

Publications: A historiography of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902: 120 years of fruitful labour

By Fransjohan Pretorius

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Abstract

In this paper a quick glance is taken at some of the more important themes and works on the Anglo-Boer War that have been published between 1899 and 2019. More or less a thematic approach is followed. Reference is made to published reminiscences, diaries and letters of the war. British literature and Afrikaner nationalist historiography before the 1970s are investigated, followed by a discussion of more objective tendencies. Other themes are topics on military history; biographies and the role of military commanders; politics, particularly on the origins of the war; social history, notably the role and position of Africans, the concentration camps, gender studies, British society, and life of the ordinary combatant; the British colonies in the war; Boer prisoners of war; medical histories; the Peace of Vereeniging; and the aftermath of war. It is concluded that the historiography of the Anglo-Boer War has indeed seen 120 years of fruitful labour. And yet more is to come.

Paper / notes

My most sincere thanks to the Director and the War Museum of the Boer Republics for inviting me to give this key-note address.

The historiography of the Anglo-Boer War is a huge topic, because the Anglo-Boer War is one of the themes in South African history that has attracted the most attention.

From the outset a deluge of books written from a British perspective appeared on the Anglo-Boer War. By 1903 the *United Service Magazine* had already reviewed almost 100 volumes on the conflict. Within five years of the end of the war there was already a large enough number for the *American Historical Review* to give a general assessment of the value of British literature on the topic. By 1909 Volume 7 of *The Times History of the War in South Africa* was able to include a bibliography of 31 pages of published material on the war, most of it in English. However, the significance of the war was soon overtaken by the prominence of both World Wars, with the result that much less was published in Britain in subsequent years.

Most of the English literature in the first half of the 20th century was emphatically subjective and pro-British. The second half of the century saw a much more sober approach, culminating in some important publications with the commemoration of the war between 1999 and 2002. British historians have made a fine contribution to our

knowledge of the war. Significantly, a number of these are indicative of the cooperation of British historians with South African English, Afrikaans and black colleagues.

Now, some observations on **Afrikaner historiography** on the war. The first Boer publication was State Attorney Jan Smuts' pamphlet published in English as *A Century of Wrong*, in October 1899. Between 1900 and 1905 Boer (or Afrikaner) literature on the war initially saw about 24 diaries or war reminiscences, excluding those written by foreign volunteers who had fought with the Boers. The most well-known was General De Wet's memoirs published in 1902 in English as *Three Years War*.

However, in the period between 1906 and 1931 only about ten Boer diaries or reminiscences were published, mainly because Afrikaners were struggling to express themselves succinctly in either Dutch or Afrikaans. By 1925 this situation had improved with the recognition of Afrikaans as an official language (together with English).

With the emergence of a wave of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and the Afrikaner's seizure of political power in 1948, a host of subjective reminiscences and diaries appeared in Afrikaans, mainly on the disaster of the white concentration camps and on Boer heroism on the battlefield. The books by Neethling, *Mag Ons vergeet?* and Steenkamp, *Helkampe*, come to mind.

These publications were used to great effect by Afrikaner leaders to promote Afrikaner nationalism. They were soon joined on the bookshelves by the work of public and academic historians, who saw the war as a struggle for freedom. This included Gustav Preller's, *Jack Hindon, Ons Parool*, and *Talana*, and Scheepers Strydom's *Kaapland en die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*. Afrikaners felt that what they had lost in 1902 they had regained in 1948 with the National Party victory at the polls, to be followed in 1961 by the establishment of a republic outside the British Commonwealth. Rewriting the history of the war from an Afrikaner nationalist perspective was "to set the record straight" and to celebrate the final political victory over the British Empire.

However, with the republic achieved in 1961, the ideological function of the war as a historical driving force began to fade and the war lost its grip on the Afrikaner historical consciousness. Afrikaners experienced social mobility on a large scale as a growing Afrikaner middle class emerged, aided by an economic boom. On the one hand this led to the waning of Afrikaner nationalism, but on the other it fed into a more objective approach by Afrikaner historians to the war.

