



MATABELE

The War of 1893

and the 1896 Rebellion

Chris Ash



Also by Chris Ash:

The If Man: Dr Leander Starr Jameson: The Inspiration for Kipling's Masterpiece

Kruger, Kommandos & Kak: Debunking the Myths of The Boer War

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Introduction

Shortly after the publication of my first book, I was asked to talk to the Johannesburg chapter of the South African Military History Society and spoke (probably very badly) on the subject of Dr Jim and the Matabele War. When my lecture finally spluttered to a close, one of those who had managed to stay awake throughout asked me if I could recommend a book which covered both the Matabele War of 1893—on which I had just spoken—and the rebellions of 1896/7. Despite having a library full of books on the subject, or on southern African history in general, this question made me realize that (as far as I knew) there was not a single volume that dealt with the Matabele Wars in their entirety and I decided to do my best to rectify this situation. While there are other—sometimes very dry and dusty—accounts that cover specific events of one or other conflict (often in mind-numbingly tedious detail) I am ever conscious of the fact that most people find history ‘boring’ these days. It was thus never my intention to cover every single aspect or nuance of the wars but rather to give an accessible, readable, and accurate account. Indeed, I have made every effort to deal in historical fact rather than to give a politically-correct 21st century reinterpretation of it and I make no apologies for being blunt. If anyone feels the need to be ‘offended’ I would suggest they have deeper psychological issues to deal with.

Though any mistakes and/or controversial outbursts herein are all mine, I would like to thank those who have helped me with this project. First and foremost, special thanks to Phil Wright, cartographer extraordinaire and all round good egg. A ‘planning meeting’ at my house in Johannesburg turned into a splendidly drunken evening and I shall never forget the story of the pubic hair which was called to stand in for a framed butterfly’s missing antenna. Noted historian, Ken Gillings, who is always keen to discuss matters at great length, has been as helpful as ever, while Gerry van Tonder provided some fascinating insights and shared his copious research material freely. I am greatly indebted to all these fine gentlemen. Chris Cocks and Aulette Goliath of 30° South Publishers have been supportive and enthusiastic throughout, and I greatly appreciate their help.

§

The fact that no one has previously covered both conflicts in a single volume is surprising when one thinks about how many books there are on the 1879 Zulu War. It would be fair to say that few colonial wars have the appeal, or perhaps the ‘glamour’ of that conflict. The clash of stalwart redcoats against hordes of fanatically brave warriors was mirrored by various other campaigns, but none continue to capture the public imagination in quite the same way. Maybe Cy Endfield’sⁱ wildly ahistorical 1964 classic, *Zulu*, is to blame for the war’s enduring appeal, and no doubt the ‘humiliation’ⁱⁱ suffered

ⁱ Cy Endfield was ‘exposed’ as a communist by the House Un-American Activities Committee, and blacklisted in Hollywood as a result—something to bear in mind when considering how his film portrays the British Empire.

ⁱⁱ The reader will note that every British defeat of the colonial era is mindlessly described as a ‘humiliation’ in certain circles.

by the British at Isandlwana appeals those who are, for some reason, terribly ashamed of the empire...but the conflict's allure extends well beyond the hand-wringing of today's liberals: 'Zulu' company of 45 Commando, Royal Marines, for example, advanced into battle in the Falklands War chanting their battle cry, 'Zulu! Zulu!'

Rather as the magnetism of soccer threatens to overshadow every other sport, however, the problem is that it tends to put other, equally fascinating, colonial wars in the shade as authors overlook them in the rush to churn out more and more books on the Zulu War.

Whatever the reason, the Matabele Wars of the 1890s have received relatively little attention and I hope this book will go some way towards filling the gap.

There is no denying that the Matabele Wars are a lot less romantic and photogenic than the Zulu War. The 1893 war, and the rebellions of a few years later, would not make for colourful Hollywood blockbusters, the British army having by then swapped their splendid red coats for rather more sensible khaki uniforms (although precious few imperial troops served in Matabeleland in any case). The wonky, unreliable Gatlings and (frankly) ludicrous rocket batteries of the Zulu War had given way, and highly effective Maxim guns were seeing major action for the first time. Nevertheless, the Matabele warriors showed every bit as much heroism, determination and selflessness as their distant kinsmen had in the Zulu War.

There were also some remarkable characters involved: old school savage tyrant Chief Lobengula, the ambitious and ever-scheming Cecil Rhodes, and the rascally Dr Jameson of course...but also men like Captain Lendy, one of very few men in history to have died from putting a shot, Frederick Selous the archetypal great white hunter, and Kagubi the infamous witch-doctor who whipped up so much trouble during the rebellion.

