

THE 'BATTLE OF RORKE'S DRIFT' FROM A SWEDISH MISSIONARY PERSPECTIVE

Frederick Hale
University of Stellenbosch

Abstract

The "Battle of Rorke's Drift" during the Anglo-Zulu War took place at the site of the recently established Swedish Lutheran Oscarsberg mission station. However, histories of that conflict have almost completely ignored important sources stemming from the Swedish Lutheran missionaries who lived there at the time. That evidence sheds significant new light on the battle and its consequences for Oscarsberg, however, this evidence is not entirely reliable.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 gave the history of southern Africa one of its most dramatic and significant chapters by setting the stage for the eventual destruction of the Zulu kingdom as a sovereign land. It also marked the beginning of a new era in evangelisation north of the Tugela River. Although the first permanent mission stations had been established there by representatives of the Norwegian Missionary Society and other agencies during the 1850s, relatively few conversions had been effected during the reigns of the monarchs Mpande and Cetshwayo. In fact, during Cetshwayo's reign, there were occasional persecutions of Christian converts. In the 1880s, however, the number of Zulu Christians rose markedly in what had become a subordinated kingdom.

One event in the 1879 war which has received a great deal of both scholarly and popular attention for many decades is the so-called battle of Rorke's Drift, which was actually fought in part at the nearby Swedish Lutheran mission station, Oscarsberg. According to British lore, it was there that a small number of Her Majesty's intrepid troops indefatigably resisted a Zulu force of seemingly overwhelming size on the night of 22-23 January and who halted the momentum which Cetshwayo's army had gained by decimating the British at the immediately preceding battle of Isandhlwana. The heroism of the victors at Rorke's Drift was recognised in the Queen's conferring of no fewer than eleven Victoria Crosses on certain of the survivors. The event was recorded in dozens of books, and immortalised in the internationally acclaimed but unreliable film of 1964, *Zulu*.ⁱ Military history enthusiasts still make pilgrimages to the site, and the episode continues to be featured in volumes about the Anglo-Zulu War (which are published regularly every few years).

Yet historians have severely limited their knowledge of the carnage at Oscarsberg mission station by relying almost exclusively on British military and colonial administrative documents and, more recently, on Zulu oral tradition. Those kinds of sources, though indisputably valuable, leave untouched one obvious fount of information, namely the archives of the Swedish Missionary Society. No doubt owing to the inability of most of the Anglophone chroniclers in question to read Swedish, a significant body of material consequently remains untapped. In the present article I shall take steps towards redressing this *lacuna* in the mission history of southern Africa by examining the part of the principal missionary at Oscarsberg, Otto Witt, in the war. It will be seen that his reports illuminate certain aspects of the conflict while arguably obfuscating others.

2 THE BACKGROUND OF THE OSCARSBERG STATION

Oscarsberg mission station and its destruction during the battle of Rorke's Drift are inextricably linked to the man who launched the Swedish Lutheran endeavour there, Peter Otto Holger Witt. Witt was born in the south-western Swedish harbour city of Malmö in 1848, the son of a pastor in the Lutheran Church of Sweden, in which both of his grandfathers had been clergymen. He completed his theological studies at the University of Lund in 1875 and expressed interest in entering the service of the neophyte Church of Sweden Mission (CSM), which was then planning to establish a presence among the Zulus as its initial undertaking. Witt married Elin Pallin, a recently qualified teacher, that year, and briefly served a parish in the city of Helsingborg.ⁱⁱ After being commissioned by the CSM, which was in contact with the more experienced Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, the Witts left Sweden in late January or early February 1876 and arrived in Durban on 19 April. Initially they lived at Untunjambili in north-eastern Natal and were mentored by Hans Paludan Smith Schreuder, the imperious Norwegian who had arguably done more to open Zululand to missionary endeavours than anyone else. (Schreuder had acquired permission from Mpande to establish a station near the royal kraal during the mid 19th century).ⁱⁱⁱ The Witts' first child, a girl, was born in late 1876; a second followed shortly after their arrival in Natal, and a third was born in December 1878. Discussions about transferring Schreuder's other station, at Ntumeni north of the Tugela River, to the CSM and placing it under Witt's supervision, came to naught, apparently because the situation in Zululand deteriorated for missionaries during 1877.^{iv}

With that avenue apparently blocked or, at least, regarded as temporarily unfeasible, Witt began to think in terms of acquiring a site south of the Tugela. In August 1877 he and Carl Flygare, a fellow Swedish pastor who had served in the German Lutheran Hermannsburg Mission, but who had recently left it to join the CSM, had made a fruitless exploratory journey to the vicinity of Biggarsberg in the shadow of the Drakensberg. In October and November of that year, 1877, Flygare and Frans Fristedt, a newly arrived missionary, trekked through vast expanses of the colony without finding a site on which the three men could agree. Early in January 1878 Witt and Flygare visited northern Natal briefly, and it was on this third sojourn that they found what

they believed was a highly suitable site for a station.^v

Witt wrote in January 1878 to inform his superiors in the CSM that he had bought 3 044 acres of land very near the Buffalo River south-east of Dundee and thus within walking distance of Zululand. He did not hide the fact that he had exceeded, by £800, the limit of £1 000 which the CSM had imposed in giving him power of attorney, but he sought to propitiate the anger of the committee members by emphasising that the land included buildings worth at least £500. He further mentioned that a ferry on the Buffalo River was included in the price and that the CSM could earn at least £100 annually carrying passengers on the ferry when the river was in flood. Less exuberantly, Witt admitted presciently that, given the international tensions in southern Africa, the proximity of the site to Zululand might be a mixed blessing and that the previous owner, Robert Surtees, had been willing to dispose of the property because he feared impending hostilities.^{vi}