This new direction was headed by Albert Grundlingh and – if I may be so bold – perhaps myself. The Master's dissertation by Grundlingh on the Boer collaborators with the British, entitled *Die "Hendsoppers" en "Joiners"* was published in 1979, and this was given an English edition in 2001 with the title *The Dynamics of Treason*. Meanwhile my PhD on life on commando during the war was published in Afrikaans in 1991, and the English edition came eight years later. In this work the attempt was to investigate the Boers on commando, warts and all, and it was no coincidence that the chapter on discipline was the longest chapter in the book – because there was such a lack of discipline on commando.

The commemoration of the war (1999-2002) followed in the wake of the Afrikaners' renouncement of power in the democratic South Africa of 1994. Afrikaners now had to

cope with a challenging new political environment. Some Afrikaner historians used this opportunity to write about the war more objectively than before, because it was a period in Afrikaner history for which they did not have to apologize – in stark comparison with the apartheid era. A good example here is Grundlingh's work.

However, it also provided the opportunity for a number of works in continuation of the nationalist paradigm – for example Andries Raath's two volumes entitled *Die Boerevrou 1899-1902*, *Moederleed* and *Kampsmarte*.

Until the 1960s, apart from the Afrikaner emphasis on the suffering in the concentration camps, the historiography of the Anglo-Boer War focused mainly on the **military course** of the conflict, the **role of prominent military commanders** and **political aspects**. Although these issues have by no means been exhausted, historians subsequently began to consider other aspects of the war, thereby dramatically broadening our view. Following research into war and society in Europe and the United States, the primary focus shifted to **social aspects** – the vicissitudes of ordinary civilians in wartime. The war is now seen as a total South African war in which all groups participated; a war that affected all the inhabitants of southern Africa, hence the designation "South African War" favoured by some historians. The new approach has given prime attention to the position, role and experience of black people during the war, and has captured the attention of British, English South African, Afrikaans and black South African historians. Gender is another issue that has aroused interest.

Perhaps the title of the book published after the conference held at the University of South Africa in 1998 – *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking Gender, Race, and Identity in the South African War 1899-1902*, edited by Greg Cuthbertson, Albert Grundlingh and Mary-Lynn Suttie – is the best indication that the paradigms for the historiography of the war have shifted significantly.

Allow me now to continue discussing the historiography of the Anglo-Boer War along **thematic themes**. Firstly, on the **bibliography of the war**. Unquestionably one of the best is *A Bibliography of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, published in 1999 by the War Museum of the Boer Republics and the University of the Orange Free State Library and Information Services, under the editorship of M. C. E. van Schoor. Subsequently in my *The A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War* in 2010 I include a bibliography of 53 pages, arranged according to themes. Most of the titles mentioned there are books written in English.

A number of thought-provoking books have appeared on the **origins of the war**. J.A. Hobson's *The War in South Africa: Its Causes and Effects* (1900) succeeded in setting in motion a lively debate for an entire century, with contributions representing a wide variety of ideologies, including those of G.D. Scholtz, J.S. Marais, Shula Marks, Alan Jeeves, Andrew Porter and Iain R. Smith. The latter's careful analysis, *The Origins of the South African War* (1996), remains the best broad analysis to date.

Many histories have offered a **general overview of the entire war**. The jingoistic works of the likes of H.W. Wilson's *With the Flag to Pretoria* (2 volumes, 1900-1901) and *After Pretoria: The Guerilla War* (1902), and Louis Creswicke's *South Africa and the Transvaal War* (8 volumes, 1900-1902).....

....are equalled in their excessive subjectivity by pro-Boer publications from the European continent, such as the Dutch W.F. Andriessen's *Gedenkboek van den Oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* (1904) and G.L. Kepper's *De Zuid-Afrikaansche Oorlog* (1900).

