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Since the 1970s our understanding of the late Victorian army has benefited from a diverse and burgeoning array of scholarship. There have been major works on civil–military relations, the army and society, army reform, and imperial defence, buttressed by biographies of senior commanders, studies of war correspondents and the role of the army in imperial propaganda.¹ Yet the human experience of Victorian warfare has been less well documented – an oversight that contrasts sharply with a profusion of recent studies on human experience in twentieth-century warfare. Quite reasonably the authors of twentieth-century studies claim that their works shed light on the demands and burdens of campaigning, especially the ordeal of battle, perceptions of enemies, allies and warfare itself, relations between officers and men (and between various units fighting along side each other) as well as insights on tactics, morale, discipline, weaponry, and combat motivation.² These historical inquiries have benefited from the extent of twentieth-century warfare – total wars in two cases, involving millions of protagonists, many of whom were literate and left testimony about their experiences (not merely letters, poems and diaries but also oral testimony on tape and in film). There is obviously less scope for examining the military experience of the British soldier in the late nineteenth century when the numbers involved, the degree of literacy and the facilities for recording opinions were less extensive. Nevertheless, Victorian soldiers wrote letters to family and friends at home, kept diaries, composed poems, and occasionally gave interviews in far greater numbers than is often realised. This was particularly true of the soldiers who left bases in Britain and the Mediterranean to serve in the relatively short campaigns in Africa before returning (or expecting to return) home. From their writings retained in national and regimental archives, with even more recorded in the metropolitan and provincial press and some in articles and memoirs, insights can be gleaned about campaigning in Africa as well as about the values, priorities and perceptions of the soldiers themselves.

In his study of the South African War (1899–1902), Thomas Pakenham argues that ‘the ordinary soldiers took time off to write letters back to England in reply to those thousands of letters from home that littered the veld at every camp site. It was the first dramatic test of the new mass literacy, this orgy of letter writing by the working class.’³ Tabitha Jackson concurs; she claims that Forster’s Education Act of

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1870 had provided a framework for compulsory elementary education, and that the literacy rate had grown from 63.3 per cent in 1841 to 92.2 per cent in 1900. The war, she asserts, had produced a 'new outpouring of writing' and 'an equal appetite for reading' about it, hence the dispatch of 58 newspaper correspondents with the main British army to South Africa.⁴ Yet in *The Red Soldier* (1977), and in *Marching Over Africa* (1986), the late Frank Emery revealed that Victorian soldiers had written numerous letters from earlier campaigns. He confirmed that letter-writing was not an exclusive preserve of regimental officers,⁵ and that many shrewd and observant commentaries were written by non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and private soldiers. Emery, though, spread his work over much of the Victorian period, including odd letters from the Crimea, India and Afghanistan, and so covered several campaigns in a perfunctory manner – one letter from the Asante War (1873–74), six from the reconquest of the Sudan (1896–98) and a mere three from the South African War. More recent writing indicates that there is an abundance of material to sustain more focused research and writing on particular campaigns.⁶ Utilising such evidence should not only add to our understanding of these operations but may also provide corroborating testimony for critical or contentious issues, supply a greater range of perspectives from soldiers in different regiments or corps, and yield insights from soldiers engaged in different aspects of the same campaigns (particularly those in front-line, reserve or supporting roles). In seeking to test these assumptions, this work will concentrate on the later African campaigns from the Asante War (1873–74) to the South African War, and, in the last campaign, review the experience of regular soldiers from two distinctive parts of the United Kingdom – Scotland and the west country.

Emery rightly argued that the Victorian soldiery, despite being recruited primarily from the labouring classes in town and country, was more literate than often imagined.⁷ If educational improvements flowed from Forster's Education Act and the 1872 Scottish Education Act, they varied from locality to locality, hardly applied to the poverty-stricken masses in Ireland, and required the addition of free and compulsory elementary education in the early 1890s.⁸ Meanwhile the army developed its own educational requirements. In 1861 the possession of an army certificate of education was made a condition of promotion – a third-class certificate for promotion to corporal, a second-class certificate for promotion to sergeant, and a first-class certificate for a commission from the ranks. From 1871 compulsory attendance of five hours per week was required for new recruits and a new fourth-class certificate of education – a minimum intended for all soldiers – was introduced. Superficially the growth in educational attainment levels,

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as monitored by the director-general of military education, appeared meteoric, with 48.8 per cent of the rank-and-file described as 'possessing a superior level of education' by 1878, 85.4 per cent by 1889.⁹