Baden-Powell, who would later defy the Boers in his defence of Mafeking and famously go on to found the Boy Scouts, cut his teeth in Matabeleland. So did Plumer, who would also serve against the Boers and later command the British 2nd Army in the Great War, finishing his career as a Field Marshall. The dashing and redoubtable Maurice Gifford served in both Matabele Wars and lost his arm in the second – an inconvenience he did not consider sufficient to prevent him giving the empire yet more sterling service during the Boer War.

Another veteran of the Matabele Wars with links to the Boy Scouts was Major Burnham, an American frontiersman and tracker who sparked Baden-Powell's love of field craft. Despite his obvious courage and skill, Burnham was also a colourful fantasist of a man who claimed to have killed a rebel god during the rebellion, and had the distinct advantage of having written his own account of his exploits in the conflict. Equally extraordinary was 'Maori' Hamilton-Browne, a man whose far-fetched tales of derring-do were enough to earn him a senior appointment in the rebellion. Indeed, the characters are probably the most fascinating part of the tale: adventurous young Anglo-Saxons from every corner of the empire, and a few old Indian fighters from the American West, who all found themselves thousands of miles from home facing a brave and terrifying enemy.

Unlike the Zulu War, the later Sudan Campaign, or the Boer War, the First Matabele War was fought on a shoestring by troops raised and funded by Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company, not the famous old regiments of the British army. There are also endless intrigues, controversies and far-fetched conspiracy theories surrounding the origins of the conflict. As we shall see, today's usual suspects ignore the murderous rampages of the Matabele and instead heap all the blame on Rhodes and his men—something which we shall show to be politically-correct tedium. Similarly, and though somewhat pathetically dismissed as 'mercenaries' by squeamish liberals today, the reader will see that there was no shortage of dash and pluck on the side of the company men

either. Indeed, the valour and gallantry of Major Wilson's men at the Shangani Patrol's last stand was equal in every way to that of the redcoats who won eleven Victoria Crosses at Rorke's Drift.ⁱⁱⁱ

With oft-claimed links to the infamous Jameson Raid, the origins of the second Matabele War are as fascinating and controversial as those of the first, and it was a dirty, hard-fought guerrilla war, more akin to the African bush wars of the 1960s and 70s than those waged at the height of the colonial period. The brutal murders of women and children committed by the insurgents and the widespread use of dynamite to entomb rebels in their subterranean hiding places both sparked fury and condemnation at the time, but aside from the butchery, actions such as the Mazoe Patrol were as heroic as anything of the age.

But before we crack on with the action let us take a moment to explain how it was that a renegade offshoot of the Zulu tribe came to be at war with men employed by a company started by a sickly clergyman's son from Bishop's Stortford.

ⁱⁱⁱ Seven were won by soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 24th (2nd Warwickshire) Regiment of Foot, and one each by servicemen of the Army Medical Department, the Royal Engineers, the Commissariat and Transport Department and the Natal Native Contingent.

‘The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those who speak it.’

George Orwell

‘The Matabele were in many ways extremely naïve and childlike, giving vent to their primitive emotions without restraint. A black man approached a European one day with a piece of his nose on a leaf, and asked if it could be stuck on again. He had had a quarrel with his wife and during the altercation she had bitten it off.’

Chapter 1

Background

Unfortunately, and as we have already mentioned, the insidious spread of political correctness impacts any attempt to discuss African history rationally. By daring not to toe the ‘all black Africans good, all white settlers bad’ party line, one risks the usual tiresome squeals of ‘racist!’ from shrieking liberals. Any rational discussion about the rights and wrongs of the Matabele War can therefore be guaranteed to provoke a knee jerk reaction along the lines of, ‘well, the whites shouldn’t have been there in the first place’.

This oft-squawked mantra is trotted out to excuse absolutely anything the Matabele did, as though they had some sort of God-given right to be there while the white settlers did not, and can therefore be exonerated for murder, pillage, slave raiding and, well, just about anything else.

Like most things that go down well with the Islington dinner party set however, there is very little logic to this. In truth, the Matabele were also recent settlers in the area so it is bizarre that their warlike and savage colonization is perfectly acceptable to the modern-day left whereas—and in stark contrast—the relatively peaceful and law-abiding settlement of the Mashonaland pioneers is regarded as, horror of horrors, ‘evil, rapacious, exploitative imperialism’. Unfortunately, this sort of mindless nonsense permeates every discussion about the colonial period, so let us nip it in the bud before we go any further.