Louwrens Penning's *De Oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* (3 volumes, 1899-1902) is on a par with Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Great Boer War* (1902) with regard to some balance and depth.

Leo Amery's *The Times History of the War in South Africa* (7 volumes, 1900-1909).....

...and Frederick Maurice and Maurice Grant's *The History of the War in South Africa* (4 volumes, with 4 volumes of maps, 1906-1910, known as *The Official History*), still offer the best military overviews of the war, although they are not free of undue bias for the British.

Meant as an Afrikaner nationalistic antipode to them, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika* (6 volumes, 1969-1996) by J. H. Breytenbach has a pro-Boer bias, but as a reference work it proves as useful as the *Times History* and the *Official History*. However, it does not take the war beyond the middle of 1900.

Thomas Pakenham's *The Boer War* (1979) has played a major role in opening up a renewed interest in the war, particularly in Britain, but also in South Africa and the United States. It is a piece of exceptional literature. Although it is an honest attempt to give a balanced picture, the author remains an observer from within the British lines. A more academic approach is found in editors Peter Warwick and S.B. Spies's *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War* (1980). Bill Nasson's *The South African War* (1999) and its 2010 edition, and Denis Judd and Keith Surridge's *The Boer War* (2003) are also very sound works.

Martin Bossenbroek's *The Boer War* (2018), boasts with an original angle from the memoirs of three prominent people involved in the war

Among the many **published reminiscences, diaries and letters of the war**, some have achieved classical status, none more so than Deneys Reitz's *Commando*. Although originally written in Dutch in 1903 and published in English only in 1929, it is the sparkling reminiscences of a young Boer who went to war at the age of 17. Less well-known is the diary of a youthful anti-hero with a wonderful sense of humour, Roland Schikkerling, entitled *Commando Courageous*. Its publication in South Africa as late as 1964, when the main interest in the Anglo-Boer War had waned, sadly prevented this book from reaching *Commando's* classical status. To complete my choice for the trilogy of Boer greats is the sensitive diary (in Dutch) of the later famous poet, Jan Celliers, published as late as 1978 under the editorship of A. G. Oberholster. Gen. Christiaan de Wet's reminiscences, *Three Years War* (1902), written in less than three weeks while De Wet was on board ship to England shortly after the war, has been a faithful companion to many a student of the war.

Winston Churchill's *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* (1900) can be regarded as the British counterpart to Reitz's epic volume, although Gen. Ian Hamilton, together with V. Sampson, attempted to seize that honour with their *Anti-Commando* in 1931.

In recent years Edward Spiers', *Letters from Ladysmith* (2012), *Letters from Kimberley* (2013) and in 2018 *Letters from Mafeking* are exceptionally scholarly works.

Books on the **military and social history of the combatants** include publications that cover specialized themes. Modern scholarship has produced a number of fine **military** histories, among others *Lord Methuen and the British Army* (1999) by Stephen Miller and *Generaal Louis Botha op die Natalse Front* (1970) by C.J. Barnard. Just off the press is the book by Tian Schutte and Peet Coetzee, entitled *Treinvernielers*, about Boer attacks on the railways in die Transvaal. Railways and the war is a very welcome theme of investigation – in fact, it delights me that there are four papers at this conference on the railways during our war.

Some commendable recent publications that can be defined broadly as **social history** are Diana Cammack's *The Rand at War* (1990); *The Siege of Mafeking* (2 volumes under the editorship of Iain R. Smith, which hosts chapters by historians from both Britain and South Africa, in 2001); Albert Grundlingh's *The Dynamics of Treason: Boer Collaboration in the South African War* (2006); my *Life on Commando during the Anglo-Boer War* (1999); and John Boje's *An Imperfect Occupation* (2016) on the district of Winburg and the war.

The Anglo-Boer War had a profound effect on the adjacent British colonies – **the Cape Colony and Natal**. Rodney Davenport's *The Afrikaner Bond* (1966) remains a classic in this regard, as does J.H. Snyman's *Die Afrikaner in Kaapland* (1973). Johan Wassermann has filled another lacuna with his unpublished D.Phil thesis, "The Natal Afrikaners and the Anglo-Boer War" (2004).