These claims, like all educational statistics, have to be interpreted with care. By 1888, over 60 per cent of the other ranks were unable or unwilling to pass the examination for a fourth-class certificate of education (that is, simple reading and an ability to complete a few easy sums – a level purportedly attainable by an 8-year old child). So limited were these achievements that the army abolished the fourth-class certificate in 1888 and terminated compulsory schooling. Henceforth it relied upon persuasion and inducement to raise educational standards. It made the possession of a first-class certificate one of the conditions for promotion to sergeant and the possession a second-class certificate a condition for promotion to corporal. It also expected that the regiments would make provision for voluntary schooling. Nevertheless, genuine improvements in educational standards occurred: the proportion of the rank-and-file in possession of third-class certificates of education rose by nearly 30 per cent from 1870 to 1896, and illiteracy – defined as an inability to read or write one's own name – diminished sharply (from an affliction of 90 per cent of rankers in 1860 to virtual elimination by the end of the century). By the 1890s, fewer than 40 per cent of men had achieved more than the barest levels of literacy, and the proportion attaining first-class certificates of education remained persistently small. In short, the improvements were genuine but limited; as Alan Skelley perceptively observes, neither the national system of education nor the provisions made by the army were particularly effective by the late 1890s, and 'the standard reached by the majority of those in the ranks was elementary at best'.¹⁰

A literary aptitude, therefore, was perhaps not as common in the late Victorian army as some have supposed, but it was far from rare. However, an aptitude to write and the inclination and/or opportunity to do so did not always coincide. When a campaign was underway some found all too little time to write or too little inclination to do so. An engineer serving with Colonel Henry Evelyn Wood's column in Zululand apologised to friends in Sheffield: 'I have very little time for writing. We are working all day, and have not time for anything, we are so pushed', while an officer writing from Suakin in March 1885 was equally apologetic: 'You must not expect many letters, as unless I get a spare day like this I have no time or place to write.'¹¹ This may have been special pleading, at least as regards the lengthy Anglo-Zulu War where, as Archibald Forbes (the veteran reporter of the *Daily News*) recalled, letter-writing appeared to be the chief relaxation of the men in their encampments.¹² When Sergeant Josh S. Hooper (2/Buffs) was

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appointed as his regiment's letter carrier, crossing the Tugela River with mail in the morning and later re-crossing with stamps from the post office on the Natal side, he found himself 'in great demand from Colonel to Private' as 'they all want to receive letters or send some off'.¹³

During the Egyptian campaign of 1882, Lieutenant Charles B. Balfour (1/Scots Guards) was extremely fortunate inasmuch as he possessed ample supplies of paper and had the use of a table that his servants built for him.¹⁴ Many others shared the anxieties of Lieutenant H. W. Seton-Karr (1/Gordon Highlanders): 'I have not been able to write for some time as materials are short and there is nothing to write on.'¹⁵ Yet officers and men struggled to overcome these difficulties: Seton-Karr kept an extensive diary of his experiences in Egypt, and many soldiers borrowed paper and pencils or paid exorbitant amounts for materials (6d a sheet for ruled paper in some instances). Some pleaded for paper to be sent from home, while others scribbled letters on the back of knapsacks, leaving the lines of cloth visible in one or two erasures, or liberated supplies from enemy quarters. A Bishopshire youth found paper in a sheikh's tent after the battle of Ginnis (30 December 1885) that was described 'as coarse in texture and crossed by dark and thick horizontal lines'.¹⁶ Even so, writing as a sedentary exercise could be a daunting experience. Colonel H. S. Jones, in command of the Royal Marine battalion in Egypt, complained that 'the flies must be seen to be realised. They literally make everything black. I am writing under great difficulties, lying on the ground, and tormented beyond belief by these pests.'¹⁷ In writing from Ambigol Wells during the Gordon relief expedition, a Cornish officer serving in the West Kent Regiment apologised for his 'penmanship, but the flies are doing their best to carry my nose and mouth by assault; they are simply awful'.¹⁸

Some soldiers had additional incentives to persevere with their literary activities. Quite apart from an understandable desire to reassure family and friends that the writer had survived the campaign or a particular battle, several staff and regimental officers wrote for leading newspapers and journals during the Asante War and in many, if not all, of the subsequent campaigns. By its sheer prevalence, military journalism set a context for letter-writing from the front and provided a further impulse, if only in the desire to get personal versions of events to an audience at home (or sometimes to one in the colonies). Major-General Sir Garnet (later Field Marshal Viscount) Wolseley had already written extensively in *Blackwood's Magazine* about his exploits in the Red River expedition of 1870. He regarded the Magazine's payments, in excess of '£25 a month', as 'a nice addition to one's half pay'.¹⁹ Two of his staff officers in the Asante campaign, Captain (later General Sir)

