

# Epic sieges: Boer and British participation and Imperial perspectives

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## Abstract

Although the British and Boers had a tradition of conducting siege warfare, the sieges of Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith have always attracted controversy. With hindsight many historians argue that the Boers should have pressed home their early advantages by sustaining their advance into British territory rather than wasting men, ammunition, and time in sieges that ultimately proved futile. Similarly British historians complain that the sieges wrecked Buller's strategy and led into costly relief expeditions. Arguably these sieges may have been unavoidable, especially in respect of Mafeking and Ladysmith, and even if their largely passive, artillery-based conduct could have been more robust, it too was in keeping with the culture of a risk-averse citizen army.

After the reports of 'empty' battlefields, and the shock of defeats and surrenders, British and imperial opinion took comfort from the determination displayed by those besieged. The siege commentary – uncensored letters, diaries, and later images and materials – reported in the British press testified to the impression that these events were a test of wills, leadership, resilience, and above all, pluck. They stirred memories (and myths) about previous colonial sieges, and provided insights upon the emotions aroused by these events (beyond the monotony and boredom) and the perceptions of the enemy, the involvement of Blacks, and the sense of imperial destiny.

Underused by many historians, this evidence provides scant support for the radical critiques of Gardner (1966), Price (1972), Judd and Surridge (2002) and Porter (2012) while amplifying the writings on popular imperialism by MacKenzie (1992, 1993 & 1998), Richards (2001) and Spiers (2006). By reviewing experiences in all three sieges, fresh light can be shed on British and colonial attitudes, concerns about Boer tactics, and the eruption of extraordinary scenes across the English-speaking empire after the relief of Mafeking.

## Paper / notes

The epic sieges of Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith have incurred more than their share of criticism. Of all the facets of the first phase of the South African War (11-31 October 1899), often known as the Boers' 'limited offensive',<sup>1</sup> the laying of the three

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<sup>1</sup> André Wessels, 'Afrikaners at War' in John Gooch (ed.), *The Boer War: Direction, Experience and Image* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 73 -106 at p. 92.

sieges has proved the most controversial. The investments followed the initial attempts by the Boers to dislodge British and imperial forces from garrisons near their borders. They reflected the fact that despite the derailment of the armoured train at Kraaipan (12 October 1899), and the abject retreat of British forces in northern Natal, followed by the humiliating surrenders at Lombard's Kop and Nicholson's Nek – 'Mournful Monday' (30 October 1899) – British and imperial forces remained in position at Mafeking on the border of the western Transvaal, Kimberley near the Orange Free State, and Ladysmith in northern Natal.

Superficially, the investment of each of these positions – Mafeking (13 October 1899 – 17 May 1900), Kimberley (14 October 1899 – 15 February 1900) and Ladysmith (2 November 1899 – 28 February 1900) – was unsurprising. 'Laying siege', as Fransjohan Pretorius observes, 'was a time-honoured strategy in Boer warfare.'<sup>2</sup> Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the Boers had engaged repeatedly in siege operations against black peoples, and mounted seven sieges during the Anglo-Transvaal War (1880-1), one of which at Potchefstroom ended in an ignominious surrender after the hostilities had ceased.<sup>3</sup> Siege warfare suited a citizen army that relied upon the voluntary service of its burghers and a military culture that placed a premium upon avoiding the risk of heavy casualties from direct assaults. In certain circumstances, though, the Boers were willing to launch such assaults, not least at Majuba (27 February 1881), which proved the decisive battle in the Anglo-Transvaal War and led to the Transvaal republic securing its independence. General Koos de la Rey reportedly favoured storming Mafeking and later Kimberley but preference for laying siege, as favoured by General Piet Cronjé, the victor of Potchefstroom and an assistant commandant-general in 1899, prevailed. Similar decisions followed at Kimberley, where Chief Commandant C. J. Wessels led the siege initially and at Ladysmith, where the elderly and extremely cautious General Petrus (Piet) Joubert, the commandant-general, committed only 9,900 burghers and 22 guns to the siege and never exploited his victories of 30 October.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fransjohan Pretorius, 'The Besiegers' in Iain R. Smith (ed.), *The Siege of Mafeking*, 2 vols. (Johannesburg: Brenthurst Press, 2001), vol. 1, pp. 63 -107, at p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 64 and 66; Ian Bennett, *A Rain of Lead: The Siege and Surrender of the British at Potchefstroom* (London: Greenhill Books, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Fransjohan Pretorius, *The A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War* (Lanham, MD.: Scarecrow Press, 2009), p. 236 and Johannes Meintjes, *De la Rey – Lion of the West* (Johannesburg: Hugh Heartland, 1969), pp. 106-07 and 110. On the British perception of the 'crafty Cronjé', see Edward M. Spiers, *Letters*

The ensuing siege tactics proved lengthy and ultimately futile, despite inflicting heavy losses on British relief columns in the defeats of 'Black Week' (Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso, 10 -15 December 1899) and at Spion Kop (24 January 1900). Deneys Reitz, who had served on the Natal front and wrote one of the classic accounts of the war, asserted that the Boers had 'sacrificed their one great advantage of superior mobility and allowed splendid guerrilla fighters to stagnate and demoralize in the monotony of siege warfare at a time when our only salvation lay in pushing to the sea'.<sup>5</sup> Afrikaner historians have been equally critical of the time, energy, and ammunition wasted in the sieges. André Wessels described the sieges as the culmination of 'a counter- "British strategy"', whereby the Boers had merely responded to British strategic deployments and allowed themselves to be sucked into 'a Sitzkrieg in the vicinity of Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking' (as distinct from the Blitzkrieg of Second World War fame).<sup>6</sup> The corrosive effects, argued Pretorius, 'led to inertia and a lack of discipline, with disastrous consequences for Boer morale'. The sieges, he added, stifled the initiative of 'eager young officers', who 'wanted to penetrate deeper into Natal and Cape Colony' to cut the British lines of advance and supplies.<sup>7</sup>

Several British commentators have endorsed this critique. Had the Boers, argued Raymond Sibbald, 'simply left a masking force in place around this town [Ladysmith], they could have gone on to deliver the *coup de grâce* to British rule in South Africa. They might have used their mobility and temporary numerical superiority to capture the major sea ports such as Durban and Cape Town.'<sup>8</sup> 'With hindsight', claimed Tabitha Jackson, 'it is clear that the Boers should have pressed home their advantages by continuing their advances into British territory rather than skidding to a halt within the first few days of the war'.<sup>9</sup> Even worse the Boers seemingly had a great opportunity by virtue of the timidity with which Sir George White, V.C., the elderly and demoralised commander of Ladysmith, resigned himself and his 13,500 troops to investment. Contrary to established British military thinking, as expressed by Lord Wolseley in his

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from *Mafeking: Eyewitness Accounts from the Longest Siege of the South African War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2018), p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Deneys Reitz, *Commando: A Boer Journal of the Boer War* (London: Faber & Faber, 1929), p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Wessels, 'Afrikaners at War', in Gooch (ed.), *Boer War*, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Pretorius, *A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War*, p. 205 and *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Cape Town: Struik Press, 1998), p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Sibbald, *The War Correspondents: The Boer War* (Stroud, Glos.: Alan Sutton, 1993), p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> Tabitha Jackson, *The Boer War* (London: Channel 4 Books, an imprint of Macmillan, 1999), p. 46.

