

The Hero of Rorke's Drift

By

Keith I. Smith B.A. (Hons)

A common perception of those not familiar with the engagements of the Anglo-Zulu War is that Rorke's Drift was dominated by one character: Lieutenant John Rouse Merriott. Chard, R.E. This assessment has been fostered, for the general public, by the film 'Zulu', made many years ago and yet still universally popular, with its scenes of heroism on both sides. The fact that the film altered the real natures of the characters seems to be immaterial: Hook, for example, is shown as a wild young man with a bad soldiering record, who was regarded as a malingerer. The facts are that Hook was nearly 30 years of age at the time of the battle, was a teetotaler and was awarded Good Conduct pay just prior to the battle taking place.¹ He did not marry until 18 years after the battle, thus giving the lie to his odd relationship with the film's Sergeant Maxfield, who supposedly sent money to Hook's wife. The two leading stars portray Chard as a man with a typically British stiff upper lip while Bromhead is the snob who belatedly recognises Chard's courage and leadership ability.

Those who have read more closely about the engagement will hardly be in a better position to judge, since both Chard and, to a lesser extent, Lieutenant Gonville Bromhead, commanding officer of 'B' Company, 2/24th Regiment, are usually shown to be the heroes of the hour. Virtually every account of the engagement, from Coupland² to Laband,³ gives the lion's share of the praise to these two officers.

What, then, are we to make of the opinion, for example, of Sir Garnet Wolseley,⁴ who referred to Chard with the words: "a more uninteresting or more stupid-looking fellow I never saw."⁵ Such was Wolseley's contempt for him that he presented Chard's Victoria Cross to him while passing by in the field, with Chard in working clothes. Wolseley described Bromhead in similar terms: "Bromhead ... is a very stupid fellow also."⁶ When he subsequently awarded Bromhead his V.C., it gave Wolseley another opportunity to vent his spleen:

I have now given away these decorations to both the officers who took part in the defence of Roorke's [sic] Drift, and two duller, more stupid, more uninteresting even, or less like Gentlemen it has not been my luck to meet for a long time.⁷

Wolseley was not alone in his criticism of these two men. Major C.F. Clery, Staff Officer to Colonel Glyn, Commanding Officer of the 24th Regiment, had this to say:

Well, Chard and Bromhead to begin with: both are almost typical in their separate corps of what would be termed the very dull class. Bromhead is a great favourite in his regiment and a capital fellow at everything except soldiering. So little was he held to be qualified in this way from unconquerable indolence that he had to be reported

¹ Norman Holme, *The Noble 24th*, London, 1999, p. 337.

² Sir Reginald Coupland, *Zulu Battle Piece: Isandlwana*, London, (1948),1991, pp. 103ff.

³ John Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, Manchester, 1992, pp. 96ff.

⁴ General Wolseley replaced Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford shortly before the battle of Ulundi on 4th July, 1879, following which Chelmsford resigned and returned to England.

⁵ Adrian Preston (ed.), *Sir Garnet Wolseley's South African Journal 1879-80*, Cape Town, 1973, p. 57: entry for 15th July, 1879.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Preston, p. 112: entry for 11th September, 1879.

confidentially as hopeless. This is confidential as I was told it by his commanding officer. I was about a month with him at Rorke's Drift after Isandlwana, and the height of his enjoyment seemed to be to sit all day on a stone on the ground smoking a most uninviting-looking pipe. The only thing that seemed equal to moving him in any way was any allusion to the defence of Rorke's Drift. This used to have a sort of electrical effect on him, for up he would jump and off he would go, and not a word could be got out of him.⁸ When I told him he should send me an official report on the affair it seemed to have a most distressing effect on him. I used to find him hiding away in corners with a friend helping him to complete this account, and the only thing that afterwards helped to lessen the compassion I felt for all this, was my own labour when perusing this composition – to understand what it was all about. So you can fancy that there was not one who knew him who envied him his distinction, for his modesty about himself was, and is, excessive.

