experienced frontiersman, was convinced he could manage. Halfway across, several of the actors came off their horses and were swept away – among them Colenbrander, who drowned.

When the film was released it proved popular with South African audiences, although several veterans were quick to point out that it didn't quite match their recollection of events; one of those who saw it in Durban was Richard Wyatt Vause, a survivor of iSandlwana. Asked by a nephew if iSandlwana was really like it was shown in the movie, he allegedly replied

"No, it wasn't quite like that" – an early example, perhaps, of the experience of many a veteran on seeing their experiences filtered through the prism of the movie industry.

Unfortunately, no complete print of *Symbol of Sacrifice* exists today; apparently it was quite common in the early days of the industry to cannibalise previous films, to literally chop out chunks of film and splice them into another project made by the same studio. The surviving print has most of the battle scenes missing, presumably because they were so epic audiences wanted to see them again in a different context; enough remains, however, to suggest it was quite remarkable. There are some rather shaky excerpts on YouTube, including some tantalising clips from the Rorke's Drift sequence, if you are interested enough to check it out! Oh and, if you happen to have a complete copy in your collection – do let me know!

Although *Symbol of Sacrifice* is largely forgotten now it did, perhaps, establish Zulu history – or at least, conflict between outsiders and the Zulu people – as a viable theme for cinema drama, and various companies returned to it long before *Zulu* was made. In 1938 another South African film, *They Built A Nation* – essentially a celebratory breeze through white South African history – revisited the Great Trek and included a reconstruction of the battle of Blood River (Bloedrivier/Ncome). With rather less political agenda Hollywood included a Zulu attack on a Boer defensive wagon-laager in a 1955 Tyrone Power

vehicle called *Untamed*. This was very much a conventional Western of the period, a time when they were hugely popular around the world but transposed to Africa to give it a veneer of exoticism. With an almost total disregard for any real timeline, it features an 1850s wagon train moving into the interior which is randomly attacked by a wandering army of Zulus, in pretty much the same way Native American attacks were featured in Hollywood films of the time. This sequence was filmed in South Africa and is actually quite an accurate representation of Boer defensive tactics, providing you don't laugh at the way Tyrone Power gallops in at the head of a column of trouble-shooting horsemen to save the day at the crucial moment (all he lacks is a 7th Cavalry uniform...). Overall, however, despite a dashing cast and its dramatic locations *Untamed* remains deadly dull – my advice is to fast-forward to the battle scene then move on quickly afterwards.

For all its limitations, however, *Untamed* undoubtedly influenced *Zulu*, which was made only eight years later. *Zulu* was the result of a collaboration between Welsh actor Stanley Baker (later Sir Stanley) and Cy Endfield, an American director based in London. Baker was enjoying a rising career as a tough guy in various war films, thrillers, and the odd epic, and the two had spotted an article on the battle of Rorke's Drift written by the Scottish historian John Prebble. Baker was attracted by the element of Welsh heroism inherent in the story, and Prebble was co-opted to co-write



a script. The film was shot in KwaZulu Natal in 1963 and the project represented a considerable gamble for Baker and Caine – as Dickie Owen, who played Corporal Schiess, told me “We were offered the job because we were Stanley’s mates – he knew he could get us cheap that way!” Most of the cast were well known in Britain at that time but less so internationally, the one recognised star being Jack Hawkins, who was cast very much against type as the Swedish missionary Otto Witt. An unknown actor named Michael Caine was cast as Lieutenant Bromhead. The film was shot in a remote location and with the South African government watching suspiciously – this was, after all, the height of the apartheid era, and both British and black South African history was regarded with some suspicion. *Zulu* boasts a beautifully taut script full of memorable one-liners (come on, I know you are saying your favourite right now!). It wasn’t always so, however, and first drafts of the script were much longer, and much wordier; as often happens, some scenes were even shot but cut out during the final edit. For example, while in the final cut Otto Witt and his daughter are sent safely away before the real action begins, the script

originally called for them to return at the end of the film at the head of the relief column, and it hinted at a possible romance between Margaretta Witt and Baker’s character, Lieutenant Chard. Since stills exist of this scene it was clearly filmed but abandoned – to the relief, I’d suggest, of most of the film’s fans!

The film recreates, of course, the defence of the mission station at Rorke’s Drift across the night of 22/23 January, 1879. Although some of the violence seems muted by modern standards it remains a masterclass in slow-build tension as the claustrophobic conditions within the compound expose the rifts among the garrison. Sweeping panoramas and lush use of colour are used to stress both the remoteness and isolation of the garrison. Although the battle takes up less than half the film, it is brilliantly staged, each attack surpassing the previous one until the heart-stopping crescendo in which the defiant spirit of the Zulus defending their homeland is crushed beneath the relentless volley-fire of the invaders. Both Baker and Endfield inclined towards the political left, and the film is well aware of the ambiguities of the heroics it portrays, suggesting time and again that both the

soldiers and the Zulus are victims of policies formed by an Imperial elite far away from the front line (just see how many times a character asks “why are we here?”). In that, it is very much a film of its time, as Britain in the 1960s was beginning to reassess the significance of its fading role as an Imperial power and challenging the way Imperial myths had been previously represented.

