

The British soldiers' Bloemfontein: impressions and experiences during the time of the British occupation, 13 March – 3 May 1900

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Abstract

After defeating the Boers at Paardeberg, Modder River Pass/Poplar Grove and near Abrahamskraal/Driefontein, Lord Roberts' victorious army of 34 000 soldiers occupied Bloemfontein on 13 March 1900, without encountering any further opposition from the Boers. Roberts planned to continue his advance to Pretoria as soon as possible, but the exhaustion of his troops and the enteric fever (typhoid) epidemic that ensued, forced him to halt in Bloemfontein for more than seven weeks. This presentation, which aims to explore a rather obscure aspect of Bloemfontein's War-time social and military history, will provide a review of the British soldiers' impressions of Bloemfontein's buildings and gardens, shops, and of the town's women. Their experiences of life in Bloemfontein, including the clubs and bars, will be discussed. The focus also falls on how Bloemfontein was transformed from a republican Boer capital to a British Army military base and a British-dominated 'Bobsfontein'. The impact of the enteric fever epidemic will be discussed, and the British soldiers' memories of Bloemfontein, in general, will also receive attention.

Paper / notes

1. Introduction

"There is a something – a something that grows on you as you walk through the streets of the town or saunter about the suburbs. Perhaps it is only the military element to be found to-day [sic] here; or perhaps it is the architecture, the solid utilitarianism of the public buildings, the many bloodred blocks – ah! That is it! It is the redness of Bloemfontein that suggests Aldershot."¹ This is how Edgar Wallace, war correspondent for London's *Daily Mail*, described his impression of Bloemfontein during the time he spent there to report on the Anglo-Boer War (hereafter the War) of 1899 to 1902. Wallace echoed the sentiments of thousands of British soldiers who were stationed in Bloemfontein after Field Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, K.P., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E., V.C., Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in South

¹ E. Wallace, *Unofficial dispatches of the Anglo-Boer War*, p. 181.

Africa² (Fig. 1) occupied the capital of the Orange Free State Boer republic on 13 March 1900.

Wallace's comparison of Bloemfontein with Aldershot, his hometown in England, is surprising. To Wallace, as well as the British soldiers, and also those who had accompanied them, Bloemfontein not only *looked* like home, but strangely also *felt* like home. Instead of a hostile pro-Boer capital, they found a mostly friendly, welcoming and attractive town which reminded them of Britain. After weeks in the open veld, the soldiers were in bad shape but, writes historian Rayne Kruger, their "eyes shone at the sight of gardens, and solid buildings, and women...".³ This stands in stark contrast to their mainly negative experiences of the rest of the Free State republic, which was predominantly hostile territory. For this reason, the soldiers' mostly positive impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein are striking – surprising even – and certainly not typical of the war-time experiences of foreign invaders. In fact, an element of surprise characterized the British soldiers' impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein during the time of the occupation.

After Bloemfontein was occupied it was transformed into a military town teeming with British officers and troops from all walks of British society.⁴ "The streets certainly show traces of the khaki",⁵ H.F.P. Battersby remarked in his memoirs of the War. Republican Bloemfontein became the 'British soldiers' Bloemfontein'. What were the soldiers' first impressions of Bloemfontein on that late summer's day when they marched into town? What did Bloemfontein look like from *their* perspective? How did they experience Bloemfontein during the weeks that followed? The aim of this article is to sketch a picture of Bloemfontein from the point of view of the British soldiers – primarily officers and troops, but also chaplains, medical doctors and other staff who formed part of Lord Roberts' army. The impressions and experiences of the war correspondents – mainly representing British newspapers and weeklies⁶ – who had accompanied Lord Roberts on his campaign are also relevant because they often echo the soldiers' sentiments. The objective is not only to write *about* the British soldiers, but also to let

² For biographical notes on Frederick Sleigh Roberts (1832-1914), see A. Wessels (ed.), *Lord Roberts and the war in South Africa, 1899-1902*, pp. 336-337.

³ R. Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray: the story of the Boer War*, p. 267.

⁴ Soldiers from British colonies, including Australia, Canada, India and New Zealand, also fought on Britain's side, but they were in the minority.

⁵ H.F.P. Battersby, *In the web of a war*, p. 102.

⁶ Some war correspondents wrote for American, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand newspapers.

them speak for themselves where necessary. This approach not only provides a glimpse of “the life and language of Thomas Atkins”,⁷ but also allows an intimate look into the world of Bloemfontein – the British soldiers’ Bloemfontein – during the time of the occupation.

Most British soldiers were literate or semi-literate, and many kept diaries or journals during their time in South Africa. According to Lance-Corporal J.B. Lloyd, most diaries, especially those kept by ordinary soldiers, were “written on the spot”.⁸ This means that the diaries were written not only during the time when the events referred to were actually taking place, but also often in difficult circumstances, as opposed to what Lloyd described as the “luxurious environment of the officers’ mess”.⁹ After the British soldiers returned to Britain, several diaries and journals were published. Some were only printed “for private circulation”¹⁰ or, as in the case of Lionel Curtis, member of the Inns of Court Volunteers (attached as a company to the C.I.V.¹¹), “for my friends to read”.¹² In some instances, soldiers who did not keep diaries wrote their memoirs once they were back home. The soldiers’ diaries, memoirs and correspondence comprise intimate eyewitness accounts of the War, since – as Francis Fremantle (a medical doctor) wrote in his memoirs – these records are “description[s] of personal experiences and impressions”.¹³ Although the diaries and memoirs are personal records, they are also valuable and useful historical records of a watershed event not only in Bloemfontein’s history, but also in the history of South Africa. The British soldiers’ impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein during the British occupation of 13 March to 3 May 1900 are a crucial but still relatively obscure aspect of this event. Therefore, these impressions and experiences, as well as the circumstances that shaped them, need to be explored. They also represent a so-called ‘history from below’, because they reflect the opinions of the ordinary soldiers and junior officers, which often differed from the views of senior officers. This study aims to contribute

⁷ J.B. Lloyd, *One thousand miles with the C.I.V.*, pp. 123-124. For more on Thomas Atkins, see Section 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

¹⁰ Anon, *Campaigning in South Africa, 1900-1901*, p. 1.

¹¹ City Imperial Volunteers. For more details, see Section 2. Lionel George Curtis (1872-1955) saw action during the first few months of 1900, before returning to South Africa in October 1900 to become a secretary of Sir Alfred (later Lord) Milner and one of the first men to join what became known as “Milner’s Kindergarten”. C.J. Beyers (ed.-in-chief), *Dictionary of South African Biography*, vol. 5, pp. 158-159.