The Anglo-Boer War was of considerable importance to **Australia, Canada and New Zealand**, and several contingents came to South Africa in support of the British army. This, together with the war's influence on local politics, ensured a solid bibliographical contribution. The best examples are Craig Wilcox's *Australia's Boer War* (2002) and Carman Miller's *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War* (1993). The circumstances surrounding Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers have sparked a number of recent anti-imperial Australian publications, including Nick Bleszynski's *Shoot Straight You Bastards! The Truth Behind the Killing of 'Breaker' Morant* (2002) and William Woolmore's *The Bushveldt Carbineers and the Pietersburg Light Horse* (2002). South African Arthur Davey provides a more balanced view in *Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers* (1987). With *One Flag, One Queen, One Tongue: New Zealand, the British Empire and the South African War, 1899-1902*, John Crawford and Ian McGibbon have edited a useful reference work to the Kiwi experience of the war (2003).

With the British empire at the height of its power, the reaction of **British society** to the Anglo-Boer War has been portrayed in a number of excellent works in the last four or five decades. Richard Price looks at working-class attitudes and reactions to the war in *An Imperial War and the British Working Class* (1972); and Arthur Davey gives a broad overview of the British Pro-Boers in the period 1877-1902 (1978).

Religious reaction in Britain is covered inter alia by Greg Cuthbertson's unpublished D.Phil thesis, "The Nonconformist Conscience and the South African War" (1986) and H.H. Hewison (*Hedge of Wild Almonds: South Africa, the Pro-Boers and the Quaker Conscience*, 1989).

Donal McCracken studies the Irish Pro-Boers (1989) and the Irish Brigade that fought on the Boer side (1999); Stephen Miller fills an important gap with his *Volunteers on the Veld: Britain's Citizen-Soldiers and the South African War* (2007).

There is some fine material on **Boer prisoners of war**. S.P.R. Oosthuizen's unpublished thesis on the treatment and life of these Boers is only available in Afrikaans (1975), but Colin Benbow's revised edition of *Boer Prisoners of War in Bermuda* (1982) is quite useful in this regard. In 2010 Elria Wessels's, *Bannelinge in die Vreemde* appeared.

Afrikaner nationalist studies on **the white concentration camps**, in which women are portrayed as victims of the war, flooded the market between the 1930s and 1960s. J.C. Otto's *Die Konsentrasiekampe* (1954) was countered by A.C. Martin's *The Concentration Camps* (1957), which attempts to prove that the British were grossly but unfairly maligned for their conduct of the camps.

S.B. Spies's *Methods of Barbarism?* (1977) on Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener and civilians in the Boer republics brought much-needed balance and has given direction to subsequent publications, among others the five volumes on this topic in Afrikaans by Jan Ploeger (1990), and *Scorched Earth* (2001) under my editorship.

Lately **gender studies on the role of women** in the war have received long-overdue attention. Notable is Liz Stanley (*Mourning Becomes Post/Memory and Commemoration of the Concentration Camps of the South African War*, 2006). Paula Krebs brings *Gender, Race and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War* (1999) into the fray. In 2016 Elsabé Brits made a terrific contribution with *Beloved Traitor*, a biography of Emily Hobhouse.

Elizabeth van Heyningen is known for her excellent book, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History* (2013). Bill Nasson & Albert Grundlingh edited an excellent *The War at Home* in 2013 on women and families in the Anglo-Boer War.

Since Philip Bonner's thesis on the participation of **black people** in the Anglo-Boer War in 1967 aroused interest in this issue, a host of exciting new material has appeared, some of it by black historians. Sol Plaatje's diary (the only thus far found that was kept by a black person during the war) was first published by John Comaroff in 1973. Peter Warwick's *Black People and the South African War* (1983) is still the best overview....

