

Book Review

The Battle of Magersfontein: Victory and Defeat on the South African Veld, 10–12 December 1899

Garth Benneyworth

Warwick: Helion & Company
2023, 250 pages
ISBN 978-1-915113-79-5

Garth Benneyworth, a South African historian, is a senior lecturer and Head of the Department of Heritage Studies at Sol Plaatje University in the Northern Cape, South Africa. He specialises in the heritage of conflict, focusing on the South African War (1899–1902) and the broader War for Southern Africa (1960–1994). In 1999, Benneyworth was instrumental in building the Magersfontein Battlefield Museum exhibition, and he serves as the chairperson of the Council for the War Museum of the Boer Republics (Anglo-Boer War Museum) based in Bloemfontein. He is also a senior research associate at the University of Johannesburg. His research in archives and on battlefields, spanning some 30 years, resulted in a groundbreaking academic work, covering the run-up to and the actual Battle of Magersfontein, which interlinks military actions and heritage landscape.

Benneyworth's recent book, *The Battle of Magersfontein: Victory and Defeat on the South African Veld, 10–12 December 1899*, is a welcome breath of fresh air in South African historiography, and specifically in the sprawling literature concerned with the South African War (1899–1902). While there is indeed no shortage of literature dealing with the South African War, and for that matter the Battle of Magersfontein, Benneyworth seeks to address and set straight the record regarding the plethora of myths, legends, ideologies, factual errors, fabrications, and sloppy research by numerous self-appointed experts that authored books on the broader war effort and the series of battles in the northern Cape specifically. In contrast, Benneyworth's book, places the Battle of Magersfontein within a strategic, operational, and tactical context, and thus traces the series of events and three battles of Belmont, Graspan, and Modder River, during the conventional part of the war that led to the decisive clash near Kimberley in December 1899 during the so-called 'Black Week'.

To write the book, Benneyworth utilised a range of primary sources, such as diaries, photographs, maps, personal reflections, reports, and earlier interviews with survivors, which were collected over a period of 30 years. These primary sources, were supplemented by a range of secondary sources, including various regimental histories, that Benneyworth located in archives, libraries, museums, and private collections across South Africa, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Moreover, due to his close connection with both

the War Museum of the Boer Republics, and the Magersfontein Battlefield Museum exhibition, the author has an intimate knowledge of the actual battlefield, and he has spent the better part of thirty years familiarising himself with the terrain. Benneyworth's intimate, firsthand knowledge of the battlefield, supplemented with the primary and secondary sources, and a keen appreciation of military history, battlefield archaeology, and military geography, resulted in the publication of this unique, revisionist, and in-depth work on the Battle of Magersfontein.

Throughout the book, Benneyworth takes care to keep the reader informed about the political tensions and military considerations that underpinned the Boer decision to besiege Kimberly at the outbreak of the war, and whose strategic importance was amplified by the rich diamond fields in the vicinity. The strategic political and economic value of Kimberley thus prompted the British to advance on and break the Boer siege. Benneyworth also manages to illuminate key British and Boer figures involved in the battle, such as Lt Gen. Lord Paul Sanford Methuen, Maj. Gen. Andrew Gilber Wauchope, Gen. Piet Cronje, and Gen. Koos de la Rey. Benneyworth also does not fall into the trap of focusing on the decisions and contributions of the senior British and Boer commanders only but makes a concerted effort to emphasise the human side of the war also by concentrating on the experiences of the rank and file from the opposing sides during the Battle of Magersfontein. He therefore illustrates the personal experience of battle, by highlighting the plight of the ordinary soldiers at Magersfontein while under fire and involved in actual combat. He also considers how they experienced the climate and terrain surrounding the battle.

The book, comprising eleven chapters, and substantiated with several illustrations, detailed maps, and images, is a riveting read. However, the focus of the book is on the military and on political aspects surrounding the Battle of Magersfontein, with the results that the social, economic, and cultural aspects related to the battle are often neglected. Nevertheless, Benneyworth's book is recommended for anyone interested in the broader South Africa War, and those specifically seeking a deeper understanding of the Battle of Magersfontein.

Benneyworth makes a key contribution to the still burgeoning literature on the South African War, and his contribution to South African military historiography lies in his detailed interpretation and discussion of the nature, course, and consequences of the Battle of Magersfontein.

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