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Henry Brackenbury and Lieutenant (later Major-General Sir) John F. Maurice also wrote for newspapers and journals. Brackenbury, the author of a two-volume history of the campaign, readily accepted £300 from Blackwood for the work as he was a 'poor man' who needed recompense for 'the loss of my appointment which I gave up when I went with Sir Garnet, and the heavy expense of the campaign, and other matters . . .'.²⁰ Financial gain remained a powerful incentive: when Brackenbury wrote for the *Illustrated London News* in the summer of 1877, he was allowed 25 columns at four guineas per column of 1,100 words; when he wrote for the *Daily Telegraph*, he received £5 per column of 1,500 words.²¹ Twenty years later the *Morning Post* paid Winston Churchill £10 per column for the 15 articles that he wrote from the Sudan – articles that spanned some 140 manuscript pages.²²

In spite of the increasing presence of 'special' correspondents and war artists in these campaigns – some 30-odd in the Sudan (1896–98) and at least 70 accredited journalists with the British army in South Africa by early 1900²³ – the serving officer remained much in demand. When Charles Fripp, the *Graphic's* correspondent, fell ill and had to leave Zululand, he persuaded Lieutenant Edward Hutton (60th Rifles) to make sketches for him and send them to his newspaper for publication.²⁴ Journalists sometimes missed key episodes in battles, such as the charge of the 21st Lancers at Omdurman (2 September 1898), and so required soldiers to provide the crucial insights. Just as Captains Edward Stanton and Sir Henry Rawlinson, as well as Corporal John Farquharson (1/Seaforth Highlanders), provided sketches from the earlier battle of Atbara (8 April 1898), Lieutenant John Brinton (2/Life Guards), who was attached to the 21st Lancers and was wounded in the charge, may have supplied details for René Bull's sketch of the charge. Brinton, according to his friend Churchill, served as a correspondent for Bull's paper *Black and White*.²⁵

Neither the Horse Guards nor the War Office welcomed this profusion of writing for the press. In November 1872 Edward Cardwell, the secretary of state for war, ruefully quoted the adjutant general, General Sir Richard Airey, as stating: 'Three years ago no one was allowed to talk shop: now every one wants to write a Book.'²⁶ Similarly, in the festering relations between Wolseley and the Duke of Cambridge, who was the officer commanding-in-chief, the duke claimed that he dreaded Wolseley's 'connection with the Press'.²⁷ Even if the War Office came to appreciate that military correspondents were likely to be less critical than their civilian counterparts, some senior officers, including Sir Horatio Herbert Kitchener, remained profoundly suspicious of soldiers (such as Winston Churchill) who used their reporting to prepare for a political or another career once they left the service.²⁸

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Letter-writing from the front, which was mainly passed on by the *recipient* to metropolitan or local newspapers, with or without the agreement (or the name, rank and military affiliation) of the writer concerned, came into a different category. The army appreciated that soldiers wanted to receive correspondence from family and friends, and that a two-way flow of correspondence could sustain morale during an overseas campaign. Concessionary rates for postage persisted since the late eighteenth century (1*d* for soldiers' letters and 6*d* each for officers'), and elaborate arrangements were made with colonial postal services to support the flow of mail to and from the soldiers in Zululand and later the Transvaal. When the army was sent to Egypt in 1882 an Army Post Office Corps (APOC) was formed of volunteers from the 24th Middlesex (Post Office) Rifle Volunteers, and during the campaign six army post offices were opened (two in Alexandria, one in Port Said, one in Ismailia, and two accompanying the march of the 1st and 2nd Divisions), with another 15 staff manning five field post offices to service the needs of the 7,000 men sent from India to Egypt. There were similar arrangements in support of the Suakin expedition of 1885, and during the South African War, a vastly expanded APOC (396 all ranks by May 1901) sustained the massive war effort. If troops on the march could not obtain stamps, the letters were charged to the addressees at the rate which would have been prepaid. By the end of September 1902, APOC had delivered 68.9 million letters and newspapers and 1.4 million parcels to the troops.²⁹