The steering committee in Stockholm did not, in fact, protest against Witt's initiative in buying the site. Meeting on 1 March 1878, its members discussed his letter of 11 January and approved the purchase, noting especially the presence of buildings on the property. The committee postponed a decision to appropriate funds for the acquisition of a second station, however, and appears to have believed that all three missionaries – Witt, Flygare and Fristedt – would cooperate at the new site in the near future. At the time of the purchase, Fristedt was still at Neu Hermannsburg learning Zulu and getting used to missionary life, while Flygare was spending part of his time in Durban doing some of the first Scandinavian urban missionary work in southern Africa (although he also spent part of 1878 helping Witt establish Oscarsberg).^{vii}

Witt spent much of that year, 1878, developing the mission. Owing to the sparsity of the sources, relatively little can be ascertained about the first few months of the station's history. Oscarsberg appears to have functioned in a way that was quite similar to many of its counterparts among the Zulus during that period, especially the stations operated by the Norwegian Missionary Society and the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission. Accordingly, some emphasis was placed on influencing indigenous employees and residents of the land on which Oscarsberg was located. In August 1878 Witt reported to the CSM board that he had four 'Kaffers' in his employ (the youngest of whom was a boy about eight years old) to whom he taught literacy and Christianity in the mornings and evenings. In the afternoons Witt instructed approximately a dozen children. By then the young missionary was also leading worship every Sunday; between seventy and eighty people, most of them residents of the mission land, regularly attended these services. They were conducted either in the manse or in the open air. Witt envisaged using a second building on the property as a chapel but, because it lacked windows, could not yet use it as a venue for worship. At any rate, it gratified Witt that his audience listened quietly to his sermons and that 'some' of those who attended were 'very attentive'.^{viii}

The leadership of the SCM appears to have been satisfied with the initial development of Oscarsberg and shared Witt's vision of its future as the keystone of its endeavours, despite the tensions between the British colonial

authorities in Natal and Cetshwayo's regime. In October the board of the SCM asked Witt for his opinion of the desirability of sending an agriculturalist from Sweden to manage the actual farming of the land which it had purchased.^{ix} That was not done prior to the destruction of the station, however.

The Witts had taken pains to maintain a comfortable standard of living at their new station. In some descriptions of the battle that took place there, historians and other writers have mistakenly portrayed Oscarsberg as a primitive place. Morris, for example, asserted (without indicating his source) that the manse was "a poor residence" and that "the Witts had made pathetic little efforts to brighten the drab structure ..."^x This hardly does justice to their attempts to create at that lonely outpost a home with many of the comforts which the Lutheran clergy then enjoyed in Sweden. The list of furniture, household items, and other personal possessions which Otto Witt submitted to the steering committee of the SCM in his efforts to receive compensation for his losses underscores the relative luxury of the lifestyle which he and his family tried to maintain at Oscarsberg. Amongst the items which went up in flames were no fewer than thirty-six pairs of sheets, eight table-cloths, seventy-two serviettes, nine mattresses, eight large blankets, six wine glasses, and two sewing baskets. Mrs Witt may have felt compelled to project professional dignity at Oscarsberg. Her wardrobe had included, in addition to the items of clothing with which she escaped, at least twenty-three dresses, eighteen collars, thirty-six handkerchiefs, and sixty pairs of stockings. Otto Witt's wardrobe was much more modest, but it included, among other things, eighteen pairs of stockings, twelve clerical collars, twenty-four handkerchiefs, and eighteen shirts.^{xi}

Although there is no evidence that Witt joined other missionaries in calling for the British to discipline Cetshwayo or to annex Zululand before the invasion, his comments about the mounting tension in 1878 are particularly noteworthy. In March, soon after his arrival at Oscarsberg, Witt witnessed the negotiations which the British conducted with Sirayo, one of Cetshwayo's most powerful chiefs, over the boundary dispute between Natal and Zululand. How well the Swede understood the relatively complicated background of this controversy is not known; nothing in his correspondence indicates that his comprehension of it encompassed anything from the era when Mpande was the Zulu monarch or of relations between Natal and the occupied Transvaal. The presence of between twenty and thirty tents accommodating British soldiers at Rorke's Drift, however, led him to believe that "this means the certain eclipse of the Zulu people, and there should not be any doubt that within a short time Zululand will be an English colony". It therefore did not surprise him to see missionaries from Zululand cross the Buffalo River in anticipation of imminent hostilities.^{xii}

In December, when the British sent Cetshwayo an ultimatum demanding *inter alia* the extradition of certain alleged criminals, fines totalling 600 cattle, the disbanding of the Zulu army, the stationing of a British resident in Zululand, and the re-admittance of the missionaries into his kingdom, Witt again expressed optimism in correspondence to the CSM that the British Empire was about to expand. He did not believe, however, that Cetshwayo would capitulate without a fight. Witt realised that the Zulu military forces, though

inferior to the British, encompassed a large portion of the male population, and he guessed that in the short term they could be mobilised much more quickly than British units could mount an effective assault on Zululand. Nevertheless, the seemingly endless reserves which the British could muster made Witt believe that they could wear down their poorly equipped African adversaries. "With God's help, Cetshwayo's power has been or soon will be broken", he concluded.^{xiii}