¹² L. Curtis, *With Milner in South Africa*, p. viii.

¹³ F.E. Fremantle, *Impressions of a doctor in khaki*, p. viii.

towards a better understanding of an episode of Bloemfontein's war-time history from the British soldiers' perspective.

Apart from the above-mentioned diaries and memoirs, other sources also provide useful information on the subject. Local newspapers such as the pro-British *The Friend*¹⁴ and *The Bloemfontein Post* are valuable primary sources that provide details not only on newsworthy events, but also on life in Bloemfontein as seen from the British soldiers' perspective. The minutiae of the soldiers' social lives as described in these newspapers add texture to historical facts. The same may be said of the private collections and other archival records available in the Free State Provincial Archives and other repositories. Often a single sentence from a letter or manuscript is all that is needed to substantiate an argument. Other useful and valuable sources on the subject include the rich body of secondary works on the Anglo-Boer War published during the past century. All these sources were integrated and collated to reconstruct a picture of Bloemfontein from the British soldiers' point of view.

The British soldiers' impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein in the period 13 March to 3 May 1900 (i.e. from the date of occupation to the day when Lord Roberts led most of his soldiers out of the town and northwards towards the Transvaal) may be divided into various categories. The content of this article is structured accordingly. Firstly, the necessary background information concerning the British soldiers and what motivated them to join Britain's war effort against the two Boer republics is provided. This is followed by a description of Bloemfontein and its residents on the eve of the occupation. The main body of the article focuses on the various aspects of the British soldiers' impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein, beginning with the occupation of Bloemfontein on 13 March 1900. The following aspects will be discussed: the soldiers' first impressions of the town and their reception by Bloemfontein's residents on the day of the occupation; the subsequent military take-over of Bloemfontein and the resulting 'anglicisation' of the town; the soldiers' impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein's physical appearance, specifically its buildings and gardens, its clubs and bars, shops, and women; and the everyday social lives of the soldiers during their seven-week stay in Bloemfontein. The article also deals with the enteric fever epidemic

¹⁴ Previously known as *The Friend of the Free State and Bloemfontein Gazette*.

that hit the army of occupation shortly after its arrival in Bloemfontein. In conclusion, a review is provided of the British soldiers' memories of Bloemfontein in general.

2. “To be sure, Great Britain is a great nation”: race patriotism, imperialism and the British soldier

Who were the British soldiers who came to fight in South Africa and ended up in Bloemfontein for seven weeks? In his diary, G.A. Fichardt, a prominent Bloemfontein businessman at the time of the occupation, makes the following comments about the British soldiers who came to fight in South Africa: “...in England a lot of men are picked up at the drinking bars, men who do not know how to make a living, therefore take the Queen’s shilling and enlist and have no other interest as to act in the man slaying machine without knowing the why or wherefor [sic]”.¹⁵ Fichardt was probably referring to members of Britain’s permanent army, the so-called Regular Army, which consisted mostly of working-class men. These soldiers – many of them “coarse Cockney soldiers”¹⁶ – were commonly known as ‘Tommy’s’ after Thomas (Tommy) Atkins, the generic name for an ordinary British soldier. The shortcomings of the Regular Army, initially under the command of General Sir Redvers Buller, became clear during the disastrous ‘Black Week’ of 10-15 December 1899 when the Boers defeated British forces at Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso. A storm of protest erupted in Britain, attributing the defeats to poor discipline. Lord Castletown, who had accompanied Lord Roberts on his campaigns and who later became a member of staff of Bloemfontein’s new Military Governor, noted with concern that “to be sure, Great Britain is a great nation”,¹⁷ but that “now the great nation falls short of duly disciplined Tommy’s”.¹⁸ To address this dire situation which affronted Britain’s pride as the military superpower of the day, the British War Office called upon those whom Lord Castletown referred to as the “‘citizen soldiers’ – the poor despised volunteers they [the British government] have so persistently snubbed and slighted – to come to their aid”.¹⁹ It was decided that a disciplined and able-bodied volunteer citizen force should be created to supplement the demoralised permanent army. Widely publicised calls for enrolment did not go

¹⁵ Free State Provincial Archives (hereafter FSPA): A5/2, G.A. Fichardt, *A voice from Bloemfontein: 46 years’ experience* (diary).

¹⁶ Archive for Contemporary Affairs (hereafter ARCA): PV522, 2/1/2.

¹⁷ FSPA: A364/3, A few specimens of reports for press written in England: the ‘Citizen Soldiers’.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

unanswered; and eventually, 108 849 men joined the auxiliary forces to fight in South Africa. These auxiliary forces, also called the citizen-soldiers, consisted mainly of the City Imperial Volunteers (C.I.V.), an infantry regiment financed by the City of London, and the Imperial Yeomanry, a new organisation which was made up of volunteer cavalry. There was also a third component – the Militia – which was linked to the Regular Army.²⁰

While the members of the Regular Army joined mostly for financial reasons, other factors prompted the volunteers to join the auxiliary forces. They were mostly middle-class men who, apart from reasons related to peer pressure and personal circumstances, joined mainly because they felt it to be their moral duty to do so. Late-Victorian Britain was characterised by an upsurge in patriotism. A growing sense of nationalism, a belief in Anglo-Saxon racial superiority, and also increasing support for Britain's imperial aspirations fuelled what may be termed 'race patriotism'. The British considered themselves to be the natural-born rulers of the 'uncivilised' world. Another characteristic of British society was the increasing emphasis on militarism and on Britain's right to take up arms to defend its global position. The army became a symbol of power and war was presented as glamorous.²¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of Britain's male population supported the British war effort in South Africa. Echoing the sentiments of most pro-war British politicians and newspapers, Lord Castletown was convinced that "...this trumpet-call to arms will awaken the fighting spirit of our race".²² The British government did not find it hard to awaken such a spirit, because the country's national pride was at stake and it had to be defended by military means. The citizen-soldiers enthusiastically responded to the call and considered themselves fit to take on "a bunch of farmers".²³

²⁰ S.M. Miller, *Volunteers on the veld: Britain's citizen-soldiers and the South African War, 1899-1902*, pp. 9, 22; B. Beavan, The provincial press, civic ceremony and the citizen-soldier during the Boer War, 1899-1902: a study of local patriotism, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 37(2), June 2009, pp. 210, 217-218.