*Soldier's Pocket Book*, and distributed to all soldiers, British forces were not expected to defend 'posts'. A commanding officer, he maintained, should 'show' resistance 'as long as [it] can be offered' with a view 'even at the last moment, if he still commands a disciplined body of men who are in good heart ... to cut his way out and join his armies in the field'.<sup>10</sup>

Morale was far from high in Ladysmith. George Warrington Steevens, who watched the retreating forces enter the town, wrote of the 'bitter shame for all the camp! All ashamed for England! Not of her – never that! – but for her. Once more she was a laughter to her enemies.'<sup>11</sup> Henry W. Nevinson, the special correspondent for the *Daily Chronicle*, was more specific: the soldiers, he wrote, 'came back slowly, tired and disheartened and sick with useless losses ...'.<sup>12</sup> So it is perhaps not surprising that White eschewed the option of abandoning his great mass of stores and ammunition at Ladysmith (and of evacuating northern Natal) to fall back, as *The Times* historian described, step by step, first to Colenso and then, if necessary, back to Maritzburg, 'destroying the railway and clearing the country of stock and produce in front of him'.<sup>13</sup> Even if he had rallied Natalian volunteers, anxious to protect their homesteads, this could have proved a costly strategy, and one that might have had 'a serious effect upon Cape Colony'.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless Leo Amery, paying scant attention to the morale and condition of White's mounted units, insisted that the commanding officer's failure 'to send his splendid cavalry force south of the Tugela was a grave error'.<sup>15</sup>

By accepting investment, White allowed the Boers to press their advance southwards, especially as the arrival of over a thousand British prisoners in Pretoria had provided 'a new and far-reaching impetus' to the war.<sup>16</sup> The impression that Boers could have exploited this moment owes much to the admiration of their mobility and military

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<sup>10</sup> General Viscount Wolseley, *The Soldier's Pocket Book for Field Service* (London: Macmillan, 1886), pp. 302, 406. Wolseley wanted to relieve White of his command, Halik Kochanski, 'Wolseley and the South African War' in Gooch (ed.), *Boer War*, pp. 56-69 at p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> George W. Steevens, *From Capetown to Ladysmith: An Unfinished Record of the South African War* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1900), p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> Henry W. Nevinson, *Ladysmith: The diary of a siege* (London: Methuen, 1900), p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Leopold S. Amery (ed.), *The Times History of The War in South Africa 1899-1902*, 7 vols. (London: Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., 1900-9), vol. 2, pp. 261-2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 263.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263; on the condition of White's forces, see Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979), pp. 154-55.

<sup>16</sup> Amery (ed.), *The Times History*, vol. 2, p. 259.

qualities, as expressed by contemporary observers such as Howard C. Hillegas and Arthur Conan Doyle. While the former commended the Afrikaners' fighting abilities and moral strength, Conan Doyle portrayed a romanticized image of the Afrikaner as among the world's most rugged, virile, and unconquerable of races, consumed by patriotism and 'a dour fatalistic Old Testament religion'.<sup>17</sup> The Boers had also produced some imaginative military commanders, including De la Rey on the western front and Louis Botha in Natal, whose innovative use of entrenchments brought devastating successes at Magersfontein and Colenso. Finally, when Free State units first encroached upon the bordering districts on 1 November, and later crossed the Orange (Gariep) River in more substantial numbers (about 3,200 men)<sup>18</sup> under General Jan Hendrik Olivier, occupying Aliwal North (13 November), the 'north-central heartlands of the Cape Colony were virtually defenceless'.<sup>19</sup> As Judd and SurrIDGE observe, thousands of Cape Afrikaners rose in revolt, incensed by the imposition of martial law in their districts (18 October 1899) and the arming of colonial volunteers, blacks and coloureds to enforce the law.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the challenges confronting the Boers as they pressed their invasions of Natal and Cape Colony were hardly inconsiderable. They faced overwhelming hostility from the settlers in southern Natal while they had to cover prodigious distances on their horses in Cape Colony. Doubtless they might have surmounted these challenges, at least partially, by invading both colonies with larger forces: such forces could be deployed, as Cronjé demonstrated on 18 November 1899 when he withdrew the Potchefstroom and Wolmaransstad Commandos from besieging Mafeking and moved south. The range of potential benefits was demonstrated in Natal, where a small reconnaissance force of 2,000 burghers pressed as far south as Willow Grange (23 November 1899). Yet they had left not only the Ladysmith garrison astride their lengthening line of communications but also a small garrison at Estcourt, and, by mid-to-late November, British reinforcements were pouring into Natal. Given the lack of local support, it seems fanciful to assert that the Boers could have swept south to seize Durban.<sup>21</sup> Even if they

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<sup>17</sup> Howard C. Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces* (London: Methuen, 1900), pp. 70-4, 81; Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Great Boer War* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1900), pp. 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Pretorius, *Anglo-Boer War*, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Denis Judd and Keith SurrIDGE, *The Boer War* (London: John Murray, 2002), p. 99.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 98-99.