3 A WITNESS TO THE BATTLE?

At the outbreak of the war, Oscarsberg was serving as a field hospital for the British forces. Witt had been compelled to lease its modest buildings to the Crown for the first three months of 1879. The rent which the CSM was supposed to receive for this period totalled £27.0.0. In addition, it was to get £15.0.0 for the use of its punt and ferry at Rorke's Drift for the same period.^{xiv} On the eve of the battle of Isandhlwana, thirty-six patients were occupying the stone and brick manse, although only three of them were actually wounded. The supplanted Witt had been relegated to a tent on the property. He had sent his wife and three children to Gordon Memorial station a few days earlier. During the fortnight immediately preceding the battle, more than 5 000 troops had passed through the area. Despite the strategic location of the station (ten minutes' walk from Rorke's Drift), practically nothing had been done to fortify it. The location of the hospital so close to a point where the Buffalo River could easily be crossed made it all the more vulnerable.

The extent to which Witt's account of the hostilities is reliable and useful as a historical source is debatable, although his account is not without merit. Within a few weeks after the British invasion of Zululand, Witt was heralded as a principal eye-witness of the battles at both Isandhlwana and Rorke's Drift. The young Swede was quoted uncritically in the British press and vilified in the Natal press. Yet much of the attention he received was undeserved. In fact, Witt saw little if any of the extermination of the British army at Isandhlwana. Furthermore, by the time the Zulu forces attacked Oscarsberg, he and his family had taken flight from the hostilities. However, the news-hungry British journalists who accepted Witt's embellished account of the events of 22 January were unaware of these facts. Also, for linguistic reasons, most of the historians who have mentioned Witt in their accounts of the war have had to rely on the London press as their chief source of Witt's statements.

At midday on 22 January small arms fire could be heard at Oscarsberg, although no one there knew where this fire was coming from. A British officer who rode to Rorke's Drift to inspect improvements being made on the approaches to the sire was informed there of the losses at Isandhlwana and the advance of a huge Zulu *impi*. Meanwhile, Witt, a British military chaplain, a surgeon, and a soldier climbed the largest hill at Oscarsberg in the hope of seeing the source of artillery fire which they had begun to hear in the distance. They could see the distant escarpment on the other side of the Buffalo River but little else. Witt and two of the other men remained atop that hill for some time, and eventually they noticed one large corps of Zulu soldiers approaching

from the east. The three Europeans quickly descended to the station buildings, which approximately 100 soldiers were frantically attempting to fortify with biscuit boxes and mealie bags, and warned them that an attack was imminent. Witt then left the station and rode to Gordon Memorial in the hope of finding his wife and children. He observed very little, if any, of the fighting that took place at his station.

The only known source of information about Witt's actions immediately after his departure is his autobiography, which he published in 1922, that is, forty-three years later. According to this memoir, he left Oscarsberg with a Swedish engineer (whose name he did not disclose) who had been visiting the station and, despite getting lost at night while the battle raged, reached Gordon Memorial, only to discover that morning that Mrs Witt and their three children had just left in an ox wagon bound for Pietermaritzburg. The two Swedish men thus remounted their horses and pursued after them, eventually catching up with them the following day. According to this account, in the meantime a Zulu had told Mrs Witt that he had seen her husband fall at Oscarsberg.^{xv}

Still very much alive but undoubtedly shaken by the destruction of the station, Witt and his family remained only a few days in Pietermaritzburg where, according to something Witt wrote in June, fear filled the air.^{xvi} Witt consequently took his family by omnibus to Durban, only to discover that they could not afford the cost of living there. Furthermore, he feared being conscripted into a colonial regiment and sent to fight in Zululand. Perceiving no viable alternative, the Witts chose to leave the mission field without permission of the CSM. They boarded the *Warwick Castle* on 11 February and sailed to Plymouth, where they arrived on 4 March. The following day Witt informed its board from London that he was in England.^{xvii} Its members were initially displeased with his action and demanded that he give a *viva voce* account in Stockholm, which he promptly did, together with a written statement covering both his departure from the mission field and his assessment of its future.^{xviii}

In these latter comments, Witt went well beyond what he had written to the CSM from London. He professed that, before the outbreak of the war he had been fairly well informed about Zulu plans for the defence of their country, although he did not specify the extent or sources of his knowledge. The Zulus were determined from the outset, he declared, to fight to the last man to preserve their national independence. The Zulus 'unflinching courage' and 'scorn for death', combined with the topographical and geographical disadvantages which the British would confront, had convinced Witt even before the hostilities erupted that the war would last for a long time. He also revealed that he had been under severe mental stress during his final weeks in Natal and that he had been at odds with his CSM colleague Carl Flygare.^{xix}

4 THE DISPUTE IN THE IMPERIAL PRESS

Before returning to Sweden, Witt spent a fortnight in England, during which time he made numerous controversial remarks about both the war and

peacetime relations between the Zulus and settlers. His comments drew the fire of both Englishmen and colonists in Natal. Interviewed by correspondents from *The Daily Telegraph* when he debarked in Plymouth, Witt apparently embellished his report of the hostilities. He also gave the press a lengthy written narrative about what he had ostensibly witnessed. Witt admitted that he had not been close enough to the fighting at Isandhlwana to report many details of the carnage there, but he nevertheless declared that from the summit of a hill at Oscarsberg, he had seen much of the fighting some three miles away. Turning to the fighting at the station, Witt gave the impression that he had witnessed the first part of the battle at close distance immediately before and after his departure from the scene: "Before I started I saw a Zulu alone at the barricade, kneeling and firing. The whole force drew nearer; the battle grew heavier." All of this may well have been the ingenuous testimony of an eye-witness. However, in all probability Witt overplayed his hand by continuing to provide details which he had hardly been in a position to see, but which contributed to the dramatic effect of his tale: "Soon the hospital [i.e. the manse] was on fire. Our people found it impossible to defend themselves inside the barricade; they must retire within the walls. Thus, entering the commissariat store, the sick people were brought here, except five, who could not be removed and who were struck by the Zulus and burnt."^{xx}