²¹ Miller, pp. 9, 10, 22, 23, 37, 74; W. Nasson, Tommy Atkins in South Africa, in P. Warwick (ed.), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, p. 124; S.M. Miller, In support of the "Imperial Mission"? Volunteering for the South African War, 1899-1902, *The Journal of Military History*, 69(3), July 2005, pp. 694-697, 701, 706, 711; Beavan, p. 218.

²² FSPA: A364/3.

²³ Miller, *Volunteers...*, p. 9. See also Miller, In support of..., pp. 692, 703-704.

When Lord Roberts replaced Buller at the end of 1899 as the commander-in-chief of the British forces in South Africa, a large portion of Roberts' army consisted of volunteers. His first objective was to capture Bloemfontein. Lord Roberts arrived in Cape Town on 10 January 1900; and on 11 February 1900, he commenced his advance to Bloemfontein with an army that was nearly 50 000 strong. A significant proportion of this number were volunteers – citizen-soldiers – and it was often *their* impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein that were recorded in diaries, journals and memoirs. The citizen-soldiers' impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein should at all times be viewed against their mostly middle-class background. Furthermore, the fact that a sense of nationalism, a belief in racial superiority, and support for the British government's imperialist aspirations greatly influenced their decision to become soldiers, must also be borne in mind.²⁴

3. “Her Majesty’s Troops are within a short distance of Bloemfontein”: the Orange Free State capital on the eve of the occupation

When the Transvaal served an ultimatum on Great Britain on 9 October 1899, the loyalties of Bloemfontein's residents were challenged. (In accordance with a political as well as a military alliance between the two Boer republics, each would assist the other in times of war.) Since its founding in 1846, Bloemfontein had been a predominantly English town with a pronounced English character. This attribute was further augmented in the 1890s when a new wave of English-speakers settled in Bloemfontein to work on the newly opened Cape Town-Johannesburg railway. When the American traveler James Bryce visited Bloemfontein shortly before the War, he not only found it to be the “most idyllic community in Africa”,²⁵ but also a town where English was spoken and understood by most residents.²⁶ Although they considered themselves ‘Bloemfonteiners’, the loyalty of many English-speakers, particularly the so-called ‘sturdy Britons’, rested with their country of birth. At the same time, however, Bloemfontein was a fairly cosmopolitan town, with Afrikaner, Dutch, German and Jewish residents who all played a significant role in the community. At the outbreak

²⁴ Miller, *Volunteers...*, pp. 102-103; T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, pp. 252-253, 311-313; W.J. de Kock, *Die Anglo-Boere-oorlog, 1899-1902*, in C.F.J. Muller (ed.), *Vyfhonderd jaar Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis*, pp. 345-346.

²⁵ J. Bryce, *Impressions of South Africa*, p. 314.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

of the War in 1899, Bloemfontein's population amounted to about 3500. The black and coloured population numbered about 1500, while the rest were white. Of the latter, about 1100 were English-speaking and about 900 Afrikaans-speaking. By the time of the British occupation, the number of English-speaking whites had diminished, because many had left Bloemfontein for safer shores after the outbreak of hostilities. On the surface, the different groups interacted well, but after the outbreak of the War internal divisions surfaced. While most Afrikaners, Dutch, Germans and some English-speaking residents were pro-republican and in many instances indeed considered themselves 'Republicans', most of the English-speakers, the so-called 'Uitlanders', supported Britain and were called 'Jingoes'.²⁷ Not everyone was happy about the predominance of English-speakers – for example, G.L. Kepper and other pro-republicans regarded Bloemfontein as “de meest jingo-plek”²⁸ in South Africa.

The last few days before the occupation were “anxious days”²⁹ for Bloemfontein's residents. Nobody knew what to expect. Conflicting and confusing reports regarding the movements of the Boers, especially after General P.A. Cronjé's surrender at Paardeberg (27 February 1900), as well as the uncertain position of Lord Roberts' advancing army, created an atmosphere of tension and suspense in the capital. What exactly was Lord Roberts' intention? Would Bloemfontein be bombarded and then occupied or, as in the case of Kimberley, Mafeking and Ladysmith, would it be exposed to the horrors of a siege? Or would the town be spared? All that could be done was to wait and see. Sophie Levisieur, wife of a prominent local Jewish businessman and also a staunch republican, expressed her personal feelings in her diary at the time. Her inscription of Sunday, 11 March mentions a prevailing mood of “fearful excitement”³⁰ in anticipation of the arrival of the advancing British army. Most residents, both republican and pro-British, shared Sophie's mixed feelings.³¹ This uncertainty

²⁷ F.S. Malan, Die Britse besetting van Bloemfontein, 13 Maart 1900, *Historia*, 20(1), May 1975, p. 36; K. Schoeman, *Bloemfontein: die ontstaan van 'n stad, 1846-1946*, pp. 150, 152; K. Schoeman, *The Bloemfontein Club, 1881-1981: a centenary brochure*, pp. 4-6; B. Nasson, *The war for South Africa: the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, p. 182.

²⁸ G.L. Kepper, *De Zuid-Afrikaansche Oorlog: historisch gedenkboek*, p. 228.

²⁹ *The Standard & Diggers' News*, 15.3.1900, p. 3.

³⁰ War Museum of the Boer Republics (hereafter WMBR): 6032/3, Diary of Sophie Levisieur.

³¹ L. Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika: de strijd tusschen Engeland en de verbonden Boeren-Republieken Transvaal en Oranje-Vrijstaat, in zijn verloop geschetst*, p. 651; M.C.E. van Schoor, Bloemfontein gooi tou op!, *Die Taalgenoot*, xix(4), March 1950, p. 35; ARCA: PV522, 2/1/3.

intensified on Monday, 12 March, when a proclamation issued by Lord Roberts, who was already within 31 km of Bloemfontein, reached the town:

“To the Inhabitants of Bloemfontein.