Chard there is very little to say about except that he too is a 'very good fellow' - but very uninteresting ...⁹

In fact, neither of these officers had a good word to say about almost anyone; however, while Wolseley consigned his caustic comments to his private journal, Clery was a self-confessed gossip and cheerfully acknowledged the fact in his correspondence.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the criticisms do not stop there. Colonel Evelyn Wood, commander of the Fourth, later Flying, Column is reported to have told Wolseley that Chard was "a most useless officer, fit for nothing."¹¹

Lest these accounts be thought too critical, there is corroborative evidence from a fellow-Engineer officer with first hand knowledge of Chard's qualities:

Chard got his orders to leave the 5th Company [Royal Engineers] for good and departed yesterday. He is a most amiable fellow and a loss to the mess, but as a company officer he is so hopelessly slow and slack. I shall get on much better without him and with Porter as my senior subaltern. Chard makes me angry, with such a start as he got, he stuck to the company doing nothing. In his place I should have gone up and asked Lord Chelmsford for an appointment, he must have got it and if not he could have gone home soon after Rorke's Drift, at the height of his popularity and done splendidly at home. I advised him, but he placidly smokes his pipe and does nothing.¹²

One of the survivors of Isandlwana, Lieutenant Henry Curling R.A., met the two men while he was at Rorke's Drift in the days after the battle and is quoted as saying:

It is very amusing to read the accounts of Chard and Bromhead. They are about the most common-place men in the British Army. Chard is a most insignificant man in appearance and is only about 5 feet 2 or 3 in height.¹³ Bromhead is a stupid old fellow, as deaf as a post. Is it not curious how some men are forced into notoriety?¹⁴

Finally, there were also men in the ranks with an opinion:

⁸ Perhaps this was a symptom of what today might be called 'Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome'.

⁹ Sonia Clarke, *Zululand at War*, Houghton, 1984, p. 131: letter from Major Clery to Lady Alison, 16 May, 1879.

¹⁰ Clarke, *loc. cit.*; see also p. 100: letter to Sir Archibald Alison.

¹¹ Preston, p. 57.

¹² Frank Emery, *The Red Soldier*, London, 1977, p. 241: Letter from Captain Walter Parke Jones, R.E., 2nd August, 1879.

¹³ In 1878, 43% of men in the British Army were less than five feet seven inches in height: Alan Ramsay Skelley, *The Victorian Army at Home: The Recruitment and Terms and Conditions of the British Regular, 1859 – 1899*, London, 1977, table on p. 307.

¹⁴ Quoted in Adrian Greaves and Brian Best (eds), *The Curling Letters of the Zulu War*, Barnsley, 2001, p. 122. Curling was born in July, 1847 and was thus only two years younger than Bromhead, hardly qualifying the latter to be referred to as an 'old fellow'!

The men spoke very highly of Chard and another man named, I think, Milne, but I am not sure.¹⁵ Of Bromhead they did not speak well.¹⁶

How, then, could two such men manage to bring off this miracle of heroism and endurance? Let me state now that this paper does not attempt to demonstrate that either of these two officers lacked courage. They both evidently shared this quality in abundance, as did the men under their command. The incongruity lies rather in, first, the capacity of Chard in particular, as senior officer, to make the decision to stand rather than to evacuate the post; then in his having the organisational skill to manage the defence arrangements; these factors fly in the face of the damning opinions of their military colleagues and senior officers.

On the first issue, fight or flight, they may really have had little choice. They apparently discussed the two options on the spot, especially in light of the order to stand, as Clery said: "... they all stayed there to defend the place for there was nowhere else to go."¹⁷ But let us consider the two people involved.