<sup>21</sup> Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp. 170 and 174. By 25 November Sir Redvers Buller had arrived in Natal and within a fortnight had assembled 21,000 troops and 46 guns at Frere, Pretorius, *Anglo-Boer War*, p. 17; on Cronjé's withdrawal, see Spiers, *Letters from Mafeking*, pp. 77-8.

had destroyed more of the railway line, and ambushed more armoured trains (as they did at Chieveley, 15 November 1899), they would only have delayed but hardly thwarted the deployment of British reinforcements. Similarly on the western front, where Olivier's burghers forced the British to evacuate the railway junction at Stormberg, they failed to occupy the other junctions at De Aar and Naauwpoort. They did not even destroy the railway bridge across the Orange River.<sup>22</sup>

These shortcomings reflected a wide range of contributory factors. The burghers were much more variable as military fighters than the image portrayed by Conan Doyle and his ilk. Some of the urban-based fighters from Pretoria and Johannesburg were neither proficient horsemen nor skilled marksmen, and few possessed any military training or sense of discipline. Many had little appetite for the drive into southern Natal, prompting Joubert to complain about the scale of desertion from his ranks and forcing Pretoria to send burghers back to the front and to restrict railway travel to those who had leave passes.<sup>23</sup> Moreover burghers, though generally competent at fighting from prepared positions, did not always relish combat - only about half of the 2,000 intended to attack the Platrand took part (6 January 1900), and panic and ill discipline gripped many burghers in their withdrawal from Modder River (28 November 1899). Nor were all their officers energetic, innovative, and disciplined in following orders (notably General F. A. Goble in his half-hearted attack on Rhodes Drift and Fort Tuli).<sup>24</sup> The real weakness, though, derived from a lack of strategic purpose shared between the two republics, and a doubtful capacity to do more than disrupt and delay British relief columns. Doubtless the Boers might have inflicted more disruption and delay than they did, but they lacked the capacity to occupy, and hold, large tracts of Natal and Cape Colony in November 1899, possibly for trading at a peace conference. As *The Times* historian observed, 'the strategic mobility of the Boers, especially at this stage of the war, was far less than their tactical mobility'.<sup>25</sup> It is not surprising that the Boers, having targeted the garrisons at Mafeking and Kimberley at the outset of the war, and sought their surrender, should persist in these investments. Later when they trapped 13,500

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<sup>22</sup> Pakenham, *Boer War*, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 170; see also Judd and Surrige, *Boer War*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>24</sup> Judd and Surrige, *Boer War*, pp. 94-5; Wessels, 'Afrikaners at War' in Gooch (ed.), *Boer War*, pp. 87-91; on the Modder retreat, see Edward M. Spiers, *Letters from Kimberley: Eyewitness Accounts from the South African War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2013), pp. 69-70.

<sup>25</sup> Amery (ed.), *The Times History*, vol. 2, p. 262.

British troops in Ladysmith, the surrender of this force seemed a prize of massive, strategic proportions.

The three sieges had of course a major impact upon British strategy. As the arrival of General Sir Redvers Buller in Cape Town coincided with news of the humiliating events of 'Mournful Monday', he could hardly persist with his original plan of driving his army corps north towards Bloemfontein. He divided his command into its component divisions: the 1<sup>st</sup> Division under Lord Methuen would move towards Kimberley, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division under Sir Cornelius F. Clery would move to Natal, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, commanded by Sir William Gatacre, would advance upon the eastern Cape.<sup>26</sup> Buller soon took command of the forces in Natal and in due course all three divisions suffered appalling defeats.

At the darkest hour after the débâcle at Colenso when Buller sent defeatist telegrams to Ladysmith and London, saying 'I consider that I ought to let Ladysmith go and to occupy a good position for the defence of southern Natal',<sup>27</sup> he received an incandescent response. Lord Lansdowne, the secretary of state for war, replied that 'The abandonment of White's force and its consequent surrender is regarded by the Government as a national disaster of the greatest magnitude.'<sup>28</sup> Queen Victoria was equally appalled: she 'thought it was quite impossible to abandon Ladysmith'.<sup>29</sup> In effect Ladysmith, the most strategically significant of the three sieges, had become a focal point of national honour: its relief had to be secured.

The other sieges had their challenges, too. Defending "Diamond City" may have been necessary but it was somewhat embarrassing for the war party in the United Kingdom. The relatively muted celebrations that followed Kimberley's relief paled by comparison with the frenzied jubilations after Ladysmith's relief, and the even more remarkable response after Mafeking's relief. The bittersweet reaction was aptly summarised by

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<sup>26</sup> Ian F. W. Beckett, 'Buller and the Politics of Command' in Gooch (ed.), *Boer War*, pp. 41-55 at p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> The National Archives (TNA), WO 108/399, Sir Redvers Buller telegrams of 15 December 1899, nos. 53 and 54.

<sup>28</sup> TNA. WO 108/399, Lord Lansdowne to Buller, 16 December 1899, no. 57.

<sup>29</sup> George E. Buckle, *The Letters of Queen Victoria. Third Series, A Selection from Her Majesty's Correspondence and Journal between the Years 1886 and 1901*, 3 vols., (London: John Murray, 1930-32), vol. 3, p. 435.

the sour comment of the *Bristol Mercury*: 'At last Mr. Rhodes and his diamonds are safe.'<sup>30</sup>

Mafeking, if by no means an embarrassment at the time, has appalled more radical and post-colonial writers, with Brian Gardner leading the revisionist critique. He asserted that the two sides 'had come together, almost as if hypnotized; the one timidly sacrificing its freedom and inviting investment; the other bewildered, unsure, surrounding a bait of the desirability of which it was not even certain'. Mafeking, Gardner insisted, served purposes that were bereft of strategic rationale: 'it was a chance of a lifetime' for Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, the British commanding officer, and suited the character of the investing forces, 'who were by nature cautious and by instinct unwilling to take part in a clash of arms'. The result was 'perhaps the most casually conducted and jauntily withstood siege in modern history ... at times it hardly took on the characteristics of a siege at all'.<sup>31</sup>

If the three sieges were hardly dynamic affairs, lacking sustained assaults, tight blockades or dramatic breakouts, they reflected the predicaments of the besieged (other than the large body of troops in Ladysmith) and the culture of their adversaries. As the besieging forces set the tempo in any siege, the best opportunity to storm a beleaguered position was usually at the outset before defences, including observation and alarm systems, were fully prepared; command, control and communication systems developed; and the morale and confidence of the attacking forces was at its peak. In all three sieges the Boers spurned these opportunities not least at Kimberley, which was probably the most vulnerable to 'a determined assault by disciplined men'.<sup>32</sup> Fear of crossing ground seeded with dynamite mines appears to have been a factor in Mafeking and Kimberley<sup>33</sup> but this was only a derivative of a risk-averse culture. As Hillegas argued,

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<sup>30</sup> 'Kimberley Reached', *Bristol Mercury*, 17 February 1900, p. 5: on the muted celebrations, see Spiers, *Letters from Kimberley*, pp. 148-50.

