

WHAT'S NEW in MANUSCRIPTS

THE LETTERS OF GEORGE WARDELL AND THE BATTLE OF ISANDLWANA, 1879

THE RECENT ACQUISITION OF THE FAMILY PAPERS OF A LESSER-KNOWN BRITISH ARMY OFFICER BY MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY LIBRARY WILL ADD GREATLY TO THE RICH HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ANGLO-ZULU WAR

By Luke Diver

On 22 January 1879, the Zulus handed the British Army one of its heaviest defeats at the battle of Isandlwana. This battle, shrouded in controversy and continuous debate, was the Zulu kingdom's greatest military victory. The British lost over 1,000 men, including 806 non-commissioned ranks and 52 officers. Captain George Vaughan Wardell, 1/24th Warwickshire Regiment, was one of those officers. The archive acquired by Maynooth University Library includes 30 handwritten letters by Wardell, dating from 1859–79, which offer an excellent opportunity to explore the life of an officer on campaign throughout the British Empire. The collection includes his final letter, written from Rorke's Drift prior to the British

invasion of Zululand.

Wardell served throughout the Ninth Cape Frontier War (1877–8), in which he and his company successfully built and defended Fort Warwick against Xhosa attacks for several months. His efforts throughout the campaign were praised by the British commander in South Africa, General Sir Arthur Cunynghame. Following the British victory over the Xhosa, attention then turned to Zululand in an effort to further establish British hegemony in the region. Wardell noted the 'continuous knocking' of campaigning for his regiment and 'hundreds of miles marching' since arriving in South Africa, and, without any enthusiasm, predicted a war soon with the Zulus.

Letter from Rorke's Drift

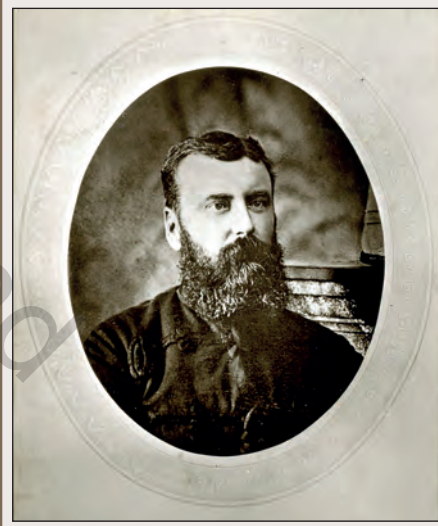
In December 1878 the British high commissioner for South Africa, Sir Bartle Frere, issued an ultimatum demanding that Cetshwayo, the Zulu king, concede to a host of demands, including the disbandment of his military. Such proposals were made in total disregard of Zulu culture and could never be accepted. Following failed negotiations, the British, without sanction from the London government, declared war on the Zulu kingdom. Under the command of Lord Chelmsford, they invaded Zululand with three columns and planned to eventually converge on the Zulu capital, Ulundi. Captain Wardell and 'H' Company, 1/24th Regiment, were attached to the centre column and waited for the invasion along the border of Natal and Zululand at Rorke's Drift.

On 10 January 1879, the day before the invasion, Wardell wrote a letter to his parents, detailing the final preparations for the advance across the Buffalo River and his thoughts about their enemy:

'I must write a few lines before bidding adieu to Natal, as very early tomorrow morning we commence crossing the Buffalo, into Zululand to bring that great and sable potentate Cetshwayo [*sic*] to his bearings. Our column is now all

GEORGE WARDELL'S EARLIER SERVICE

George Wardell was born in Toronto in 1840 to a landed family with connections in Canada, Britain and Ireland. He came from a family with a rich military tradition, following in the footsteps of his father, Major William Wardell, a veteran of several wars, and his grandfather, Lt.-Col. Wardell. George Wardell's journey to Isandlwana began when he enrolled as an ensign in the 24th Regiment in May 1858. In 1861 he became a lieutenant, with purchase, and, as detailed in his letters, subsequently served in Mauritius, Rangoon, Madras, Malta, Gibraltar and Brecon. On 23 February 1872 he was promoted to captain. As company commander, Wardell was stationed on St Helena before being posted to South Africa following an increase in native disturbances.



ready prepared for advancing, and we are only waiting the finishing strokes to be put to the pontoons that carry us across the river. It is not very wide, but has a good clear of water, and is pretty rapid. We are encamped alone 800 yards from the river. Just behind us are the 2/24th. Our column also consists of one battery field Royal Artillery,



about 500 horsemen, and a native contingent about 2,000-strong comprised of Natal Zulus with European officers . . . all in all we have for South Africa a tidy little army in the field.

