# "This horrid war"—the newly discovered diary of Captain James Primrose, 1851-53

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On 19 September 1851 Captain James Primrose of the 43rd Light Infantry Regiment, then based at Clonmel in Ireland, started a diary in which he went on to record his South African experiences in the frontier war of 1850-3, now also known as the War of Dispossession or the War of Mlanjeni. He then took part in the campaign against Moshoeshoe which culminated in the Battle of Berea in November 1852. His diary runs from September 1851 to March 1853.[1] It was found recently among family papers stored in a manor house in Oxfordshire, along with a sheaf of paintings depicting British troops in action in the Amatola mountains and on the Orange River, for he was an accomplished water-colourist. Another diary, concerning his Afghanistan service, is much pre-occupied with the incident that made him nationally notorious: when he was in command at Kandahar, he had to be relieved—some said rescued—by Lord Roberts. The diaries and paintings are currently in the possession of General Primrose's great grand-daughter, who intends placing a photocopy, together with a transcription and copies of the relevant paintings, in the archives of the National Army Museum later this year.[2]

How does Primrose's Cape diary differ from other written records surviving from these times? Lumley Graham, a Lieutenant in the 43rd, kept an intermittent diary of his service, most of which survives, but Lumley Graham was accident-prone and missed much of the action.[3] Lieutenant Hugh Robinson, an ensign in the 43rd, wrote some vivid descriptions of his service in his letters home.[4] Captain W.R.King of the 74th Highlanders wrote a book about the war; though not a record written on the spot at the time, it does contain some of his excellent drawings of incidents in the campaign.[5] James Kingsley, a young subaltern in the Cape Mounted Rifles kept a diary of the campaign from December 1850 to December 1853, but he is not as

[1]The entries for June to September 1852 are missing.

[2]The owner of the Primrose diaries and paintings has asked not to be named until she has deposited copies in the National Army Museum.

[3]The original of the Lumley Graham diary is lost, but two incomplete copies are extant and divided between the Bodleian Library, Oxford (GB 162 MSS.Afr.r.8), and the Historical Papers of the University of Witwatersrand (A1506). The Bodleian has a complete typescript copy of the whole diary.

[4]Robinson's original letters remain in private hands, but there are microfilm copies in the library of the National Army Museum in London (accession number 1994-02-1280) and in the Cory Library in Grahamstown (MIC 220).





central to the action as Primrose and seems to have spent a lot of time in frustrated inaction.[6] Primrose's diary deepens our knowledge of how mid Victorian soldiers encountered and experienced the skirmishes on the frontier laid out on a wider canvass in the writings of Stephen Lakeman[7] and James Mackay.[8] Primrose does not describe the kind of practices (including decapitation and the preservation of native skulls as trophies) mentioned by Lakeman, but he does record the deep frustration and disgust which many British soldiers felt about their "work of destruction" of Xhosa villages and crops. J.B. Peires notes that this was a common sentiment among the British regular troops.[9] What comes across strongly in Primrose's diary is his awareness of the cost of the war, for both the war itself and its extension into the lands of Moshoeshoe were unpopular with the government in London. Sir Harry Smith is also cut down to size in Primrose's account. Keith Smith, in his account of Sir Harry Smith's "last throw," describes Smith's forceful character, but Primrose and his fellow officers, who encountered him in 1852, were unimpressed.[10] Above all there is an element of the workaday soldier about Primrose's account: he is a professional, keen to see the country but astonishingly incurious about the Xhosa people. He wants to go on to fight against Moshoeshoe because this offers a chance of seeing more of the country.

Primrose was the son of a soldier. The family background was Anglo-Irish Protestant, and included some distinguished military antecedents, including Lieutenant General Gilbert Primrose, who was adjutant of the 2nd Foot Guards in 1688 and half brother of the first Earl of Rosebery.[11] Primrose's career reflected the spread of Britain's global commitments: by the time he left Ireland for South Africa he had already served in Canada (in the aftermath of the suppression of the Papineau Rebellion) and had helped with famine relief in Ireland. Good fortune and ability meant

[5]William Ross King, *Campaigning in Kaffirland, or, Scenes and Adventures in the Kaffir War of 1851-1852* (London: Saunders & Otley, 1853).

[6]The Kingsley diary is in the National Army Museum (Acc. 8011). A virtually unreadable microfilm copy exists there, along with a badly labelled typescript of the whole diary.

[7]Stephen Lakeman, *What I Saw in Kaffir-land* (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood, 1880).

