

‘The Danger of Divided Command’: British civil and military disputes over the conduct of the Zululand campaigns of 1879 and 1888

John Laband •

Civil and military command in nineteenth-century southern Africa

In the hey-day of the British Empire the respective spheres of authority of the civil and military powers were not necessarily unequivocally defined, leading on occasion to disputes which threatened the efficient conduct of military operations. The most spectacular and bitter confrontation of this sort was that between the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, Lord Kitchener, which culminated in Curzon's resignation in August 1905.¹ The obscure colonies of Natal and Zululand were of a very different order from the glittering Indian Empire, but there too, in 1879 and again in 1888, sharp wrangles developed between the civil and military authorities with ultimately significant consequences. For the British Government was at last forced to revise and clarify its regulations so that henceforth throughout the Empire—besides India—colonial governors and the officers commanding forces would have no doubt as to their respective jurisdictions.

The British annexed Natal on 31 May 1844 as a District of the Cape Colony, and on 15 July 1856 it was created a separate Colony of the British Crown under a Lieutenant-Governor.² Meanwhile, a permanent British military presence was established in Natal when on the evening of 31 August 1843 Maj T.C. Smith, in command of two companies of the 45th Regiment, some Royal Engineers, a troop of the Cape Mounted Rifles and a half battery of field guns, encamped on the hill at the western end of Pietermaritzburg, the fledgling capital. Their camp was named Fort Napier in honour of the Governor of the Cape, Sir George Napier, and would remain the headquarters of the Natal garrison and its supply and remount centre until it was finally withdrawn on 12 August 1914.³

• Department of History, Wilfred Laurier University, Canada.

¹ See P. Mason, *A Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, its Officers and Men* (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 397-8, 400-1.

² J. Laband, *Rope of Sand: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century* (Johannesburg, 1995), pp. 108, 125.

³ G. Dominy and H. Paterson, 'Fort Napier: the imperial base that shaped the city' in J. Laband and R. Haswell (eds), *Pietermaritzburg 1838 - 1988: A New Portrait of an African City* (Pietermaritzburg, 1988), pp. 102, 109.

Belying its permanent presence in Pietermaritzburg between 1843 and 1914, the Natal garrison theoretically remained only a temporary expedient, to be withdrawn when circumstances permitted. The volatility of southern Africa during this period meant, however, that it never was. The garrison remained at Fort Napier not simply to provide physical security for the apprehensive white settlers who felt themselves constantly threatened by the overwhelmingly preponderant African population, but because its presence was necessary in terms of global imperial strategy. In an era of increasing competition from rival colonial powers such as Germany, it remained necessary to protect the port of Durban from naval attack, since the harbour retained its importance as a naval base on the alternative Cape route to India if the Mediterranean and Suez Canal should be closed to British shipping. Moreover, the Natal garrison served as a reserve from which troops could be drawn to protect more important posts, such as the Cape, or be despatched on forward expeditions to secure imperial interests in the interior of the sub-continent.⁴

Nevertheless, the garrison was always maintained at the lowest possible strength commensurate with the dangers of the military situation, not only in the interests of imperial economising and the limited budget of the War Department, but also to promote colonial self-reliance and local self-defence. Thus reinforcement during crises like the Ninth Frontier War (1877-8), the Anglo-Zulu War (1879) and the First Boer War (1880-1) was only a temporary expedient, and the garrison was always drastically reduced once peace returned. Nevertheless, the size of the South African garrison did grow steadily to a strength in 1882 that remained constant until the crisis of the Second Anglo-Boer War, despite the need during the mid- and late-1880s to detach troops to trouble-spots like Zululand and Bechuanaland. In 1882 the largest peacetime concentration of imperial troops in South Africa was at Fort Napier with a cavalry regiment, three infantry battalions and a battery of mountain guns. By contrast, only two-and-a-half battalions were stationed at the Cape.⁵

Since the British garrison in southern Africa was never strong enough to shoulder the full military burden unaided, it was always necessary to supplement it with units raised locally from among the colonists and the African population. This policy worked reasonably effectively in the Cape, but not in the case of Natal. There the Lieutenant-Governor (Governor from 1882), in his capacity as Supreme Chief over the Native Population, had the right to exact *isibhalo*—or compulsory labour and military service—from Africans living in the colony. In time of military need, therefore, magistrates (as the Governor's representatives) were authorised to raise levies from the chiefs in the Native Reserves and place them under white levy-leaders. Such levies were overwhelmingly made up of inadequately trained and poorly disciplined infantry, though a few units of motivated African irregular horse were of good calibre. From 1882 the Governor of Natal was also Special

⁴ G. Dominy, 'The imperial garrison in Natal with special reference to Fort Napier 1843-1914: its social, cultural and economic impact' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1995), pp. 377-8; E.M. Spiers, 'The British Army in South Africa: military government and occupation, 1877-1914' in P.B. Boyden, A.J. Guy and M. Harding (eds), *Ashes and Blood: The British army in South Africa 1795 - 1914* (London, 1999), p. 76.

⁵ The vagaries of the transfer of troops on special duties from one area to another, the complex system of reliefs and the detachments of units on special expeditions into the interior make it very difficult to be absolutely precise about garrison strengths at any particular date. See H. Paterson, 'The military organisation of the Colony of Natal, 1881 - 1910' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Natal, 1985), pp. 47-51; P.B. Boyden and A.J. Guy, 'The British Army in Cape Colony and Natal, 1815 - 1877' in Boyden et al, *Ashes and Blood*, pp. 44-7; I.F.W. Beckett, 'Military high command in South Africa, 1854 - 1914' in Boyden et al, *Ashes and Blood*, pp. 64-5; Dominy, 'Imperial garrison in Natal', pp. 367-8.

Commissioner for Zulu Affairs, becoming Governor of Zululand in 1887. This gave him the authority to raise African levies in the British administered parts of Zululand, in addition to Natal.