The basic historiographic difficulty in this account is that it gives the impression that Witt had actually observed everything which he described, when we know from other evidence that he quickly left Oscarsberg not later than the beginning of the battle. It is highly plausible that the real sources of the latter half of his narrative were testimonies by people whom he subsequently met in Pietermaritzburg and Durban. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that editors in London did their share of embellishing; Witt's published comments are in implausibly polished English, a language of which he is not known to have been fluent at the time. The British press, hungry for firsthand news from the war, may well have been too eager both to accept uncorroborated testimony and enhance it to boost sales of the newspapers.

On the other hand, Witt's remarks about relations between Zulus and British settlers in Natal were met with hostility immediately in London and subsequently in Natal. Interviewed by Colonial Secretary Michael Hicks-Beach as a supposed authority on Zulu affairs, Witt answered a query about the feelings of the Zulus in Natal towards Europeans there. "Well, not over friendly," Witt replied. "The colonists generally treat the kaffirs very badly - just as dogs. Therefore if they felt themselves able to drive the white settlers out of the colony they would do so at the first opportunity." On the other hand, the Swede related that he had not opposed British intervention against the Zulu monarch and generalised that his subjects "did not like Cetewayo at all" "because he was a tyrant of the worst kind, and no one was safe under his rule."^{xxi} After a lecture delivered at the City Temple, Witt answered in the negative when asked whether he believed it had been Cetshwayo's intention from the outset to invade Natal.^{xxii}

In one typical riposte, an anonymous writer in Hampstead contradicted Witt's assertion that colonists in Natal treated the indigenes like dogs. Himself a former resident of that colony, this Englishman asserted that instances of abuse were exceptions and that "the Zulus much prefer a strict and just

master to one who treats them with too much familiarity ...”^{xxiii} Some of those who questioned Witt’s authority as a witness were apparently unfamiliar with crucial details of his missionary career. Another anonymous Englishman thought Witt had been disingenuous in his remarks about obeying Cetshwayo’s laws in not sheltering fugitives from justice. “May I ask him ... how he, being in British territory and under British protection, was allowed to stay there by the goodwill of the Zulu King, and that he ought to obey his laws, although not in his country?” he wrote to the editor of *The Standard*.^{xxiv} Presumably this reader did not realise that in 1876 and 1877, Witt had served at one of Schreuder’s stations, Ntumeni, in Cetshwayo’s domain.

Through the process of investigative journalism, editors at *The Natal Mercury* in Durban sought to undermine Witt’s credibility. Readers of that newspaper were given an excerpt from the proceedings of the Resident Magistrate’s Court at Msinga pertaining to “Regina v. Rev Otto Witt, Swedish Missions”. In this case, which had been heard before Henry Francis Fynn the Younger on 7 November 1878, the Swede had pleaded guilty to a charge that on a farm called Tyiana (the Zulu name for Oscarsberg) he did “on or about the 29th day of September 1878, wrongfully point or aim a loaded gun, and otherwise assault or strike one Nomrola, a native woman, the wife of one Kamgana, resident of the aforesaid farm”. The incident allegedly was an attempt to compel the woman, who was not one of the Witts’ employees, to wash some clothes for his family. Witt was sentenced to pay a fine of £5 or serve one month in prison with hard labour. He chose the former punishment.^{xxv}

The most directly damning indictment of Witt’s narrative, however, came from the pen of his colleague Flygare, who was still in Durban serving as the pastor of the Scandinavian Lutheran congregation. In a long letter to *The Natal Mercury*, Flygare contradicted Witt’s statement about colonial mistreatment of the blacks as ‘dogs’ and ‘hung out the dirty laundry’ about the tensions that existed between the Swedish Lutheran missionaries (over financial matters). Flygare even questioned the legitimacy of Witt’s calling to missionary work and attributed it, in part, to the frustrations Witt had experienced as a neophyte pastor in Sweden.^{xxvi} Two days later, Flygare sent an equally vitriolic critique of his colleague’s behaviour to the leadership of the CSM in Stockholm. He declared that Witt’s remarks in London were ‘false testimony’ and ‘dishonest assertions’ which were doing the CSM inestimable damage in Natal because they gave the English-speaking public the false impression that Swedish missionaries in general were disloyal to the colony and unconcerned about public safety.^{xxvii} Flygare also wrote directly to Witt in Sweden and did not mince words in lambasting what he called his colleague’s “fictitious account of what you experienced during your flight from Oscarsberg”. He challenged him, in particular, on two points. First, Flygare declared emphatically that “the fact of the matter is that the battlefield of Isandhlwana ... cannot be seen from the highest peak of the hill at Oscarsberg, as it lies at least seven English miles away”. Secondly, Flygare was certain that Witt had sensationalised his narrative of his journey from Oscarsberg to Pietermaritzburg by exaggerating the danger of being exposed to a Zulu attack. Flygare asserted without giving a scintilla of evidence that “not a single Zulu pursued you a single step on the road” and suggested that “what was really pursuing you was not the Zulus but rather *the fear of the Zulus*. ...”^{xxviii}