Her Majesty’s Troops are within a short distance of Bloemfontein, and will enter the town in a few days. If no opposition is encountered the town will be protected, and peaceful inhabitants remain unmolested. If opposition is met with, the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief will be compelled to take such steps as may seem to him best to overcome it. This may result in damage to the town and loss of life, which the Field-Marshal would regret. The inhabitants of Bloemfontein are hereby warned to take such measures as will in the event of opposition being offered, tend to the security of their own safety.”³²

Lord Roberts’ proclamation triggered a series of events. During the two days that preceded the occupation, Bloemfontein “presented a strange appearance”³³ as it became the scene of anxious decisions, hasty departures and intense emotions. On Monday, *The Friend of the Free State and Bloemfontein Gazette* confirmed that “a large British column comprised entirely of cavalry are reported to be advancing in the direction of Bloemfontein”.³⁴ That night, President M.T. Steyn and a number of his loyal civil servants, including some English-speakers, left the capital for Kroonstad, while the rest of the town’s residents prepared themselves for the inevitable: either peaceful surrender or, in the case of armed resistance, bombardment.³⁵ Despite the Boers’ brave resistance in the *koppies* (hillocks) to the south of the town, Lord Roberts and his army kept on marching to Bloemfontein through the night; and by the next morning, they were on the town’s doorstep. At about 10:30,³⁶ three war correspondents rode into town to enquire about Bloemfontein’s response to Lord Roberts’ proclamation. They were directed to the Bloemfontein Club, where they found a group of men waiting: Dr B.O. Kellner, the Mayor; Mr J. Collins, the Under-Government Secretary; Mr J.G. Fraser, Member of the Volksraad for Bloemfontein, and Mr W. Ehrlich, a member of the Town Council. These men formed a so-called ‘peace deputation’ that went out to meet Lord Roberts at the point where he and his army were waiting near

³² FSPA: A17/2, Proclamation issued by Lord Roberts, 11.3.1900.

³³ *The Standard & Diggers’ News*, 15.3.1900, p. 3.

³⁴ *The Friend of the Free State and Bloemfontein Gazette*, 12.3.1900, p. 3.

³⁵ M.C.E. van Schoor, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn: regsman, staatsman en volksman*, p. 170.

³⁶ Sources differ regarding the exact time.

Ferreira Siding, to the south of the town. On behalf of Bloemfontein's residents, who were terrified that "their pretty little town"³⁷ might be bombarded, the deputation "surrender[ed] the City".³⁸ Lord Roberts and his men were now in a position to occupy Bloemfontein without any military opposition.³⁹

4. "The entry of a man who led the armed strength of an empire": the occupation of Bloemfontein by Lord Roberts' army

"March 13th: We have fallen into bondage – today the English took possession of the town."⁴⁰ This inscription in the diary of Elsa Levisseur, Sophie's daughter, not only describes her personal impression and experience of the occupation, but her use of the word 'possession' also aptly describes Bloemfontein's fate. Bloemfontein became 'a town possessed'. At approximately 13:00 on Tuesday, March 13, Lord Roberts and his army, which stretched "about a mile [1,6 km] in length",⁴¹ commenced their march into town.⁴² (A total of some 34 000 British soldiers entered Bloemfontein on this date.⁴³) To the onlookers who watched the soldiers from a distance, the unfolding spectacle must have been awe-inspiring and overwhelming at the same time: a seemingly endless procession of khaki enveloped in clouds of dust, almost like wingless locusts,⁴⁴ advancing towards Monument Hill⁴⁵ (Fig. 2). After weeks of "long marches and short rations",⁴⁶ it was a "wreck of an army"⁴⁷ that entered Bloemfontein. In his 'Diary of the Transvaal War', an unknown soldier writes that the long march to Bloemfontein was "worse than an engagement".⁴⁸ He describes how the "...men fall down exhausted, they march until their constitution gives out, then, fall blinded by heat & dust...".⁴⁹ Arriving in Bloemfontein, the troops were half-starved, fatigued, their faces unshaven and burnt by the Free State sun, with their khaki uniforms in tatters; and, in

³⁷ L.S. Amery (ed.), *The Times history of the war in South Africa*, vol. 3, p. 589.

³⁸ FSPA: MBL 1/1/1/9, Minutes: meeting of Bloemfontein Town Council, 15.3.1900, p. 477.

³⁹ *The Friend*, 15.3.1900, p. 4; Anon, *Cassell's history of the Boer War, 1899-1902*, p. 802; Amery, p. 590; Van Schoor, *Bloemfontein...*, p. 35; J.G. Fraser, *Episodes in my life*, pp. 272-273.

⁴⁰ WMBR: 6032/1, Diary of Elsa Levisseur, p. 76.

⁴¹ Anon, *Cassell's...*, p. 803.

⁴² Anon, *South Africa despatches*, vol. 1, p. 22.

⁴³ Amery, vol. 4, p. 8. See also footnote 77.

⁴⁴ ARCA: PV522, 2/1/2.

⁴⁵ E.P. Lowry, *With the Guards' Brigade: from Bloemfontein to Koomati Poort and back*, p. 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁷ A.T. Mahan, *The story of the war in South Africa, 1899-1900*, p. 306.

⁴⁸ FSPA: A612, Diary of an unknown British soldier.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

many cases, their “very sore feet”⁵⁰ were wrapped in sackcloth, the worn-out boots having long been discarded.⁵¹ Roberts’ elaborate indirect strategy had been a resounding success, but it had exhausted his army. He had relieved Kimberley (15 February), besieged and defeated Cronjé at Paardeberg (17-27 February), and defeated Boer forces at Modder River Pass (near Poplar Grove, 7 March 1900), as well as in the vicinity of Abrahamskraal and Driefontein (10 March). He had forced the Boers to abandon the Free State capital without putting up a fight, and soon the Boers would also withdraw from the Colesberg front and leave the southern Free State.⁵² Four decades later, this type of rapid advance was referred to as a *Blitzkrieg*. But Roberts’ soldiers suffered the consequences of such a march; and they entered Bloemfontein as exhausted and potentially very ill men.

The soldiers were in a physically desperate state, but what they encountered in Bloemfontein took them by surprise. It also surprised others, including *The Friend*, which expressed the conviction that “such a scene has never had its parallel in the history of the world”.⁵³ Entering Bloemfontein from the south-east via Monument Road (the present-day Church Street), Lord Roberts was the “man who led the armed strength of an empire”⁵⁴ into town. His procession, which consisted of his *aides-de-camp* and members of his staff, military attachés, war correspondents and Indian servants, followed by cavalry, first marched past Waaihoek, Bloemfontein’s main black location.⁵⁵ On top of Monument Hill “an excited crowd of niggers”⁵⁶ awaited the procession’s arrival; and once they spotted the British, there was an explosion of cheering, handclapping and singing. ‘God save our gracious Queen, long live our noble Queen’, they sang, some of them standing at attention. British war artist Mortimer Menpes remembers how “Kafir women showered down on us a rain of

⁵⁰ National Archives Repository (hereafter NAR): A768, Diary of E.G. Chissel, p. 29.

⁵¹ NAR: WOFK 1769, Army order: W.F. Kelly, 14.3.1900, p. 8; Anon, *Cassell’s...*, p. 806; Amery, vol. 3, p. 591; J.H. Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, vol. 5, pp. 114-115.