As Commander-in-Chief and Vice-Admiral in and over Natal (and after 1887 of Zululand as well), the Governor had the authority to raise other forces as well. Thus, besides the African levies, whose military worth was generally questionable, the Governor had at his disposal the Natal Mounted Police, a small standing body of quasi-military police, created in 1874. Their counterpart in Zululand was the Reserve Territory Carbineers, created in 1883, and renamed the Zululand Police in 1887. There were also the Natal Volunteer Corps, first raised in 1855, and consisting by 1879 of one artillery, three infantry and eleven mounted corps. Drawn predominantly from the English-speaking colonists, their numbers were very small. The Mounted Burgher Force, a largely nominal commando organisation established in 1863, and the Rifle Associations, which dated from 1862, were of only negligible military value.⁶

Colonial officials consequently shared with most colonists the desire for the continued presence of the imperial garrison, not merely because they valued the attendant economic benefits, but because they knew they were incapable of taking on the full burden of their own defence. Not only would it be impossible to force through the necessary but unpopular militia legislation to ensure a much more comprehensive settler commitment to military obligations, but assuming financial responsibility for its own defence would have been beyond the Natal administration's capability. During the 1860s and 1870s the colonial government contributed about ten per cent of the total imperial expenditure on maintaining the garrison at Fort Napier. During the crises of the Anglo-Zulu and First Anglo-Boer Wars this contribution dropped to 0.6 percent of imperial expenses. Imperial military expenditure in Natal and Zululand during the 1880s averaged £150 000 a year. In the same period it cost the colonial government around £60 000 in total to maintain the Natal Mounted Police and the Volunteer Corps, as well as to contribute to the imperial garrison. The latter commitment was only some £7 000, or less than five per cent of the total.⁷

It might not seem unreasonable, therefore, to presume that the Governor's influence on military affairs affecting Natal would be commensurate with the colony's small contribution to the upkeep of the imperial garrison and to the puny strength of its own military establishment. However, the structure of British colonial government in South Africa did not admit this logical conclusion.

The imperial agent in southern Africa was, from 1846, the High Commissioner and Governor of the Cape, directly responsible to the Secretaries of State for the Colonies and for War, and through them, to the imperial cabinet at Westminster. It was the office of High Commissioner which gave formal sanction to the Cape Governor's actions beyond the borders of that colony, and permitted him to assert British paramountcy over the interior of southern Africa, including Natal and Zululand. Until 1882 the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal was not a full Governor, which subordinated him to the High Commissioner in frontier matters, most particularly the affairs of Zululand. However, as Her Majesty's Special Commissioner for Zulu Affairs from 1882, and then as Governor of the Colony of Zululand from 1887, the Governor of Natal gained more freedom to act in Zululand, though this was

⁶ J. Laband and P. Thompson, *The Illustrated Guide to the Anglo-Zulu War* (Pietermaritzburg, 2000), pp. 22-3.

⁷ Dominy, 'Imperial garrison in Natal', pp. 320-2, 371-5; Paterson, 'Military organisation of Natal', pp. 36-40, 52-4, 56-61.

still technically limited by the superior authority of the High Commissioner. To complicate his position still further, the Lieutenant- and later full Governor also reported directly to the Colonial Secretary at Westminster.⁸

Crucially, the High Commissioner was also designated Commander-in-Chief according to the form normally used in the commissions of American and West Indian Governors. He could thus claim that the framing and implementation of defence policy in southern Africa was his preserve alone, and overrode the inferior authority of other governors as commanders-in-chief in and over their own particular colonies, such as Natal or Zululand.

However, whether this meant in practice that he exercised actual control over all military planning and operations, or whether these fell within the sphere of the General Officer Commanding Her Majesty's Forces in South Africa, was a moot point. This military officer was himself responsible to the Secretary of State for War, who framed imperial military policy and had supreme control of the army. To complicate matters further, the GOC was also answerable to the Field Marshal Commanding-in-Chief at the Horse Guards, who held office at the pleasure of the Crown, and who implemented the decisions of the imperial cabinet. Between 1856 and 1895 this personage was the Queen's militarily conservative cousin, HRH the Duke of Cambridge, who doggedly maintained his grip on matters of command, discipline, appointments and promotions. He was extremely jealous of these prerogatives and resented and resisted the interference of civilians—including the Cabinet—in military affairs.⁹

This complex tangle around the demarcation of military authority in southern Africa came into open question in the very first days of British administration at the Cape, during Lord Caledon's Governorship (1807-1811). It was—after considerable indecision on the part of the imperial government—decided in favour of the High Commissioner in whom supreme military control was thereafter vested.¹⁰ The will of the High Commissioner, especially if he was of forceful character, would henceforth prevail over that of the GOC. The case of Lt-Gen Sir Arthur Cunynghame, initially in command of operations during the Ninth Frontier War, is illustrative. He fell out with Sir Bartle Frere, the dynamic High Commissioner appointed in March 1877, and was recalled and replaced in March 1878 by Maj-Gen Sir F. Thesiger (later Lt-Gen Lord Chelmsford, subsequently in command of operations in Zululand).¹¹

Neither Cunynghame nor Chelmsford were soldiers of much renown, for the relative smallness of the imperial garrison and the subordination of military authority to the High Commissioner meant that for most of the nineteenth century South Africa was not a significant or highly prized military command. Not surprisingly, they and other GOCs often proved unequal to conducting operations during a real crisis. In such circumstances, a more effective soldier, popular with the public and acceptable to the dominant military faction of the moment, would be despatched to supersede or side-line the ineffectual commander, as when Chelmsford was in turn replaced by Gen Sir Garnet Wolseley in May 1879.¹²

⁸ J. Benyon, *Proconsul and Paramourcy in South Africa: The High Commission, British Supremacy and the Sub-Continent 1806 - 1910* (Pietermaritzburg, 1980), pp. 7-11, 69-70, 212-13, 358-61.

⁹ J. Laband (ed.), *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879* (Stroud, 1994), p. xxvii.

¹⁰ V.T. Harlow, 'Cape Colony, 1806 - 1822' in E.A. Walker (gen. ed.), *The Cambridge History of the British Empire, Volume VIII: South Africa, Rhodesia and the High Commission Territories* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 206-8.