[8]James McKay, *Reminiscences of the Last Kafir War: Illustrated with Numerous Anecdotes.* (Grahamstown: Richards, 1871).

[9]Jeffrey Brian Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-1857* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2003).

[10]Keith Smith, *Harry Smith's Last Throw: The Eighth Frontier War 1850-1853* (London: Frontline Books, 2012).

[11]These and other details of the background of the officers of the 43rd Regiment, are taken from an alphabetical inventory of the careers of members of the regiment in the nineteenth century held in the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum, in Woodstock, Oxfordshire.

that he had risen four steps in the service—from ensign to Captain—without having to purchase any position, as was possible for officers of the British army in his day.

His diary starts dramatically. He is with his regiment at the barracks in Clonmel:

> Early this morning about 4 o'clock I was awoken from a sound sleep by Skipwith sitting on my bed, looking somewhat pale from the effects of too much claret the night before. He came with the unexpected intelligence that the 43rd were to proceed to Cork there to embark with as much despatch as possible for the Cape of Good Hope.

Primrose and his men were the last of three contingents of British troops, summoned in 1851 from Ireland and Mauritius, to help in the task of dealing with the Xhosa and their allies on the Eastern Cape frontier. The Xhosa rebellion was prompted by the policy of Sir Harry Smith, the Governor of the Cape (1847-1852), in pushing the frontier of the Cape Colony eastwards, and creating, from Xhosa land, the new territory of British Kaffraria. The Xhosa chiefs resented the transfer of their powers to a white Commissioner, and the seizure of their lands—which makes it appropriate to describe this as a war of dispossession. Their hostile reaction took place when the British forces at the Cape had been reduced by Smith, as evidence to London that his policy could succeed without the use of force. Spurred into action by the mystic Mlanjeni, and under the leadership of Sandile and Maqoma, the Xhosa defeated a British column at the Boma Pass and the next day (Christmas Day) attacked and devastated many of the local mission stations, outlying farms and military villages—settlements for military pensioners.

The British then pursued the Xhosa and their Khoikhoi and Hottentot allies into their stronghold in the Amatola mountains, with the ultimate aim of driving them back across the Kei River. Success was intermittent and never complete, and Smith was forced to dissimulate to London about the prospects of completing the task.

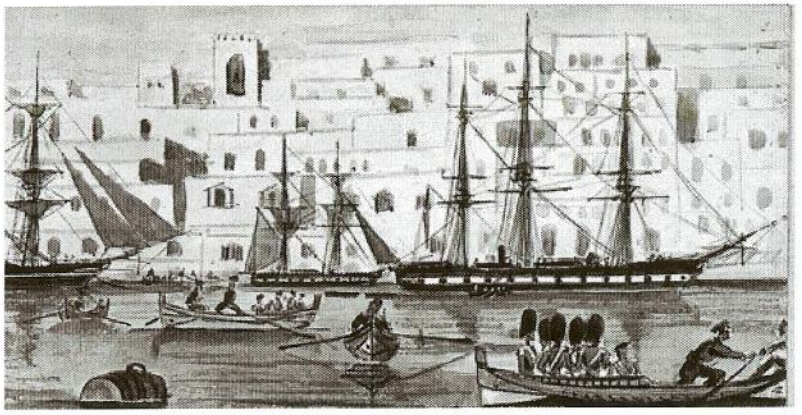
By the time the contingent of the 43rd regiment boarded their ship in Cork, events in the Eastern Cape had reached a stalemate. It was clear that the only way of forcing the Xhosa from their homes was to invade the deep kloofs where they took shelter, kill them, capture their cattle, ruin their crops and burn their villages, but this was dangerous work in awful conditions, and was taking much longer than the government—and paymasters—in London had expected. The 43rd were part of a strategy of providing the necessary numbers for the sweep of the territory to be more effective.

The first thing that had to be settled before the 43rd sailed was the question of who was in charge. Here we see the British purchase system in full flower. After a flurry of





negotiations, Major Henry Skipwith, son of a Leicestershire baronet, purchased the Colonelcy over the head of Major William Fraser, who had been commissioned two years before Skipwith was born, but who was "determined not to throw his money away in purchasing and thought it advisable not to risk anything in a country like Kaffirland."