<sup>31</sup> Brian Gardner, *Mafeking: A Victorian Legend* (London: Cassell, 1966), p. 54; on the supposedly 'senseless' siege see also Michael Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell and the Origins of the Boy Scout Movement* (London: Collins, 1986), p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice and M. H. Grant (eds.), *History of the War in South Africa*, hereafter *Official History*, 4 vols. (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1906-10), vol. 2, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> Georges de Villebois-Marcuil, *War Notes. The Diary of Colonel Villebois-Mareuil from November 24, 1899 to April 4, 1900* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1902), p. 196; see also Spiers, *Letters from Kimberley*, p. 173 and *Letters from Mafeking*, pp. 59-60.



Men who follow the most peaceful pursuits of life value their lives highly.

They do not assume great risks even if great ends are to be attained. The majority of Boers were farmers who saw no glory in attempting to gain a great success, the attainment of which made it necessary that they should risk their lives.<sup>34</sup>

The consequences were all too apparent whenever assaults were mounted. The battle for Platrand (6 January 1900) was hampered not merely by shortfalls in attacking numbers but also, as General Ben Viljoen recalled, because 'The attack was not properly conducted owing to jealousy amongst some of the generals and there was not proper co-operation.'<sup>35</sup> When the Boers besieging Kimberley eventually received a Long Tom gun (7 February 1900), the French artilleryist, Colonel Georges de Villebois-Mareuil saw this as a splendid opportunity to mount an assault, combining artillery and riflemen. 'The Boer generals', though, refused to march, and chafing at 'their heedlessness', he bemoaned their lack of 'military instinct.... They are always having to deliberate with a neighbour, and it is ever the neighbour who refuses to march. I consider, therefore, that my plan is ruined...'.<sup>36</sup> At least this heedlessness avoided the disaster that befell Commandant Sarel Eloff when he commanded the belated attack on Mafeking (12 May 1900). His troops penetrated through the Barolong stadt in three columns before finding that promised support was not forthcoming. Although some men fought their way out, ten were killed, 19 wounded, and 108 surrendered.<sup>37</sup>

Instead of storming their targets the Boers relied upon long-range bombardments, mostly by artillery but also by rifle fire, particularly at Mafeking, a small isolated town bereft of natural defences. Initially the Boers expected an immediate impact from their weaponry. After the first five-hour bombardment of Mafeking on 16 October, they sent an emissary to request the town's surrender 'to avoid further bloodshed', prompting Baden-Powell's memorable reply: 'But we haven't had any yet.'<sup>38</sup> The relatively mild

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<sup>34</sup> Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*, p. 130.

<sup>35</sup> General Ben Viljoen, *My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War* (London: Hood, Douglas & Howard, 1903), p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> De Villebois-Mareuil, *War Notes*, pp. 219, 221-22.

<sup>37</sup> Spiers, *Letters from Mafeking*, pp. 125-30.

<sup>38</sup> National Army Museum (NAM), 1968-10-42, Baden-Powell diary, 16 October 1899.

effects of the cannonade reflected the tendency of shells either to fall harmlessly on the veld or in the considerable distances between buildings, and the remarkably wide streets, or to pass straight through the 'soft' mud-bricked buildings, and detonate, if at all, when they burrowed into the sandy ground. In each of the sieges soldiers and civilians found protection in bombproof shelters dug into the ground, following alerts from improvised alarm systems.

Direct hits, nonetheless, had devastating effects; they damaged buildings, inflicted death and injury (most notably in Ladysmith), and compounded the psychological impact of the regular shelling upon soldiers and civilians alike. Even worse only Ladysmith possessed two naval 4.7-inch guns, with which to engage the enemy in long-range shelling and thereby boost morale by retaliating-in-kind. In each siege the British guns were outranged by their Boer counterparts, particularly so in Mafeking, and supplies of ammunition had to be husbanded carefully. Although engineers in Kimberley and Mafeking manufactured their own guns, the "Long Cecil" and the "Wolf" respectively, the balance of advantage always lay with the Boers. None of the besieged communities had shells to match the 94-lb shell of the long-range 155mm Creusot guns, known as 'Long Toms'. These burst and showered steel fragments but the Boers only had four of these guns: three were employed initially at Ladysmith, one for several months at Mafeking and one in the last week at Kimberley.<sup>39</sup>

Disease produced far more casualties than the effects of the shelling. Each of the besieged communities had to endure rationing, and an increasingly unbalanced and diminishing diet, with poor water in Ladysmith spreading water-borne diseases such as typhoid fever (enteric) and dysentery. During the siege the Intombi hospital buried 600 patients, 510 from enteric or dysentery and only 59 from wounds.<sup>40</sup> Horseflesh was consumed in each siege, and imaginative cuisine embellished the diet of white and black citizens alike: Captain Tyson's soup in Kimberley and Sowens porridge in Mafeking. Anxiety about the ability to sustain these food supplies, coupled with uncertainty about the imminence of relief, particularly after the defeats of "Black Week"

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<sup>39</sup> Louis Changuion, *Silence of the Guns: The History of the Long Toms of the Anglo-Boer War* (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> *Official History*, vol. 2, pp. 577, 600 and 655.

and the disaster at Spion Kop, led to pressure on members of the black communities to leave Kimberley and Mafeking.<sup>41</sup>

Despite all their similarities there were important differences between the three sieges. Although Ladysmith was overlooked by significant hills, it had an inner ring of smaller but defensible hills, and in the crucial battle of Platrand, British regular soldiers resisted courageously when Wagon Hill and Caesar's Camp came under attack. They suffered 424 casualties, 175 of which were killed or died of their wounds,<sup>42</sup> a level of sacrifice that eclipsed all the losses from sorties out of Kimberley and Mafeking. In Ladysmith, too, the regular garrison was significantly larger than the civilian community and so civil-military tensions were never as acute as they would become in Kimberley, where Lieutenant-Colonel Robert G. Kekewich commanded a tiny garrison of about 550 regular troops (400 Loyal North Lancashires, a detachment of 21 mounted infantry from the same regiment, some 100 Royal Artillery and 50 Royal Engineers). Within a town whose population had swollen to nearly 50,000 with refugees, Kimberley's defences relied upon colonial volunteers and a town guard, supported by the resources of the De Beers Consolidated Mines, a company founded by Cecil John Rhodes. The 'considerable friction' that developed between Rhodes and the military authorities in Kimberley became a 'notorious' feature of the siege, prompting Conan Doyle to observe that 'Colonel Kekewich, and his chief staff officer, Major O'Meara, were as much plagued by intrigue within as by the Boers without.'<sup>43</sup>

Quite different challenges faced Colonel Baden-Powell (B-P), who had only 20 regular officers with him in Mafeking. Even before the Boer ultimatum had expired, the town had accumulated vast stocks of supplies and begun the construction of its defences. In the ensuing siege B-P relied upon colonial volunteers, mounted police, a town guard, and armed blacks and 'coloureds' to defend their own communities and livestock. Facing desperate odds in the first month of the siege, he had to deceive, deter, and at times dumfounded an enemy by his diplomacy and aggressive defence – a series of forays or 'kicks', coupled with firm resistance when attacked. In commanding the siege successfully for 217 days, he survived a defeat at Game Tree Fort (26 December 1899), mastered the demands of civil-military relations, prevailed

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<sup>41</sup> Spiers, *Letters from Kimberley*, pp. 111-12n6, 117 and *Letters from Mafeking*, pp. 96-99; see also Tim Jeal, *Baden-Powell* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), pp. 260-77.