¹¹ J. Mathews, 'Lord Chelmsford: British general in southern Africa 1878 - 1879' (unpublished D. Litt. et Phil. thesis, University of South Africa, 1986), pp. 31, 35-6.

¹² Beckett, 'Military high command', pp. 60-3.

Chelmsford and Bulwer, 1879

These already snarled threads of command began to knot still further in 1879 when the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal and the GOC, both subordinate to the High Commissioner, came into conflict over their respective spheres of authority and the appropriate employment of the forces at their command. Nor was it an issue which could be decided parochially, for the structure of imperial government ensured that it came directly to the attention of the Secretaries of State for both the Colonial and War Offices and through them to the Cabinet at Westminster, as well as to that of the Commander-in-Chief at the Horse Guards.

When Lt-Gen Lord Chelmsford arrived in Natal in August 1878 to make arrangements for the impending Zululand campaign, he discovered that the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Henry Bulwer, was not in favour of war, and this fundamental divergence of opinion did not make for ready cooperation. Considerable friction would develop over the next nine months between the civil and military authorities. The most contentious issue centred on the deployment and command of the Natal border levies, for to resolve the question was to decide who exercised ultimate authority over military operations in the Zululand theatre, Chelmsford or Bulwer. Sir Bartle Frere, as High Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief, was empowered to arbitrate between them, or to support one against the other since, as we have seen, supreme military control was vested in him. Since it was in his political interests that the war be brought to a swift and successful conclusion, it might be supposed that he would be predisposed to support the General in charge of actual operations.¹³

Because Bulwer agreed to the bulk of Natal Mounted Police and the Natal Volunteer Corps being placed at Chelmsford's disposal when he invaded Zululand, or were required to man the defensive laagers in Natal itself, the Lieutenant-Governor realized that the defence of the districts of the colony bordering on Zululand would have to be left in the hands of the African population.¹⁴ However, Chelmsford had already got his way in persuading Bulwer—in the exercise of his prerogatives as Supreme Chief—to permit the drafting of nearly 8000 African auxiliaries from the Natal Native Reserves into the Natal Native Contingent for service in Zululand, and to make over their command to the military authorities. This meant that additional African border levies would have to be raised once the British troops, colonial Police and Volunteers, and the NNC had marched away into Zululand.

In late November 1878 Bulwer and the nominated senior officials who formed the Executive Council of Natal¹⁵ completed their arrangements for the defence of the colony. Natal was divided into Defensive Districts, each under the command of a Colonial District Commander, responsible to the Natal government. These commanders had charge of the defensive posts in their districts, as well as whatever forces they could raise—crucially, only until such time as their districts were placed under direct military command.¹⁶ Chelmsford intended that the border levies be a standing force of some 6 000, but Bulwer demurred,

¹³ For a detailed analysis of the struggle for dominance over operations in Zululand and Natal, see J. Laband, 'Bulwer, Chelmsford and the border levies: the dispute over the defence of Natal', in J. Laband and P. Thompson, *Kingdom and Colony at War: Sixteen Studies on the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879* (Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town, 1990, pp. 150-65, *passim*..

¹⁴ *British Parliamentary Papers* [henceforth *BPP*] (C. 2318), enc. 18 in no. 1: minute by Bulwer, 28 February 1879.

¹⁵ The government of Natal was a limited representative one until responsible government was granted in 1893.

¹⁶ Colonial Secretary's Office, papers in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository [henceforth *CSO*] 2629, no. 4237/78: circular, Instructions for the Colonial District Commanders, 21 November 1878.

arguing that the colonial government was not financially able to maintain such a large force in the field. Reluctantly, in late December 1878 Chelmsford gave way, and agreed that in each Defensive District along the border the Commander would raise a small standing Border Guard supplemented by a larger Reserve who would relieve each other at intervals.¹⁷

When he began his advance into Zululand on 11 January 1879, Chelmsford had no intention of leaving the defence of the border districts immediately to his rear exclusively in the hands of the civil authorities and the border levies. As was his prerogative in terms of the defence agreement reached with Bulwer in November 1878, he placed the three Defensive Districts along the Thukela and Mzinyathi rivers under his overall military command.¹⁸ Bulwer later conceded that Chelmsford had the right to dispose of the colonial troops in these districts for whatever 'military reasons may at any time appear necessary'.¹⁹

Disaster rapidly overtook Chelmsford's forces at Isandlwana on 22 January 1879, and his Right Column was bottled up at Eshowe by the Zulu. During February and March Chelmsford set about retrieving the situation, and decided that before mounting a major new invasion he must relieve the Eshowe garrison. It appeared obvious to him that, once the Eshowe Relief Column began its advance, he should not only have the final say concerning the dispositions of the colonial levies in the Defensive Districts immediately to his rear, but that they should assist by making diversionary raids across the border into Zululand.²⁰

Bulwer refused permission for them to do so. As he saw it, not only had the border levies been raised solely to protect Natal from Zulu attack, but 'raiding expeditions' were, in the vigorous phrasing of a resolution adopted by the Executive Council, 'an impolitic and undesirable system of war...calculated to provoke retaliation'.²¹ In taking this uncompromising position, Bulwer believed he was standing securely on his prerogatives as Supreme Chief, and was adamant that 'no provision is made for the supersession of the Lieutenant-Governor by any military or other authority'.²²

Yet Bulwer was on shaky ground. It was not merely, as we have seen, that the affected border Defensive Districts had been placed under military authority in January 1879 in terms of the November 1878 decision of the Executive Council. For on 14 March the Attorney-General of Natal, Michael Gallway, advised Bulwer that in his opinion Chelmsford was justified in directing Natal's Africans to perform 'any military service which the General Commanding in Chief may assign to them or order them to engage in'.²³ But Bulwer was by then too fully engaged to pull back, especially since Chelmsford proceeded contemptuously to flout him. The General required the border levies not only to create a diversion in favour of his advance on Eshowe, but he believed that in the long run an 'active defence' of vigorous cross-border raiding would force the Zulu to abandon the border zone altogether and thus diminish their capacity to raid the colony.²⁴ Confident that his strategy was the correct one,

¹⁷ Government House, papers in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository [henceforth GH] 1413: no. 4909/78: Bulwer to C.B.H. Mitchell, 20 December 1879; GH 1326, no. 160/78: Chelmsford to Bulwer, 30 December 1878.