5 RE-ESTABLISHING OSCARSBERG

Although its buildings were largely destroyed during the battle, Oscarsberg emerged from the ashes relatively quickly to become one of the cornerstones of the CSM's programme of evangelisation amongst the Zulus. Initially it was not certain that it would be rebuilt. While Witt was in Sweden, his colleague Frans Fristedt, still in Natal, solicited the opinion of James Dalzell, the seasoned Scottish missionary at Gordon Memorial, about the feasibility of re-establishing Oscarsberg and how the Zulus in the surrounding area felt about Witt. Dalzell expressed his conviction in July 1879 that "Oscarberg [sic] is not a suitable place for a mission station" and insisted that he had warned Witt of this in 1878. The Scotsman did not explain the basis for his judgement about the site. In the wake of the public debate in Natal over Witt's comments, Dalzell cautioned against allowing Witt to return to Natal. "The position he has placed himself in makes it impossible to send him back with any prospect of successful labour," Dalzell believed. "I would not be surprised if some colonists 'of the baser sort' should treat him 'as a dog' after what he has said about them. All respect for him is gone."^{xxxix} On the other hand, Karl Hohls of the Hermannsburg Mission wrote to Witt in August 1879 and urged him to return to Oscarsberg as soon as possible. He also urged the Swede not to be perturbed by Flygare's intemperate remarks about him, but to forgive that 'Hetzkopf' (i.e. hot-head).^{xxx} The field superintendent of the Norwegian Missionary Society, Ommund Oftebro, expressed similar opinions in a letter to Witt the following month.^{xxxi} In December 1879 Flygare wrote from Durban to the leaders of the CSM and apologised for having criticised Witt publicly. He asked for forgiveness but stated that it would be difficult for him to work closely with Witt.^{xxxii}

These votes of confidence eventually helped the CSM to decide to send Witt back to Natal. In the meantime, however, there were numerous headaches over the possible reconstruction of Oscarsberg. Bernhard Kraft, a German farmer to whom Witt had granted power of attorney shortly before leaving Natal, informed him in October 1879 that he did not know when the British would leave Oscarsberg, even though the war had already ended. With the British still present at the site, it was impossible to resume agriculture there. Army horses and oxen were grazing in the fields, and a fort had been erected where Witt's house and simple chapel had once stood. More worrying was the conduct of Zulu freebooters who, according to Kraft, were plundering in the vicinity.^{xxxiii} A few weeks later he wrote that the British were still occupying what had been the station and expressed his fear that they might requisition it for use as a permanent camp.^{xxxiv}

Witt therefore temporarily abandoned the hope of re-establishing Oscarsberg. Shortly before the end of 1879 he suggested that the CSM sell the property and instead try to penetrate conquered Zululand. Only if it proved impossible to acquire a site for a station there quickly, Witt proposed, should the CSM attempt to resume its work at Oscarsberg.^{xxxv}

In the meantime, Kraft had begun to secure compensation for the damages the CSM had incurred at the station and to collect the rent for the military's use of the station. Indeed, as early as 18 March 1879, some eight weeks after the battle, Kraft had submitted to the British military claims totalling £42 for hire of the station and its punt and ferry. At the time he also asked for compensation for damages to Oscarsberg, although the amount he requested is not known.^{xxxvi} The British were not generous. In May Lieutenant Colonel John North Crealock informed Kraft that the army would pay £36 for the rent of the buildings at Oscarsberg for four months, £5 for one month's hire of the punt, £16.2.0 for timber used at the station, and £12 for a crop of maize on the property.^{xxxvii} A claims board inspected the remains of Oscarsberg on 2 May. Meeting in Pietermaritzburg in October, it ruled that nothing further would be awarded because the damage had been inflicted by the Zulus, not by the British.^{xxxviii}

Witt returned without his wife and children (who remained temporarily in Sweden) to Natal in July 1880. He was accompanied by three Swedish artisans whom the CSM had hired to rebuild Oscarsberg, and a few other Swedish emigrants who wanted to settle near the station. Before the Anglo-Zulu war, Witt had envisaged the establishment of a small Swedish Christian colony near the Buffalo River in the hope that it would prove beneficial for influencing and supporting African converts to Christianity. *En route* to Durban, Witt wrote to supporters of the CSM that he could await "strong opposition to me because of my candid but careless remarks in England about the colonists' relations with the blacks."^{xxxix} There was indeed some hostility, both in Durban and upcountry. "That heroic and noble-minded Swedish missionary, the Rev Otto Witt, returned to Natal on Thursday," reported a journalist sarcastically in *The Natal Mercury*. "Our readers will remember the illustrious part taken by this divine in the defence of Rorke's Drift, and the generosity with which he subsequently defended the colonists from odious aspersion and calumny in Downing Street."^{xl} Witt's Swedish travelling companions preceded him to Oscarsberg. Hoping to avoid confrontations with vengeful colonists, Witt purchased a horse and took a circuitous route through Natal. However, in one town enraged people who discovered his identity threatened to tar and feather him. He eventually reached Oscarsberg on 21 August, a fortnight after the other Swedes in his party.^{xli}