Nevertheless, the War Office remained anxious about information from a campaign finding its way into the public domain. On 7 March 1881 Ralph Thompson, the permanent under-secretary at the War Office, warned newspaper editors not to reveal information, particularly if sent by telegraph, that could assist the enemy. He evinced concern about revealing the dates when reinforcements were due to arrive, all movements of troops, the numbers of guns and garrisons, details of transport and where collected, and information about temporary bridges and posts.³⁰ Understandable as these anxieties were, what was published in Britain was probably of less importance than what was written in Africa and either published locally (a section of the Egyptian press remained hostile to the British policy in Egypt and the Sudan)³¹ or went astray. The *Daily Chronicle's* extensive reports of the battle of Abu Klea (17 January 1885) went missing for several weeks, and other reports and sketches from the same battle never reached their destination. Some 2,000 bags of mail were also seized, ransacked and burnt by the Boers when they captured the Roodewal Railway Station on 7 June 1900.³² Beleaguered British forces went to extraordinary lengths to protect their correspondence: in the Transvaal, in 1881, dispatches were

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written on tissue paper, folded small and hard, and then placed in quills which native runners concealed in their hair. All too often, though, the runners discarded their messages lest the Boer patrols discover them. During the Sudan campaign of 1898 when the expedition moved beyond the railway terminus, correspondents sent their letters, sketches, and telegrams down river by native swimmers.³³

From the Egyptian campaign onwards, the military authorities moved beyond exhortation and censored telegrams from the front. On the subsequent Nile expedition Bennet Burleigh, the correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, complained that the excised copy concerned both well-understood military details and the feelings of officers and men about the news of Khartoum's capture and the death of Gordon. 'For that black day', he wrote, 'very few of those who formed part of the Nile Valley expeditionary force will ever forgive the officials responsible.'³⁴ While information on the troops' morale might have been of interest to the Mahdi, its suppression served political purposes. 'Special' correspondents faced even more difficulties when the obsessively secretive Kitchener was in charge of the Sudan campaign of 1896-98. He treated most of the press with contempt, rarely gave interviews, limited their telegraphic allowance to 200 words a day, and required Major (later Major-General Sir) F. Reginald Wingate to act as censor. As Wingate, assisted by Brevet-Colonel (later Major-General) Leslie Rundle and Major (later Major-General) Hector Macdonald, had to read thousands of words daily, this meant delays and cuts, often without telling the writers.³⁵ Apart from irritating the 'special' correspondents, this censorship enhanced the value of uncensored communications from the front, namely the letters of officers and men.

Generally letters from soldiers (and sometimes from civilians accompanying the expeditionary forces) leant colour, corroboration at times, and often particular insights to the reports from 'special' correspondents. Their style varied enormously, ranging from highly personalised, graphic and blood-curdling descriptions to more detached, detailed and factual accounts. Even if the letters were perforce limited in perspective, often blinkered by regimental loyalty, and frequently inaccurate in assessing distance, casualties and numbers of the enemy, they had a lasting value. They described the hardships, dangers, fears and exhilaration of active service in a way rarely conveyed in the official dispatches. Sometimes they constituted the only first-hand record of particular engagements, that is, if the vast majority of officers were killed, as in the ambush at Bronkhorst Spruit (20 December 1880) or if journalists were not present, as in the siege of Wakkerstroom (1880-81).³⁶

Their value was further enhanced by the ability of editors to identify the authors, exploit their local appeal, and highlight the element of

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human interest. Letters passed on by recipients to the metropolitan or, more commonly, local newspapers might or might not carry the author's name, rank, and regimental affiliation. Traditionally, serving officers who wrote directly for newspapers or journals had to be discreet. Sir John Adye feared that any revelation of his name 'would injure me professionally', while Brackenbury insisted: 'The authorship [of an article on the Royal Artillery] must be kept secret . . . They may *guess* as much as they like, but they must not be able to *assert* who is the writer.'³⁷ A fortnight later he urged that Blackwood should 'not send me a cheque for RA article, lest it should be traced, – unless it is without my name, payable to bearer, and not crossed'.³⁸ Similarly, during the South African War, when writing for the newspapers had become so prevalent that officers and men sent letters directly for publication in the 'Letters from the Front' columns of many newspapers, these letters were often anonymous,³⁹ unlike those passed on by friends and family to the press.

