

Re-fighting the 2nd Anglo-Boer War: historians in the trenches

Some one hundred years ago, South Africa was torn apart by the 2nd Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). The war was a colossal psychological experience fought at great expense: It cost Britain twenty-two thousand men and £223 million. The social, economic and political cost to South Africa was greater than the statistics immediately indicate: at least ten thousand fighting men in addition to the camp deaths, where a combination of indifference and incompetence resulted in the deaths of 27 927 Boers and at least 14 154 Black South Africans. Yet these numbers belie the consequences. It was easy for the British to 'forget' the pain of the war, which seemed so insignificant after the losses sustained in 1914-18. With a long history of far-off battles and foreign wars, the British casualties of the Anglo-Boer War became increasingly insignificant as opposed to the lesser numbers held in the collective Afrikaner mind. This impact may be stated somewhat more candidly in terms of the war participation ratio for the belligerent populations. After all, not all South Africans fought in uniform. For the Australian colonies these varied between 4½ per thousand (New South Wales) to 42.3 per thousand (Tasmania). New Zealand 8 per thousand, Britain 8½ per thousand, and Canada 12.3 per thousand; while in parts of South Africa this was perhaps as high as 900 per thousand. The deaths and high South African participation ratio, together with the unjustness of the war in the eyes of most Afrikaners, introduced bitterness, if not a hatred, which has cast long shadows upon twentieth-century South Africa.

The prominent place the war occupies in Afrikaner historiography and collective consciousness was underlined at a conference hosted by the War Museum of the Boer Republics, in Bloemfontein, in 1998. During the proceedings, an appeal was made for the identification of all the descendants of the Boers who collaborated in one or other way with the British. The lady, who made the politically impassioned call, argued that treachery was hereditary and that the Afrikaner people should know whom of their number carried the traitors' gene. Cooler minds and reasoned arguments made little impression. For her the war had not ended at Vereeniging. While she was inferring that the Afrikaners had been 'sold out' again in 1994, her statements more importantly reflect that the scars left by the Anglo-Boer War still run very deep through certain, if diminishing, portions of South African society and has been a major focus of Afrikaner history writing. This 'long war' phenomenon is not surprising. Arthur Marwick has explained, not perfectly, the interrelationship between war and society in terms of a four-tier model: based upon the examination of the disruptive and destructive aspects, the test set, the participation levels, and the psychological impact of the war. Using this or any other argument, few will argue that the war had little social, economic and political impact.

Radical historians, dismissing the traditional periodisation and moving toward a more interdisciplinary approach, concentrated upon social history and the writing of

a total integrated history of all South Africans. As far as they were concerned, the Anglo-Boer War warranted little attention. W.M. Tsotsi denied the importance of both the Great Trek and Anglo-Boer wars and refused to see them in terms of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, and as something comparable to the struggle against *apartheid*. Black radicals labelled blacks that had collaborated with whites as "traitors" and, when they did refer to the Anglo-Boer War, it was seen as "a war between English and Afrikaner exploiters fought on someone else's land."¹

This has only relatively recently begun to change with a new approach to the war, focusing on the war experiences of black South Africans. With Philip Bonner, B. Hankey and Donald Denoon in the van, it culminated in the publication of Sol Plaatje's war diary (1973) and the appearance of Peter Warwick's *Black People and the South African War* in 1978. H.T. Siwundhla and J.S. Mohlamme, working at American universities, produced similar works; while S.J. Maphalala and Bill Nasson, with their theses on the experiences of black people in Zululand and the Cape Colony, introduced valuable regional studies.² Work on the war by black historians is, however, still rare. For the black people of southern Africa, the war brought suffering and misery, and little more. Political expectations were dashed in May 1902 and again in May 1910.

According to Andreski's notion of the military participation ratio, the wartime gains by the less privileged members of society are dependent upon "the proportion of militarily utilised individuals in the total population."³ The greater the participation of the less privileged, the more the social pyramid is flattened. This did not happen in South Africa, despite a reasonably wide participation by the entire population. The *hensoppers* and joiners enjoyed many benefits, mostly financial, while Milner and his successors were forced to resuscitate the rudimentary structure of Boer society after the war. Black people oppositely were sacrificed for the improvement of Anglo-Boer relations and their participation was not rewarded. Frustration set in and it was almost as if the war was blanked out of the black consciousness: Fransjohan Pretorius has even referred to a "blank black memory regarding the war."