¹⁸ GH 1326, no. 6/79: Bulwer to Chelmsford, 13 January 1879.

¹⁹ CSO 1926, no. 1356/79: Bulwer to Chelmsford, 28 February 1879.

²⁰ GH 1423, enc. in no. 1222/79: memorandum by Chelmsford, 20 February 1879.

²¹ *BPP* (C. 2318), enc. 19 in no. 1: extracts from the proceedings of the Natal Executive Council, 1 March 1879.

²² *BPP* (C. 2318), enc. 7 in no. 1: Bulwer to Chelmsford, 7 February 1879.

²³ Attorney-General's Office, papers in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, 1/16/1, p. 405: memorandum by M.H. Gallway, 14 March 1879.

²⁴ *BPP* (C. 2318), no. 18: Chelmsford to Bulwer, 18 April 1879.

Chelmsford proved himself prepared to proceed, if needs be, without Bulwer's prior sanction, or even knowledge. Between March and May he accordingly ordered a series of raids into Zululand by the border forces.

Knowing full well that Bulwer would vigorously object to such high-handedness, Chelmsford embarked on some preemptive 'active defence' of his own. He must have understood that there would be no point in turning primarily to Frere for support, even though, as High Commissioner, framing defence policy was his prerogative. Not only had Frere already made it clear that he feared the 'raw' border levies would be 'next to useless' for cross-border sorties and should be reserved entirely for the 'passive defence' favoured by Bulwer,²⁵ but his credit and prestige had been brought by the disastrous Zulu campaign into an eclipse as great, if not greater, than Chelmsford's own. So Chelmsford turned elsewhere in the command chain for support.

On 11 April Chelmsford wrote to the Commander-in-Chief, the Duke of Cambridge, indignantly complaining that Bulwer's interference with his arrangements to secure the Natal border from Zulu incursions was 'quite indefensible', and requesting that the Field Marshal give him 'full support in this matter'.²⁶ Chelmsford had little doubt he would receive it. Cambridge was his long-standing patron, for as a conservative officer of primarily Indian service, Chelmsford agreed with him in damning many aspects of contemporary army reform. Moreover, Chelmsford knew just how much the Duke resented civilian interference in military affairs. But Cambridge was himself subject to intense pressure from Parliament and from public opinion through the press, both highly critical of Chelmsford's handling of the Zululand campaign. Besides, the Field Marshal himself found considerable grounds for disquiet concerning Chelmsford's generalship, and these were supported by Chelmsford's own critical staff in Zululand. Consequently, he steadily lost the will to help save Chelmsford in his command.²⁷ Chelmsford, though, was unaware that he was in the process of forfeiting his most influential ally. It was with considerable confidence, therefore, that he addressed Bulwer the day following his despatch to Cambridge, loftily informing the Lieutenant-Governor that he had referred the whole question of military command in South Africa to the Home Government.²⁸

Bulwer indignantly responded to Chelmsford in person on 15 April,²⁹ and followed this up with an enormously long despatch to Sir Michael Hicks Beach, the Colonial Secretary, rehearsing his entire dispute with Chelmsford and insisting that the border levies had never been placed under the General's command, and that he had never authorised their employment over the border. Chelmsford, he insisted, by ordering the levies into Zululand, had 'exceeded his powers and acted without due regard for the authority of this Government'.³⁰

Meanwhile, as a second line of defence, the General wrote on 22 April to secure Frere's support for his undisputed command of the troops along the border, vehemently

²⁵ BPP (C. 2318), enc. 10 in no. 1, minute by Frere, 11 February 1879.

²⁶ Chelmsford Papers, National Army Museum, London, 28: Chelmsford to Duke of Cambridge, 11 April 1879.

²⁷ Laband, *Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign*, p. xvii. See Cambridge's letters of 6 March and 22 May 1879 to Frere, printed in Sonia Clarke, *Zululand at War: The Conduct of the Anglo-Zulu War* (Houghton, 1984), pp. 112, 114.

²⁸ BPP (C. 2318), enc. 2 in no. 13, Chelmsford to Bulwer, 12 April 1879.

²⁹ GH 1326, no. 40/79: Bulwer to Chelmsford, 15 April 1879.

³⁰ GH 1221, no. 67/79: Bulwer to Hicks Beach, 16 April 1879.

insisting that 'the danger of divided command...be done away with'.³¹ Not to be outdone, on 30 April Bulwer also appealed to Frere, who had left Pietermaritzburg on 15 March to attend to affairs in the troubled Transvaal Colony. He was on increasingly weak ground, however, for to his chagrin he was forced to admit to Frere that on 23 April his Executive Council had reluctantly conceded that Chelmsford did indeed have the right to employ the border levies in sorties into Zululand if 'imperatively necessary for military reasons'.³²

Yet whatever Frere or the Executive Council might think of the respective merits of the dispute, the matter was already moving out of their hands, and out of Bulwer's and Chelmsford's too. The Home Government had been digesting the barrage of mutually recriminatory despatches, and on 19 May Hicks Beach, the Colonial Secretary, telegraphed Bulwer with notice of Chelmsford's unequivocal victory. The Government had decided that the 'full command of any forces, whether European or Native...must of course be with the General, with whom the responsibility for the operation rests'.³³

Yet Chelmsford's triumph was to be short-lived. The exasperated Government had also decided to solve the problems inherent in a divided command (and to put an end to an embarrassingly shrill and increasingly personal dispute) by creating a single, unified South African command. Not one of the discredited officials or officers on the spot was selected to fill the post. Hicks Beach telegraphed Bulwer on 28 May informing him that the chief civil and military authority in south-east Africa was to be placed into the hands of Gen Sir Garnet Wolseley.³⁴ As a full General he out-ranked Chelmsford; as Governor of Natal he subordinated Bulwer; and as Governor of the Transvaal and High Commissioner for South East Africa he displaced Frere from his supervision of affairs in Natal and Zululand.³⁵ The Duke of Cambridge and his circle much deprecated this appointment, for they deplored Wolseley and his 'Ring' of careerist professional officers and their reformist military ideas.³⁶ Nevertheless, the Cabinet were convinced that under this dynamic and professional 'dictator' the embarrassing and expensive Zululand campaign would finally be brought to a speedy conclusion.