<sup>42</sup> *Official History*, vol. 2, p. 570.

<sup>43</sup> Conan Doyle, *Great Boer War*, pp. 302-03.

in an intricate form of trench warfare, defeated a major Boer assault, and emerged as the first British hero of the war. By comparison with White and Kekewich, Baden-Powell proved a robust, energetic, and charismatic commanding officer. This has not spared him from excoriating criticism for taking part in a siege instead of operating in the field (for which he lacked artillery, transport and medical support), his treatment of blacks, and his post-war distortions of the siege record.<sup>44</sup>

So what do the eyewitness accounts of the sieges, mainly letters but some diaries and interviews, all uncensored, and often published in the metropolitan, provincial and colonial press, add to the existing record? Only a minority of the material appeared during the sieges but it found an outlet due to the “porous” nature of the sieges and the desperate interest in the fate of the beleaguered communities. News passed through enemy lines via black runners in all three sieges, despatch riders from Kimberley,<sup>45</sup> and later in official communications between the besieged and their relief forces via heliograph from Ladysmith and Kimberley, aided by searchlights at night from Kimberley. Most of the eyewitness accounts appeared after the sieges had ended, testifying to the insatiable interest in these events, especially local involvement in the siege and relief operations, and an appreciation of frank and graphic assessments that embellished the bland accounts in official despatches.<sup>46</sup>

Many of these correspondents confirmed the critical value of the railway and its accompanying telegraph. The sieges began whenever the Boers severed these links north and south of the three towns but in each instance the railways had brought in soldiers, guns, ammunition, supplies, and refugees, and the pre-stocking of food that proved invaluable in each of the sieges. The railways had also removed women and children from Mafeking before the siege and an ambulance train carrying wounded officers and men from Ladysmith.<sup>49</sup> In both Kimberley and Mafeking railway corps were

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<sup>44</sup> Gardner, *Mafeking*, pp. 39, 42, 54, 129, 212-13, 229-30; Richard Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class: Working Class Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War: 1899-1902* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 132; Piers Brendon, *Eminent Edwardians* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1981), pp. 226-7; and Pat Hopkins and Heather Dugmore, *The Boy: Baden-Powell and the Siege of Mafeking* (Rivonia: Zebra, 1999).

<sup>45</sup> R. J. McHugh, *The Siege of Ladysmith* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1900), pp. 19 and 89; Gardner, *Mafeking*, p. 99; Lieut.-Colonel W. A. J. O'Meara, *Kekewich in Kimberley: Being An Account of the Defence of the Diamond Fields October 14<sup>th</sup> –February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1900* (London: Medici Society, 1916), p. 57; and Brian Gardner, *The Lion's Cage* (London: Arthur Barker, 1969), pp. 37-9.

<sup>46</sup> Edward M. Spiers, 'Military correspondence in the late nineteenth century press', *Archives*, vol. 32, no. 116 (2007), pp. 28-40.

<sup>49</sup> 'Experiences of a Nurse', *Leicester Chronicle*, 23 December 1899, p. 4.

formed to protect valuable railway property and operate armoured trains in support of the early sorties from the towns. In Mafeking, though, the railway proved of continuing significance: a defence rail was created to protect the north-eastern portion of the town. Over 200 tons of rails were used to create shell-proof shelters; an accumulated store of 20,000 lbs. of meal fed the black railway staff for three months; and 115 armed staff, who served throughout the siege in the railway division, protected part of the town and railway stock, including 18 locomotives, valued at £120,000. Various railway engineers formed an ordnance workshop, which produced the 5-inch howitzer, "Wolf", while specialists kept the overhead tank filled for watering horses. Plumber Smith and his assistants serviced all the pumps around Mafeking, and railway ex-servicemen manned three machine guns.<sup>50</sup>

Correspondents described, too, how successful sorties became memorable events in each siege, bolstering morale and unsettling the enemy. All the commanding officers approved such operations but aborted them whenever they incurred significant casualties (Game Tree Fort for Mafeking, Carter's Ridge for Kimberley and Surprise Hill for Ladysmith). Ironically Ladysmith, despite the size of its garrison, mounted only two sorties. The first involved a night assault on Gun Hill (7/8 December 1899) which was extremely successful, removing a breechblock from a Long Tom and capturing a gun sight and a machine gun for very few casualties. Although the second assault on Surprise Hill (10 December 1899) foundered after a Boer counter-attack, the losses – 20 dead, 38 wounded and six missing – should easily have been absorbed by a garrison of Ladysmith's size.<sup>51</sup> White, however, was reluctant to keep pressing the enemy on the surrounding hills.

Conversely Kekewich and Baden-Powell, commanding much smaller garrisons, tried to defend their towns in a vigorous and resolute manner. They probed the enemy's positions to ascertain the strength of its dispositions and to harass those within reach of co-ordinated assaults, whether gun emplacements or advanced entrenchments. While these operations, sometimes accompanied by armoured trains, lifted the spirits

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<sup>50</sup> Brenthurst Library, Vyvyan Mss., MS.147/5/1/40, Captain J. R. More, 'Siege of Mafeking, 1899-1900', n.d.