First Bromhead. He was born in Versailles in August, 1845, of a prominent military family and was 33 years old at the time of the battle.¹⁸ He had been commissioned as Ensign into the 2/24th in April, 1867, rose to Lieutenant in October, 1871 and was still in that rank at Rorke's Drift seven years later: plainly he was not a brilliant soldier. On the basis of service seniority, he was second-in-command to Chard at Rorke's Drift and in this position his limited intellectual and military skills would not necessarily have proved an obstacle, although his deafness might. If someone else were to devise the strategy and issue the orders, then he was probably a man who could carry those orders to his subordinates and see them carried out. In this he was almost certainly aided by his senior N.C.O.s, Colour Sergeant Bourne and Sergeants Williams and Windridge. All three of these men were commended by Chard in his official report. Three other Sergeants were also present: Sergeants Gallagher, Maxfield and Smith. Maxfield was killed while a patient in hospital but the other two receive no mention.

Now Chard. He was born in December, 1847 and at 31 he was two years younger than Bromhead;¹⁹ this refutes Coupland's casual remark that "they were both scarcely out of their teens".²⁰ He was commissioned into the Royal Engineers in July, 1868 and before going to Natal he served in Bermuda and Malta. He arrived in South Africa on 5th January, 1879 and only reached Rorke's Drift on 19th January, three days before the fight. Thus he too had been a lieutenant for eleven years without advancing, again underscoring his poor qualities. Is it possible that this man, described in such unhappy terms as those we have seen earlier, had the decisiveness, resolve and organisational ability to arrange such a competent defence in just one hour? The answer is, probably not. He would have been able to shape the orders to carry out the strategy but he almost certainly did not have the initiative to develop it. Where, then, were these characteristics to be found?

¹⁵ This was Sergeant F. Millne, 2nd Battalion, 3rd (East Kent) Regiment of Foot ('The Buffs'). He was not decorated for any part he took in the action. See also Donald R. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, London, 1965, 1994, pp. 391, 395.

¹⁶ Trooper Symons' Diary, Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban, MS 1072.

¹⁷ Sonia Clarke, *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ *Cf.* note 13 above.

¹⁹ He was also therefore slightly younger than Curling.

²⁰ Coupland, p. 104.

They did not come from Colour Sergeant Frank Bourne, the ranking N.C.O., as one might assume from the movie. In reality, at only twenty-six years of age,²¹ Bourne was an excellent soldier, as his career demonstrates, but he was simply too young and too inexperienced for such confidence to be placed in him.

Wood and Buller later discussed the defence with General Sir Henry Ponsonby:

But the puzzle to them was – who was the man who organised it – for it showed genius and quickness neither of which were apparently the qualifications of Chard.²²

The answer lies with another, one with much more military experience than either of these two officers. Sub-Assistant Commissary James Langley Dalton was just the right man for the moment. Dalton was born in 1833 and was thus in his mid 40s at Rorke's Drift. He had already enjoyed a full career in the Army, having enlisted in the 85th Foot in November, 1849 aged 17. He was subsequently promoted Corporal in 1862, and Sergeant in 1863. Four years later he became a clerk and was promoted Master Sergeant, then served with Wolseley at Red River in Canada in 1870. After 22 years service, he retired in 1871 with a Long Service and Good Conduct medal. In 1877, he was in South Africa, where he volunteered for service in the British Commissariat.

When Lieutenants Adendorff and Vaines, both from the same company in the 1/3rd Regiment, Natal Native Contingent, arrived at Rorke's Drift about 3.15 p.m. on that day, Chard was at the ponts. Having delivered their warning message, Vaines went off to Helpmekaar while Chard and Adendorff rode up to the post at the mission, about 800 metres distant. On their arrival, the preparations for the defence of the post were, it is recorded, already in progress,²³ apparently in response to a similar message sent by Captain Alan Gardner and received only minutes earlier.²⁴ This version, however, does not entirely correspond with events as recorded by Henry Hook:

Suddenly there was a commotion in the Camp, and we saw two men galloping towards us from the other side of the river, which was Zululand. Lieutenant Chard of the Engineers was protecting the Ponts over the river and, as Senior Officer, was in command at the Drift ... Lieutenant Bromhead was in the Camp itself The horsemen shouted and were brought across the river, and then we knew what had happened to our comrades ... At the same time, a note was received by Lieutenant Bromhead from the Column to say that the enemy was coming on and that the post was to be held at all costs.