Provincial newspapers, especially those who could not afford to send their own 'specials' or employ officers to cover a campaign, reproduced reports from the central press agencies or from those in the major London newspapers. Like the London press, they also printed letters passed on from the family and friends of serving soldiers, especially as these were a cheap and distinctive form of news. When the *South Wales Daily News* received its first letter describing the battlefield at Isandlwana, it stated that 'We shall be glad to publish any letters from soldiers at the seat of war, which may be received by their friends in South Wales and Monmouthshire.'⁴⁰ It was inundated with letters thereafter. Provincial weeklies (and evening dailies) exploited the potential of this correspondence by emphasising the local provenance of the writer, or by highlighting the regional or county connections of certain regiments, or by publishing material that was new and different from the reports already published in the metropolitan press. For most of the South African War, the *Somerset County Gazette* ran a weekly column entitled 'Our Country's Share in the War' in which it published letters from the front and commented on the activities of the Somerset Light Infantry. If local newspapers could hardly claim that soldiers' letters were 'scoops', they welcomed the correspondence as a means of enhancing their coverage of contemporary campaigns and of sustaining their readers' interest in the fate of soldiers overseas. Their headlines capitalised on the local dimension, with phrases such as 'A Barnstaple Man at Ulundi', 'A Wiganer in South Africa', 'Letters from Bury Lads', 'A Pitlochry Soldier's Baptism of Fire', or 'Letter from a Leeds Man' – even in the last instance, where the correspondent was later described as 'formerly of Leeds, but now of central Africa!'⁴¹

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If editors knew the writer personally, they could vouch for his integrity, especially if he commented upon contentious issues (such as the killing of retreating Zulus after the battle of Ulundi).⁴² They printed letters recounting the bravery of local soldiers, notably the death of Private Donald Cameron, 79th (Cameron Highlanders), who was reportedly the first man to enter the enemy trenches at Tel-el-Kebir (13 September 1882) and was immediately dubbed a 'Perthshire Hero'.⁴³ They also printed letters which informed family and friends about the survival and good health of local soldiers: after Tel-el-Kebir, a Royal Marine sent a letter to his parents in Stirling in which he mentioned meeting another nine men from his home town, (naming three rankers from the 42nd (1/Black Watch), another three from the 72nd (1/Seaforth Highlanders), two from the 74th (2/Highland Light Infantry) and one from the 79th (Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders).⁴⁴ Editors relished the opportunity of exposing errors in official reports that listed certain soldiers as missing or dead. The *Wigan Observer* printed a letter from Private John Stevens, a ranker in the ill-fated 1/24th that was annihilated at Isandlwana (22 January 1879), explaining that he had been posted elsewhere before the battle. While recounting his own survival, Private Stevens reported that his friend and fellow Wiganer Private Dyer was among the slain.⁴⁵ The *Dover Express* was even more caustic over a perfunctory letter sent by the War Office to a 60-year old widow, stating that her youngest son had perished in the same battle. When Private James Holland wrote to her subsequently, the paper asserted: 'One may imagine the joy of the mother on the receipt of the letter, but one may also imagine from this what the life of a British soldier is thought of at headquarters.'⁴⁶

Human interest aside, editors and sometimes journalists (where the letters or interviews were incorporated as part of longer reports) commended the letters to their readers. The *South Wales Weekly and Daily Telegram* praised the correspondence of private soldiers from Monmouthshire in Zululand and *en route* to Afghanistan as 'replete with interest and are creditable specimens of the progress of education in the army'.⁴⁷ The *Midland Counties Express* lauded an 'interesting letter' from Lieutenant-Colonel the Hon. Reginald Talbot (1/Life Guards) in Egypt as 'Its style contrasts very favourably with the high-flown descriptions of certain special correspondents'.⁴⁸ The *Natal Witness* reproduced a lengthy report from a journalist of the *Free State Express*, who had interviewed two soldiers – Sergeant Jeremiah Madden (King's Dragoon Guards) and Private Joseph Venables (58th Regiment) – captured by the Boers after the battle of Laing's Nek (28 January 1881). The journalist reported their stories verbatim, including accounts of how they had been well-treated by their captors, and claimed that they were 'told in good faith'.⁴⁹

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More substantively editors drew their readers' attention to letters that contained vivid or 'graphic' accounts, sometimes of fierce hand-to-hand fighting or the formidable effects of British fire-power or simply the immense and varied hardships of campaigning in African conditions.⁵⁰ In these respects, editors were not only selecting letters of particular interest but were also extracting passages that might appeal to their readership. The editorial role, therefore, went beyond Emery's claim that newspaper editors simply 'tidied up spelling, improved grammar and punctuation, and possibly corrected the proper names appearing in their raw copy. . . [even if] their substance and content would appear unchanged'.⁵¹ Although many editors published letters in their entirety, especially when they were short but even on occasion when they spanned a couple of columns of newsprint, they also selected key passages for publication and excised others. Oliver Borthwick, son of the owner of the *Morning Post*, and its editor J. N. Dunn excised and amended the lengthy correspondence of Winston Churchill from the Sudan, which certainly contained superfluous material.⁵²