For reasons which do not seem to have been recorded, the CSM did not soon realise its vision of establishing a station in defeated Zululand but instead concentrated on re-establishing Oscarsberg, which remained the focal point of Swedish Lutheran missionary endeavours during the early 1880s. The war had wreaked havoc not only on that nascent effort but also on African settlement in the area and had forced many Zulus to leave the area. Nevertheless, owing in part to evangelisation beyond the SCM property, the work progressed fairly rapidly. In April 1881 Witt reported that an average of between sixty and seventy people attended his services. By then a new chapel, measuring six by ten metres and accommodating approximately eighty people, had been completed.^{xlii}

Did the defeat of Cetshwayo and the establishment of British hegemony over Zululand significantly promote the propagation of Christianity there, as some

missionaries, including Witt, had hoped? Certainly some of them continued after the war to believe that would be the case, and there is some statistical evidence that their hopes were fulfilled. In the Norwegian Missionary Society, for example, which had stations in both Natal and Zululand, the number of baptisms rose sharply during the 1880s; indeed, during this decade, several hundred baptisms took place.^{xliii} However, the termination of the war does not appear to have made a major or immediate impact on the history of the SCM's evangelisation of the Zulus, apart from the fact that it allowed Witt to rebuild Oscarsberg. Whatever the expectations of the Swedish missionaries may have been during the early 1880s, he, Fristedt, and Flygare did not seem particularly optimistic about rapid expansion at that time. They understood that they had, in fact, embarked on a very arduous task.

At any rate, the re-establishment of Oscarsberg permitted the development of a multifaceted ministry which eventually led to a much larger and effective missionary presence. In addition to evangelisation on both sides of the Buffalo River, Witt and his associates conducted literacy courses, and his musically talented wife taught singing to Zulu children on an almost daily basis. Although progress in the pupils' ability to read came slowly, Witt expressed his conviction in late 1881 that God was blessing his educational ministry and that the desire of the young people near Oscarsberg to attend school had increased. "They never fail to come unless they have a valid reason," he declared.^{xliiv} As the economy of Natal evolved and industry developed in nearby Dundee, the CSM began to minister to urbanised Zulu converts, a dimension of its work which it attempted to expand during the 1890s, when many young male members of its rural congregations migrated to the Witwatersrand. Various impediments, however, including the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Boer War, prevented the Swedish Lutherans from doing this until 1902.^{xliv}

6 THE FAULTY HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE 'BATTLE OF RORKE'S DRIFT'

From a historiographical perspective, it is particularly enlightening, if at the same time disillusioning, to juxtapose the documented facts about the relationship of the CSM to the battle at Oscarsberg, it is especially interesting to read what emerges from Swedish sources, and what numerous historians without access to that material have written on the topic. The role which Witt played at his station on 22 January has never been adequately treated in the relevant historiography. During the 1960s and 1970s several books were written about the Anglo-Zulu War (either in general or on specific aspects of the war). Most of the authors of these chiefly popular accounts either mentioned Witt and his station very briefly or ignored him entirely. None appears to have availed himself of relevant materials in Swedish, which the linguistic barrier may make excusable, and very few seem to have employed what Witt related in English during his stay in London in March 1879. Instead, when describing Witt, most historians of the war have merely reproduced what they found in existing secondary literature. This accounts for the continuation of errors in the relevant scholarly and popular literature.

One partial exception to this is Donald R Morris, whose weighty study *The washing of the spears* remained the standard history of the war for many years after its publication in 1965. Morris devoted several pages to the battle at Oscarsberg and intimately related events, apparently relying exclusively on British sources. Those tendentious materials, however, gave him a caricature of Witt, who consequently emerges, in his book as a most peculiar figure. Even before the battle, Morris claimed, Witt was an “odd missionary”, although why that was supposedly the case is not stated. Morris also asserted that Witt was already unpopular in Natal, “where the colonists resented the wildly inaccurate stories he gave to the English newspapers”. In fact, Witt was virtually unknown in the colony until his first accounts of the battles at his station and Isandhlwana, together with a few deprecating statements about race relations in Natal, appeared in the British press in March 1879, some six weeks after the battle. As the British soldiers who had commandeered his station prepared for the Zulu assault, Witt supposedly “became frantic at the sight of the destruction of his furniture”. This reaction was probably found in one of the contemporary accounts. Less easily explained is Morris’ pretension that a historian could read Witt’s mind. Referring to the Swede’s concern about the safety of his wife and children, who had left Oscarsberg several days earlier, Morris declared that “in his excited imagination nothing stood between them and a bloodthirsty Zulu *impi* but the Buffalo River and a few miles of open country.” Finally, Morris alleged, again without betraying the source of his information, that immediately before Witt left Oscarsberg he relinquished his “claim to his homestead”.^{xlvi}

As the centenary of the war approached, several other histories of it were published in South Africa and elsewhere. The accounts of Witt and his modest role were invariably derivative (relying heavily on Morris’ influential book but rarely acknowledging it), condescending, and vague. Alan Lloyd, for example, devoted one sentence to the Swede, describing him obliquely as an “excitable man whose relationships were poor on both sides of the border ...” On what he based this one-dimensional portrayal of Witt’s personality Lloyd did not indicate.^{xlvii} David Clammer, in another general history also published in 1973, sought to provide more details about Witt and Oscarsberg but only confused matters. He declared that James Rorke had previously farmed at the place which bore his name and had erected there a house and a barn, “the latter having been turned into a chapel when a Swedish missionary named Otto Witt took the place [sic] over in 1875.” This chronology is incorrect; Witt arrived at the site only in 1878, some twelve months before the battle. Clammer’s account of his conduct on 22 January, given without indication of source, does not make sense. He wrote: “Witt, the missionary, horrified at the destruction of his property, and hearing of the disaster that had befallen the Central Column [at Isandhlwana], decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and departed in the direction of Helpmekaar.” This assertion leaves the reader wondering whether Witt left Oscarsberg before, during, or even after the battle there. Clammer revealed that he did not understand Witt’s subsequent remarks by asserting that the Swede “set up as a lecturer in England, claiming to have been present not only at Rorke’s Drift, but at Isandhlwana as well”.^{xlviii}

