

Issue 12: Film Reviews

Zulu

Dir: Cy Endfield, UK, 1964

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Lieutenant Bromhead: "Sixty! We got at least sixty wouldn't you say?"

Lieutenant Adendorff: "That leaves only 3,940."

(*Zulu*, 1964)

In every violent encounter between alien cultures, history finds one of its most interesting challenges: to represent emotional events from a balanced perspective that takes into account the dignity of both sides without allowing emotional polemics to distort the historical record. Balanced reporting on enemy nations during wartime can be traced at least to the Roman Empire, when Tacitus wrote glowingly of the threatening barbarian hordes in *Germania*:

And yet marriage there is a serious matter...they lead lives of well-protected chastity, corrupted by none of the enticements of public performances... Among a people so numerous, there are extremely few instances of adultery, the punishment for which is prompt (Tacitus, 1999: 84).

Two millennia later the writings of another contemporary historian regarding a different "barbarian horde" would serve as the inspiration for a complex and dramatic film. The bloody exchanges between Imperial Great Britain and the then recently unified Zulu Nation, known as the 1879 Anglo-Zulu war, produced a large number of historical and quasi-historical accounts — many in forms of media not available to Tacitus. But it would be from the pen of Scottish historian John Prebble that the inspiration for one of the greatest war films ever produced would flow.

The British film *Zulu* (1964) remains the most memorable depiction of the Anglo-Zulu war, and arguably of any British conflict. The film is based on the fate of a small contingent of ninety-six British soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 24th (2nd Warwickshire) Regiment of Foot, stationed at Rorke's Drift (Lavell and Payne, 1918: 174). Throughout the day and night of January 22 and 23, these ninety-six men would defend their position from a fierce attack by between 3,000 and 4,000 Zulu warriors (Cannon, 1997: 818). Their successful defense held back a possible Zulu invasion of Natal Colony in British South Africa (Steinberg, 1963: 407). The origins of the film *Zulu* lie in an obscure article by Prebble detailing the battle of Rorke's Drift. Cy Endfield, a blacklisted American director living in exile in England, read the article and approached Prebble to flesh out a script. *Zulu* remains a classic motion picture distinguished by its thirty-first ranking on the British Film Institute's Top 100 British Films of the twentieth century ("The BFI 100," 2003). The film starred Stanley Baker as Lieutenant John Chard and the then unknown Michael Caine in his breakthrough role as

Lieutenant Gonville Bromhead.

Primarily, this paper will examine the various personalities and ideologies that influenced the production of this film in an attempt to explain the problematic depictions of British soldier and Zulu warrior alike. Namely, how did a representation of the action at Rorke's Drift manage to contain seemingly contradictory elements of nationalist and progressive ideology, yet manage to elude definitive categorization as an ideological vehicle for either the leftist or the rightist interpretation of the past? How can a film that was by all accounts an independent collaboration between a Scottish historian, a Welsh actor and a blacklisted American director contain such seemingly contradictory messages? In instances where the film and the historical record part ways, the motives for this departure will be examined and reasons for this departure hypothesized using the questions that follow. Why is religion seemingly marginalized by the ahistorical drunken missionary? Why is the mostly English regiment portrayed as being primarily Welsh? What were the intentions of the production team?

Origins and Production

At this point, we would do well to examine the personalities of those involved in *Zulu's* creation. John Prebble was a Scottish historian with over twenty books to his credit, his most famous works being *Culloden* (1964) and *The Highland Clearances* (1963). Prebble's leftist political leanings are made quite clear in his own autobiography: "The passion we felt made me, like others, members of the British Communist Party" (Prebble, 1993: 14). In *The Highland Clearances*, Prebble sheds more light on his own particular leftist ideological philosophy, clearly influenced by English imperialism in his beloved Scotland (Prebble, 1969: 323).

Stanley Baker co-produced *Zulu* and starred as Lt. John Chard, an officer with a non-aristocratic background who would take practical command of the troops during the battle (Wetta and Curley, 1992: 169). Baker was sympathetic to Welsh causes and had previously collaborated with Endfield in the film *Hell Drivers* (1957). He was an easy convert to Endfield's project when he learned that it would depict the battle of a regiment based out of his native Wales. With a tiny budget of two million dollars, Baker set out to produce his film on-site in Natal.