So, if you are reading this far, you probably think it’s a great film – as, indeed, do I. But is it any good as a piece of history? Well, despite the fact that it regularly appears in polls of “most accurate historical films of all times,” the answer is, surprisingly, not so much. For one thing it wasn’t filmed at the real Rorke’s Drift but rather at the Royal Natal Park in the uKhahlamba (Drakensberg) mountains; Rorke’s Drift was still a working mission in the 1960s and the Lutheran Church regarded the one night of violence associated with the site as an aberration which they were not keen to commemorate, and besides – the mountains made for a more epic backdrop. The style and layout of the mission buildings is wrong, most of the battle took place at night – which would hardly be cinematic – and the

personality of several of the key characters was changed to fit the story arc. There is an irony in this, of course, the “Hook Paradox.” Many enthusiasts grumble about the way that Private Alfred Henry Hook was grossly misrepresented as a malingerer when in fact he was something of a model soldier – but the fact is, we only know that because the film stimulated us to find out! No film, and would anyone care? The class conflict between the Baker and Caine characters, which is at the heart of the film’s drama, is addressing issues of the 1960s rather than 1870s – in fact the real Chard and Bromhead worked together perfectly well – while the archetypally patriarchal Colour Sergeant Bourne, magnificently portrayed by Nigel Green, was in fact 23 at the time of the battle. And neither was Otto Witt’s daughter as old as she is portrayed – nor was she present on the eve of the battle. Moreover, the Welshness of the garrison is greatly overstated – the regiment were not the South Wales Borderers until two years after the war, and indeed was only at the beginning of an association with Wales which had begun as recently as 1873; most of B Company were English or Irish, with a slightly higher proportion of Welshman than was typically the case in the Victorian Army. And no, nobody sang *Men of Harlech* during the battle, let alone at the very end when, in fact, both sides were utterly exhausted! The course of the battle is given much more structure than it actually enjoyed, while the uniforms are both inaccurate in detail and far too bright and clean.

It’s worth commenting, too, on the way the Zulus are represented in the film. There is no Zulu perspective in *Zulu*, despite its title, something which is hardly surprising given that the film is anchored firmly within the defensive perimeter. Nevertheless, the Zulus are not diminished or demonised in any way – in fact it’s central to the film’s viewpoint that they are represented as courageous enemies. Time and again they are visually marked out as belonging to this country, rising up out of the grass or coming over the top of the hill, whereas the redcoats clearly do not, and stand out in their conspicuous uniforms like a sore thumb. In that respect the representation of the Zulus owed something to *Untamed*, where the Zulus similarly appear from a mysterious and threatening landscape to herald their attack with sinister chanting and the pointing of their spears. At the end of *Zulu* the two sides reach a point of mutual respect and, whilst it’s easy to dismiss that as simplistic today, it was very different in tone to the way Native Americans were usually depicted in Golden

Age Hollywood. Indeed, it is noticeable that the role of King Cetshwayo was played by Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi who was then beginning an immensely influential political career representing Zulu interests which continues to this day. But, while the Zulus may look great, there are issues of accuracy there, too, in that the Zulu amabutho (regiments) who fought at Rorke’s Drift had not been involved in looting the camp at iSandlwana, and so were not in a position to fire “our own damn rifles” back at the defenders. Nor, come to that, did the mass wedding suggested early in the movie take place (it is true that regiments were given permission to marry as a unit – which marked a step towards semi-retirement in the Zulu military system – but the weddings took place individually).

How much should *Zulu* be held to account, then, for its historical failings? Well, not much, in my view, I learned a long time ago that it was possible to acknowledge its failings and love it anyway. For one thing it was made at a time when there was very little literature available on the war and, indeed, much of the scholarship of recent times was inspired after the event by the film. It was harder to get things right then – and, given the extent to which it was rescuing this event from forgotten history, people cared less anyway. In fact, of course, the film was a great commercial success, particularly within the U.K., and is arguably single-handedly responsible for the enduring fascination Rorke’s Drift enjoys to this day. And if you want to know what really happened, there are, after all, plenty of books you can go and read (I’d advise you to start with one of mine!).

In the early 1970s Baker and Endfield

announced that they were preparing a follow-up to *Zulu*, about the battle of iSandlwana. Endfield had started drafting a script and Baker was pencilled in to play Brevet Colonel Anthony Durnford, who can be variously evoked as the hero or villain of the story, depending on your point of view. Sadly, the project was cut short by Sir Stanley’s untimely death in 1976, and the project was sold on to another company (Endfield wrote a novel which expanded on his original concept) and finally emerged in 1979 as *Zulu Dawn*.