Watercolour by Second Lieutenant William Thomas Markham (1830-1836)

Fig. 2-1:~ *HMS Vulcan* in Vittoriosa harbour, Malta, 1854

Primrose sailed in *HMS Vulcan*,[12] the Commander of which was under orders to get to the Cape under steam as quickly as possible, calling wherever he chose for coal. The passengers were alarmed when the *Vulcan* called in at Sierra Leone because of the possibility of bringing fever on board the crowded ship. Coaling took three days, a "damnable" operation because of the dust and noise, but Primrose viewed the workmen with an (innocent) artist's eye:

> I never saw such splendid men as the crewmen in all my life. Any one of them might have served as a model for any sculptor. They looked like bronze statues imbued with life. Their muscles stood out in a wonderful manner as being perfectly naked except generally for a straw hat and a very small patch of cloth round the loins. There was nothing to prevent them appearing to perfection.

[12] *HMS Vulcan* was an iron-hulled screw frigate. Launched in 1849, she was converted to a troopship in 1851. During the Crimean War (1854-1856) she was also used to transport sick and wounded soldiers and for the movement of Russian prisoners to Constantinople.

They reached Simon's Town two months after leaving Cork, and disembarked "all our heavy baggage with the whole of the women of the Regiment." Knowing that everything at the seat of war was "dear beyond conception" they laid in stocks of provisions and Primrose lists what he took with him:

> My kit I have reduced to a small compass and two portmanteaus will be more than sufficient for my clothes etc. In addition I have a kind of bed made of cushions of my armchair which with a small patrol tent are to be packed in a canvas bag. These with a saddle and bridles constitute my worldly goods for the frontier.

He was not impressed with Simon's Town, "a wretched place supplied entirely by the ships of the Navy and very few merchantmen who come into it. The consequence is that everything is bad and of an inferior description." It was a relief to reach Algoa Bay and land safely through the surf, before marching up country via the line of Forts—Grey, Pato and Murray—to reach King William's Town, Sir Harry Smith's headquarters, on 20 December. This was hard marching in great heat; Primrose records that the men were "very much done up." Typically for the Eastern Cape, heavy rain accompanied the heat and (typically for the British army) their new tents leaked. Unsurprisingly Primrose's reaction to their situation was sour:

> King William's Town is a miserable little village. The inhabitants are fattening on the military...the morning after our arrival we all paid a visit to Sir Harry Smith by his desire. As is his custom he made us a speech which from anyone else would have been very complimentary but as he says the same thing to every regiment on their arrival in his command we did not set much value on his encomium...for three days after our arrival it rained almost constantly ... I scarcely know which is worse—heat or wet—but we did not come here to be comfortable.

From then on until his Division marched against Moshoeshoe in November 1852, Primrose and his men formed part of the effort to push into the Amatola mountains and drive the Xhosa back across the Kei. It was tough going: on their first patrol they marched 18 miles to Fort White and then on to Fort Cox. These forts were ostensibly useful as refuges and strong points but Primrose concluded that they were useless so long as the Xhosa were strong in the countryside round about:

> These forts are the most desolate spots and the inhabitants can move only a few yards outside their walls—'tis perfect imprisonment: for if they went half a mile they should be surrounded and murdered to a certainty.





The changeable climate, the distances covered and the failure to supply the men with adequate equipment made huge demands on men's stamina. Primrose records seeing a detachment of the 12th Lancers returning from a patrol:

> Such a sight I never witnessed in all my life ... The last time I met them was when we were quartered together in Dublin ten months since. Then they were all bright and in capital order. All the men and officers had grown long beards and some were nearly black from exposure to the atmosphere night and day for 44 days—nearly all their clothes were torn off their backs...No one who has not witnessed the return of a Patrol can possibly conceive the appearance of the whole party—the rags, the dirt, some without shoes, and all kinds of hats, the only uniformity being in their arms—in fact as unlike English soldiers as they possibly can be ... The men were very cheery returning and certainly were in prime condition, those who could march, but there were a great number sick.

This patrol brought in 30,000 head of cattle, 15,000 of which were sold and the proceeds divided among the soldiers employed in the war. The remainder were given to Britain's allies in the campaign—the "Fingoes" (amaMfengu) and "friendly Kaffirs." This was indeed a war of dispossession.

Once established at their base camp in Keiskamma Hoek, they commenced "the work of destruction," designed to starve the Xhosa into surrender:

> The men were told off into working parties of 25 each, provided with sickles, billhooks and old swords. While these men worked 25 others remained outside the field as a guard in case of attack. We worked away till about 4 in the afternoon and of course in this time cut down an immense quantity of Indian corn and destroyed lots of pumpkins. Strange to say not a single shot was fired at us although we all imagined the enemy would have made one great stand in defence of their precious corn.