It might not unnaturally be supposed that the cabinet directive of 19 May 1879, which laid down that full command of ALL forces must be with the general responsible for operations, was both clear and unambiguous. Yet events in Zululand during 1888 would prove otherwise, and demonstrate how easily even cabinet decisions can be forgotten.

Smyth and Havelock, 1888

Zululand became a British possession as from 18 May 1887. Sir Arthur Havelock, from February 1886 already Governor of the Colony of Natal, Commander-in-Chief and Vice-Admiral in and over Natal, Supreme Chief over the Native Population and Her Majesty's Special Commissioner for Zulu Affairs since February 1886, was in addition appointed by

³¹ Chelmsford to Frere, 21 April 1879, quoted in maj the Hon. G. French, *Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War* (London, 1939), pp. 212-13.

³² GH 1326, no. 54/79: Bulwer to Frere, 30 April 1879.

³³ BPP (C. 2318), no. 11: Hicks Beach to Bulwer, 19 May 1879.

³⁴ BPP (C. 2318), no. 19: Hicks Beach to Bulwer, 28 May 1879. Chelmsford, who was in the field in Zululand, only learned on 16 June of Wolseley's appointment, but was not apprised of the details until 5 July and only received formal notice of his supersession on 9 July, whereupon he resigned. See Mathews, 'Lord Chelmsford', pp. 308-12.

³⁵ See BPP (C. 2318): Appendix: Commission issued to Sir Garnet Wolseley, 28 May 1879; Benyon, *Proconsul and Paramountcy*, p. 165.

³⁶ See E.M. Spiers, *Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester, 1992), pp. 67-9, 109-11, 157.

Royal Commission Governor of Zululand. He in turn appointed the chief civil officers, namely, the Resident Commissioner and Chief Magistrate of the Colony of Zululand, and the Assistant Commissioners and Resident Magistrates for the six Magisterial Districts into which the new colony was divided for administrative purposes.³⁷ A force of mounted and unmounted paramilitary police styled the Zululand Police, recruited from among the Zulu and officered by white sub-inspectors under the command of Cmdt George Mansel, was responsible for maintaining law and order.³⁸ The new civil administration was financially maintained by a hut tax imposed on 30 August 1887,³⁹ and governed by the Laws and Regulations for Zululand, promulgated on 21 June 1887.⁴⁰ Crucially, in terms of article 1, Havelock as Governor was vested with the 'powers and prerogatives of Supreme Chief over the African people of the territory', which he regarded as 'absolute and undefined'.⁴¹ They formed the basis of his executive, political and judicial powers over the people of Zululand, and included his right to raise levies and auxiliaries in time of military need.

However, potential danger lay in the twilight zone between the freshly established and alien jurisdiction of the Governor's representatives, the white officials, and the great chiefs of Zululand who retained certain limited judicial and other residual powers under their supervision. Dinuzulu, the heir of King Cetshwayo, and his adherents known as the uSuthu, proved the most intransigent. Dealing with them ought to have been a matter for the civil administration, but by August 1887 Dick Addison, the Resident Magistrate of the Ndwandwe District where they were concentrated, began to fear that his small force of Zululand Police was insufficient to contain them. So Melmoth Osborn, the Resident Commissioner, was pressured into requesting Havelock to permit the temporary forward movement of troops of the imperial garrison to Entonjaneni and Nkonjeni to lend Addison 'moral support...in preventing disturbances'.⁴² This action was the first crucial step in a process whereby the Zulu civil administration progressively abdicated its authority to the military, though Havelock never envisaged such military support as anything other than strictly temporary, and expected his magistrates to stand on their own feet unaided.⁴³

In August 1887 the troops' temporary presence in Ndwandwe in was efficacious in cowing the uSuthu, but by October the civil authorities called for them again. While more troops slowly moved up from Fort Napier in Pietermaritzburg to swell the over-stretched units already in Zululand,, Havelock made use of his powers as Supreme Chief in Zululand to order the enrolment of a force of Mounted Basutos from among the Tlokwa people of the Nqutu District to reinforce the Zululand Police.⁴⁴ Like the Zululand Police, they were

³⁷ BPP (C. 5143), enc. in no. 29: Proclamation of the Annexation of Zululand, 14 May 1887; Government House Zululand, papers in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository [henceforth GHZ] 845: Secretary of State to Special Commissioner Zululand, 11 May 1887; Zululand Archives, papers in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository [henceforth ZA] 5, no. R595/87: Havelock to Osborn, 21 June 1887; GHZ 845: Governor of Natal to Secretary of State, 22 June 1887.

³⁸ ZA 5, no. R462/87: Havelock to Osborn, 14 May 1887.

³⁹ ZA 5, no. R856/87: Proclamation (Zululand No. IIII of 1887), 30 August 1887.

⁴⁰ BPP (C. 5331), enc. 1 in no. 2: Laws and Regulations for the Government of Zululand (Zululand, No. II of 1887), 21 June 1887.

⁴¹ Colonial Office 879/30, *African Confidential Print* 370, enc. 1 in no. 11: Havelock to Lt-Gen H.A. Smyth, 29 June 1888.

⁴² ZA 41: Osborn to Havelock, 17 August 1887.

⁴³ GHZ 821, no. 5/88: Havelock to Colonial Secretary, 18 January 1888.

