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The Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War (review)

Bruce Vandervort

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Most students of the Anglo-Zulu War will probably not be aware that black Africans made up more than half of the British army that invaded Zululand in January of 1879 and went on to fight the storied battles of Isandlwana, Rorke's Drift, and Ulundi. The British invasion force, under the overall command of Gen. Frederick A. The sizer, soon to be Lord Chelmsford, totaled some 16,800 men, at least 9,000 of whom were Africans. Of these, a few, perhaps as many as 1,000, were dissident Zulus, warriors whose leader held a grudge against Zulu paramount chief Cetshwayo or who were out to avenge a slight directed their way by men of another Zulu regiment. The bulk of the large African component, however, was comprised of the Natal Native Contingent (NNC), men recruited from Africans resident in Natal, the province of South Africa adjacent to Zululand from which the British invasion was launched.

This is the force whose story Paul Thompson first told in a 1997 edition of the book under review here. He later returned to the subject and in 2003 has produced a revised and expanded version of his book that is sure to remain the definitive account of Britain's black allies in the Anglo-Zulu War for some time to come. Not that Thompson is likely to have much competition. As he points out in the Foreword to the book (p. v), the substantial literature on the Anglo-Zulu War contains very little about the NNC, for reasons that are "partly political, partly cultural." During the imperial era, Europeans were not interested in diminishing their own exploits by extolling those of their "native" levies. And, "In the wake of empire, the African had no desire to glorify them, unless they were feats of resistance." To many in the current generation of South Africans, Thompson says, the NNC represents "collaboration in colonial rule, egregiously incorrect politically and best forgot. It is fairly safe to say the new history textbooks for South Africa are hardly likely to mention the contingent at all."

Not only would this deny "many brave men their meed of praise and

[distort] our appreciation of the past," Thompson writes (p. v), but it would scant the part played in the Anglo-Zulu War by the province of Natal. In 1879, Africans made up the vast majority of the population of that province, accounting for just under 320,000 of its overall population of 361,587. Many of these Africans, like the amaHlubi, amaNgwane, or amaQadi, were peoples who earlier had been driven from Zululand as a result of Zulu expansion, the Mfecane or "crushing," that began in the time of the great king Shaka in the 1820s and continued under his successor, Dingaan.

Most of these "displaced persons" were bitterly anti-Zulu, Paul Thompson tells us, and supported the British because they "had brought peace to a land ravaged by warfare, the source of which had been Zulu expansion" (p. 1). That the British, about to go to war against the 250,000-strong Zulu **[End Page 245]** nation, should have tried to tap into this vast reservoir of manpower should not surprise us. Nor that there should have been so much local opposition to doing so, however short-sighted it might have been. Heavily outnumbered white farmers and town dwellers in Natal were not eager to see young blacks issued with guns, as army recruiters proposed doing. There was a widespread fear that black fighters were likely to turn their weapons on whites rather than Zulus. This issue lay at the heart of the interesting prewar debate among the white authorities as to how the African levies were to be organized and equipped. The British military wanted them to be organized along the lines of the British regimental system and to be issued, at least partially, with firearms. Civilian authorities...

The Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War. By Paul S. Thompson. Scottsville, South Africa: Privately published, 2003 [1997]. ISBN 0-620-30298-4. Maps. Notes. Bibliographical essay. Pp. v, 179. \$70. Can be obtained from the author at Thompson@ukzn.ac.za.

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