Nonetheless, the 2nd Anglo-Boer War is clearly one of the crucial events in South African history and has been the subject of much research and reassessment, and the battle for the naming of the war reflects the tremendous impact it had on all the peoples of southern Africa. The South African War, the Second War of Independence, the English War and the Boer War all insufficiently describe the complexities of the conflict. The Anglo-Boer War - perhaps too simplistically - is taken from the two main belligerents, the parties who declared war. This has several problems. Firstly, it excludes the 'other' parties: the Cape Afrikaners, Australians, New Zealanders, Dutch, Belgians, Austrians, Russians, Germans, Frenchmen,

¹ K. Smith, *The changing past: Trends in South African historical writing* (Southern: Johannesburg, 1988), pp 157, 220. This argument came again to the fore at the *Second Anglo-Boer War: a re-appraisal* conference held in Bloemfontein, 11-15 Oct 1999.

² H.T. Siwundhla, *The participation of Non-Europeans in the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (Claremont Graduation School, 1977); J.S. Mohlamme, *Black people in the Boer republics during and in the aftermath of the South African War of 1899-1902* (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1985); S.J. Maphalala (unpub MA dissertation, UZ 1979); B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902* (CUP: Cambridge, 1991).

³ R. Pope, *War and society in Britain, 1899-1948* (Longman: London and New York, 1991), p 9.

Canadians, the Englishmen of Natal and the Cape, the so-called *Uitlanders*, and the thousands upon thousands of Black South Africans. Furthermore, it was not the second conflict between Boer and Briton. If one enumerates the events culminating at Bloemfontein (1848), the war, which erupted in 1899, must number as the 3rd Anglo-Boer War. But then Free Staters have and will argue that they were not declared belligerents in 1880, and refer to the 1899-1902 conflict as the Anglo-Transvaal War! The 'Three Years War' (De Wet's terminology) is too vague yet perhaps the best of a poor list. Only once the shadows of the Bantu-Boer-Brit conflicts grow old and eventually disappear, will historians look upon these events with new-found clarity and objectivity. A hundred years from now, historians may very well group and refer to the conflicts of the nineteenth century - and perhaps even through to 1994 - as **the wars of South African unification.**

However, all this is not to say that the war had little to no impact upon the Dominions. In the case of Australia and New Zealand, this was their first foreign war and, as with Canada, a crucial nation-building experience. To mark the event, several centennial conferences were held, new books have appeared and numerous old titles have been republished. In all, five Boer War conferences were held during the last half of 1999: one each in the case of the United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia and two in New Zealand. For some, in the words of a well-known English historian of the war, this was fast becoming the 'Bore War.' Yet each occasion drew a surprisingly large crowd. In Britain and South Africa the gathering was largely academic: almost 100 historians from 17 countries presented papers at the Bloemfontein conference. In Australia it comprised a majority of military history buffs and in New Zealand, most astonishingly, the audience largely embraced descendants of soldiers who had served in South Africa. Some proudly wearing the medals of their ancestors posed a number of informative questions relating to "the methods of barbarism" as well as the virtues of colonial as opposed to imperial troops.

This swell of popular support was also seen in the launch of a new New Zealand official history of the war⁴ and a re-enactment of the march of the 1st Contingent from Karori down to Queen's Wharf in Wellington, the point of embarkation for South Africa. The governor general, Sir Michael Hardie Boys, used the opportunity to honour those who left on later service: "As the century has passed, we have learned that while there is genuine honour in military service, there is never, ever, any glory in war." While Prime Minister Jenny Shipley emphasised that the first of the ten New Zealand contingents that left for South Africa had, without knowing it, started New Zealand on her path to nationhood.⁵ Memorial plaques were unveiled in several New Zealand towns, from Hamilton, North Island (26 Oct 1999) to Kaikoura, South Island (23 Oct 1999).