... There was a general feeling that the only safe thing was to retire and try to join the troops at Helpmekaar. The horsemen had said that the Zulus would be up in two or three minutes; but luckily for us they did not show themselves for more than an hour. Lieutenant Chard rushed up from the river, about a quarter of a mile away, and saw Lieutenant Bromhead, orders were given to strike the camp and make ready to go, and we actually loaded up two wagons. Then Mr Dalton, of the Commissariat Department, came up and said that if we left the Drift every man was certain to be killed. He had formerly been a Sergeant-Major in a line regiment and was one of the bravest men that ever lived. Lieutenants Chard and Bromhead held a consultation, short and

²¹ Holme gives his date of birth as 27 April, 1853: p. 324.

²² Letter from Sir Henry Ponsonby to his wife, quoted in Preston, p. 319, note 35.

²³ Intelligence Branch, War Office, *Narrative of the Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War of 1879*, (J.S. Rothwell, compiler), London, 1881, 1907, re-printed London, 1989, p. 45. This is clearly based on Chard's official report, found in Holme, *op. cit.*, p. 267 and The National Archive (PRO), Kew, WO 33/34, Inclosure in No. 70.

²⁴ Chard's account sent to Queen Victoria, Holme, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

earnest, and orders were given that we were to get the Hospital and storehouse ready for defence, and that we were never to say die or surrender.

Not a minute was lost. Lieutenant Bromhead superintended the loopholing and barricading of the Hospital and storehouse, and the making of a connection of the defences between the two buildings with walls of mealie-bags and wagons.²⁵

It is most likely that Dalton had already initiated the defensive arrangements when Chard arrived but Hook's account of the preparations for flight also has the ring of truth. There is no drama or romance; just the facts stated simply and clearly. There was also no reason for Hook to have invented what he related since he had nothing to gain by so doing. The slow-witted Chard would almost certainly have been in favour of flight: he was no soldier and he obviously reposed little confidence in Bromhead's ability to hold the post, even though he, Chard, was in command as a result of his seniority. The initiative was provided by Dalton, who opposed flight and instead explained how the post could be held and probably pointed to the work that had already been done. Once Chard had agreed to stay, a stream of orders were issued and the process of constructing the defences continued apace.

From this point on, the vital decisions having been taken, the defence was a matter of grim determination and courage, obviously characteristics which Chard enjoyed to the full and which carried him through the long hours of the defence, backed up by Bromhead and in particular by Dalton, who, even after he had been wounded, still continued to assist with the defence.

Dalton's role was not a matter known only to Hook. In commenting above on Chard, Wolseley continued:

I hear in this camp also that the man who worked hardest in defence of Roorke's [sic] Drift Post was the Commissariat officer [Dalton] who has not been rewarded at all.²⁶

This was not to remain so. Dalton received his own well-deserved, but belated, Victoria Cross on 16th January, 1880, almost twelve months later to the day.

An interesting event occurred some months later when Ulundi had been won and Natal was settling back to enjoy the peace:

After the war, the company of the 24th that had defended Rorke's Drift was marching into Maritzburg amidst a perfect ovation. Among those cheering them was Mr. Dalton, who, as a conductor, had been severely wounded there.

"Why, there's Mr. Dalton cheering us! We ought to be cheering him; he was the best man there," said the men, who forthwith fetched him out of the crowd, and made him march with them. No one knew better the value of this spontaneous act than that old soldier ... Mr. Dalton must have felt a proud man that day.²⁷

I'm sure he did.

© Keith Smith, 2002.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,

²⁵ Account of Private Alfred Henry Hook, 'B' Company, 2/24th Regiment, in Holme, p. 285.

²⁶ Preston, p. 57. One might also apply this same remark to Assistant Commissary W.A. Dunne, Dalton's superior officer at Rorke's Drift, and who went unrewarded, despite his great efforts during the defence. Lord Chelmsford made a recommendation that both Dunne and Dalton be awarded the Victoria Cross (TNA (PRO), WO 32/7386).

²⁷ Major General W.C.F. Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, London, 1896, p. 207.

photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the author.