I do not think we shall meet with much opposition at first or even afterwards. I don't fancy that after the first brush they will care about facing us in the open country. I only hope that it will not be a long business, for I am getting pretty really tired of this kind of life, and have had enough of it of late to last me for a long time to come. We have had some pretty trying time of it as far as weather is concerned since we landed in Natal. Soldiering at home in a barracks, with a roof over your head, is pleasant enough . . . The life we lead is very far different . . . I can assure you all is no child's play. We have now said good bye to a civilised life.'

He, like many others, was naturally optimistic about the forthcoming campaign. Given the professionalism and training of the British soldier, and the victory over the Xhosa the previous year, it was expected that it would be relatively easy to overcome the Zulus, with their iron spears, rawhide shields, knobkerries (clubs) and a few antiquated muskets and rifles. There was a widening technological and tactical gulf, as the British

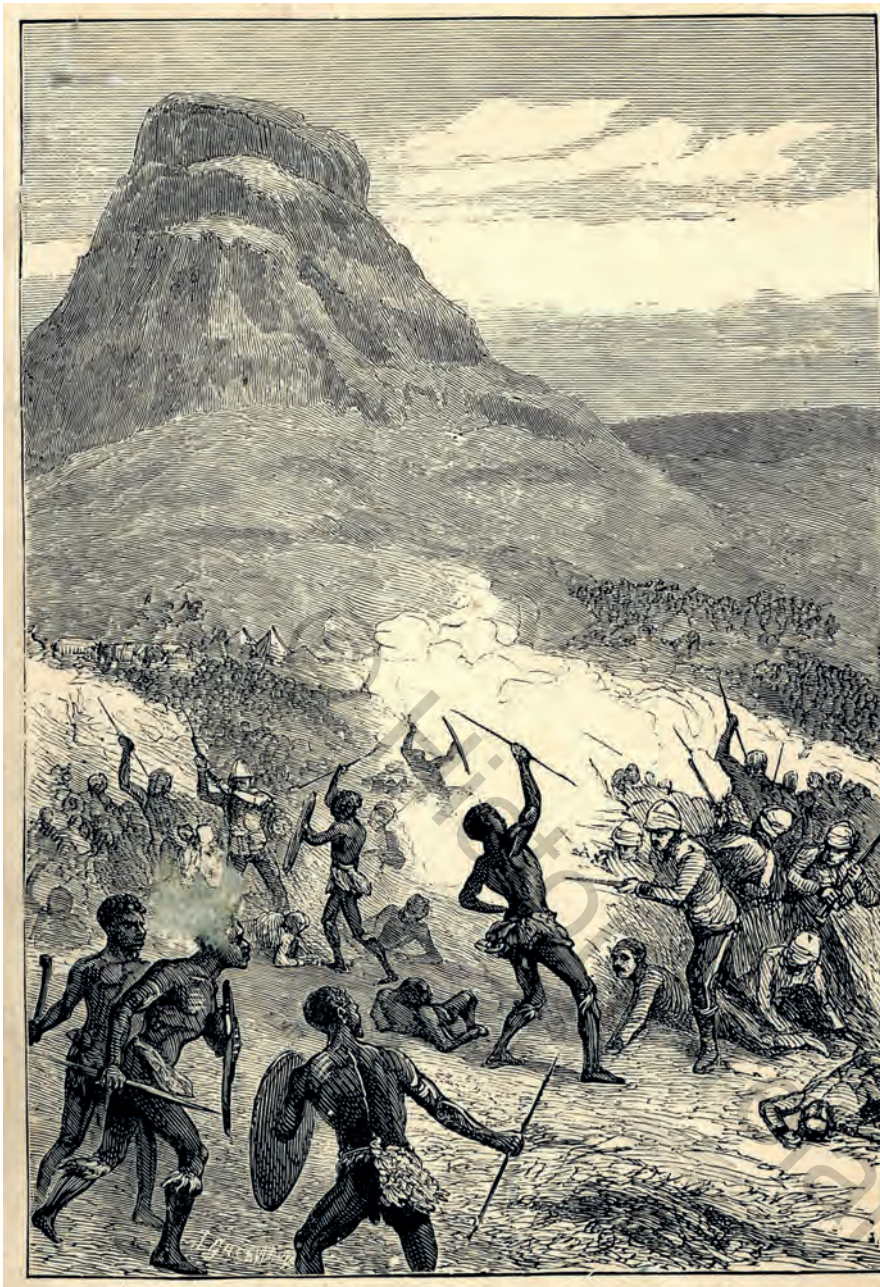
carried the breech-loading rifle, the Martini-Henry; despite this impressive technological advantage, however, poor leadership, combined with inadequate intelligence and over-confidence, would limit the effectiveness of the rifle. Without a prepared concentrated force, the British were vulnerable to aggressive and mobile Zulu attacks on isolated positions. In a letter of 6 November 1878 Wardell had acknowledged the skill and aggressiveness of the Zulus, and believed that they would offer a far more difficult challenge than that posed by the Xhosas: 'Zulus are far more powerful and better armed than the last'. Nevertheless, such was the confidence of the British that their only concern was that the Zulus would refuse to confront them in a pitched battle, thus removing the possibility of a decisive victory. Wardell expected that the three columns would reach 'the king's great kraal' at Ulundi, and expected to 'astonish their heroes before very long'. He continued: 'I don't want to see any poor devils bowled over but I am curious to see our field battery open fire on them in mass. I think it will open their eyes.' Such preconceived notions of the unworthiness of their opponents would be eradicated within twelve days of the campaign. Wardell ended the letter: 'If all is well I will send you a line again'. It was the last letter that he wrote.

