

Title

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## Film Portrayals of the Anglo-Zulu War and Scholarly Analyses

Africa has a history that is often viewed through a Eurocentric lens. Unfortunately, this omits very important details about the cultures and histories of the indigenous population. This is especially true of European colonial ambitions on the continent. However, these Eurocentric accounts of Africa can provide historians with the seed for a closer examination of its cultures and history. One such instance is the Anglo-Zulu War which occurred in South Africa in 1879.

Not unlike other colonies and dominions of the British Empire, the Zulu Kingdom had a long and rich pre-colonial history. However, as with other colonies targeted for subjugation, these cultural and historical features provided both advantages and disadvantages when the war began.<sup>1</sup> During my search for scholarly and film portrayals of the war, I encountered a continuity between authors with regard to cultural influence on the war.

After turning Canada into a federation of the British Empire, the British government believed all of South Africa could be brought under its control in a similar fashion.<sup>2</sup> Of course, war would be the justification for, and means by which, the Zulu kingdom would be defeated and incorporated. This war has been the subject of many scholarly works as well as popular films. This paper will compare and contrast understandings of the war in scholarly works with its depiction in films.

Both scholarly literature and films are not only subject to the information available at the time of their creation, but also political and social influences. For historians consulting

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<sup>1</sup> David I. Holmes, "A Stylometric Foray into the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879," *English Studies* 93, no.3 (May 1, 2012): 310-312. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0013838X.2012.668790>.

<sup>2</sup> David I. Holmes, "A Stylometric Foray into the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879," *English Studies* 93, no.3 (May 1, 2012): 310-312. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0013838X.2012.668790>.

secondary sources, it is important to be mindful of changes in consensus over time. This is also true of the film is designed to reach a larger audience. Historians should apply the same responsible methods of analysis and critique to the evaluation of a films accuracy as they would to scholarly works.

Sometimes the frequency of scholarly discussions and research can outpace the production of films. This is the case with the Anglo-Zulu War, the most recent film I was able to locate was *Zulu Dawn* which was released in 1979.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, there have been scholarly articles and books on this war published just weeks prior to the creation of this historiography. Challenges such as this has required an examination of current scholarship in addition to that of the time these films were released.

Recognizing the large interval of time between the most recent film and current scholarly literature has allowed me to situate my work accordingly. While it may be difficult to compare current scholarship with an older film, it is possible to determine how accurate the film was based on the scholarship of the time. There is also an opportunity for me to situate my findings within current scholarly understandings.

Beginning with the oldest and most popular of the films, *Zulu* was released in 1964.<sup>4</sup> Primarily focused on Rorke's drift, the film depicts events from the British perspective. Aside from the obvious issues of favoring one side of the story and focusing on one particular event, there is the problematic representation of the British protagonist and Zulu antagonist. John

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<sup>3</sup> Cyril B. Enfield, director. 1979. *Zulu Dawn*. Paramount Pictures. <https://www.amazon.com/Zulu-Dawn-Burt-Lancaster/dp/B00YH8S2IS>

<sup>4</sup> Cyril B. Enfield, director. 1964. *Zulu*. Paramount Pictures. DVD

Laband offers an alternative take on this portrayal with *Zulu Warriors: The Battle for the South African Frontier*.<sup>5</sup>

Laband begins with an overview of the colonial dynamics the British Empire was experiencing in South Africa in 1879.<sup>6</sup> According to Laband, Britain and other European powers during this time maintained their colonies through constant conflict and division with the indigenous population.<sup>7</sup> Africa in particular presented rivalries and cultural differences that could be exploited to this end. Loose alliances and relationships often formed between groups to resist rivals or even colonizers.<sup>8</sup>

These alliances were important, but vulnerable, parts of the Zulu state and as such were susceptible to attack. Many experienced colonizers including the British, knew that divide and conquer was a very effective strategy. Laband emphasizes the role of collaboration among the Zulu elite and the effectiveness of British attacks on agriculture.<sup>9</sup> As was the case in many European colonies, the disparity between economic and military power often placed the odds in favor of the colonizer.

According to Laband, overwhelming British resources combined with the exploitation of political and social weaknesses within the Zulu kingdom, all but ensured a British victory.<sup>10</sup> While Laband offers a great introduction and thorough overview of the Anglo-Zulu War, there are a few things that could be looked at more closely. How the British were able to erode the

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<sup>5</sup> John Laband, *Zulu Warriors: The Battle for the South African Frontier*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 6-10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 33-35

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 102-104.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 262.

Zulu economy, and which Zulu officials they worked to turn, would be helpful in establishing a more accurate understanding of British strategy.