In his more narrowly focused study of the battle at Oscarsberg, Michael Glover perpetuated the convention of quickly dismissing Witt. He ridiculed the Swede's account of the slaughter at Isandhlwana and generalised that "Witt was as unreliable as a witness as he was in every other way". Glover gave no indication, however, how he was in a position to make such a comprehensive indictment or what the content of Witt's other unreliability may have been. Glover appears to have relied on an unspecified and inaccurate account, for he declared that Witt had earlier sent his family to the safety of Pietermaritzburg and found them only after reaching Durban. In fact he had sent them to the Gordon Memorial station, and they were reunited in northern Natal.^{xlix}

Some of these historiographical *faux pas* can perhaps be traced to an unreliable oral tradition amongst Witt's descendants. The untenability of such evidence, if that is what it can be called, is clear from an undated document written by P S Hervey and preserved at the Killie Campbell Africana Library of the University of Natal. A son of Witt's eldest child, Hervey presumably believed he could serve historical scholarship by committing to writing a sensational inherited account of how the Witts left Oscarsberg separately and how they were eventually reunited. Stating that he was conveying information which his mother had given him, Hervey declared that Witt "had constructed the buildings so gallantly defended by the British forces", but upon receiving word that "the natives were massing for an attack on all Europeans" he sent his wife and children to Port Natal. 'A day or two later' Witt himself left his station in pursuit of the wagon which he believed was carrying his family to the coast. *En route* Witt had to perform guard duty on the Zululand border. After completing this undesired task he continued further south in Natal searching for his wife and small children. At one point an elderly Zulu man told him, to his horror, that an *impi* had attacked a wagon matching the description which Witt gave him and killed the white people in it. Meanwhile, Mrs Witt had been travelling for several days and, along the way had heard from a Zulu man that an unspecified European on horseback had fallen victim to another African war party. Quite unexpectedly the separated grief-stricken Witts subsequently found each other in the veld. Hervey related these 'full facts' in detail, mercifully resisting the temptation to conclude his tale by remarking that his maternal grandparents lived happily ever after.¹

Virtually none of this proves factual when compared with contemporary Swedish accounts. To mention only the most obvious errors, Witt did not erect the buildings at Oscarsberg, and there is no evidence that anyone told him that the Zulu forces were massing to attack; Witt claimed at the time that he had monitored their movements from the highest hill at his station. He did not send his family to Port Natal, but only to Gordon Memorial a few kilometres away. There is no evidence, moreover, that Witt performed guard duty. Finally, Hervey appears to have relied on nothing save his imagination when describing, among other things, how his grandfather, riding a 'gaunt looking horse', had 'looked indifferently into the valley' after virtually abandoning the search for his wife and children. This flight of fantasy is unfortunately typical for much of Hervey's manuscript. In short, his version of this family tradition, if it has any value at all, lies in its exemplification of how unreliable and apparently embellished materials of this sort can be.

Generally speaking, treatments of the Anglo-Zulu War published in the 1990s were less flawed as far as Witt and Oscarsberg are concerned. However, in some notable instances this has simply meant ignoring or touching on them only in passing. John Laband's *Kingdom in crisis: The Zulu response to the British invasion of 1879*,ⁱⁱ which sought to depart from the conventional Eurocentric approach to the conflict, is a case in point. Another is *The Anglo-Zulu War* by Laband and Ian Knight.ⁱⁱⁱ Neither of these works repeated the errors cited above, but neither made use of the extensive Swedish source material available.

The main lesson that emerges from this comparison of primary evidence and historians' reconstructions of the events at Oscarsberg is that historiography is a fragile and painstaking task whose practitioners can easily go astray and create highly misleading accounts of past events. Small wonder that especially since the 1970s, postmodernist critics of traditional, empirical historiography have called into question the fundamental validity of the enterprise and pointed to the 'tropes' (to use Hayden White's oft-quoted term)ⁱⁱⁱⁱ which shape what historians write. Only by meticulously examining pertinent evidence in whatever language it is given can one begin to approach the exercise in a responsible way. The call of the Renaissance could hardly be more apt in reminding us of the need to avail ourselves of every relevant source of information: *Ad fontes!*

ENDNOTES

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- i For a discussion of the shortcomings in this film's historicity, see Frederick Hale, 'The defeat of history in the film *Zulu*', *Military History Journal*, X, no 4 (December 1996), 145-151.
 - ii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II: 1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, Otto Witt, "Sjelfbiografi".
 - iii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II: 1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, Otto Witt (Untunjambili Mission Station) to Church of Sweden Mission steering committee, 30 May 1876.
 - iv H Schreuder (Ntumeni Mission Station) to Mission Committee, 6 June 1877, in *Missionsblad*, II (September 1877), 21-23.
 - v C L Flygare (Durban) to *Missions-Tidning*, 31 December 1878, in *Missions-Tidning*, IV, no 5 (1879), 100.
 - vi Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, Otto Witt (Greytown) to SKM Steering Committee, 11 January 1878.
 - vii Flygare to *Missions-Tidning*, 31 December 1878, 101.
 - viii Otto Witt (Oscarsberg Mission Station) to *Missions-Tidning*, 21 August 1878, in *Missions-Tidning*, III, no 10 (1878), 206-213.
 - ix Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A I:1, *Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1883*, 21 October 1878.
 - 10 Donald R Morris. *The washing of the spears*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), p 438.
 - 11 Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:2, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1880-1883*, 'Förteckning å vår enskilda förlust vid Oscarsbergs brand'.
 - xii Otto Witt (Oscarsberg Mission Station) to unspecified recipient, 8 March 1878, in *Missions-Tidning*, III, no 6 (1878), 134-135.

