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Zulu Victory: The Epic of Isandlwana and the Cover-Up (review)

James B. Thomas

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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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When Lord Chelmsford led the British Army into Zululand in January of 1879, he and the entire British Empire figured that the ensuing war would be another quick and decisive imperial victory over another indigenous people. Ultimately, the Anglo-Zulu War was a British victory, but not until after the setback and embarrassing defeat at the battle of Isandlwana. The defeat of the Imperial Army and Native contingents at Isandlwana was not as devastating as the Italian defeat at Adowa, or as strategically disastrous as Britain's own later battle of Colenso during the Boer War. It was not even as troublesome to the national spirit, if one believes Kipling, as the breaking of the square at Abu-Klea. Still, the shock and surprise of the virtual annihilation of Her Majesty's 24th Foot at the hands of the Zulus set in motion a train of excuse making and scapegoat seeking of remarkable proportions.

In their book, *Zulu Victory*, Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill take a fresh approach to unraveling the mysteries and controversies that still exist over the battle of Isandlwana. Their research is good and their organization and style are excellent. They address much of the old debate—such as the "Ammunition Controversy," relegated to an appendix—as well as bring in new interpretations. What is perhaps most gratifying about their book, however, is the level of respect they accord the Zulu. There are no surprises for our cynical time regarding the manufacturing of reasons for war or the level of cover-up that followed. While other studies give grudging acknowledgment of Zulu martial skills (even some contemporary accounts did that), Lock and Quantrill give the reader a sense that to properly understand the battle, and the war, it is necessary to see the Zulu as equally human, at least equally capable and in many ways superior to the Victorian soldier, whose training **[End Page 1222]** and experience caused so many—not least Chelmsford himself—to be utterly surprised at their defeat.

The authors' Zulu perspective is nicely done and very well researched,

which is to be expected considering their broadening of the scope of the story. What is more impressive, however, is that the British sources were so exhaustively researched and in some cases reexamined. This is most important in the discussion of the cover-up which followed the disaster at Isandlwana. Of particular interest is the examination of Chelmsford's order, later deliberately altered by Lt-Colonel John Crealock, to shift blame for the defeat away from Chelmsford to Colonel Anthony Durnford, who, having died in the battle, could not defend himself. This altering of evidence is so like the alteration of Sir Redvers Buller's so-called "surrender message" of the Boer War—analyzed by Thomas Pakenham and others—that one gets the impression it was common practice to mold facts to create agreeable conclusions.

Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill do an excellent job of retelling a story that never gets tiresome, and do so with fresh insight and broadened scope. *Zulu Victory* is a welcome addition to the field, and is highly recommended for historians or anyone interested in the ways in which the lessons of history can be ignored in order to avoid embarrassment

James B. Thomas
HCCS-Northwest College
Houston, Texas

Kentucky and the South before, during, and after the Civil War through the many details of William Preston's life. The author provides a well-balanced approach to the subject by including the social roles of husbands and wives and slave owners and slaves in the Old South, the economic and political aspects of being a Southern gentleman, and the role of the family in Southern life. Additionally, Schlinger supplies background information on the early history of Kentucky and all the people and events throughout Preston's life, allowing readers with any amount of historical knowledge to understand what role his life played in American history. I recommend this book for anybody interested in Kentucky history, Southern history, and the Civil War.

Charles D. Grear

Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas

Zulu Victory: The Epic of Isandlwana and the Cover-Up. By Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill. Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 2005. ISBN 1-85367-645-4. Maps. Photographs. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 336.

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



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