

Book Review

The Raw War: 123 Battles of the Boer War (1899–1902)

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At first glance, the book has an enticing title and, given that it covers 123 battles from the South African War (1899–1902), it offers much promise to parties interested in this conflict specifically, and military history more broadly. The author situates the 123 battles against what the book describes as the ‘six phases of the war’, namely the first Boer and first British offensives; the second British offensive; the Boers losing the conventional war; the Boers then initiating a guerrilla war; and the British developing a counterstrategy to the guerrilla war. Each battle starts with a situational analysis, followed by an outline of the battle itself, and concluding with an analysis and lessons learned and not learned.

From its outset, however, spelling mistakes regarding the names of key persons and places abound, and soon it becomes apparent that the book cannot pass muster as an academic work of military history. The narrative also contains many errors of terminology, which proofreading, or even peer review, would have identified. Without dissecting each of the 123 battles in detail to make this point, some examples follow.

The surname of the commander of the Kimberley garrisons is spelt “Kekerwhich” but should be spelt “Kekewich” (page 39). The same is true about the British commanding general at the Battle of Talana Hill (24 October 1899) being indicated as “Penn Symonds”, when in fact he was “Penn Symons”.

Many basic historical errors are also found, for example on pages 101–102, the Battle of Graspan (25 November 1899) is spelt “Grasspan”.

On page 22, President Brand is mentioned, while it was in fact President Steyn of the Orange Free State Republic (OFS). Page 25 has it that the ‘OFS had signed a treaty with the RSA to guarantee each other’s independence’. This presumably refers to the mutual defence pact between the Orange Free State Republic and the South African Republic (ZAR) and not the RSA – an abbreviation, which presumably refers to the Republic of South Africa, which only came into existence in 1961. Page 252 shows a photograph of British graves captioned as those of soldiers killed at the Battle of Driefontein (10 March 1900); yet, nowhere on the remote Driefontein battlefield were any of the British soldiers buried in a walled cemetery, which in this case appears to be the Boshof town cemetery.

On page 24, Keeling portrays the British army as having ‘made little progress since Napoleon’s defeat in 1815 at Waterloo’s battle in Holland’. This statement negates the expansion of the British Empire, much of it built on military conquest, and which included the Crimean War (1853–1856). One must only look at the creation of the Indian Empire and the acquisition of territory during the scramble for Africa, after the Napoleonic Wars. On page 32, it said that General Cronje was going to assist in the Orange Free State, when in fact he went to the Kimberley sector, and commanded the Boer forces at the Battle of Modder River and then at the Battle of Magersfontein (10–12 December 1899), both places being in the Cape Colony.

Confusion also prevails about the Siege of Kimberley (11 October 1899–15 February 1900), as on page 41, the narrative has it that Baden-Powell assembled more defences’, and again on page 45, that Baden-Powell was active in Kimberley. However, Baden-Powell was never the commander of the Kimberley garrison, as he commanded Mafeking, some 420 km north of Kimberley.

Regarding both the Mafeking and Kimberley sieges, the civilian losses and deprivations refer only to white civilians.¹ Nothing is said about the black civilians who, having fled the Rand Mines, found themselves locked up in Mafeking. Once they had completed the construction of siege defences, their food was stopped, and they were forced to walk through the Boer lines to Kanye in Bechuanaland. Many hundreds perished from starvation.

Regarding civilian casualties during the Siege of Kimberley, on page 45 it is said, ‘the children suffered the most; without milk, many died during the siege’. This is, however, a very narrow view of the siege and its effect on civilians. Current research has white civilian casualties being approximately 51 killed and 107 wounded. The Kimberley municipality recorded total deaths as 1 679 of whom 1 648 were classified as natives at the time. If one can attach a hierarchy to suffering, then it was the mineworkers trapped in the compounds who bore the brunt of starvation, with 1 600 fatalities, apart from those recorded by the municipality. These civilian experiences escape the analysis of these two sieges.

Other points making no sense are found, for example, on page 49 where the author describes the British infantry attack during the Battle of Talana Hill (24 October 1899), ‘The 60th Rifles destroyed Majuba, and when Colonel Bobby Gunning called the NCOs together, he implored them to “remember Majuba, God and our country”.’ The name “Majuba” refers to an action on 27 February 1881 during the Transvaal War of Independence (or the First Boer War), in which the 60th Rifles participated; however, the regiment did no such thing as destroying Majuba. That action saw the entire British force routed from the summit of Majuba and defeated, resulting in an armistice and peace negotiations.