⁵² Amery, vol. 3, pp. 379-458, 553-597; A. Wessels, *The Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902: white man’s war, black man’s war, traumatic war*, pp. 51-53; Breytenbach, pp. 1-128.

⁵³ *The Friend*, 15.3.1900, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Battersby, p. 101.

⁵⁵ The word ‘location’ was used at the time to describe what is known today as a ‘township’.

⁵⁶ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 10.5.1900, p. 3. For many years, words such as ‘niggers’, ‘kafirs’, etc. were regarded – and are still regarded today – as derogatory and unacceptable; but here they are quoted from contemporary sources and should be read in that context. No negative connotations are implied.

golden quinces and cigarettes”⁵⁷ as tokens of gratitude to those whom they believed had come to liberate them from the Boers. Further down Monument Road and into upper Church Street, the welcoming scenes became even more intense as the black residents made way for whites. In his diary, J.T. Carmichael, probably an English-speaking republican, noted matter-of-factly that the “inhabitants welcomed troops”,⁵⁸ but this appears to be an understatement. *The Standard & Diggers’ News*⁵⁹ reported that a large proportion of the residents “had strong British sympathies”.⁶⁰

This explains why Lord Roberts’ entry was like a “feestelyke [sic] intocht”,⁶¹ and why he and his troops were “received with the wildest excitement by the Bloemfonteiners”.⁶² Such was the enthusiasm that Henry Johnson, an army chaplain, gained the impression “that British blood ran in the veins of many of the inhabitants”.⁶³ Well-wishers demonstrated their support by handing the soldiers fruit and sandwiches and shouting ‘God bless you, boys’.⁶⁴ Others walked arm in arm with them, singing ‘Soldiers of the Queen’ and ‘Rule Britannia’.⁶⁵ Menpes notes that “...we were all made a fuss of that day”,⁶⁶ while according to Captain S.E. St Leger of the Mounted Infantry, it was a “warm-hearted welcome the like of which we never met with in any part of South Africa”.⁶⁷ Bloemfontein’s warm welcoming of the British soldiers also made an impression on Lord Roberts, and in a despatch to Queen Victoria he officially reported that they had been met with a “cordial reception from the inhabitants”.⁶⁸ It was clear that most of Bloemfontein’s inhabitants who had remained in the capital after the republican government had left, welcomed Lord Roberts’ soldiers as if they were an army of liberation. It would be understandable if the British almost felt as if they had not captured an *enemy* capital.

⁵⁷ D. Menpes, *War impressions being a record in colour by Mortimer Menpes*, p. 63.

⁵⁸ FSPA: A99, Diary of J.T. Carmichael.

⁵⁹ A Johannesburg-based newspaper which published reports in English and Dutch.

⁶⁰ *The Standard & Diggers’ News*, 19.3.1900, p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 22.3.1900, p. 4.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ H. Johnson, *With our soldiers at the front: or conflict and victory in South Africa*, p. 169.

⁶⁴ J. Ralph, *At Pretoria: the capture of the Boer capitals and the hoisting of the flag at Pretoria*, pp. 138, 145.

⁶⁵ *The Friend*, 15.3.1900, p. 4; Anon, *South Africa...*, p. 22.

⁶⁶ Menpes, p. 63.

⁶⁷ S.E. St Leger, *War sketches in colour*, p. 246.

⁶⁸ Anon, *South Africa...*, p. 22.

“We expected to find the town full of bearded Boers”,⁶⁹ exclaimed a ‘disappointed’ A.B. (‘Banjo’) Paterson, the well-known poet and war correspondent, who was one of the first to enter Bloemfontein. To the British soldiers, Bloemfontein must indeed have presented a colourful and festive picture: men, women and children sporting blue, white and red ribbons and rosettes and waving Union Jacks.⁷⁰ “A positively surprising number of Union Jacks sprang forth from their hiding-places and fluttered merrily all over the town”,⁷¹ recounted Rev. E.P. Lowry. Did the soldiers appreciate all of this, or were they too exhausted and starved to feel much enthusiasm for the British ‘red, white and blue’? Were they, too, amazed at the extent to which Bloemfontein resembled an English town, rather than the hostile Boer capital they had expected to find? Over and above the flags and ribbons, the soldiers probably also appreciated the large numbers of cheering females whose voices rose above those of all the rest. According to Captain St Leger, it was the women in particular who expressed “all possible manifestations of delight”⁷² at the sight of the soldiers. It was, after all, the ‘best of the British Empire’ that was on display; and Bloemfontein’s women, including “a delighted”⁷³ contingent of sisters of St Michael’s Home, gathered in large numbers to appreciate the sight. An (unknown) officer of Rimington’s Scouts remembered how “hysterically enthusiastic womenfolk crowded round us and would not rest content till they had shaken hands and ‘carried’ on in their peculiar manner”.⁷⁴ Amongst the ‘enthusiastic womenfolk’ were the teachers of the Dames Instituut (Eunice), who rode around on their bicycles and shook hands with the passing soldiers.⁷⁵

Led by Lord Roberts – brigade after brigade, company after company, squadron after squadron – the army proceeded down Monument Road, crossed St George’s Street and marched onto the market square, where a large crowd of spectators – mostly women – were waiting. After a short halt on the square, the procession turned left into Maitland Street (Fig. 3), heading for the government offices, where Lord Roberts proclaimed that Bloemfontein was formally occupied in the name of Queen Victoria.

⁶⁹ C. Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War: the war in South Africa 1899-1902*, p. 72.

⁷⁰ Ralph, *At Pretoria...*, pp. 138, 145; Amery, vol. 3, p. 590; Breytenbach, p. 114; H.W. Wilson, *With the flag to Pretoria: a history of the Boer War of 1899-1900*, vol. 2, p. 544; R. Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray...*, p. 268.

⁷¹ Lowry, p. 17.

⁷² St Leger, pp. 245-246.

⁷³ M. Leith, *‘One the faith...’: a history of St Michael’s School*, p. 19.

⁷⁴ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 17.5.1900, p. 3.

⁷⁵ Anon, *Gedenkboek van den oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*, p. 284.

