

# *The Meaning of Majuba for Natal*

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In the context of 19th century military history, the skirmish fought on Majuba mountain on 27th February 1881 was but a minor engagement. Yet its effects were far-reaching and its memory, no less than that of Isandlwana two years previously, hung heavy over Natal for many years thereafter. Nervous of the effect which the outbreak of hostilities might have on their trade with the Transvaal, but confident of a speedy victory for the British forces, the Natal colonists were dismayed at the series of military setbacks which culminated on Majuba, and they reacted with incredulity to the peace negotiations which followed. Natal suffered little material damage, her boundaries were not altered and few of her inhabitants were actively involved, but her pride as a loyal British colony was severely bruised and her confidence in British arms undermined. Hundreds of imperial troops had demonstrated to the silent 'black' gallery who witnessed this 'white' war

Majuba. Victorious Boer commandos gather round General Joubert's field headquarters after the battle.

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that they were apparently unable to retain the Transvaal territory which Theophilus Shepstone, at the head of no more than 25 Natal Mounted Policemen, had annexed for the Crown in 1877.

Moreover, by immediately concluding a peace, Gladstone's new Liberal Government in London had allowed the invasion of Natal to go unpunished and had permitted the Boers and their descendants to escape with the mistaken notion that they were militarily superior to anything that Britain's Empire could throw against them. It required the further agony of 1899-1902 to demonstrate the extent of their error, to the cost of both sides and at the price of a further deterioration in Anglo-Boer relations. In the meantime, it mattered little that, during the course of 1881, Gladstone was burnt in effigy in various parts of Natal, while in Pietermaritzburg's Market Square the Union Jack was unofficially lowered and, before burial, was funereally drawn on a wagon through the streets of the town by a team of oxen, each of which was named after a prominent Boer leader. In the Natal Legislative Council elections the following year, the colonists nevertheless rejected the opportunity of acquiring responsible government status for themselves, in favour of retaining the dubious security of a British garrison.

Celebrated in some quarters as an early triumph for the cause of South African independence, Majuba (and the self-indentification which it promoted in persons of Dutch extraction throughout the subcontinent) was a blow to the notion of confederation under the British Crown which white Natalians had supported in principle throughout the 1870s. As such, Majuba could more readily be interpreted as a divisive setback to the movement towards 'closer union' as a British dominion, which was only effected in 1910. Amidst revived talk of confederal structures in southern Africa, in preference to the extension of the 'closer union' concept across existing ethnic frontiers, Majuba should serve as a reminder to all Natalians of the hazards inherent in any attempt to redivide those whom the course of history has brought together in this part of the world. It should highlight the danger of having to re-experience that history if we choose, for current political purposes, to ignore it.

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