<sup>51</sup> A 4.7-inch howitzer was destroyed on Surprise Hill (10 December 1899), *Official History*, vol. 2, p. 549. On Gun Hill, see Archie Hunter, *Kitchener's Sword-Arm: The Life and Campaigns of General Sir Archibald Hunter* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1996), pp. 131-2.

internally,<sup>52</sup> they were inherently risky and tactically limited ventures. At most the raiding party could break into an enemy position but the party was always far too small, and lacked sufficient support to hold any captured objective: they were effectively hit and run raids. As soon as the costs of these undertakings exceeded their benefits, the sorties had to be abandoned as in Kimberley after Carter's Ridge (28 November 1899), and in Mafeking after Game Tree Fort (26 December 1899). This was partly on account of the overall losses - 22 dead and 28 wounded at the former; 24 dead, 22 wounded and three missing at the latter - but also after the loss of irreplaceable officers (Major H. Scott Turner at Carter's Ridge, Captain Ronald J. Vernon and two others at Game Tree Fort, with the dashing Captain Charles FitzClarence among the wounded). As expectations had risen after earlier successes, morale plummeted in the aftermath: Lieutenant H. B. Gemmell (Bechuanaland Rifles) struggled to describe 'the gloom which fell over everybody when it was known how many were lost [at Game Tree Fort]. No officer in the garrison would have been more missed than poor Vernon, whose good fellowship and unvarying courtesy had endeared him to everyone.'<sup>53</sup>

The wild oscillation of feelings reflected Thomas Pakenham's observation that 'A siege is a war in microcosm, expressed in heightened, theatrical form. Boredom, discomfort, anxiety, funk, bravery, hope, humiliation – above all, discomfort and boredom.'<sup>54</sup> Barely a month had passed in Mafeking when John R. Algie, the town clerk, bemoaned the 'monotony of the thing' and the lack of 'official or authentic news from the outside world'. By 8 December 1899 he was still convinced that 'the vast majority of our Garrison [presumably the town guard in which he served] have not yet fired a shot' while the 'Dutch have not the heart to make anything like a plucky determined attack...'.<sup>53</sup> By Christmas Day Lieutenant W. Gordon Grant (Kenilworth Defence Force) wrote from Kimberley that we are 'getting tired of this inactivity, and wishing that something would happen. Even an attack would be welcomed, just to break the monotony...'.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> A. M. Crauford, 'A Nurse's Diary in Besieged Mafeking', *Crompton's Magazine of Fiction*, vol. 16 (1900), pp. 57-68 and vol. 17 (1901), pp. 37-42, 109-19, 245-7, 285-92, 396-401 and 488-94, at p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> 'The Siege of Mafeking', *Ayr Advertiser*, 23 August 1900, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Pakenham, *Boer War*, p. 265.

<sup>53</sup> Brenthurst Library, 'The Mafikeng Siege Diary of John Ronald Algie (town clerk) 1899-1900', transcript copy, 17 November and 8 December 1899, pp. 45 and 62.

<sup>54</sup> 'Besieged in Kimberley', *Northern Scot and Moray & Nairn Express*, 31 March 1900, p. 6.

Initially the shelling had alarmed the civilians, particularly the women (if not the children, who often ran out after the shells had landed to collect fragments). The shelling of the convent and hospital in Mafeking, funeral processions in Kimberley, and women and children generally, caused outrage and deep enmity towards the enemy. As the Manx lady complained from Kimberley:

The Boers did not try to fight our soldiers. Oh dear, no! They did not fire on our defence works, nor yet did they come out of their hiding places and fight as Englishmen do, but kept under cover, and tried to kill defenceless women and children, and otherwise starve them to death, while they fed on the fat of the land.<sup>55</sup>

Apart from those who were so unlucky that they suffered a direct hit, that is nine persons killed and 22 injured from the 8,000 shells poured into Kimberley,<sup>56</sup> responding to alarms and taking shelter became part of the grim routine. The participants wrote about their mounting privations, including the scale and quality of the rations, with soldiers in Ladysmith probably suffering the most, as well as social tensions and desperate hopes for relief. Writing from Ladysmith on 6 February 1900, Lieutenant Guy Reynolds (5<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards) complained about living 'almost entirely on horseflesh and 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> biscuits a day. I don't care much for horseflesh. It is rather sweet, and generally very tough, though ox is not much better in that respect...'.<sup>57</sup> Even worse was the strain of mounting guard amid the utter squalor of trench life in Ladysmith: as a sergeant in the Gordon Highlanders recalled,

Scarcely a man escaped from diarrhoea and dysentery, and some pitiable sights were to be seen ... these men drawing themselves, or crawling outside their crude places of abode to make for the w.c.s but never getting the length, the blood and slime running and leaving traces here and there and everywhere all the time. These were the men who had to fight for Ladysmith....

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<sup>55</sup> 'Horrors of the Siege', *Isle of Man Weekly Times*, 16 June 1900, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Official History*, vol. 2, p. 69.

<sup>57</sup> 'Letters from the War', *Warrington Guardian*, 31 March 1900, p. 2.

If we worked till 1.30 a.m. or 2 a.m. in a drenching rain and black darkness, and had then to be turned out at 3 a.m., you may guess what comfort, what rest, the hour in between afforded, with diarrhoea, dysentery, fever, etc. on you, and pained with torn and bleeding arms and legs....<sup>58</sup>

Social tensions erupted periodically in Kimberley and Mafeking, both frontier towns with minorities sympathetic to the Boers. Baden-Powell, ever concerned about espionage and the seepage of information to the enemy, incarcerated at least thirty suspects in gaol and lost four men through desertion to the enemy.<sup>59</sup> Residents in both towns wrote of profiteering and hoarding by shopkeepers, of military raids upon offending shops, and of panics by customers. As a Kimberley resident remarked, 'The scenes at the butchery every morning beggar description. The crush is awful, and several ladies have had to go home minus skirts, which have been torn off getting through the door.'<sup>60</sup> Similarly in Mafeking when Ben Weil's store was allowed to sell certain articles at exorbitant prices, Mrs. Gustavus Simmonds described how 'The crush outside the store was so great that women fainted, and some were waiting for hours and then unable to get in.'<sup>61</sup>

More serious were the tensions inside the cramped and overcrowded hospital facilities. Infant mortality rates soared among the white and black communities in Kimberley, while the Intombi hospital with its 300 beds on a neutral site near Ladysmith struggled to cope with 10,688 patients throughout the siege. Meanwhile the tiny hospital in Mafeking found itself under fire on several occasions. Its overwrought staff, treating far too many patients, became bitterly divided, and feuded with members of the railway community, compelling Baden-Powell to intervene.<sup>62</sup>

As these tensions were coupled with the grinding monotony, a pervasive sense of isolation, and grumbling about the lack of news or the prospect of relief, Mafeking diarists summarised their feelings. Nurse Crauford, writing at the end of February, claimed that 'There is little news to write – just the same old thing each day – shelling

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<sup>58</sup> 'Letters From A Ladysmith Defender to Friends in Crief', *Strathearn Herald*, 21 April 1900, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Spiers, *Letters from Mafeking*, pp. 81 and 113.