The procession then headed south towards the Presidency. There, a silk Union Jack, neatly stitched together by Lady Roberts, with a shamrock adorning one corner, was hoisted. Much cheering by the onlookers ensued, and yet another round of 'God save the Queen' was sung. By that time, at about 13:40, soldiers were still marching into town, so that by late afternoon Bloemfontein was swamped by the occupiers. All one could see was "khaki of various shades and various degrees of dirtiness",⁷⁶ writes Rev. Lowry in his memoirs. A total of 1405 officers, 32 549 troops and 11 540 horses⁷⁷ entered Bloemfontein on 13 March.⁷⁸ More soldiers, including the members of the 6th and 9th Divisions, arrived in Bloemfontein the following day. The Canadian battalion arrived on 16 March, while other units arrived later. For the following seven weeks, Bloemfontein would be their home base while they took some much-needed rest and recreation, waited for reinforcements and supplies, and also prepared themselves for the next stage of the campaign.⁷⁹ During this time, Bloemfontein was also used as a base from whence actions against the Boers were launched.⁸⁰ But in the meantime, rest and recreation were uppermost in the minds of most British soldiers, albeit that illness would soon come to the fore, leading to serious problems – see Section 11, *infra*, for more particulars in this regard.

On the evening of Tuesday 13 March the occupation was celebrated in different ways. Lord Roberts and his officers took possession of the Bloemfontein Club, where a formal dinner was hosted in his honour. The Field Marshal had good reason to celebrate: not only was the occupation of Bloemfontein a major personal achievement for him – it was also a triumph for the British war effort as a whole. The capture of the capital of the Orange Free State republic, which brought the first part of Lord Roberts' campaign to a "glorious conclusion",⁸¹ had enormous symbolic value. It served as a psychological triumph for both officers and troops and restored confidence

⁷⁶ Lowry, p. 17.

⁷⁷ WMBR: 5803/1, Return of troops marching into Bloemfontein on its surrender, 13th March, 1900.

⁷⁸ Anon, *South Africa...*, p. 22.

⁷⁹ F.I. Maxse, *Seymour Vandeleur: the story of a British officer being a memoir of Brevet-Lieutenant-Colonel Vandeleur, D.S.O., Scots Guards and Irish Guards, with a general description of the campaigns*, p. 267; Wilson, p. 546; Nasson, p. 182.

⁸⁰ FSPA: A481/1, Letter from Alex Wright to Alexander Monro, dd. 2.5.1900. Wright, a British soldier, refers to various skirmishes with Boers hiding on the farms and in the *koppies* in the vicinity of Bloemfontein. See also B.J. Bridges, *The New South Wales Lancers and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, unpublished M.A. dissertation, pp. 200-201.

⁸¹ J. Ralph, *Towards Pretoria: a record of the war between Briton and Boer to the hoisting of the British flag at Bloemfontein*, p. 328.

(arrogance?) – a factor that later manifested itself in some soldiers' behavior.⁸² Many also believed that the capture of Bloemfontein meant that the War had ended.⁸³

Although the troops also had reason to celebrate, they were largely excluded from the formal celebrations in town. One may argue that the sheer physical exhaustion from which most of them suffered must have dampened their spirits. But there were needs to be met and it is recounted that some troops, their names and numbers unknown, headed towards Waaihoek for “unaccustomed entertainment”.⁸⁴ *The Friend* reported that there was “general rejoicing in the native ‘location’”⁸⁵ on the day of the occupation, and the cavorting continued through the night. With very little to lose and not knowing whether they would ever return home, some troops took to the arms of black women. The pro-republican Dutch novelist Louwrens Penning writes that “in de Kafferlocaties vierde echter het schuim van het Engelsche leger in den nacht van 13 op 14 Maart met Kaffermeiden, die zich op het fraaiste hadden opgetuigd, op hun manier feest. Den geheelen nacht heerschte in deze locaties een bandelooze brooddronkenheid, en den volgenden morgen lagen vele Khaki's in de goot.”⁸⁶

There were, of course, also those who had little to celebrate on “that bitter day”.⁸⁷ Most of Bloemfontein's Republicans closed the shutters of their houses and locked themselves in, unable to face the unfolding reality.⁸⁸ Many were worried about their personal safety, and the German businessmen barricaded their shops for fear of looting. Frederic W. Unger, an American freelance journalist who had entered Bloemfontein in advance of Lord Roberts' procession, noted that amid the cheering crowds, some timid faces were seen staring at the passing troops from the rear of a garden, or barely visible behind a lace curtain.⁸⁹ In her detailed diary, Elsa Levisieur stated that her sister Clara and cousin Rose Ehrlich had “put on black”⁹⁰ on the day of the occupation, as a sign of mourning. They went to the market square in their black

⁸² Kruger, p. 268; J.G. Maydon, *French's cavalry campaign*, p. 198.

⁸³ E. Belfield, *The Boer War*, vol. 2, p. 95.

⁸⁴ Pakenham, p. 375. See also Van Schoor, Bloemfontein..., p. 35.

⁸⁵ *The Friend*, 22.3.1900, p. 3.

⁸⁶ Penning, p. 653. “In the Kaffir locations the scum of the English army celebrated on the night of 13-14 March with Kaffir women, who had dressed up pretty for the occasion. The whole night long licentious drunkenness raged in the locations, and the next morning several Khakis lay in the gutter.” (Free translation)

⁸⁷ Bloemfontein Public Library (hereafter BPL): *Afric. 920LEV*, Memories of Sophie Levisieur, p. 72.

⁸⁸ *The Friend*, 13.3.1950, p. 3.

⁸⁹ F.W. Unger, *With 'Bobs' and Kruger: experiences and observations by an American Boer War correspondent in the field with both armies*, pp. 167, 193.

⁹⁰ WMBR: 6032/1, p. 83.

dresses, and could not help “crying copiously”⁹¹ at the sight of the spectacle: Bloemfontein, the beloved town their parents and grandparents had built to become the admired capital of a ‘model republic’, being invaded by the British. Elsa’s personal feelings, which she wrote down later that same day, capture the sentiments of most Republicans: “...today I have felt almost as miserable as I fancy it is possible to feel – pure, unalloyed misery...”.⁹² For all the cheering and excitement of the pro-British, there was also the other side: the underlying anger, resentment and bitterness which, in the words of Unger, created in Bloemfontein an “atmosphere of fear and suspense”⁹³ that became a constant reminder to the invaders that their presence was not welcomed by all. The British soldiers’ impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein were not unaffected by this reality.⁹⁴

5. Bloemfontein becomes ‘Bobsfontein’: the transformation of a Boer capital

The troops that marched into Bloemfontein with Lord Roberts on 13 March 1900 included a Cavalry Division (including the 6th Dragoon Guards, 1st Australian Horse, New South Wales Lancers, 10th Hussars, 9th, 12th and 16th Lancers, and several batteries of the Royal Horse Artillery), Alderson’s Mounted Infantry (including the 1st and 3rd Mounted Infantry regiments, Roberts’ Horse, the New Zealand Mounted Rifles and Rimington’s Guides), Le Gallais’ Mounted Infantry (including the City Imperial Volunteers, Kitchener’s Horse and Nesbitt’s Horse), Martyr’s Mounted Infantry (including the 1st and 2nd Queensland Mounted Infantry), Ridley’s Mounted Infantry (including the 5th and 7th Mounted Infantry regiments), the Guards Brigade (including the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards, 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards and 1st Battalion Scots Guards), the VIth Division (including batteries of the Royal Field Artillery, the 1st Battalion Oxfordshire Light Infantry and the 1st Battalion Yorkshire regiment), the VIIth Division (including the 2nd Battalion Norfolk regiment and a Field Hospital), the IXth Division (including the 7th Field Company Royal Engineers, 2nd Battalion Seaforth Highlanders and the Royal Canadian Regiment), and a supply park.⁹⁵ In due course, more units arrived in Bloemfontein. From the above, it is clear

⁹¹ FSPA: A507/6, Letter from Cela Skea to Karel Schoeman, 16.3.1979.