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- xiii Otto Witt (Oscarsberg Mission Station) to *Missions-Tidning*, 23 December 1878, in *Missions-Tidning*, IV, no 2 ((1879), 35-36.
- xiv Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:2, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1880-1883*, F. Becker (Greytown) to General H H Clifford, 20 October 1879.
- xv Otto Witt, *Märkliga livserfarenheter. Minnen ur det flydda* (Stockholm: privately published, 1922), 19-22.
- xvi Otto Witt (Carlstad) to *Missions-Tidning*, June 1879, in *Missions-Tidning*, IV, no 6 (1879), 127.
- xvii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, Otto Witt (London) to CSM, 5 March 1879.
- xviii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A I:1, *Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1883*, 28 April 1879.
- xix Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, Otto Witt (Stockholm) to CSM Steering Committee, 2 May 1879.
- xx *The Times* (London), 6 March 1879.
- xxi *The Daily News* (London), 8 March 1879.
- xxii *The Times* (London), 13 March 1879.
- xxiii E.W.M. (Hampstead) to *The Standard*, 12 March 1879, in *The Standard* (London), quoted in *The Times of Natal*, 25 April 1879.
- xxiv 'Inquirer' (unspecified provenance) to *The Standard*, undated, quoted in *The Times of Natal*, 25 April 1879.
- xxv *The Natal Mercury*, 21 April 1879.
- xxvi C L Flygare (Durban) to *The Natal Mercury*, undated, in *The Natal Mercury*, 21 April 1879.
- xxvii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, C L Flygare (Durban) to CSM Steering Committee, 21 April 1879.
- xxviii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, C L Flygare (Durban) to Otto Witt, 11 May 1879.
- xxix Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, James Dalzell (Gordon Memorial) to F L Fristedt, 14 July 1879.
- xxx Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, K. Hohls (Hermannsburg) to Otto Witt, 27 August 1879.
- xxxi Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, O.C. Oftebro (Zinkwazi) to Otto Witt, 3 September 1879.
- xxxii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:2, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1880-1883*, C L Flygare (Durban) to CSM Steering Committee, 1 December 1879.
- xxxiii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, quoted in Otto Witt (Helsingborg) to CSM Steering Committee, 14 November 1879.
- xxxiv Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:1, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1874-1879*, quoted in Otto Witt (Helsingborg) to CSM Steering Committee, 6 December 1879.
- xxxv Ibid.
- xxxvi Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:2, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1880-1883*, F. Becker (Greytown) to General H H Clifford, 20 October 1879.
- xxxvii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:2, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1880-1883*, John North Crealock (Utrecht) to Bernhard Kraft, 19 May 1879.
- xxxviii Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:2, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1880-1883*, 'Claim No 75. Claim of Revd Otto Witt'.

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- xxxix Otto Witt (Spanish Sea) to *Missions-Tidning*, 20 June 1880, in *Missions-Tidning*, V, no 7 (1880), 157-159.
- xl *The Natal Mercury* (Durban), 16 July 1880.
- xli Otto Witt (Oscarsberg Mission Station) to unspecified recipient, 23 August 1880, in *Missions-Tidning*, V, no 11 (1880), 254-255.
- xlii Otto Witt (Oscarsberg Mission Station) to *Missions-Tidning*, 19 April 1881, in *Missions-Tidning*, VI, no 6 (1881), 125-127.
- xliii Olav Guttorm Myklebust, *Det Norske Misjonsselskaps historie. Sør-Afrika* (Stavanger: Det Norske Misjonsselskap, 1949), 89.
- xliv Church of Sweden Mission Archives, A II:2, *Bilagor till Svenska Kyrkans Missionsstyrelses Protokoll 1880-1883*, Otto Witt (Oscarsberg Mission Station) to CSM Steering Committee, 21 October 1881.
- xlv Frederick Hale, 'Swedish Lutheran Missionaries on the Witwatersrand, 1902-1960', Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of Pretoria, 2005.
- xlvi Morris, *The washing of the spears*, 317, 399-400.
- xlvii Alan Lloyd, *The Zulu War 1879* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon), 89.
- xlviii David Clammer, *The Zulu War* (Devon: David & Charles, 1973), 41, 103.
- xlix Michael Glover, *Rorke's Drift: A Victorian epic* (Cape Town: Purnell & Sons, 1975), 84, 94.
- I Killie Campbell Africana Library, unaccessioned files no. 26303, P S Hervey, 'Another tale of old Natal: Pioneer family's flight from Rorke's Drift'.
- li John Laband, *Kingdom in crisis. The Zulu response to the British invasion of 1879* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
- lii John Laband and Ian Knight, *The Anglo-Zulu War* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1996).
- liii See especially Hayden White, *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and *Tropics of discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). The influence of White's provocative and controversial studies on subsequent historiographical thought is extensive and lies outside the scope of this article.