'Chest and horns'

On 20 January the centre column departed from Rorke's Drift and established their new camp at the base of Isandlwana hill. On 22 January, following reports of a large concentrated Zulu force several miles east of the camp, Lord Chelmsford decided to divide his force of some 5,000 men and head towards the reported sightings, in the hope of confronting the enemy. Around 1,800 men remained at Isandlwana to defend the camp against any possible attack. The men who were left behind were disappointed; they believed that they would miss the first major action of the war.

That morning, reports were received of a large Zulu force marching in the direction of Isandlwana. Over 20,000 Zulus had eluded the attention of Chelmsford's force and were now marching in strength in their traditional battle formation of 'chest and horns'. The 'chest' would make a frontal attack and the 'horns' would attempt to surround and cut off any retreat by flanking and enveloping. In preparation for the attack, Col. Pulleine ordered his infantry companies to form an

Above: Capt. Wardell's sketch of Fort Warwick, which he and his company built and successfully defended against Xhosa attacks for several months during the Ninth Cape Frontier War (1877-8). (Maynooth University Library)



extended line around 1,000 yards outside the camp. Captain Wardell's 'H' Company was positioned on the right flank, beside two pieces of artillery, under the command of Major Smith of Ballintemple, Co. Cavan. These men would face the 'chest' of the Zulu attack. Initially, the

Above: Scene from the battle of Isandlwana, 22 January 1879, the British Army's heaviest military defeat by the Zulus. (Maynooth University Library)

Opposite: Capt. Wardell's last letter to his parents, written from the camp at Rorke's Drift. (Maynooth University Library)

'old and steady shots' of the 24th Regiment were producing a deadly volley-fire. As Wardell and the other companies were checking the Zulu advance, however, the British right flank became highly vulnerable. Col. Durnford, a Royal Engineer from County Leitrim, and 500 men of the Natal Native Horse defended a *donga* (dry gully) against the Zulu left 'horn'. At first Durnford's men successfully maintained constant and accurate fire to stall the attack. Owing to a lack of ammunition, however, and the obvious danger of being outflanked and isolated, Durnford's

position was no longer tenable, so he ordered his men to retire back to the camp and establish a new position. This dangerously exposed the right flank of the entire British position.