<sup>60</sup> 'Diary of the Siege of Kimberley', *Alnwick and County Gazette*, 31 March 1900, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> 'Lady's Letter from Mafeking', *Mansfield Chronicle*, 18 May 1900, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Official History*, vol. 2, pp. 69 and 577; Spiers, *Letters from Kimberley*, p. 170; *Letters from Ladysmith*, p. 175 and *Letters from Mafeking*, pp. 88-9.



and sniping, grumbling sometimes, and working always.<sup>63</sup> Algie, when writing on 6 March 1900, asserted that the ‘townspeople are getting sick of this tiresome monotony. They think it high time the authorities made some determined attempt to effect relief.’<sup>64</sup> In these circumstances any form of distraction was welcome whether sports, concerts or amateur theatricals. In Mafeking, the most remote location and therefore the last siege likely to be relieved, distractions were especially important and a pivotal element in civil-military relations. Held on Sundays when the Boers rarely shelled the town, these pastimes included cricket, football and athletics followed by a host of entertainments: agricultural and horticultural exhibitions, a siege baby show, gymkhanas, dances, concerts, and a siege exhibition. Baden-Powell proved the consummate showman, starting with his songs, piano playing, recitations, and prize-winning sketches. ‘Our Colonel’, wrote a man from Eyemouth, ‘was always to the fore with a comic rendering, which always went down well with a very appreciative audience.’<sup>65</sup> Corporal Charles Rose (Protectorate Regiment) remembered B-P keeping ‘his audience laughing until the tears ran down their cheeks. His monologues were delightfully amusing ... Baden-Powell’, he claimed, was ‘a great commander’ but ‘even greater as a comedian’.<sup>66</sup>

Radical critics, though impressed by B-P’s showmanship, have still deprecated his qualities as a commanding officer. Seizing on evidence of grumbling, Hopkins and Dugmore claim that ‘The white residents blamed Baden-Powell for all their woes’.<sup>67</sup> This is quite untrue. Mrs. Simmonds blamed not Baden-Powell, without whom ‘we should have been taken long before this’, but the pre-war Cape Ministry: ‘It is entirely owing to them that we are in the plight we are.’<sup>68</sup> Mafekingites appreciated B-P’s ‘dauntless and cheerful manner’,<sup>69</sup> which Nurse Crauford saw as infectious: ‘The Colonel is always so cheerful himself, so we feel we must be the same ...’.<sup>70</sup> They appreciated, too, that many of his ruses annoyed the enemy, not least a dummy truck sent down the railway line and a dummy fort, both of which drew Boer fire from the

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<sup>63</sup> Crauford, ‘A Nurse’s Diary’, p. 245.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Life at Mafeking’, *Western Mail*, 30 April 1900, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> ‘An Eyemouth Man in Mafeking’, *Berwickshire News*, 17 July 1900, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> ‘A Hero of Mafeking: Aberdeenshire Man on the Siege’, (*Aberdeen Evening Express*, 28 August 1900, p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> Hopkins and Dugmore, *Boy*, p. 153.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Extracts from Mafeking Diary’, *Leamington Spa Courier*, 1 September 1900, p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> ‘A Portobello Man in Mafeking’, *Edinburgh Evening News*, 15 August 1900, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Crauford, ‘A Nurse’s Diary’, p. 288.

town.<sup>71</sup> In the seventh month of a weary siege, Bernard Baker, a town guardsman, wrote on 16 April that 'In Baden-Powell we have a capital all round man. His abilities are great. He is not only a soldier, but an artist, author, elocutionist, and diplomat. He is undoubtedly the right man in the right place.'<sup>72</sup> Finally, when B-P faced his greatest test in Eloff's attack, Edward Ross, a local photographer who had always regarded the Colonel as a complex and highly ambitious character, observed him as a commanding officer:

his tone, his self-possession, his command of self, his intimate knowledge of every detail of the defences, where everything at that moment was, and where it was to be brought and put to, shewed [sic] us the ideal soldier ... It was something I would not have missed seeing for anything ... there he stood with his hands behind his back, a living image of a being knowing himself, and his own strength and fearing neither foe nor devil. Such was B.P. the soldier.<sup>73</sup>

Similarly the citizens of Kimberley made their views abundantly clear about how Cecil Rhodes contributed to the defence of the town. If they were not privy to all the meetings between Kekewich and Rhodes, they did not rely, as so many of Rhodes's critics did, upon the partisan diary of Kekewich's devious and intriguing intelligence officer, Major O'Meara.<sup>74</sup> Eyewitnesses commented on what Rhodes did for them rather than what he said or how he behaved. 'Mr. Cecil Rhodes', wrote Mrs. L. E. Lunt, 'has personally been most liberal, and has left nothing undone for the public good.'<sup>75</sup> This liberality extended to raising and paying for the Kimberley Light Horse (864 men by 26 November 1899), the pumping of 300,000 gallons of water into the waterworks reservoir, and relief works in the form of road making for refugees and unemployed mineworkers. 'On these works', Mrs. Rochfort Maquire observed, '13,000 men were employed at a cost of £2,000 a week'.<sup>76</sup> Rhodes made morale-boosting tours of the

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<sup>71</sup> 'Rector of Mafeking in Bristol', *South Wales Daily News*, 24 July 1900, p. 5 and 'A Forest Hill Man in Mafeking', *Kentish Mercury*, 13 July 1900, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> 'At the Siege of Mafeking', *Scarborough News*, 15 June 1900, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> B. P. Willan (ed.), *Edward Ross. Diary of The Siege of Mafeking October 1899 to May 1900* (Cape Town: van Riebeeck Society, 1980), p. 229.

<sup>74</sup> For a summary of the shortcomings and criticisms of O'Meara's diary, see Spiers, *Letters from Kimberley*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>75</sup> 'The Siege of Kimberley. By an Essex Woman Who Lived Through It', *Essex County Chronicle*, 23 March 1900, p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> 'Life in Kimberley during the Siege', *The Times Weekly Edition*, 23 March 1900, p. 184.

defence works, and had the engineers of De Beers company produce a genuine long-range gun, "Long Cecil" for the defence of Kimberley: 'the big gun that Mr Labram made here', wrote Albert Clucas, 'is a beauty. Just think of making a big gun, like that here, and the powder, and shells and all.'<sup>77</sup> Finally, when the Boers brought a Long Tom to shell the town, Rhodes opened up the mines to provide protection: 'we women and children', wrote Jessie Guild, 'through the kindness of the Hon. Cecil Rhodes, had to go down the mines, and we lived there a week, and saw no daylight.'<sup>78</sup>

