

THE TRANSVAAL REBELLION: THE FIRST BOER WAR 1880-1881

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Index, illustrations, notes, select bibliography and index

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Defying their British rulers, the Boers of the Transvaal rose in rebellion in December 1880. A British column, moving between Bronkhorstspuit and Pretoria, was attacked by a Boer commando and almost annihilated and the seven British garrisons in the territory were invested by bands of Boers, ignited by a burgeoning Afrikaner nationalism and a desire for independence. The events caused a flurry in distant Britain, where the government, inundated with domestic concerns and wary of further stimulating Afrikaner nationalism, decided to grant self-rule to the Transvaal. Yet, in the meantime, events in South Africa moved apace. The relief column, commanded by Major General Sir George Pomeroy Colley, was defeated three times within almost as many weeks and the garrisons lost all hope of reinforcement. The political settlement, patched eagerly together by a London focussed on pressing domestic troubles, was condemned by Greater Britons in Britain and South Africa.

The Transvaal Rebellion is a most discerning and clear-sighted study of this war, totally free of jargon, fair in its judgements and refreshingly original in viewing the war from the separate viewpoints of both the Boers and the British, officers and troops. John Laband has provided a valuable service to scholars and students in drawing together a very large and disparate literature into a coherent, carefully structured and well informed study. The bibliography is in itself an impressive catalogue of private and official papers, newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets, and of books, conference papers and journal articles. It is also a useful tool for anyone wishing to work in the field.

Laband first sets out the essential features of the war. The British presence (the 'imperial factor') in southern Africa is ranged in Chapter One; the political situation in the Transvaal on the eve of the war is explored in Chapter Two; while

the Boer and British military systems are compared in Chapter Three. This arranging of the furniture is an essential prelude to the eight chapters that follow, taking the reader through the battles and engagements that marked this campaign. The outbreak of the rebellion and the first battle of the war, at Bronkhorstspuit (20 December 1880) are covered in Chapter Four. The investment of the seven British garrisons is discussed in Chapter Five. The constitution of the Natal Field Force, under the command of the unfortunate Colley, a kinsman of the much more successful Duke of Wellington, is discussed in Chapter Six; while its defeat, or perhaps rather humiliation at Laing's Nek (28 January 1881), Ingogo (8 February 1881) and then Majuba (27 February 1881) are covered in Chapters Seven, Eight and Ten. Chapters Nine and Eleven address the political side of the war and the loss of appetite, in London, for yet another extended colonial campaign at a time when the attention and energies of the imperial government were absorbed by troubles in Ireland and other pressing matters closer to home.

Although some Afrikaans-speaking historians (lay and university-based) will question the use of the term 'rebellion', this is sensible and the reasons for its use are well-argued by Laband (see pp. 4-7). In fact, he goes a long way in readdressing much of the sometimes romantic, often hagiographic literature generated by Afrikaner historians over the decades and particularly that marking the centennial in 1981. He recrafts the war, its players and much of the intellectual furniture in a way that is at once more objective, far less passionate and idealistic, and yet far more engaging.

Moreover, *The Transvaal Rebellion* has a particular contemporary significance. It opens a range of questions on variegated contemporary conflicts and, specifically current Western operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These include the debate on participation in foreign wars, the development of appropriate, modern, armed forces and their use as foreign policy instruments in far-off theatres, on military planning, and, very importantly, on the interface between foreign campaigning and domestic politics. The parallels between the British experience in South Africa in 1881 and that of the Coalition forces in the Gulf region now are many.

In sum, *The Transvaal Rebellion* is an original and significant publication, a book bound to create a stir and an essential, indeed most welcome, addition to the bookshelves of any serious military historian.

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