⁴⁴ GHZ 845: Havelock to Major McKean, Nqutu, 17 October 1887; Intelligence Division of the War Office, *Precis of Information Concerning Zululand* (London, 1985), p. 98.

technically under the command of the Governor, rather than under that of Colonel Henry Sparke Stabb, Officer Commanding Troops, Natal and Zululand.

The October show of military force proved temporarily efficacious, but twice in January a 'demonstration of troops' again became necessary.⁴⁵ By late April the civil officials had again lost control, and the uSuthu were in open rebellion. On 2 June Addison and his Zululand Police, supported by troops from the military post at Nkonjeni and a force of auxiliaries drawn from local 'loyal' Zulu, were ignominiously repulsed on Ceza when he attempted to serve warrants of arrest on Dinuzulu and his uncle, Ndabuko. British authority throughout Zululand was brought into jeopardy.⁴⁶ Colonel Stabb, concluded that he had no option but to call in reinforcements,⁴⁷ but before they could arrive further successful uSuthu action at Ivuna on 23 July led to the civil authorities abandoning of all territory north of the Black Mfolozi River to the uSuthu.⁴⁸

Clearly, a proper military solution was now called for since the civilians had lost control of the situation. That, at any rate, was the view of Lt-Gen Henry Augustus Smyth, who arrived in Durban on 26 June. Smyth was a Royal Artillery officer and a veteran of the Crimean War. He had been Commandant of the Woolwich Garrison and military district from 1882 to 1886 before being appointed on 23 January 1888 to the Cape of Good Hope: South African Command.⁴⁹

From Durban Smyth proceeded straight to Eshowe where, on 28 June, he assumed command from Stabb of the troops in Zululand. Smyth reveals himself in his communications to have been something of an alarmist. He immediately informed Havelock (who could only have taken it as a slur on his administration) of the dangerously scattered dispositions of the troops and the impending 'course of disaster in this country'.⁵⁰ He followed up this dramatic telegraphed of 30 June with another of the same day in which, while specifically not suggesting that martial law be declared, nevertheless stated that 'actual armed intervention has now got beyond the power of colonial or civil forces to cope with'. He therefore proposed that he 'be given the direction of the whole of the forces available' without having to keep his troops 'in attendance' on the movements of other, colonial forces under the separate command of officials responsible to Havelock.⁵¹

Smyth's proposal was reasonable enough in the circumstances, and was certainly in the spirit of the cabinet decision of 19 May 1879 giving full command of the forces to the general 'with whom the responsibility of the operation rests'.⁵² However, in insisting (and continuing to insist) that all operations in Zululand be put under his unrestricted command, and that the imperial troops cease to act simply in support of the civil power—as, for example, they had done during the Ceza debacle of 2 June—⁵³ Smyth was touching Havelock very much

⁴⁵ GHZ 845: Resident Commissioner to Governor, 6 January 1888; ZA 5 no. R89/88: Havelock to Osborn, 11 January 1888; Stabb Papers, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, 4, no. 2/2/17: Col R.G.R.Martin to Col. H.S. Stabb, 25 January 1888.

⁴⁶ Laband, *Rope of Sand*, pp. 404-6.

⁴⁷ GHZ 712, no. Z345/88: Stabb to Havelock, 15 June 1888.

⁴⁸ BPP (C. 5522), enc. 2 in no. 60: Stabb to Assistant Military Secretary, 28 June 1888.

⁴⁹ Sir Sidney Lee (ed.), *The Dictionary of National Biography: Supplement, January 1901 – December 1911* (Oxford, 1920), vol. II, pp. 352-3.

⁵⁰ War Office papers in the Public Record Office, Kew [henceforth WO] 32/7838, file 079/6889: Smyth to Havelock, 30 June 1888, first telegram.

⁵¹ WO 32/7838, file 079/6889: Smyth to Havelock, 30 June 1888, second telegram.

⁵² BPP (C. 2318), no. 11: Hicks Beach to Bulwer, 19 May 1879.

⁵³ BPP (C. 5522), enc. 1 in no. 60: Smyth to Adjutant-General to the Forces, 2 July 1888; GHZ 713, no. Z495/88: Smyth to Havelock, 21 July 1888.

on the raw. As the *Natal Mercury* commented, it had ever been the Governor's policy 'to divest the situation as far as possible of a military character, and to confine operations within the scope of civil action'.⁵⁴ Indeed, to place the restoration of civil authority in Zululand entirely into the hands of the military would have been for Havelock tantamount to admitting that his officials had not only failed in their task, but could not regain control of the situation. So Havelock had to find a way of maintaining at least the gloss of civil control over developments in Zululand. This meant he could not surrender the entire direction of the forces to Smyth as the General desired, and he suggested a compromise.

On 1 July Havelock confirmed in a letter that the General, in addition to the regular British troops of the garrison, would have command over Major McKean's Mounted Basutos and any African levies organised along military lines which the civil authorities succeeded in raising in Zululand and Natal. Osborn, the Resident Commissioner of Zululand, would retain overall control over the Zululand Police and any chiefs and their adherents employed as auxiliaries — provided they were deployed in close cooperation with Smyth's forces. The civil authorities would remain responsible for enforcing the law and arresting the rebels, but could call on the military if necessary to provide support.⁵⁵ That last point was the nub of the matter, and Havelock spelled it out unequivocally in his telegram of 1 July that preceded his more formal letter: the extent to which the troops were to be employed would rest with the Resident Commissioner acting under Havelock's instructions.⁵⁶

Understandably, Smyth was far from content with this arrangement. As the *Natal Advertiser* had rather irreverently expressed, Havelock had been constrained to summon him rather like 'the fire engine' to put out the flames of revolt.⁵⁷ It was not therefore for the Governor to tell him how to go about his professional business. He immediately questioned how his troops were to operate effectively if he was to wait for Havelock's instructions relayed through Osborn, especially since the latter was frequently out of communication with both himself and Havelock. In any case, Smyth reminded the Governor, it was difficult enough to keep in close touch with Pietermaritzburg via the tenuous field telegraph.⁵⁸