Paul Singer Thompson begins his book *Black Soldiers of the Queen the Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War* with a brief mention of the film *Zulu*.<sup>11</sup> During this introduction, he explains the accuracies of certain films and books but mentions their omissions.<sup>12</sup> Similar to Laband, Thompson gives the reader a broad overview of the conditions in South Africa in 1879. He devotes most of the first chapter to explaining what underlying issues were affecting both British colonial interests, and the integrity of the Zulu political structure.<sup>13</sup>

His writing then becomes more linear, beginning with the mobilization of British troops in chapter 2 and continuing until the end of the war in chapter 17. Thompson incorporates some maps to help the reader visualize the geographic relation of certain colonies and areas.<sup>14</sup> These are helpful in establishing the relevance of certain locations not just for a military strategy, but also for grasping the boundaries between different groups, cultures and governments.

Thompson also presents a strong argument for the role of political systems in the war.<sup>15</sup> He describes not only the different structures, but what the strengths and weaknesses were in both systems.<sup>16</sup> There is also a great deal of detail with regard to military structures, even including the organization and role of smaller units.<sup>17</sup> By examining the military component of

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<sup>11</sup> Paul S. Thompson, *Black Soldiers of the Queen the Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo-Zulu War*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), vi.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. vi.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 3-8.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 39, 50, 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 2-5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 2-5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 9-23.

the war so closely, Thompson offers the reader a clear understanding of specific differences between the British and Zulu.

This is valuable because it goes beyond a generalized study of the war in terms of economy and politics. Since the event being studied is a war, it makes sense that an author such as Thompson would focus heavily on warfare itself. Overall, the book provides an easy to follow, linear but in-depth look at the causes and conditions of the Anglo-Zulu War. While it is scholarly in nature, it could be understood by most readers.

Another film, *Zulu at Dawn* was released in 1979 and is primarily focused on the Battle of Isandlwana.<sup>18</sup> This film contains some of the same problematic Eurocentrism in its presentation as *Zulu*. Again, there is the British protagonist and Zulu antagonist with an especially negative and shallow portrayal of Zulu culture. While the film seems to accurately depict the chronology of events, it is almost entirely from the British perspective.

Ron Lock specifically focuses on the Battle of Isandlwana in his book *The Anglo-Zulu War-Isandlwana*. In the forward by Prince Buthelezi, he states that the book is intended to refute historians who believe the Battle of Isandlwana was a disaster.<sup>19</sup> Respectably, he also mentions the importance of acknowledging disservice done to British personnel and commanders by historical inaccuracies.<sup>20</sup> Still, the book seems to have an overtly hostile representation of the British.

Beginning with a prelude to the war and events leading up to it, Lock provides the reader with the economic and political climate beginning in 1878.<sup>21</sup> He does so by explaining the

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<sup>18</sup> Cyril B. Enfield, director. 1979. *Zulu Dawn*. Paramount Pictures. <https://www.amazon.com/Zulu-Dawn-Burt-Lancaster/dp/B00YH8S2IS>

<sup>19</sup> Ron Lock, *The Anglo-Zulu War-Isandlwana*. (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2017), xi.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. xi.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 1-5.

dynamics and relationships between the Zulu and their neighbors. Following a description of the Zulu, he also briefly mentions the dynamic of the Boer and their relationship to the British.<sup>22</sup>

Like many authors, Lock does go into some detail on the disparity of military force between the British and Zulu.<sup>23</sup> He also expands greatly on the differences in culture and political structure and examines what the consequences of this war for both sides. There is also a brief exploration of Zulu advantages and familiarity in the climate and environment.<sup>24</sup> While these things are necessary for understanding details about the conflict, they also offer the ability of the reader to compare it to similar conflicts between major European powers and their colonies.

Interestingly, unlike many other authors I have encountered, he addresses the Zulu rejecting Christian missions and how conversion could have jeopardized the zeal with which Zulu soldiers may have fought.<sup>25</sup> Though not covered greatly, most of the fourth chapter is devoted to covering specific instances of this. Doing so can help a reader such as myself understand the deeper cultural implications of British aims in the area.

Overall, I believe Lock provides a strong examination of the Anglo-Zulu War but more importantly, a detailed look at the Zulu perspective. His willingness to delve into this aspect of the war provides historians with a crucial dialogue to offset prevailing attitudes in films as well as other sources. This book would be a strong complement to a more neutral but conventional study of the Anglo-Zulu War.

In conclusion, I have noticed the importance of establishing a larger picture of events in conjunction with finer details such as military units, cultural and/or religious beliefs, and the

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<sup>22</sup> Ron Lock, *The Anglo-Zulu War-Isandlwana*. (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2017), 9-12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 20-26, 44-47.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 86-89.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 53-55.

inner workings of countries or groups. While the films I watched failed to address some of these aspects, authors seem to elaborate quite extensively on them. While secondary sources may go through a more stringent process of scrutiny, they are prone to errors in accuracy. Equally, films are not necessarily dramatized to the point of complete inaccuracy.



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