By this time Primrose's division was under the command of Colonel William Eyre, whom Noel Mostert has described as "everything that the twentieth century was to consider a guerrilla or special forces commander should be: tough, violent, merciless with foe and his own men alike."[13] Under Eyre's command, Primrose led his contingent through the dreaded Boma Pass—the scene of the Christmas Eve defeat in

1850—and concluded that "I have no doubt the Kaffirs would have attacked us had not Col. Eyre disposed of his force in such style as he did." By this he meant that Eyre had his men advance in skirmishing order, spreading pickets out as far as possible on both sides of the narrow path so that the main party could not be attacked from unknown points in the darkness of the surrounding bush as they made their way forward.

Primrose's view of Eyre oscillated between enthusiasm and disgust. When in October 1852 he heard that Eyre was departing to search for the two leading chiefs, Maqoma and Sandile, his diary brims with praise:

> what a man Col. Eyre is! Such indomitable perseverance—nothing stops him, no hardship and no exertion is too much for him. If anyone can put a stop to this war he is the man.

He records without comment that Eyre's men were shooting Xhosa who were moving across the Kei, and strung one of the corpses up on a tree. His disgust was aroused by Eyre's treatment of his own men, not the Xhosa. When a flooded stream thwarted their progress in March 1852:

> ... a scene occurred in which Col. Eyre was the principal actor and who quite disgusted us with his conduct. We had crossed the drift when he ordered 10 men per company to fall out and make it passable for the waggons. Our men were getting their blankets and accoutrements off and the remainder by order of our own Colonel were laying down. Col.Eyre being in a villainous temper and thinking the fatigue men were not as alert as might be rushed amongst my company and actually struck two of my Privates with a *knobkerrie* while they were lying on the ground ...

Eyre was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath and *aide-de-camp* to Queen Victoria in 1853 and went on to serve in the Crimea. His ruthless approach to the Xhosa did not attract attention, or criticism, in Britain, for events in the Eastern Cape were not regularly or fully reported there. His methods of crushing opposition were, however, mirrored in the way that the British dealt with mutineers, and suspected sympathisers, in the Indian Mutiny or Great Rebellion of 1857, which did cause great debate and criticism. Eyre, who died in 1859, was fortunate to have carried out his deeds at the Cape in relative obscurity.

[13]Noël Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 1111.





The "work of destruction" was a lot safer for the British than taking the war into the deep kloofs where the Xhosa had taken refuge. The first casualty among his fellow officers Primrose mentions was the Regimental surgeon, Davidson, who was shot twice through the head in a night attack in February 1852. The following month Lieutenant the Hon. Henry Wrottesley was shot in the thigh by a "Hottentot" sniper and died from loss of blood. In April, Captain Owen Ormsby Gore was shot at the head of his company when entering the bush:

> Foolishly he was riding some 30 to 40 yards in front of his men and afforded a sure mark when he got near the bush. His horse was also shot in the head and immediately fell. Graham his Sub immediately rushed up to him, when he said; "I'm a dead man" ... we buried poor Gore late at night close to the fires of the camp. Everything was conducted in perfect silence—a small dark lantern being carried at the head of the procession to enable us to distinguish where the grave was dug and for Greene to read the funeral service over.

The Xhosa practice of digging up such bodies to recover valuables and equipment, and to mutilate and display the dead, made burials all the more testing:

> Fires were lighted on the graves next day to obliterate the spot as much as possible...yesterday some of our people on visiting the spot where poor Davidson and the men of the 73rd were buried found the bodies had been disinterred by the Kaffirs. The cloths and blankets which covered them stolen and their bones left to bleach in the sun...Poor Davidson's skull was easily recognised by the holes that the two bullets had made in it. It must have been a horrid sight and 'tis shocking to think that one's comrades are treated in this manner.

But the Xhosa were suffering much heavier casualties than the British. The two guns which Primrose escorted on a patrol in March 1852 were particularly effective, and the Xhosa had no answer to them. Primrose records:

> The guns as soon as they were in position commenced firing shot and shell in every direction. The effect produced we ascertained the following day as numerous dead bodies of Kaffirs—of all ages and sexes, were found, some without arms etc. all knocked to pieces.