Editors were not always scrupulous in their printing of soldiers' letters. They sometimes misspelt surnames (during the Anglo-Zulu War, the 2/24th had neither a Corporal Samuel Miles nor a Sergeant W. Maule, as the *Bristol Observer* and the *Brecon County Times* alleged, but it did have a Corporal Samuel Wiles and a Sergeant W. Morley).⁵³ They occasionally reported an involvement in battles where none had occurred; indeed, they had little opportunity to corroborate the veracity of authors who stated or implied that they had been present at famous battles, notably Isandlwana and the defence of Rorke's Drift.⁵⁴ The late Norman Holme, in his substantive study *The Noble 24th*, correctly observed that 'spurious claims' were made by several soldiers, 'possibly to increase their standing within the community, or with members of their family' and that these are now 'firmly embedded in family folklore'.⁵⁵ Soldiers sometimes retracted comments made in correspondence sent immediately after a battle. Lieutenant Henry Curling, RA, psychologically shaken after escaping from Isandlwana, later conceded: 'When I was ill, I wrote such a stupid letter: I think I must have been off my nut when I wrote it.'⁵⁶ Accordingly any usage of soldiers' letters as historical sources has to be corroborated, wherever possible.

Nevertheless, editors correctly described the content of most letters as intrinsically 'interesting' or of 'great interest' inasmuch as they provided timely commentary on matters that would catch the attention of their readers. If pride of place went to detailed descriptions of major battles and vivid accounts of hand-to-hand fighting,⁵⁷ there were plenty

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of reports on the hardships of campaigning, descriptions of native allies and adversaries, comments on other fighting units, newspaper reporting, and, in some letters, even critical remarks about commanding officers. Whether these letters were intended for publication (and some were),⁵⁸ they were often frank and forthright in their mode of expression and sometimes raised issues of controversy at home. In doing so, they contributed to debates about the terms and conditions of military service, the effectiveness of weapons, support services and military leadership, and the strategy and tactics employed in African campaigns.

The letters have a longer term value as eyewitness accounts of the British Army on active service, and as testimony to the values, motives, concerns and aspirations of Victorian soldiers. As sources, these letters have their limitations; only a small proportion remain in their original form, often deposited in national or regimental museums, and most survive as printed material in nineteenth-century newspapers. Although editors reproduced some letters fully and accurately, their intervention, as already described, devalued many of the originals. Where comparisons with original letters can be made, as in the correspondence of Churchill and a few others, the excisions appear to be mainly personal and family asides, lengthy narratives, some florid writing and occasionally assertions too sweeping to print.⁵⁹ So material has been lost but even the original letters did not always reveal the innermost thoughts of the authors. Like the sepoy letters of the Great War, selected for publication by David Omissi, the correspondence evolved through 'layers of filtration'.⁶⁰ Soldiers exercised a degree of self-censorship as they were writing to friends and family at home, and so tended to express themselves correctly (avoiding swear-words) and to dwell upon socially acceptable matters (rarely referring to any sexual liaisons). As with the sepoy letters, there was 'scribal intervention' if authors, like Private James Price (2/24th), required a literate 'chum' to write their letters for them.⁶¹ Where scribes were involved, this could produce a somewhat stilted and conformist prose, reflecting either standard phrases suggested by the scribes or the inhibitions of the author as he expressed himself in a semi-public arena.⁶² Yet the proportion of Victorian soldiers who relied upon scribes was probably far smaller than in the overwhelmingly illiterate sepoy army, and, unlike the sepoys, the Victorian soldiers could express opinions without fear of censorship at regimental or more senior levels.

As a consequence, their views remain unique as a commentary upon the course and conduct of particular campaigns. While general points can be drawn from this correspondence and are summarised in the Epilogue, the letters are used, first and foremost, within the context and

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chronology of specific campaigns. Each chapter of the book focuses upon a different campaign, using the letters to indicate how feelings evolved from the hopes and optimism at the outset, through periods of acclimatisation and adjustment to the rigours and pace of campaigning, to the sensations of excitement and relief (or sometimes shock and horror) at surviving major battles, and ultimately to moments of reflection as the hostilities drew to a close. They provide breadth of coverage from all arms and services,⁶³ comment on all the major events and battles, and address the principal issues of each campaign. They proffer important insights from the regimental level, from officers and other ranks, on the course and conduct of colonial warfare.