The earliest known inhabitants of southern Africa were the copper-skinned Bushmen and lighter Hottentots—not the blacks from the Bantu tribes that originated in west and central Africa. The names for these earliest southern Africans were (and still are) often used interchangeably, which is perhaps understandable given that it was several years before the Dutch settlers at the Cape recognized them as distinct ethnic groups.^{iv} Indeed, there was a great deal of inter-breeding between the two so the boundaries are certainly blurred and a collective term for the two groups, ‘Khoisan’, is currently in vogue.

The closest thing southern Africa has to an ‘aboriginal’ race would be the Bushmen, a people described as ‘little sallow folk, barely five feet high, their heads adorned with peppercorn tufts of hair and lobeless ears, their triangular fox-like faces almost innocent of beards’.² The Hottentots—who are thought, either to be an offshoot of the Bushmen or else to have arrived in the region somewhat later—largely displaced the Bushmen in places. They were:

‘...of slight build with backs as hollow and hands and feet as small as the Bushmen’s; their eyes were far apart, their cheeks sunken and their chins pointed, their skins a dingy olive-yellow.’³

^{iv} These two groups are currently referred to as ‘the San People’ and ‘the Khoikhoi’ but I have elected to retain contemporary names/terms throughout this book. This is not intended to cause offence, though those who delight in taking offence at such things will no doubt do so.

An early British visitor to the Cape described them as:

‘...a race of men distinct from both negroes and European whites, for their hair is woolly, short, and frizzled, their noses flat, and their lips thick, but their skin is naturally as white as ours.’⁴

Though roughly similar in appearance, the Hottentots, who worked copper and tended herds of cattle, were hundreds of years ahead of the Bushmen in terms of development. In contrast, the Bushmen were essentially Stone Age hunters,⁵ so it is hardly surprising that the pastoral Hottentots were able to marginalize and effectively replace them.

In earlier times it would seem, scattered parties of both these groups had ranged over much of southern Africa before being driven into the extreme south by the black Bantu tribes as they started spreading out from central Africa. Around 915 AD, the Muslim explorer, Massoudi of Baghdad, wrote of having encountered Bushmen (known as Wak-Waks) as far north as modern-day Dar es Salaam—an area he described as being just ‘south of the black man’s land’.⁶ Even then, he recorded how encroaching Bantus hunted down and killed the poor Wak-Waks ‘as though they were baboons’.

The steady march of Bantu expansion continued inexorably over the following centuries, pushing ever southwards and driving both Bushmen and Hottentots before them. They settled the land in a way which, had they been European colonists, would have had modern-day liberals up in arms. Needless to say, anything done by non-white settlers is viewed in a completely different light for some unspecified reason. Though there are vastly varying theories, it would seem certain that by the 1400s (some claim hundreds of years earlier and no one knows for sure) the various groups of Bantu settlers which would later become known as the Mashona^v had arrived in what today is known as Zimbabwe, and the northern areas of modern-day Mozambique.⁷ Other Bantu groups continued the push southwards and over the Limpopo into what is South Africa today.

Despite the modern-day view, the Mashona (and their various sub-groups and offshoots) were by no means the ‘indigenous people’ or ‘original inhabitants’ of what would later become Zimbabwe. By the time the ‘Scramble for Africa’ took place in the late Victorian era, the Mashona could at least claim to have lived there for a few hundred years or more.^{vi} However, their neighbours to the west, the Matabele,^{vii} could not even make this assertion as they had been a much more recent arrival.

The Matabele were an offshoot of the Zulu tribe which emerged when the Bantu advance south made it as far as modern-day Natal. Around 1817, after an especially successful raid on a neighbouring tribe, avarice got the better of the minor Zulu chieftain,

^v Rather than a tribe in itself per se, the word ‘Mashona’ was first employed by the Matabele to describe a large number of different tribal groups in the modern-day Zimbabwe area, all of which shared a common language. There are various theories as to what the word originally meant, none of which are terribly complimentary. In contemporary works, names like Makalaka, Baduma, and Wahungwe pop up to describe various sub-divisions of what we now generally term ‘the Mashona’ but we will avoid undue complications by using the generic term throughout, as this book is not intended to be an anthropological study of Africa.

^{vi} Portuguese and Dutch settlers could have made similar claims in the parts of Africa they had colonized.

^{vii} The word ‘Matabele’ is thought to originate from the phrase ‘sank out of sight’ as Mzilikazi’s warriors would disappear behind their large shields when facing attack.