According to the Chief of the Australian Army, Lt Gen F.J. Hickling, who opened the Canberra conference, the Anglo-Boer War saw the first use of Australian troops in Empire defence and the birth of the Australian Army on 1 March 1901 was the natural result. The British Empire did not emerge from the war unchanged. Hiatuses in an army designed only to 'police' were exposed by the unexpected intensity of the war. They also faced the dilemma of dealing with guerrilla-type

⁴ John Crawford with Ellen Ellis, *To Fight for the Empire: An illustrated history of New Zealand and the South African War 1899-1902* (Reed: Wellington, 1999).

⁵ 'Boer War centenary marked', *The Dominion* (Wellington), 22 Oct 1999.

armies without infringing the law of war and its conventions. Breaker Morant, anti-hero of the Stan Kubrick film, illustrated the point all too clearly for Australia.

Not surprisingly, the first Australian books on the war were produced very quickly, in fact long before the war even ended. They were W.T. Reay's *Australians in war: with the Australian Regiment from Melbourne to Bloemfontein* (Melbourne 1900) and F. Wilkinson's *Australia at the front: a colonial view of the Boer War* (London 1901). They were followed a decade later by the official history – P.L. Murray, *Official Records of the Australian Military Contingents to the War in South Africa* (Melbourne 1911) – which was little more than an inconsistent assemblage of military minutiae by a junior officer who had served in South Africa.⁶ The Australian War Memorial has contracted Craig Wilcox to write a centennial official history and this will appear in May 2002. [An early insight into his work will be found in this issue.]

Yet the apparent importance of war meant that discussion could not wait until then. The 1999 Chief of Army History Conference, which has over the years become one of the major Commonwealth military-history events on the calendar, focused on the war and Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, of the Australian Defence Force Academy's school of history, co-edited the handsome volume of proceedings reviewed in this issue. This volume, *The Boer War: Army, Nation and Empire*, represents the first real attempt at an understanding of the role of the Australian colonial forces, the impact of the war upon the Australian colonial societies as well as the formative experience it proved for the Australian commanders of the First World War. The 2nd Anglo-Boer War was undoubtedly a formative episode in the shaping of Australia and the first of several martial blocks in the building of Australian nationalism.

The 2nd Faculty of Military Science Conference, arranged around the theme *South Africa at War in the Twentieth Century* and held at the South African Military Academy during the first week of September 2000, was a tremendous success. In all, thirty-eight papers were delivered on issues relating to the 2nd Anglo-Boer War, war and society in the age of total war, military education and operations other than war, resistance and integration, the impact of war, military operations, historiography of the two world wars, support and support operations, and the transition into a new defence force. The proceedings will be published in two special issues of *Scientia Militaria*: one containing the 'history' papers, the other dealing with matters more 'contemporary'. The next conference will be built around the theme *War and Society in Africa* and is planned for September/October 2001. Round tables and suggestions for panels are welcome. A conference notice and call for papers appears on page 92 of this issue.

Finally, the Military History Department of the University of Stellenbosch (SA Military Academy) has instituted something called the Turner Lecture: an annual event, presented by an eminent military historian of international standing, and named after Major L.C.F. Turner who holds a central seat in the pantheon of South African military historians. He was a prolific writer and, as member of the Union War Histories Section, contributed to what is argumentatively the best South African official history, namely *Crisis in the Desert* (1952), *The Sidi Rezeg battles, 1941* (1957) and *War in the Southern Oceans* (1961), as well as numerous UWH

⁶ See C. Wilcox, 'The Australian official record' in C. Wilcox (ed.), *Recording the South African War: Journalism and official history, 1899-1914* (London, 1999), pp 29-31.

manuscripts. A student of the Napoleonic era, Turner obtained an M.A. (History) from the University of the Witwatersrand with a dissertation on *The Cape of Good Hope and the Trafalgar campaign* in 1938 and was the first Military History lecturer at the South African Military Academy, albeit in a part-time capacity, and supervised the establishment of the Military History Department. The 1st Turner Lecture, a lucid statement entitled *Military education and the study of war* and presented by Jeff Grey, is published in this volume.

Lt Col Ian van der Waag
Editor