During the campaigns, soldiers wrote letters from troop-ships, camps, bivouacs, and occasionally from forts or barracks (as in Egypt), but generally in surroundings quite different from the confines of British barracks where noise, profanity and bustling camaraderie were commonplace. Soldiers found themselves frequently in open, thinly populated country, sometimes quite isolated from the nearest township, and periodically under threat from a hostile foe. During moments of repose they reflected upon the strains of campaigning and the realities of war, composing and writing their letters in privacy (or in confidence with a literate friend). Letter-writing flourished, argued Alexander Forbes, because life in camp enabled the best qualities of the soldier to emerge: they used 'less foul speech, . . . were more kindly to one another, and more Godly than in garrison'.⁶⁴ Although these observations were purely impressionistic, active service probably had some effect inasmuch as rankers (unlike the officers) had less access to drink (other than the occasional rum issued at night) and the risks of battle placed a premium on comradeship and fatalism about the future.

Yet the sheer quantity of the correspondence indicates that the Victorian army was possibly not as remote from the rest of society as is sometimes supposed. Although the army attracted the bulk of its recruits from casual labourers and the urban poor – young men seeking a refuge from hunger and unemployment or an escape from their domestic circumstances, especially from amatory mistakes – it had a broader appeal. It attracted those who were impressed by military bands and uniform as recruiting parties marched through their locality, or were ready on a whim or fancy to travel abroad, join friends in the ranks, and seek a life of adventure instead of a tedious menial occupation. Admittedly many of these recruits, unless they came from military families, probably enlisted without the blessing and support of their families. Few families had a positive image of the army as a career, that is, living in barracks and serving under military discipline, tales of drunken and licentious soldiery, lengthy periods of overseas

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service, and limited prospects on returning to civilian life. As Lord Wavell recollected, 'There was in the minds of the ordinary God-fearing citizen no such thing as a good soldier; to have a member who had gone for a soldier was for many families a crowning disgrace.'⁶⁵ This correspondence indicates, nonetheless, that many soldiers kept in touch with families and friends. They either reconciled with relatives after the trauma of enlistment or kept in touch with them or, in some cases, forged new relationships through marriage.⁶⁶ In letters from Africa they expressed concerns about the health and welfare of family, asked to be remembered to old friends, and passed on messages about comrades from the same locality.⁶⁷

The authors may have taken the Queen's shilling, and left their domestic surroundings, but they knew that there would be interest at home in how they fulfilled their military commitments. In this respect the letters testify to the motivations of the authors, as well as to their morale, attitudes to death in battle, and their warrior ethos – values that distinguished them from many of their civilian readers (other than those with a service background). Campaigning in Africa, as the writers indicated, afforded an opportunity to serve 'Queen and country', to do their duty, and to earn honours for their regiment (or their company, frequently described as 'the pride of the regiment'), promotions in the field, and medals for themselves.⁶⁸ Highly motivated, these soldiers usually exuded confidence in their leaders (at least initially, and often throughout their campaigns); recorded few instances of ill-discipline on active service (other than in the protracted South African War); and appreciated the efforts expended on their logistic support, including the postal services and the supply of food and provisions (which rarely broke down). If these feelings were expressed in a somewhat formulaic language, the letters indicate that most soldiers began (and sometimes ended) these campaigns positively motivated, with a strong sense of comradeship and robust morale. Nor does it seem that they were simply writing in this vein to impress their readers. They could be frank, and the letters are particularly revealing when they describe the flagging of morale after serious defeats, or when units found themselves besieged and the toll of sick and wounded began to mount. As a Gordon Highlander reflected on the siege of Ladysmith: 'The authorities may keep much in the dark, but the fearful truths connected with this part of the misery of the siege remain all the same . . . I know what the pinch of hunger is.'⁶⁹ Many soldiers, nonetheless, remained fatalistic about the risks of battle and, whether actively religious or not, frequently claimed that survival was a matter of God's will. If they were to die, they expected to do so by fighting 'bravely' at their 'post' or by fighting and dying 'like a faithful English soldier'. Such sentiments car-

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ried credibility when the authors had just observed the sacrifice of comrades at Isandlwana and the sight of corpses strewn over the battlefield.⁷⁰ They chimed with fervent desires to engage their foes, to gain revenge for fallen comrades and to close with the enemy. As soldiers they were imbued with a warrior ethos, a code by which they would assess adversaries and allies alike.