Havelock was unmoved, however, and proceeded to dig in his heels. He stood by his exclusion of the Zululand Police from military control when insisting a few days later to Lord Knutsford, the Colonial Secretary, that they must always be available for their routine, non-military, duties of upholding the law in Zululand. He also insisted that the military's unavoidable ignorance of 'special reasons or political considerations' made it essential that the command of auxiliaries remain the responsibility of experienced civil officials, rather than of regular officers, as advocated by Smyth.⁵⁹

While these communications were flying back and forth, Smyth had already set his military operations in motion. The issue of Havelock's insistence on his right to subordinate military concerns to the best interests of his civil administration remained consequently unresolved, and Smyth had reluctantly to acquiesce in the divided command over the forces deployed. To make matters even more infuriating for the General, since Havelock continued

⁵⁴ *Natal Mercury*, 20 July 1888.

⁵⁵ ZA 6, enc. 3 in no. R937/88: Governor to General, 1 July 1888.

⁵⁶ WO 32/7838, file 079/6889: Havelock to Smyth, 1 July 1888, telegram.

⁵⁷ *Natal Advertiser*, 27 June 1888.

⁵⁸ WO 32/7838, file 079/6889: Smyth to Havelock, 1 July 1888, telegram.

⁵⁹ BPP (C. 5522), no. 54: Havelock to Knutsford, 4 July 1888.

to regard the troops as no more than an adjunct to the civil powers, he consequently had no compunction in bombarding Smyth almost daily with instructions on operational matters.⁶⁰

Despite this interference, often out of date and not necessarily militarily sound, Smyth's forces succeeded in expelling the uSuthu from their stronghold on Hlophkehulu Mountain on 2 July. Subsequently, joint operations by several columns advancing through the coastal and northern areas of Zululand between 7 July and 30 August were effective in ending uSuthu resistance with greater ease than the pessimistic Smyth had anticipated.⁶¹

Meanwhile, while uSuthu resistance was being broken, Smyth and Havelock continued to snipe increasingly vigorously at each other concerning the unresolved relationship between the civil and military powers. On 16 July Smyth categorically informed Havelock that, as he understood it, the direction and movement of troops belonged to the General. He conceded that he was acting under the Governor's instructions as to objectives and the extent to which troops were employed but, as he reiterated, operational and tactical decisions were his, not the Governor's.⁶² Havelock immediately and tartly responded by declining to take up the challenge, and insisting that in the matter of civil and military relations he was 'complying strictly' with the regulations in Chapter 2 of the *Colonial Rules and Regulations*.⁶³ But with the precedent of the Bulwer-Chelmsford dispute doubtless in mind, Smyth believed he had right on his side. On 17 July he appealed directly to the Secretary of State for War, the Hon. Edward Stanhope, complaining in his telegram of the delay to military operations caused by the subordination of the military to the civil authority.⁶⁴

Stanhope saw that the feud could not be allowed to continue. Though his sympathies lay with the General he favoured a diplomatic solution, and on 21 July requested Smyth to meet personally with Havelock to resolve the question of who should control military operations in Zululand. A vindicated Smyth immediately informed Havelock of Stanhope's injunction.⁶⁵ However, the Governor would budge neither from Pietermaritzburg nor from his previous position. He contemptuously suggested that Smyth write to him if he had anything new to say because, for his part, he was 'perfectly satisfied' with the existing arrangement whereby the troops were to act only in support of the civil powers at their request, and saw no need for any change.⁶⁶ Rebuffed so uncompromisingly, Smyth gamely retorted on 29 July that all future operations were to be in the hands of the military, assisted only by the advice of the civil authorities.⁶⁷ Undaunted, Havelock ignored Smyth and continued to issue his string of instructions from distant Pietermaritzburg, provoking Smyth on 3 August into telegraphing him in protest at being hampered in the successful conduct of operations while he waited for the Governor's messages to arrive.⁶⁸ The exasperated General's protest was merely for the record, however, since it was patent that Havelock would again ignore it. Thus Smyth turned

⁶⁰ See the series of telegrams concerning operations which Havelock sent to Smyth during July and August 1888 in WO 32/7838, file 079/6889 and WO 32/7838, file 079/6931.

⁶¹ GHZ 716, no. Z767/88: Stabb to Assistant Military Secretary, 19 October 1888; War Office, *Precis*, pp. 101-3.

⁶² WO 32/7838, file 079/6889: Smyth to Havelock, 16 July 1888, telegram.

⁶³ WO 32/7838, file 079/6889: Havelock to Smyth, 16 July 1888, telegram.

⁶⁴ WO 32/7838, file 079/6889: Smyth to Stanhope, 17 July 1888, telegram.

⁶⁵ WO 32/7838, file 079/6901: Smyth to Havelock, 22 July 1888, telegram.

⁶⁶ WO 32/7838, file 079/6901 and file 079/6889: Havelock to Smyth, 23 July 1888, two telegrams.

⁶⁷ WO 32/7838, file 079/6889: Smyth to Havelock, 29 July 1888, telegram.

⁶⁸ WO 32/7838, file 079/6931: Smyth to Havelock, 3 August 1888, telegram.

again for redress to Stanhope at the War Office, deprecating on 10 August 'the inconvenience to active operations' caused by the subordination of the military to the civil authority.⁶⁹

Clear as it must have become to the authorities in London that a real crisis in military-civil relations had arisen in Zululand, comparable to that between Chelmsford and Bulwer in 1879, no immediate attempt was made to resolve it before the campaign had run its course. That it had soon done. On 21 August Smyth informed Havelock that by 30 September the troops would either be redistributed to their regular garrisons at Entonjaneni and Eshowe or ordered to return to Natal. It would thereafter be up to the Governor to fill the vacuum left by the troops with detachments of the augmented Zululand Police.⁷⁰ On 7 September Smyth and his staff took ship in Durban for Cape Town.⁷¹ As the *Natal Mercury* proclaimed, 'The proper military part of the business is over.'⁷²

However, the concerns arising out of Havelock's and Smyth's divided command had not been resolved. Which is not to say that Lord Salisbury's administration did not realize the serious implications for colonies administered in the same way as Zululand. The imperial cabinet therefore addressed itself to the matter, and on 1 November 1888 Ralph Thompson, the Under-Secretary of State at the War Office, communicated the government's decision to the Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office.