⁹² WMBR: 6032/1, p. 83.

⁹³ Unger, p. 193.

⁹⁴ BPL: *Afric. 920LEV*, p. 72; Van Schoor, *Bloemfontein...*, p. 35; Breytenbach, p. 115.

⁹⁵ F. Maurice (ed.), *History of the war in South Africa 1899-1902*, vol. 2, pp. 606-613.

that most of the occupying soldiers were from England, but there were also soldiers from, *inter alia*, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

With so many newcomers in the town, it can be said that Bloemfontein before 13 March 1900, and Bloemfontein after that date, were two different places. According to Filson Young, war correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, the change was sudden: “We had not been in Bloemfontein three hours before the whole aspect of the place was changed.”⁹⁶ The occupation of Bloemfontein was a ‘velvet’ take-over, executed in a gentlemanly fashion. Two days after the occupation, *The Friend* reported that “the Military, when once in the town, took possession of everything in a quiet way”.⁹⁷ Lord Roberts and his senior staff moved into the Presidency, which was converted into the military headquarters. Other senior officers occupied the empty homes of residents who had left the town. Major-General G.T. Pretzman was appointed as Bloemfontein’s Military Governor and all key government positions were allocated to British officers. Municipal regulations were replaced by military law, which subjected the residents, particularly the black people, to various control measures.⁹⁸ Furthermore, the Post and Telegraph Services were placed under military control; some private businesses, such as bakeries, were ‘taken over’; and the Union Jack could be seen fluttering at the government offices and the Presidency.⁹⁹

The pro-republican *The Friend of the Free State and Bloemfontein Gazette* was also ‘taken over’ and its name changed to *The Friend* – a daily newspaper “published for the entertainment and information of the Army”.¹⁰⁰ The anglicising of Bloemfontein, much of it symbolic, was later taken a step further by the changing of names: the Presidency became Government House, the *Volkshospitaal* was renamed the National Hospital, and the Railway Hotel became the Victoria Hotel, to mention a few examples. Bloemfontein, the “Steynless City”,¹⁰¹ became “British Bloemfontein”.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ F. Young, *Memory harbour: essays chiefly in description*, p. 124.

⁹⁷ *The Friend*, 15.3.1900, p. 4.

⁹⁸ FSPA: MBL 1/1/1/9, Minutes: meeting of the Bloemfontein Town Council, 15.3.1900, p. 476.

⁹⁹ Anon, *South Africa...*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁰ J. Ralph, *War’s brighter side: the story of The Friend newspaper edited by the correspondents with Lord Roberts’ forces, March-April, 1900*, p. 6. See also *The Friend*, 13.3.1950, p. 3.

¹⁰¹ *The Friend*, 17.3.1900, p. 3.

¹⁰² *The Standard & Diggers’ News*, 19.3.1900, p. 3.

The key figure in all these changes was Lord Roberts, alias “Bobs”¹⁰³ or “Little Bobs”,¹⁰⁴ and to the British soldiers, Bloemfontein became “Bobsfontein”.¹⁰⁵

Although the military took possession of Bloemfontein ‘in a quiet way’, there was nothing quiet about the town itself. The once sleepy capital became a bustle of activity, and an inscription in Lieutenant B. Moeller’s diary provides a glimpse of what it was like: “It is a wonderful sight, with the troops from all parts of the Empire, war correspondents in rickshaws and buggies, and foreign military attachés in khaki and silver lace; they are all here”.¹⁰⁶ *The Friend* described Bloemfontein as a “beehive of soldiery”,¹⁰⁷ and at times the residents seemed to be the strangers, while the soldiers gave the impression of being the residents. Julian Ralph, the pro-British American war correspondent, wrote that it was impossible to miss “the endless parade of soldiers up and down the pavements, the same motley cavalcade of mounted men in the streets”.¹⁰⁸ In Ralph’s view, Bloemfontein had become “soldier-burdened”.¹⁰⁹ But for Arthur Conan Doyle, who served as a medical doctor in the British Army, the sight of all these men was rather reassuring. According to him, Bloemfontein’s streets presented an “object-lesson in the resources of the Empire”,¹¹⁰ and the presence of so many soldiers assured him of the future of “the [British] race”.¹¹¹ On 13 March, Bloemfontein had become a military town; and for the following seven weeks, its streets belonged to the soldiers.

6. “A little town of white houses and many-coloured gardens”: the British soldiers’ impressions of Bloemfontein’s buildings and gardens

One of the most intriguing aspects of the British soldiers’ impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein relates to their impressions of Bloemfontein’s physical appearance,

¹⁰³ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 19.6.1900, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.6.1900, p. 3. ‘Bobs’ and ‘Little Bobs’ were nicknames that British soldiers had already given to the commander they admired many years before the war in South Africa, albeit that Roberts could at times be very harsh with his soldiers. The ‘Little’ refers to the fact that Roberts was small in stature, albeit physically very tough. See, for example, A. Wessels, “Frederick Roberts” in S.J. Corvi and I.F.W. Beckett (eds), *Victoria’s generals*, pp. 165, 171, 188-189.

¹⁰⁵ Pakenham, p. 375.