The attractions of active service, though, ranged beyond military matters. Campaigning in Africa fulfilled desires for adventure and foreign travel that were among the more positive attractions of military service. These young soldiers saw sights in an exotic continent that many of their families and friends would never do; they visited places in Egypt that they had only learned about from sermons and Biblical readings. Their writings, if not remotely on a par with those of contemporary missionaries and explorers,⁷¹ sustained the growing popular interest in Africa generally, and in Egypt in particular. For Drummer George Paterson (1/Black, Watch), Cairo was as 'pretty a city as ever I saw. The streets are lined with tall, shady trees on each side, while the houses (in the principal part of the city) are magnificent. No wonder then Cairo is called the mother of the world.' Tel-el-Kebir, he informed his friend, was 'situated in the Land of Goshen, a land, I am sure, you have often read about as well as myself'.⁷²

The letters reveal, too, that Egypt (and to a lesser extent the other campaigns in Africa) had more prosaic attractions. Egyptian service offered the prospect of earning khedival medals and a khedival allowance which, if added to the field allowance, almost doubled the daily pay of regimental officers.⁷³ Given the relatively low rates of pay endured by officers and other ranks, another facet of army life that hardly enhanced its image at home, active service had its compensations. This was especially true for the rank-and-file, some of whom earned gratuities for distinguished service in the field. Although soldiers regularly grumbled about the charges for sea-kit and the cost of goods supplied by local traders, they no longer suffered many of the stoppages that could reduce their pay to as little as a penny a day in Britain; and, if serving on 'dry' campaigns, soldiers had little incentive to spend money anyway. As Sergeant J. F. Bolshaw (17th Lancers) wrote from Zululand: 'If I ever do return again I shall be quite a rich man, as we cannot spend any money here. All our pay is saved.'⁷⁴

The linkage between the attractions and opportunities of active service and the image or reputation of the army at home underpins much of the correspondence from the African campaigns. Soldiers, if despatched from Britain on expeditionary forces, anticipated that they would return home relatively quickly. They reckoned that the campaigns would be short and decisive affairs, and, in writing about their

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exploits, were either preparing for their homecoming or at least leaving a record in case they failed to do so. This context had less significance for soldiers drawn from garrisons in the Mediterranean, Natal and Cape Colony, or from the army of occupation when it was formed in Egypt, or from India, but the turnover of men in a short-service army always ensured that many were anticipating a return to Britain (not least the reservists who rejoined the colours for a specific conflict, like the 80,000 who served in the South African War). Facing the prospect (or possibility) of an early return to Britain, soldiers had every incentive to write about their own experiences, as well as the achievements of their unit, the mission as a whole, and any likely rewards. Lance Corporal J. A. Cosser wanted not merely to earn a medal but to 'come into the street and show off a medal'.⁷⁵ If positive accounts of service in Africa could enhance the status of individual soldiers in their own communities, they could also boost the reputation of the army generally.

Where matters went awry in African campaigns, soldiers were even more anxious about the manner in which they were reported at home. In extreme calamities their letters might provide crucial evidence, but normally they anticipated that official despatches and the reports of 'special' correspondents were likely to precede the receipt of correspondence from themselves. Explaining any reverses and apportioning blame seemed crucial requirements, and some soldiers were quick to explain events from their own point of view. In these circumstances the writing was often forthright, whether occasioned by apparent paranoia – as in the case of Lance-Corporal Cosser: 'They do not let the people of England know half of what goes on here'⁷⁶ – or worried by press censorship in later campaigns, or incensed by the perceived failings of command or of the government. Although many soldiers remained deferential, defending embattled commanders from outside critics, some broke ranks to criticise commanders, and others readily denounced their respective governments. Those who expressed political opinions may or may not have been representative of fellow soldiers, but they were often blunt in their assertions – as Sergeant Bolshaw wrote from Zululand: 'There is no mistake about the English Government's fault in sending so few men as they did.'⁷⁷

In short, the letter-writing of Victorian soldiers remains valuable because of its range and scope. Despite the factual errors, limited perspectives, and editorial intrusion, these letters contain a wealth of detail, some unique insights and highly revealing commentary about the army on active service. If the chronology and events of specific campaigns establish a context for each group of letters, the relationship between soldiers and their local communities, the image of the army

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at home and the process of conveying news from Africa provide a broader framework for the correspondence as a whole. The letters may contain few literary flourishes, but they are written with vigour and clarity, are often conversational in character and are sometimes passionate in expression. They reflect all too well the feelings and tensions of soldiers operating in an alien environment, with their values, discipline and training periodically stretched to the limits.

Notes

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- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 98.
- 11 'A Thrilling Incident in the Zulu War', *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 1879, p. 3; 'Letter from an Officer at Suakin', *Oswestry Advertiser*, 22 April 1885, p. 5.
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- 61 'Letter from a Cwmyoy Man', *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 26 April 1879, p. 3.
- 62 Omissi, *Indian Voices*, pp. 5, 9.
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- 64 'Mr. Archibald Forbes' Lecture at Folkestone', p. 6.
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