.....and Bill Nasson's *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape* (1991) the best regional monograph. Stowell Kessler made a great contribution with his book *The Black Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War* (published by the War Museum of the Boer Republics in 2012). The Museum also published another title in 2012 under the editorship of Johan van Zijl, Rodney Constantine and Director Tokkie Pretorius – *An Illustrated History of Black South Africans in the Anglo-Boer War*. Authoritative books have appeared on other ethnic groups by Fred Morton (1985), John Laband (2000), and Bernard Mbenga (2002).

The **medical history of the war** is rich with diaries and reminiscences of doctors and nurses who served on the Boer or the British side (or both). J.C. (Kay) de Villiers and Miemie Groenewald have done some sterling work on Boer medical aspects, as has Shula Marks on British nursing in the war. De Villiers' 2 volumes, *Healers, Helpers and Hospitals: A History of Military Medicine in the Anglo-Boer War* (2008) is a monumental contribution. A very, very interesting book is that of Rose Willis, Kay de Villiers & Arnold van Dyk, *Yeomen of the Karoo* (2016) about the Imperial Yeomanry hospital at Deelfontein, a forsaken place in the Karoo.

International interest in the war, particularly in Europe and the United States, has ensured a rich harvest of books on the topic. Ulrich Kröll's *Die Internationale Buren-*

Agitation (1973), which looks at pro-Boer activities in Germany, France and the Netherlands, is sadly only available in German. *The International Impact of the Boer War* (edited by Keith Wilson, 2001) offers some excellent chapters, but an overall binding factor is lacking. Vincent Kuitenbrouwer looks in great depth at Dutch Pro-Boer Propaganda and the war in *A War of Words* (2010).

Biographies of people involved in the war have accumulated steadily. Fine examples include Keith Hancock's biography of Jan Smuts (1962); Tim Jeal's on Robert Baden-Powell (1989)...

.....Roy Macnab's on Gen. Georges de Villebois-Mareuil (1975);Richard Mendelsohn's on Sammy Marks (1991); J. W. Meijer's on Gen. Ben Viljoen (in Afrikaans, 2000)...

....and Brian Willan's on Sol Plaatje (2001). Expect early next year Carel van der Merwe's biography of General Ben Viljoen – a superb contribution.

Important work has been done on **the Peace of Vereeniging**. This includes Sophia du Preez's unpublished thesis in Afrikaans (1986); M.C.E. van Schoor has looked extensively at peace attempts before and during the war, which culminated in the Peace of Vereeniging (*Die Bittereinde Vrede*, 2005). Of great importance as a source for further study is the minutes taken by J.D. Kestell and D.E. van Velden on the peace negotiations between the Boer governments and the two representatives of the British government (Lord Kitchener and Lord Milner), which was published in English in 1912.

My final theme, on **the aftermath of the war**, provides important material on the political and social reconstruction in South Africa after the war. In *A Grand Illusion* (1973) Donald Denoon succinctly looks at the failure of imperial policy in the Transvaal Colony during this period. Unfortunately A.P.J. van Rensburg's probing study on the economic recovery of the Afrikaners in the Orange River Colony is only available in Afrikaans (1967). David Omissi and Andrew Thompson have acted as editors for the authoritative *The Impact of the South African War* (2002).

Military lessons learned from the war are well covered in Jay Stone and Erwin Schmidl's *The Boer War and Military Reforms* (1988) and in R. Williams's *The South African War and Army Reform* (1991). And also in Spencer Jones's *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914* (2012). Most recent on the aftermath of the war is Karel Schoeman's *Imperiale Somer* in Afrikaans (2015).

In conclusion: We have a proud history of books on the Anglo-Boer War, covering a wide range of relevant themes, and the latest publications are mostly at a high level, revealing a balanced and objective historiography. However, we should not be too complacent – more and hard work still needs to be done.

We need to look closely at military case studies, regional social histories, biographies on for example George Benson, Lucas Meyer and Gideon Scheepers, British prisoners of war, and case studies on the black experience.