Cyril Raker Endfield was the director and co-producer of *Zulu*; he became involved with the *Zulu* project during his exile in England. He was best known for the crime drama/thriller *The Sound of Fury* (1951), a motion picture that was highly critical of the "American Dream" (Booker, 1999: 181). Endfield also wrote and directed a 1948 radio play, *The Argyle Secrets*, which blurred the lines between democratic America and fascist Germany with a commentary on class and race relations (Langman, 1995: 297). Later, he was blacklisted by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) for his membership in Yale's Young Communist League during World War II, pronounced-leftist bias in various films, such as the wartime film *Inflation* (1942), and refusing to name other Hollywood communists.

Ethnic Groups

A few very different ethnic groups met at Rorke's Drift in 1879, and the film gave all but one an equitable treatment. The English in the film are represented most prominently in the film by Bromhead's swaggering aristocratic character, and not by the bravery of the mostly English troops

that he historically commanded. The fact that the defenders at Rorke's Drift were mostly English was glossed over by the film: "This is a Welsh regiment man, although there are a few foreigners from England in it." In fact, the composition of 'B' company, 24th Regiment, although later based out of Wales, actually contained only a small minority of Welsh defenders in 1879. The most genuinely kind character in the film also happens to be Welsh, a private named Tommy who constantly worries about the fate of a calf whose mother had died [1] (Morris, 1994: 99). Additionally, at the real battle, a missionary stood watch on a nearby hill as a sentry to warn of the Zulu's approach. However, once again the film makes a slight, yet telling departure from reality, by replacing the religious figure with two Welsh sentries. In one fell swoop, religion finds itself marginalized and the Welsh are lionized as the outpost's first line of defense. Baker was Welsh by birth and Prebble had been stationed in North Wales during much of the Second World War (to say nothing of the suffering of Baker's Welsh ancestors at the hands of the English) and so it seems fair to attribute the film's pro-Welsh tone largely to its producers (Prebble, 1993: 47).

Anti-Clerical Themes

Scholars have noted a glaring irregularity in the film's treatment of religion: "There was a clergyman, the Reverend George Smith, among the defenders; he distinguished himself but is not in the film" (Frase, 1999: 267). Instead of depicting the Reverend's historic role in the battle, Endfield and Prebble choose to insert a fictional drunken coward and his hapless daughter. The film makes its stance on the impracticality of formal religion explicit when the church is requisitioned for use as a field hospital and the altar taken to be used in the construction of the outpost's defenses. When reproached by the Reverend Otto Witt for these actions; Color-Sergeant Bourne (Nigel Greene) retorts, "A prayer is as good as a bayonet on a day like this," further marginalizing religion. Later in the film, it is the Reverend who incites the native contingent to desert the outpost by preaching of "Cain killing his brother Able" as a metaphor for them killing fellow Africans. After he is jailed for this offense, he attempts to convince the young soldier guarding him to desert: "Thou shall not kill... obey the word." While imprisoned, Witt succumbs to the temptation of drink and begins screaming: "He breaketh the bow and snappeth the spear asunder..." At this point the camera pans to Color-Sergeant Bourne manning the outpost's defenses, who finishes Witt's biblical quotation "The Lord of Hosts is with us." This clever bit of editing suggests religion's vulnerability to being interpreted in order to legitimize a variety of actions. This scene is made all the more interesting by a passage from John Prebble's autobiography referencing the century prior to the action at Rorke's Drift: "In a century inspired, directed, and sometimes betrayed by the Old Testament, there was always divine authority to be cited for the destruction of those who were anathemas to Church or State" (Prebble, 1993: 171). As if religion had not already been marginalized enough by the character of Witt, as he is forced into a wagon and sent off with his daughter, he yells back in a drunken stupor: "Death awaits you...You're all going to die!" While the film gives credit to the camp's cook and a medical officer for distributing ammunition along the British lines, the Reverend actually performed this duty. The fact that the film's drunken missionary and all his actions were totally ahistorical, especially when so many other details were faithfully recreated, suggests that Prebble allowed his own anti-clerical feelings to distort the film's representation of the historical record for ideological reasons.