It would be anachronistic to expect Primrose to have recorded much remorse about the casualties the British were inflicting, but viewed with modern sensitivity his atti-

tudes are unattractive. He is typical of the British army officers of his time in showing little or no sympathy for the fate of the Xhosa, and no interest in them as a people. In contrast the relatively few casualties among his fellow officers are recorded in some detail and with a real sense of loss. He had no sympathy either for the missionaries many of whom had worked very close to the Xhosa before being attacked at Christmas 1850. He describes the flight of one group from their Mission station and sums up the situation "[s]o much for the attempts of the Missionary Society to tame these worthless savages."

However there are glimmerings of sensitivity. Primrose was clearly surprised by the ruthlessness of their allies in the Cape Corps. In January 1852:

> We found the Cape Corps who had ridden on before us had made a successful onslaught on some Kaffir cattle...three Kaffirs were killed—they were armed with *assegais* and made no resistance. No quarter seems to be given by the Corps for on their riding up one Kaffir threw down his *assegai* as much as to beg for his life—but the sergeant said something about not taking prisoners and immediately shot him down. This seems very horrible but such proceedings by all accounts are necessary with savages.

On the other hand women, British and Xhosa, were placed in a different, protected, category. On board ship two pregnant wives of soldiers died and he records with sadness that their deaths were unnecessary (resulting from "excessive heat and want of proper ventilation") and that they were "poor creatures—they were tossed overboard with a couple of round shot tied to their feet." In the Amatola he records his "regret" in finding a Xhosa woman shot dead by the men of his company.

G.T. Fritsch Collection, University of Stellenbosch, GTF EM SMB 32.931, http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/4949

UCT Mss & Archives, BCS 595, Aquarelles by George Duff, 1852

Fig. 2-2:~ Siyolo (photo) & "Seyolo" in sailor's cap on *HMS Styx,* 1852





By late October 1852 reports were coming in that the Xhosa had effectively been starved into submission: Chief Siyolo had surrendered and the country seemed "totally deserted." Chief Sandile was reported to be willing to surrender, but feared "being hung immediately." Primrose describes the scene with studied detachment: "The men are strolling all over the country seeking anything in the shape of game, either Kaffirs or buck—a real amusement to them."

It was at this point that the attention of Sir George Cathcart, who had succeeded Sir Harry Smith in March 1852, turned to the need to impress British power further north, on the Sotho King Moshoeshoe in the Orange River Sovereignty. Moshoeshoe had defeated the former British resident in the territory in June 1851 and still owed the British money and cattle. For Primrose it was enough that "[b]y all accounts this Chief has for a length of time been excessively insolent, particularly as he has never felt the power of British arms." Here was the chance for another adventure, and Primrose refused money offered by a brother officer to exchange positions: "I on principle refused as I thought it would not do, especially as 'tis said Moshesh intends to fight us, independently of the chance of seeing the country."

So Primrose took part in the long march northwards across the Orange and Caledon rivers, crossing with the aid of a rubber pontoon, "an American invention." Just before Christmas 1852 he took part in the Battle of Berea, fought near Moshoeshoe's fortress of Thaba Bosiu:

> The division had scarcely arrived when we saw Basutos assembling from all sides of the mountains and soon several thousands appeared in sight...they closed upon us from the front and both flanks. Their movements were rapid to a degree and they seemed right well handled. The force we had upon the ground of all ranks scarcely numbered a thousand while it was estimated by many persons they had at least six times that number ... I was desperately tired for the heat was great and the excitement greater. Thank God I came off safe myself although many a shot struck the ground within a yard or two of me.

In fact, the British cavalry had fought a desperate battle with the Basotho and at one point became "completely surrounded by the enemy in thousands. Nothing but the most determined coolness saved many of them." But Moshoeshoe had had enough. The British had seized 4,000 Sotho cattle, and the following day Primrose records:

> soon after we arrived at our camp a flag of truce arrived from Moshesh with a letter saying that he had been very much pun-

> ished and was sorry and all that sort of thing and begged for peace...many were the opinions about the policy of the Governor in proclaiming peace so soon for we all were desirous of returning and really giving Moshesh a good licking.[14]

It remained to march the 640 miles back to Keiskamma Hoek. There Primrose became responsible for building the new strong points that were essential to Cathcart's policy of holding down the country. With the coming of peace his diary records his anxiety about his own future. He had to lobby hard with his superiors, but was successful, becoming Deputy Assistant Quarter Master General, before being promoted Major in 1855, and commanding the regiment in India in 1857.