1 Siege of Mafeking (13 October 1899–17 May 1900), and Siege of Kimberley (11 October 1899–15 February 1900).

Another example is the use of the term “cannons”, which in fact refers to ship artillery and should be described as “guns” or “field guns”. On page 55, at the Battle of Elandsplaagte (21 October 1899), the Boers retaliated with their ‘giant guns’. In all the literature on the South African War, no term such as “giant guns” is found, leaving a question regarding what type of artillery this was.

On page 97, where the Battle of Belmont (23 November 1899) is mentioned, it is said that the British did not feed their troops before the battle, ‘as hunger would raise their fighting spirits’. It would be useful to know the source of this statement, as the British forces were fed when they arrived at Belmont Farm late in the afternoon of 22 November 1899. Nowhere in any of the literature of the war is there any indication of a formal British army policy of using hunger to induce combat aggression. The facts were that, before going into action at Belmont, the troops were issued a rum ration, had their water bottles filled with tea, and received tinned rations.

At Belmont, the British infantry attack is erroneously described as that the first Boer volley is said to have flown ‘harmlessly over their heads’ (page 97). The reality was that the attacking infantry, particularly the Grenadier Guards, suffered many casualties when crossing the open veld towards the hills. On page 98, another error has it that it was not possible to bring the naval guns into action, as ‘the horses of the 18th Battery had no water since the start of the day’. While the condition of the horses is correct, the 18th Battery was a separate artillery battery from the naval guns, and the two operated some distance from each other, with the naval guns having their own animal transport. General Featherstonhaugh is described as ‘leading the guards’ and, while the narrative is not clear, the implication is that he was ‘shot and killed without hesitation’ (page 99). However, Major General Featherstonhaugh commanded the 9th Brigade during the action, and was severely wounded.

The Battle of Modder River (28 November 1899) had the British artillery shelling the north side of the river before the infantry attack was launched. The author has ‘Pole-Careur’s’ men later breaking through by crossing the river and, on page 107, it is said that the day ended as ‘Christiaan de Wet moved up and down the trenches with his sjambok to enforce his discipline.’ The historical reality was somewhat different. There was no preparatory bombardment against the north side of the river or against any of the Boer positions prior to the infantry attack. It was Major General Pole-Carew’s troops that broke through and crossed the Riet River into the village of Rosmead. Christiaan de Wet was nowhere near the action, as he only arrived at Magersfontein after the battle was concluded on 12 December 1899.

The Magersfontein action receives a similar narrative. On page 143, it is stated, ‘Most of the Boer trenches at Magersfontein were used in WW1’, which makes no sense at all. Moreover, it is said that the action was ‘concluded and lost in the first ten minutes’ when in fact it was not (page 144). Unfortunately, an enduring myth is perpetuated on page 145 where it is said that the Boer forces ‘included a barbed wire fence’ in their defence works, which they did not. There were farm fences on the terrain at the time; yet, these impeded neither the frontal attacks nor the attempted enveloping attack behind the hill, none of which is mentioned.

One final point on historical errors is that of the concentration camps. The author correctly identifies that the camps were part of the British counterstrategy to guerrilla war (page 389); however, in Chapter 68, he states that the motive behind the camps was ‘utterly humane’ (page 389). In all the literature of the war and of the camps, it is widely accepted that there was nothing humane behind the motive to establishing the camps. As for the camps discussed, the book refers only to camps interning Boer civilians.

No mention is made of the concentration camps that interned more than 120 000 black civilians from late 1900 until the middle of 1901, when the Native Refugee Department was formed. This military department then created and managed forced labour camps along a work or starve policy where black civilians were induced as forced labourers into wartime and agricultural service to the British army. Many thousands, perhaps 30 000 or even more, perished under the most inhumane conditions.

In conclusion, *The Raw War: 123 Battles of the Boer War (1899–1902)* did not set out to be an academic work of history and is recognised as such. It is also not an analysis of the South African War, and the book contains many errors, which could have been avoided through a peer-review process at the time of writing. Nevertheless, it provides an overview of 123 battles and can be used as a quick go-to reference guide about these battles. Alternatively, it might provide a ready introduction for those seeking to align the chronology of the war with 123 of its battles. Perhaps a second edition, edited and reviewed, might do the book justice.

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