

BOOK REVIEW:

INCIDENT AT TREWIRGIE: FIRST SHOTS OF THE ZULU REBELLION 1906 BY PAUL THOMPSON

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Maps. Notes.

Shortly after settling the conquered world, the imperial powers developed a military concept for the occupation and, where they deemed it necessary, for the pacification of their variegated possessions. A vast literature, embracing both the theory and the practice of such operations, developed. The British, following the fashionable ideas of the Victorian soldier-philosopher, Colonel C.E. Callwell, adopted the concept of small wars, a term applied to a variety of scenarios; Callwell, in fact, enumerated seven categories of potential enemies ranging from well-structured armies to guerrillas and irregular cavalry.¹

Small wars, whether in the form of the pacification of simmering discontent or the crushing of outright rebellion, inevitably accompanied colonial enterprise. One cannot say that its history has been neglected – certainly not in South Africa or India – and there is no doubt that our knowledge of small wars, and, more particularly, certain specific small wars, has advanced enormously over the past few decades. This was, of course, aided first by the ‘new social history’ of the 1960s and 1970s and more recently by the expansion of military interest into asymmetrical conflict. The confluence of social protest and popular unrest with grassroots anonymity, black liberation and anti-colonialism appealed particularly to the

¹ Colonel C.E. Callwell’s *Small Wars: their principles and practice*, which was first published by the War Office in 1896 (Printed for H.M. Stationery office by Harrison and Sons, London) and reprinted several times until 1914, became the classic primer for colonial warfare.

technical and political interests of the 'new social historians' and the postcolonialists that followed.

The new interest in South African protest history cannot but point in the direction of Bambatha, who, although a relatively minor Zulu chief, embodied the spirit of protest in early-twentieth-century South Africa. It is a fascinating tale. Of the imposition of a controversial hut tax in a troubled colony; a tax that gave vent to popular protest and the sudden spilling over into what the colonial authorities defined as 'rebellion'. The dawning realisation by some of the rebel leadership that their uprising could only succeed if they adopted a guerrilla strategy; and the difficulties they encountered as this way of war was alien to the Zulu. The rebellion was doomed to fail from the start: the course of events standing in sharp contrast to the resistance offered by the Xhosa who were masters at guerrilla tactics.

The rebellion that often bears Bambatha's name has therefore, quite unsurprisingly, been the focus of several studies. Bosman's *Natal Rebellion* (1907) and Stuart's *History of the Zulu Rebellion* (1913) appeared shortly after the event, but both carry the colonial hallmarks of their time. Shula Marks' *Reluctant Rebellion*, part of the shift of the 1960s and influenced by George Shepperson's study on the Chilembwe rebellion in Malawi, followed in 1970. However, for the lay reader and battlefield trampler, Paul Thompson, with his recent, path-breaking *The Zulu Rebellion of 1906 in Maps* (2002), provides the most convenient introduction to the subject and he has followed this with a biography of Bambatha (2004) as well as the work now under review.

For the student of colonial warfare and of Zulu warfare in particular, this book on the *Incident at Trewirgie*, focussing on "the first shots" of the rebellion, is another welcome addition to the expanding literature. The 'incident' occurred on a small farm in the Richmond district, to which Mjongo and Makanda, who had defied the magistrate at Henley and so (in a sense) sparked the rebellion that bears Bambatha's name, had retired. Sub-Inspector Hunt, who was sent to Trewirgie farm to arrest them, arrived late in the afternoon on February 8. However, Hunt and his detachment of Natal Police failed to apprehend the two and in the ensuing brawl Hunt and another policeman were killed and, as a result, the Natal government proclaimed martial law and mobilised the Natal Militia. The story is told in five chapters that move (largely chronologically) from the protest at Henley to the clash at Trewirgie, the declaration of martial law, the manhunt for the perpetrators, and the

court martial; all culminating in the public executions described, after the foreword, as an forward-looking intermezzo.

Thompson has done well in unearthing the scattered sources (official memoranda, court records and newspaper reports) and marshalling them in a clearly structured, well-rounded piece of work. However, such incidents occurred elsewhere in the British Empire and indeed in other empires at this time and they have been investigated in isolation for too long. What are needed are studies that cut across both the imperial centres as well as representative portions of the empires. It is true that the focus of imperial and colonial studies has shifted away from London, Paris and Lisbon to their imperial peripheries, from the colonial and dominions offices to those at 'the receiving end of empire' and in such disparate locations as Delhi, Dublin and Durban. Yet, too many studies focus solely on a particular place and disregard happenings in Europe or elsewhere in the colonial empires. The 'incident' at Trewirgie in February 1906 and similar happenings elsewhere were all manifestations of both popular discontent as well as thinking on imperial policing. Some ideas originated locally, others emanated from London or Paris or Lisbon and washed out into the empires. The author would have opened up the debates on colonial discontent and imperial policing even further, had he included something of this in his study. Nonetheless this is a contribution that breaks new ground and is a vast supplement to our knowledge of the so-called 1906 Bambatha Rebellion.

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