

## **Why have Impressions of the Battle of Rorke's Drift changed over time?**

The Battle of Rorke's Drift was a battle against the Zulus and followed an earlier defeat that day for the British Army. One hundred and thirty-nine soldiers managed to defend their position against five thousand Zulu warriors. Eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded to soldiers who took part to honour such a heroic feat.

There have been different interpretations of the Battle of Rorke's Drift over the years and recently it has even been used in a cartoon about Tony Blair and the war in Afghanistan.

One early interpretation of the battle was Elizabeth Butler's painting 'The Battle of Rorke's Drift.' The painting shows the Battle as a perfect example of British heroism. Moreover, the Zulus are pushed to one side, portrayed as evil, perhaps as almost sub-human, and definitely inferior to the British. I believe she did this for a number of reasons. This war was the start of the 'scramble for Africa'. If all that reached the ears of people in Britain was the news of a terrible defeat then further conquests there might be put in jeopardy. So it was important that news of this victory reached the British people to help lift morale. Furthermore, Benjamin Disraeli who was Prime minister at the time was in trouble politically and by painting a scene of a victory during his period of power it could have helped deflect some of the criticisms he was facing in Britain.

In 1964 the film 'Zulu' was released depicting the Battle at Rorke's Drift. The film shows the British as heroic and a prime example of British dominance. However unlike Elizabeth Butler's painting it also shows the Zulus as brave in the face of many losses. I think the director does this for a number of reasons. For example, Britain no longer had an empire. This was reminder of Britain's glory days in sunny places when the picture at home was much more bleak. Furthermore Black Civil Rights was in full flow. By depicting the Zulu as brave and tactically intelligent this showed the director and producers as modern and forward thinking. It is possible that this was very clever of the director to portray Blacks this way at a time when Blacks were still denied rights. If they were given equality he would come across as a man in favour of equality and fairness. As you can see in the space of a hundred years views on the Zulu have changed but the British are still upheld as brave and heroic.

Recently Rorke's Drift was used in a cartoon criticising the war in Afghanistan. Tony Blair is shown dangling from a rope on a dead horse saying, 'chin up lads you're fighting for the 21-century'. It is suggesting that Blair was out of date and trying to relive imperialism which doesn't work in the modern day. So in the space of 40 years Rorke's Drift has changed from act of British heroism to symbol of an Empire that had ceased to exist.

In conclusion I think you can track the decline of Rorke's Drift as a symbol of heroism with the decline of the British Empire. The reason for this is that as the standing of the British Empire decreased it is natural that battles or figures that were held in so high an esteem by those that ran it would also decline with it.