To what extent were middle-ranking officers such as Primrose aware of what we would now call "the bigger picture"? At the start of the diary we meet an officer who was content to take whatever experience the army offered him, without comment. By the end of the war he had come to his own conclusions about the wisdom of Cathcart's policy and is particularly pessimistic about the prospects for white settlement in the area where he has been fighting. As he works on the fortification of Keiskamma Hoek he reflects that:

> The system the Governor is pursuing in establishing these Posts about the country is most admirable but how they are to be maintained is a mystery if the report is true of a number of regiments going home at the termination of hostilities. 'Tis said he intends each should be a village—but I don't see where the inhabitants are to come from. There is no emigration to this Colony; the goldfields of Australia holding out greater inducements to fortune hunters.

He was present when Cathcart with General Charles Yorke inspected the post he was building:

> A certain portion of land has been allocated for a village and the engineers and a Board are to lay out the different reserves. The Governor seems very sanguine as to the results but other people think very few will come to settle here.

Primrose was also constantly aware that he was fighting as part of a force that had to keep costs down. The practice was that the men should live, as far as possible, off the country since supplies could not easily be brought to them. For meat they ate

[14]Lieutenant Lumley Graham noted that "I don't remember another instance in history of a war beginning and ending the same day with one battle, and that very indecisive."





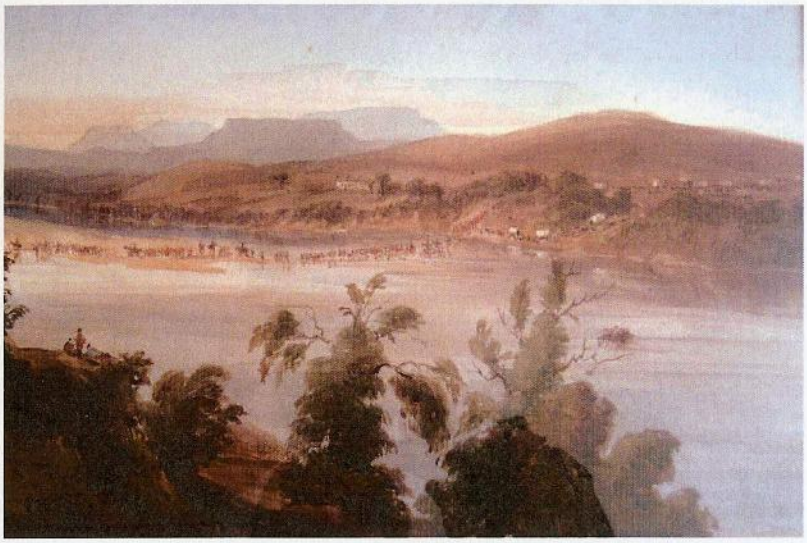
the cattle they seized from the Xhosa and any buck they might shoot; if neither of these options was available they ate the trek oxen. Uniforms, boots and other "accoutrements" were slow to reach them—foreshadowing the dreadful supply problems of the Crimea. Ammunition also ran short: in April 1852 an order was issued to the effect that cattle taken should be bayoneted rather than shot—to save ammunition.[15] When the Xhosa chiefs finally submitted in March 1853 Primrose wrote "Two years and four months have the Gaikas [amaNgqika] held out against us. What the cost to the government has been I cannot say but it must have been enormous."

Charles Dixon, 1901, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Birkenhead_(1845)#cite

Fig. 2-3:~ The night-time wreck of the *Birkenhead*, 1852

British forces were often thinly stretched: the wreck of the troopship *Birkenhead* in February 1852, with the loss of ten officers and 353 other ranks, was a major blow. The shortages and changes of policy that Primrose experienced were a distant reflection of the dispute between those who, like Sir Harry Smith, wanted an ambitious "forward" policy, and those in government in London who feared the cost of such a policy. In the end the British were able to consolidate their position in South Africa, until the discovery of diamonds ushered in a new era.

[15]The officers were expected to buy their own weapons and merchants came to them. In May 1852 Lumley Graham records that "The proprietor of Colt's pistols is here with 600 revolvers which he thinks, if brought into the field, would soon drive the Kaffirs over the Kei."



Aquarelle by James Primrose, c. 1850s

Fig. 4-5:~ Troops crossing the river

*(see Jackson article, ""This horrid war"—the newly discovered diary of Captain James Primrose, 1851-53" on page 52)*

Aquarelle by James Primrose, c. 1850s

Fig. 4-6:~ Troops resting on hillside

*(see Jackson article as above)*