Rhodes, claimed Thomas Bennet, was 'the life and soul' of the siege. Although he had heard many criticisms of the man, Bennet spoke of him 'as he found him ... a generous-hearted, self-sacrificing man, kind to the poor, and a friend to the working man'. Rhodes, he wrote, found work for blacks not least in tunnel excavation, and his 'generosity was not confined to inhabitants alone. He was also very kind to the Boer prisoners, though they showed little gratitude to their benefactor.'<sup>79</sup> Finding a safe abode for the women and children in the mines, where they were supplied with bedding, food, and other requirements, served a greater purpose. James Rochfort Maguire appreciated that 'Our brave defenders felt ever so much more comfortable when they knew that their womenfolk and little ones were out of harm's reach.' The women, he added, 'were quite happy and comfortable among the diamonds'.<sup>80</sup> None of these impressions meant that Rhodes should be absolved from the charges of selfish and self-indulgent behaviour during the siege, spreading unnecessary alarm at times, and acting in an insubordinate manner towards Kekewich (to whom he was quite vindictive after the siege). But the contribution of Rhodes to the success of the siege was massive, and O'Meara certainly erred in trying to treat Rhodes as just 'an ordinary civilian'.<sup>81</sup>

When relief forces arrived in each town impressions varied enormously. In Ladysmith the spectacle of half-starved men and women gripped the attention: when the besieged forces tried to form a guard of honour, Gunner J. Taylor (19<sup>th</sup> Battery) described how 'It was heart-aching to see them, they were so weak they could hardly

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<sup>77</sup> 'Experiences of the Kimberley Siege', *Isle of Man Weekly Times*, 31 March 1900, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> 'Life in Kimberley', (*Dundee*) *Courier & Argus*, 24 March 1900, p. 4.

<sup>79</sup> 'In A Besieged City', (*Dundee*) *Courier & Argus*, 24 May 1900, p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> 'In Besieged Kimberley', *Daily News*, 21 March 1900, p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> G. A. L. Green, *An Editor Looks Back: South African and Other Memories, 1883-1946* (Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1947), p. 83.

carry their rifle [*sic*].<sup>82</sup> The cavalrymen, who relieved Kimberley, disagreed about the state of the town and citizenry: while some reckoned that they had arrived just in time, and that the rations were steadily getting worse, Captain Cecil W. M. Feilden was not alone in commenting: 'the inhabitants ... did not look nearly in such a starved condition as we had expected'.<sup>83</sup> Mafeking after 217-days investment was in a desperate state: it was 'a miserable hole of a town', wrote Trooper Patrick Maxwell, and 'its few buildings' had been 'tremendously knocked about by shells'.<sup>84</sup> A few men had actually relieved both Ladysmith and Mafeking and could make meaningful comparisons. Lance-Corporal Field reckoned that the water was 'a great difference between Mafeking and Ladysmith': it was like 'drinking poison' when they relieved Ladysmith, 'while the water in Mafeking was as good as ever he had at home in England'.<sup>85</sup> Yet Colonel Frank Rhodes, a veteran of the Ladysmith siege, made the most telling comparison:

It is wonderful what he [B-P] did with so few men and guns ... it made me blush for Ladysmith.... I should say [he is] the best man the country has produced.... Of course he humbugged about the food, but he held Mafeking by his audacity and resourcefulness and it was a totally wonderful show.<sup>86</sup>

This view chimed with the response to the relief of Mafeking across the United Kingdom (other than in Nationalist areas of Ireland) and much of the English-speaking empire. Although the relief of Ladysmith triggered widespread jubilation, these scenes of celebration were eclipsed by the frenzy of Mafeking Night and for days afterwards. It is far too simplistic to describe this "mafficking" as 'pathetic, the relieved reaction of a nation fed on grandiose notions of imperial might but underneath all the glitter, pomp and circumstance, insecure, resentful of international hostility, and embarrassed by the war's early fiascos'.<sup>87</sup> Compared with the early reports of empty battlefields, British defeats, and abject surrenders, a successful siege could be understood as an outcome

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<sup>82</sup> 'A Chagford Artilleryman at Spion Kop', *Totnes Times*, 14 April 1900, p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> 'In Pursuit of Cronje', (*Blackburn*) *Weekly Standard and Express*, 21 April 1900, p. 6; see also Spiers, *Letters from Kimberley*, pp. 137-9.

<sup>84</sup> NAM, Acc. 1974-02-33, Patrick Maxwell Mss., P. Maxwell to Maine, 20 May 1900.

<sup>85</sup> 'A Lance-Corporal and the Relief of Mafeking', *Cheshire Observer*, 25 August 1900, p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> Col. Frank Rhodes, letter, 1 June 1900, in Viscountess S Milner, *My Picture Gallery 1886-1901* (London: John Murray, 1951), p. 194.

<sup>87</sup> Judd and SurrIDGE, *Boer War*, p. 182.

that fitted squarely within a long imperial tradition, and one that could be interpreted as a supreme test of collective character. John Morley, M.P., a Gladstonian Liberal, commended the moral virtues that had been displayed: 'fortitude and endurance, the patience and cheerful courage ... [and] pluck – physical pluck and moral pluck, especially when the two, as in this case, were so admirably combined'.<sup>88</sup> Even the anti-war *Manchester Guardian* applauded the 'qualities of endurance, courage, and devotion' demonstrated by the defenders, who were not professional soldiers, so much as 'average Englishmen in the colonies' challenged in an exceptional way.<sup>89</sup>

Of course they were not all Englishmen but they were ordinary colonists, both men and women, including blacks willing to fight the Boers, and led by a charismatic commander and his staff, who had distinguished themselves over 217 days. In celebrating this achievement, people across the empire were revelling not in a victory like Paardeberg but in a resolute display of defiance, as *The Times* asserted, by 'the common man of the Empire, the fundamental stuff of which it is built, with his back to the wall, fighting overwhelming odds without a thought of surrender ... and at long last coming out proud, tenacious, unconquered, and unconquerable'.<sup>90</sup> Far from lending support to any radical critique of Mafeking, the popular rejoicing all across the English-speaking empire, vindicated the thesis of Jeffrey Richards that the empire at this time was 'above all the People's Empire, a major element in their sense of identity and national pride'.<sup>91</sup> If Ladysmith kept the flag flying, and Kimberley's citizens managed to preserve themselves and their mineral assets, the resilience of Mafeking, a small, outpost at the extremity of the empire, and the panache of its commanding officer, captured the popular imagination like no other. The celebrations were an astonishing but revealing response.

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<sup>88</sup> 'John Morley, M.P., at Cambridge', *Cambridge Independent Press*, 25 May 1900, p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 19 May 1900, p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> *The Times*, 21 May 1900, p. 11.

<sup>91</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Imperialism and Music: Britain 1876-1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 523.