

In The Footsteps of Shaka Zulu

Just as some people are said to have had 'a good war', so the Zulus have had 'a good history'. Among all the black nations of Africa, they have most captured the imagination of the western world, helped along considerably, it has to be said, by Michael Caine in the classic film *Zulu*.

But if the Zulus' past has been glorious, the present is harsher for them. Although the largest single grouping in South Africa, their political allegiance is divided. The ambition of most of them to have a wide degree of autonomy for their historic Kingdom of Zululand in Natal is being thwarted by the centralising ANC. Their most vigorous leader, Dr. Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the Minister for Home Affairs, is increasingly treated as at best a semi-detached member of the ANC-dominated Pretoria government.

He has also been badly treated by the world outside South Africa. While bravely refusing to have any truck with the apartheid regime so long as President Mandela remained in prison, he nonetheless stood out against demands for sanctions on South Africa. He understood that those who would suffer most from them would be South Africa's black people. But instead of earning gratitude and plaudits, he has mostly been cold-shouldered by the international community. Under the pressure of political correctness, they have found it more convenient to buy the ANC view of the Zulus as trouble-makers.

Luckily not everyone makes that facile judgement. Among the most notable exceptions is the remarkable John Aspinall. 'Aspers' is passionate in his admiration for the Zulus, and devotion to their cause, and they in return regard him as a 'White Zulu'.

I went along for the ride on one of Aspers' recent expeditions into the bush of Natal's Mfolozi Game Park. While one purpose was to indulge Aspers' passion for wild animals, it was a chance also to follow Zulu history to its source and to witness a Zulu imbizo: a Zulu gathering with singing, dancing and speeches, attended by King Zwelitini and by Dr. Buthelezi.

Going into the bush with Aspers is not to be undertaken lightly. Since half the time he thinks of himself as an honorary wild animal, you can be landed in some uncomfortable situations, as he sociably walks right up to a white rhino or some other large creature whose peaceful intentions cannot be taken wholly for granted. A pair of good running shoes is highly recommended.

Used to gambolling with his own gorillas and tigers in his private zoo at Howletts in Kent, he readily assumes that those accompanying him share his fearlessness. And coming across a small and cuddly wild animal popped into your bed - Asper's idea of a joke - is an exacting experience for those of us who don't normally dream of finding anything much more exciting than a toy-boy.

Our saving grace was the formidable Ian Player, philosopher, historian, former Chief Game Conservator of Zululand and saviour of the White Rhino. Not only is he an unrivalled expert on the animals and birds of southern Africa - and a somewhat cooler head than Aspers - he is also an expert on Zulu history.

Under his guidance and enthused by his recall of Zulu legend, we walked Mfolozi in the footsteps of the great King Shaka, who in the short space of 12 years welded the

clans of Zululand into a formidable nation. Although Mfolozi is now empty of people, you can still see the traces of Shaka's military campaigns of well over a century ago, in burned homesteads and smashed grinding stones.

That military tradition reached its high point when, in 1879, twenty-five thousand Zulu warriors under the leadership of Mnyamana Buthelezi swept over the Nqutu hills then trotted over the plain, armed only with sticks, spears and shields, to the Sandhlwana hill, where the best of Britain's African army were drawn up, awaiting the Zulu attack. Within a matter of a few hours, the Zulus had overwhelmed the camp, wiped out some eight hundred and twelve British soldiers and brought lasting fame to themselves.

Benjamin Disraeli, upon hearing of the great Zulu victory is reported to have said:

"A remarkable people the Zulus, they defeat our Generals, convert our Bishops and change the future of the history of Europe". He was referring to Lord Chelmsford's defeat at Isandhlwana, to Bishop Colenso who had taken the side of the Zulu people after his arrival in Natal, and the killing of Prince Louis Napoleon of France, the last in the Napoleonic line."

Although subsequently defeated and split up into innumerable small kingdoms by Sir Garnett Wolseley, the Zulus' moment of triumph remains undimmed and indestructible.

All the sadder, therefore, that fortune has subsequently deserted them. They seem to bear remarkably little grudge against history or the British for that. Indeed it was indicative of the Zulus' ability to forgive and forget to hear Dr. Buthelezi, himself a direct descendent of the Zulu general at

Isandhlwana who bore the full force of British fire-power, fete-ing and praising John Aspinall, who is as British as they came.

"One cannot help but admire Mr. Aspinall's commitment to the Zulu Nation, and what he desires them to be, whether one agrees or disagrees with his expression of these sentiments, no other person I know, black or white can equal his inimitable style. Whatever John Aspinall says comes from the depth of his heart, he is not a fake. He is a unique personality, because once you are his friend, his friendship is consistent and constant."

The Aspinall style is indeed inimitable, the rhetoric owing more to the age of Shaka and Cetshawayo than to the modern realities of South African politics, where three-piece suits and shiny Mercedes are more a feature than traditional warrior outfit with shield and spear. Some of Aspers' ambitions for the Zulus have in past years been known to make white South African administrators - and even the Zulus themselves if that is genetically possible - blanch. Yet thank goodness someone has preserved some passion and loyalty for these remarkable but friendless people. They deserve more, both of the world and of South Africa itself.