Conclusions

In the midst of this examination, one must not lose sight of the film's overt message: that all

people from the British Isles could take pride in the awesome power of Imperial Great Britain during this period of history. Still, the film's unified meaning initially eluded this author; how could the same film seemingly endorse imperialism while simultaneously promoting anti-religious and pro-indigenous nationalist messages? The correlation of several basic facts can be used to distill an explanation for the film's seemingly contradictory messages; Baker was something of a Welsh nationalist and Prebble sympathetic to Scottish causes. In addition, Prebble harbored anti-clerical feelings that could be traced back to his experiences while living with a Vicar:

It was the thought of that implacable church and its obvious disgust for me ... I had learnt this day that God was...a cut above the class to which we belonged. That day, I think, the painter was loosed from its mooring and my faith began a slow drift into non-belief (Prebble 1993: 96).

Prebble was distressed by the wretched condition of the poor contrasted with the opulence of organized religion. More significantly, Prebble belonged to a generation of socialists tainted by the overly-nationalist ideas that smacked of Stalinist communism. Prebble himself remarked with approval on the shift of the Communist International from the mission of international socialism to Stalin's "socialism in one country" during the 1930s: "...'patriotic peoples nationalism'...here was an English history of which we could be proud, without the shame of industrial greed and imperial growth" (Prebble 1993: 18). In *Zulu*, the producers did not intend the main theme to be the imperialist English triumphant against a colonized race. Instead it was meant to be the colonized Welsh and Scots, who having beaten off a religious threat from a Christian missionary, coming together in a common solidarity despite their national differences. Even the hospitalized anarchist-minded criminal who feigned illness fights alongside his comrades in the end. In order to make this point, the film portrayed the regiment as comprised of mainly Welsh and Scottish soldiers. Baker and Prebble must have envisioned the force at Rorke's Drift not as imperial conquerors, but more as gladiators, forced to fight a fellow colonized race by their imperial masters.

While Prebble seems to have left very little written evidence to explain his contributions to *Zulu*, his opinion on the nearly analogous situation of the Buffalo Soldiers [2] here in the United States lends credence to the above interpretation: "Thus men who were once slaves, commanded by junior officers who were the sons of evicted immigrants or had themselves been dispossessed, were now used to subdue, remove and confine a free people" (Prebble 1993: 140). Here, minority groups, the Irish- and African-Americans, are used by another imperialist power, America, to subdue a native people, Native Americans. Replace the Irish and Africans with Welsh and Scots, the Native Americans with Zulus, and Prebble's above quotation would aptly describe *Zulu's* message.

Zulu contains several key ingredients of leftist ideology; the film was anti-imperialist, anti-religion, and pro-minority before these became popular progressive ideas. It is the genius of *Zulu* that the film managed to package seemingly contradictory elements of leftist and conservative ideology together into a popular war film while covertly carrying a progressive message. Indeed, *Zulu* had created a new template for other leftists in the film industry; in order to advertise your message, first attract your audience with action, realism, and a splash of history, at which point your audience will be amenable to slight distortions of said history for ideological purposes. *Zulu's* release signaled the beginning of a shift from traditional industry paradigms to more progressive conventions that would come to dominate the motion picture industry for decades to come, and it did so virtually unnoticed. Our current crop of ideologically motivated war films are a direct consequence of this

general movement toward polemic messages in films depicting historical events. In any event, due to *Zulu's* groundbreaking style, the public came to expect realism in war movies. Unrealistic, overly-patriotic John Wayne sanitations of history were on the way out, along with John Ford Westerns that seemed like elaborate musicals in the shadow of *Zulu's* realism, even if this new realism came at the price of subtle distortions to the truth. Indeed, *Zulu's* progressive messages were expertly shrouded by the fog of war.

Notes

[1] Interestingly enough, decades earlier, when Shaka Zulu's mother Nandi died, Shaka had ordered the death of all cows under his control so that their calves would suffer his same motherless fate.

[2] The Buffalo Soldiers were African-American soldiers who fought against Native Americans on the 19th century American western frontier.

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