This time there was to be no washing of linen in public as had occurred when Bulwer's and Chelmsford's vitriolic correspondence of 1879 had been published in the *British Parliamentary Papers*. The government resolved that the contentious matter between Havelock and Smyth was to be omitted from the *Blue Books* when the correspondence concerning the Zulu Rebellion of 1888 was published, and it has remained secluded with the War Office papers ever since.

More significantly, the government decided to amend the Colonial Office Regulations in order to clarify the relationship between Colonial Governors and Officers Commanding Troops in the Field. Vindicating Smyth no less than Chelmsford had been in 1879, the government agreed in principle that once a general had been told to 'go on', then military operations became his full responsibility. If relations between the civil and military authorities subsequently broke down, the governor would consequently be to blame for not restricting himself to the civil sphere.

In his despatch, Thompson enclosed pages 304-5 of the *Colonial List 1888: Rules and Regulations* as amended to reflect the government's position on the relationship between the civil and military authorities. The relevant paragraphs now read as follows:

'11. Except in the case of invasion or assault by a foreign enemy, it is the duty of a governor to determine the objects with which and the extent to which HM's Troops are to be employed. He will therefore issue the Officer in Command of the Forces directions respecting their distribution and employment...

⁶⁹ WO 32/7838, file 079/6931: Smyth to Stanhope, 10 August 1888, telegram.

⁷⁰ GHZ 714, no. Z580/88: Smyth to Havelock, 21 August 1888; War Office, *Precis*, pp. 103-4.

⁷¹ *Natal Mercury*, 6 September 1888.

⁷² *Natal Mercury*, 5 September 1888. By 2 November the Zululand garrison was reduced to its 'normal' level of one squadron of the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons and two companies of mounted infantry drawn from the 1st Bn, The Royal Scots (Lothian Regiment).

13. On the other hand, the Officer in command of the Forces will determine all military details respecting the Distribution and Movement of Troops...in conformity with the general directions issued to him by the Governor...

18. And in the event of the Colony being invaded...and becoming the scene of active military operations, the Officer in Command of HM's Land Forces assumes the entire military authority over the Troops.⁷³

As Smyth had pointed out in his telegram of 17 July to Stanhope, in the case of Zululand in 1888 where the troops were involved in putting down an uprising, the enemy was 'in strict terms not a foreign one'.⁷⁴ Thus paragraph 18 would not have applied in one sense since Zululand was not invaded, and Havelock's continuing command over some colonial troops remained legitimate. But Zululand had become 'the scene of active operations', and paragraphs 11 and 13 most certainly would have applied. Smyth ought therefore to have enjoyed operational freedom from Havelock's constant interference.

Certainly, the clarified regulations made sense, and restricted the civil and military authorities to their proper spheres of competence. Lord Knutsford, the Colonial Secretary, could only agree, and on 4 January 1889 wrote to Thompson accepting his proposed modification of the *Colonial Regulations* clarifying the powers of officers in the field.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Sir Henry Bulwer, as Lieutenant-Governor of Natal during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, and Sir Arthur Havelock, as Governor of Natal and Zululand during the uSuthu Rebellion of 1888, were naturally both primarily concerned not so much with military operations as such, as with the repercussions of hostilities on the functioning of their civil administration and on the security and livelihood of their civilian population. In 1879 Bulwer did not seriously question Lt-Gen Lord Chelmsford's conduct of the Zululand campaign until his strategy of the 'active defence' impacted directly on Natal's border population. Then Bulwer did his best to foil the General by denying his right of command over the colonial levies stationed along the border with Zululand. In 1888 Havelock felt justified in interfering more directly and comprehensively with Lt-Gen H.A. Smyth's military arrangements since he believed they impacted on the authority of the civil powers. As operations were taking place in the British Colony of Zululand, they could be viewed as a matter of internal security, rather than of defence against an external power, as the Zulu kingdom had been in 1879.

In both cases, the dispute between the civil and military authorities became increasingly shrill and personal and a public embarrassment. Bulwer's and Chelmsford's altercation proved damaging to both of them, since an increasingly exasperated government put an end to it — not by strongly supporting one or the other—but by superseding both disputants. Gen Sir Garnet Wolseley was sent out with both supreme civil and military authority, thus putting an end to the fractiously divided command in Natal and Zululand.. Nevertheless, the Government did lay down the principle in May 1879 that full command of the forces operating in the field must be with the general in command.

⁷³ WO 32/7838, file 079/6957: Ralph Thompson, War Office, to Under-Secretary of State at the Colonial Office, 1 November 1888.

⁷⁴ WO 32/7838, file 079/6889: Smyth to Stanhope, 17 July 1888, telegram.

⁷⁵ WO 32/7838, file 079/7062: Knutsford to Thompson, 4 January 1889. See also WO 32/7838, file 079/7099: Knutsford to War Office, 29 January 1889.

Yet, despite this precedent, in 1888 the government initially ducked the issues of divided command and civil interference in military operations until the dispute between Smyth and Havelock became too heated to be ignored. Then it eventually took a decided line (though only once operations in Zululand were actually over) and reaffirmed that the commander in the field, though acting at the behest of the civil authorities, must nevertheless exercise control over active operations. Smyth, like Chelmsford, had been vindicated. Moreover, so that a similar dispute could not arise again, this time the government revised the *Colonial Office Rules and Regulations* to make quite explicit in what circumstances the Officer in Command assumed entire operational authority over the troops stationed in a colony. This clarification would benefit future British civil and military relationships, not only in Natal and Zululand where the problems inherent in a divided command had become particularly manifest, but in other colonies administered in similar fashion.