Zulu Dawn was one of the last conventional epics to be filmed before CGI, at a time when they were fast becoming too expensive to make. It features a host of British acting royalty from Sir John Mills and Peter O’Toole to Bob Hoskins, Denholm Elliott, Simon Ward, Peter Vaughan and Phil Daniels, and Burt Lancaster brought in to play Durnford, presumably to ensure American finance. Despite that, the storyline is mediocre, the dramatic conflict between the characters which made *Zulu* so compelling replaced with a lightweight run-through of the events leading up to iSandlwana with little enough characterisation or personal drama. On the whole, however, its use of location is much better than *Zulu*, and it was filmed near the real locations. Although the presence of monuments on the actual battle site meant that the real iSandlwana is only glimpsed in the

OPPOSITE

What *Zulu* does best; the stunning battles over the mealie-bag barricades!

BELOW

The Zulus in *Untamed* (1955) – foreshadowing the way they would be depicted in *Zulu* (1964)



distance, the crossing at Rorke's Drift was filmed at Rorke's Drift – albeit the wrong way round, from the Zulu to the Natal side – and the battle scenes were shot at Siphezi mountain, about 20 miles from iSandlwana (and where, incidentally, the real Zulu army bivouacked on its way to the battle). The Fugitives' Drift sequences were filmed on the spot. More attention was given to accurate uniforms, and generally the film recreates the appearance of the British army in the field quite well, although there were some glaring errors. The various officers in the auxiliary units, including Simon Ward's character, wear light blue uniforms which are just not right, and the absence of a large number of working Martini-Henry rifles meant that the 24th Regiment's firing line is armed instead with carbines. The group of lancers who constitute Lord Chelmsford's escort have clearly caught the boat out three months too early whilst the impact of polyester and polystyrene on 1970s film costume is just a little too explicit at times. Peter O'Toole plays Chelmsford with an edge of icy arrogance the rather gruff

and reserved real Lord did not possess. Simon Ward's character is an amalgam of several real characters whilst most of the rest – Bob Hoskins' Colour Sergeant, the clumsy soldier, the helpless drummer boy, and overzealous Quartermaster – are products of the battle's overworked clichés, most of them not drawn in sufficient depth for the viewer to care about their fate. Clearly uncomfortable about the lack of Zulu representation, the film attempts to introduce a Zulu storyline but largely abandons it before it goes anywhere.

Generally *Zulu Dawn* follows the course of events reasonably well, arguably better than *Zulu*; nevertheless, there are obvious distortions. The crossing at Rorke's Drift took place under cover of darkness, not in glorious sunshine with bands playing and Colours flying, and the representation of the battle itself is confused, depicting the 24th fighting in close formations when in fact they were in open order, and falling back on the since discredited ammunition failure theory as an easy explanation of “where it all went wrong.” To make the most of the practical advantages of less

rain and better light the film was shot in the South African winter, and the countryside has a dry, sandy look at odds with the summer green of the real battle. Arguably more seriously, the film ran into financial problems during shooting resulting in a rushed release; in order to get as wide a showing as possible many of the bloodier scenes were cut out, and *Zulu Dawn*, about a truly terrifying close-quarter battle in which thousands of men and animals were killed in a confined area, remains a film in which many people die – but almost none of them bleed.

Although it's probably true that a better film could be made about iSandlwana, *Zulu Dawn* is not without its moments. The landscape is great, and the epic set-piece scenes are superb, and the moment when the Zulus break through the British lines and storm through the camp has a visceral excitement that just needed a little more – well, viscera – to top it off. On the whole *Zulu Dawn* is a missed opportunity, but still well worth watching.

Since 1979, politics, attitudes, and film making have all changed significantly, and the only dramas on Zulu history filmed since have concentrated instead on the rise of the kingdom under King Shaka (indeed, a new production about Shaka's life has recently been announced). Will there ever be another film about the British invasion of 1879? Well, for sure it won't be a remake of *Zulu* but that's probably a good thing; why rework a classic when there are so many fresh stories to be told? Any new production would undoubtedly have to take the Zulu perspective much more seriously, in the way that modern films about the American West engage much more with Native American culture and experiences. But a film – or TV series! – about the Zulus defending their homeland against the British invasion? I could certainly go with that. ■

Ian Knight is the author of Zulu Rising; The Epic Story of iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift



ABOVE

Mercifully left on the cutting room floor; Margaretta Witt returns with the relief column at the end of Zulu

LEFT

The “Saving the Colour” scenes were filmed at the actual river crossing. Although, of course, the Queen's Colour of the 24th was cased, not flying, and there's not much truth about the chic, powder-blue uniform on the left, either!