'Beginning of the end'

Pulleine, realising the precarious position of the camp, ordered the bugler to sound 'Retire' in the hope of establishing a concentrated formation closer to the camp. At first the British retired in good order, but as the Natal native contingent withdrew in disarray, wide gaps appeared in the defence. The Zulus, spurred on by this opportunity, pressed home the advantage and broke into the British lines. This was, as Professor Wardell, George's nephew, later stated, 'the beginning of the end'. With the chaotic and claustrophobic nature of the hand-to-hand struggle, the British were unable to form a concentrated position. As a result, pockets of resistance formed throughout the camp and beyond. Wardell and three companies of the 24th Regiment formed squares, a standard infantry tactic of the time that presented no obvious flanking opportunities to the attacker. Wardell's position would have been at the centre of the square, encouraging his men, maintaining discipline, attempting to bring control to their position, and ordering his men to volley-fire in an effort to preserve ammunition. With limited ammunition, disrupted formations, no command and control, and with no hope of breaking out of the camp and performing a fighting retreat, it was only a matter of time before they were overrun by the Zulus. Nevertheless, Wardell and his men fought well and were able to retire closer to the camp, whilst attempting to rally with other units. Eventually they managed to make their way to the 1/24th camp area, around 1,000 yards from their initial position, and made their last stand.

Of the 1,800 soldiers, African allies and camp-followers that were present at the beginning of the battle, 1,300 were killed. Not one officer of the 24th Regiment survived; they died along with their entire compa-

nies. Despite their victory, the Zulus suffered catastrophic casualties in the region of 3,000—an extremely high rate for a civilian army. In June 1879 the bodies of the 24th Regiment were finally buried. After seven months in the open, George Wardell (aged 38) was one of the few recognisable officers left on the battlefield; he was found beside another officer, Lt. Dyer, 2/24th, and 60 men. Wardell was survived by his wife, Lucy, and six daughters.

Conclusion

For those interested in military, social and cultural history, these archives certainly illuminate our understanding of the military tradition and military service of the landed gentry during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. George Wardell's 30 letters to his family offer an intimate insight into the life of an officer in the British Army during a period of vast territorial expansion. They provide rich material on his daily life and the localised difficulties

of 'imperial policing' and fighting in 'small wars'. Furthermore, considering the rarity of the discovery of new primary source material on the Anglo-Zulu War, this collection is unique and profoundly personal, and it will be an exciting find for historians and students interested in the conflict and in British colonial warfare generally. This is significant, as, despite their obvious importance, collections like this have been traditionally overlooked in Ireland. The growing awareness of and interest in military history means that sources like the Wardell Collection will no longer be hidden in plain sight.

Unfortunately for the Wardell family, George's death was not their only loss. Three years later his brother, Captain John Charles Wardell, Royal Marine Light Infantry, was shot dead at the battle of Tel-El-Kebir in Egypt. Another brother, Warren, a veteran of the South African War (1899–1902), was killed in France in November 1914. Warren's papers detail his experiences in Burma, the latter stages of the South African War and the first months of the Great War. Moreover, the collection contains the papers of John Wardell, son of John Charles, Professor of Modern History and Director of Military Studies at Trinity College (1901–11). This rich and diverse collection can be consulted by contacting Special Collections and Archives at Maynooth University Library, +353 (0)1 4747423, library.specialcollections@nuim.ie.

Luke Diver is a Ph.D graduate of Maynooth University.

FURTHER READING

- A. Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo: the Zulu War of 1879* (London, 2012).
- I. Knight, *Brave men's blood: the epic of the Zulu War, 1879* (London, 1990).
- I. Knight, *Zulu rising: the epic story of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift* (Oxford, 2010).
- D.R. Morris, *The washing of the spears: the rise and fall of the Zulu Nation* (London, 1966).

Camp at Rorke's Drift
Buffalo River, Natal
10th Jan'y 1879

My dearst Father & Mother,

A happy New Year to you all, and many more of them, I must write you a few lines before bidding adieu to Natal. As very early tomorrow morning we commence crossing the Buffalo into Zululand. It being that great and noble potentate, Colchwayo's two hearings, one column is now all ready prepared for advancing, and we are only waiting the finishing stroke to be put to the pentons that convey us over the river, it is not very wide, but has a good deal of water, and is pretty rapid. We are encamped here about 800 yards from the river. Just behind us are the 2^d 24th. Our column also consists of one battery field Royal artillery. About 500 horsemen, and a native contingent about 2000 strong composed of Natal Zulus. With European officers of course,