¹⁰⁶ B. Moeller, *Two years at the front with the Mounted Infantry*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁷ *The Friend*, 26.3.1900, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Ralph, *War’s brighter side...*, p. 183.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹¹⁰ A. Conan Doyle, *The great Boer War*, p. 369.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

and specifically its gardens and houses (Fig. 4). Many soldiers mention Bloemfontein's 'look' and 'feel' in their diaries and memoirs, whether in a positive or negative way. Even before they had set eyes on Bloemfontein, some soldiers had a picture of the town in their minds, based on what they had seen in English publications. Lance-Corporal J.B. Lloyd writes that Bloemfontein "looked in real life exactly as it has appeared in pictures in all the illustrated papers".¹¹² What did Bloemfontein look like on 13 March from the British soldiers' perspective? Officer C.E. Hands sketches a vivid picture on the basis of which we can visualize him and Lloyd marching down Monument Road, "first past a few straggling shanties – poor shanties, but each with its bit of green garden patch – then past groups of little wooden houses, each with its narrow verandah and crinkled iron roof, then past continuous rows of houses, gradually enlarging as in a reversed picture. And these began to have trees around and in front of them ...".¹¹³

Many British soldiers compared Bloemfontein, which in the words of Thomas Pakenham had "always looked incongruously colonial",¹¹⁴ with their home-towns in England. To them, Bloemfontein looked like a typical English town. An unidentified soldier found Bloemfontein's profile familiar and noted that the town looked "almost like an english [sic] town with its spires & chimneys".¹¹⁵ According to Lionel Curtis and his companions, Bloemfontein reminded them of Cambridge, England, and the Presidency "looked like a Scottish country house".¹¹⁶ Even Bloemfontein's roads looked like "some of the roads in Derbyshire".¹¹⁷ If Bloemfontein reminded the soldiers of an English town, it would have been a pretty English town, because the word 'pretty' is repeatedly used to describe Bloemfontein. Erskine Childers' first impression of Bloemfontein was that of "a quiet, pretty little place".¹¹⁸ In his diary, the unidentified soldier noted that, from the point where he and his comrades had pitched their tents

¹¹² J.B. Lloyd, *One thousand miles with the C.I.V.*, p. 118.

¹¹³ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 10.5.1900, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Pakenham, p. 372.

¹¹⁵ FSPA: A612.

¹¹⁶ Curtis, p. 45.

¹¹⁷ Anon, *Cassell's...*, p. 803.

¹¹⁸ E. Childers, *In the ranks of the C.I.V.: a narrative and diary of personal experiences with the C.I.V. battery (honourable artillery) in South Africa*, p. 64. Erskine Childers (1870-1922) saw service in South Africa as a member of the C.I.V. Later he became famous as the author of the best-selling novel *The riddle of the sands* (1903, followed by several other editions, and never out of print since it was first published). Childers was executed during the Irish Civil War.

“within a mile [1,6 km] of the town”,¹¹⁹ it looked like “a pretty little place”.¹²⁰ One of the war correspondents, probably H.F. Gwynne, describes Bloemfontein as a “pretty peaceful little town...”.¹²¹ Battersby also thought that Bloemfontein was ‘pretty’, and describes it as “a petty[sic]-pretty little place”.¹²² According to Captain L.M. Phillipps, “Bloemfontein is a pretty little place, but”,¹²³ he adds, “it takes you by surprise”.¹²⁴ Phillipps was surprised by the fact that after such a long sojourn in the dry Free State veld, described by poet Rudyard Kipling as a rather depressing “enormous pale landscape”,¹²⁵ one could come across such a ‘pretty place’ seemingly out of nowhere.

What was it about Bloemfontein that reminded the occupiers of home? What aspects of the town were so particularly ‘English’ that it looked like an English town? According to the soldiers’ impressions, two features stood out: Bloemfontein’s gardens and houses. When he marched into Bloemfontein on the day of the occupation, Filson Young’s first impression of Bloemfontein was how “the dust rose in clouds wherever man walked, and spread a grey garment over the flowers in the street gardens”.¹²⁶ It is not clear whether Young is referring to the ambience of Monument Street and Church Street which, at the time of the occupation, boasted some of Bloemfontein’s most beautiful gardens. Perhaps he meant the well-known garden of “Old Man Israel”¹²⁷ on the left side of Monument Street. Or was he describing the shady gardens of the water erven close to Bloem Spruit¹²⁸ in Upper Church Street? Young does not tell, but later that day, after the dust had settled and he had taken a proper look at Bloemfontein, he felt at home in “a little town of white houses and many-coloured gardens asleep in the noonday sunshine”.¹²⁹

¹¹⁹ FSPA: A612.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *The Friend*, 17.3.1900, p. 3.

¹²² Battersby, p. 107.

¹²³ L.M. Phillipps, *With Rimington*, p. 92.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ R. Kipling, *Something of myself: for my friends known and unknown*, p. 158.

¹²⁶ Young, p. 124.

¹²⁷ FSPA: A491.3, I.O. Bergh, *Some “Blikore”*, p. 47.

¹²⁸ Known as *Bloemspruit* in Afrikaans, it was referred to by Bloemfontein’s English residents as *Bloem Spruit* or *Sluit*, meaning ‘small stream’.

¹²⁹ Young, p. 123.

The opinionated Julian Ralph's first impression of Bloemfontein was that of a "tree-decked, garden-crowded little town".¹³⁰ To him and others, Bloemfontein was like an "oasis in the parched veldt [sic]".¹³¹ A soldier who describes himself as a 'Mounted Black' remembers Bloemfontein's "nice well-kept gardens",¹³² while Captain Phillipps mentions the pleasantness of seeing familiar "creeper grown fronts and flower patches"¹³³ after the long and grueling march through the veld. Mortimer Menpes was so taken with the "lovely gardens"¹³⁴ that he soon found himself painting them. The experience of Bloemfontein's pretty gardens was not limited to impressions only, since the soldiers also spent time enjoying them. During the days that followed, Bloemfontein's gardens became a sanctuary for the soldiers and, in the words of Young, the source of some form of "out-of-doors [entertainment]".¹³⁵ The residents themselves, particularly the English, played their part and many allowed the soldiers to enter their properties and enjoy the gardens. Young writes how the sisters of the Greenhill Convent gave him and his companions tea "in their beautiful garden of roses and geraniums and fuchsias"¹³⁶ (Fig. 5). Some soldiers, mostly officers, took refuge from Bloemfontein's heat by sitting in the shade of trees while contemplating the lush gardens.¹³⁷ The troops enjoyed the gardens more discreetly, but sometimes they were noticed unexpectedly by civilians such as E.N. (Noel) Roberts, who caught sight of "an Irish soldier hidden in the Bockenhausen [sic]¹³⁸ garden".¹³⁹

Like the gardens, Bloemfontein's architecture also made a favorable impression on the visitors. Julian Ralph found the buildings "modern, new and tasteful".¹⁴⁰ The capital's "substantial and ornate"¹⁴¹ public buildings are described by the 'Mounted Black' as "very fine",¹⁴² while concerning the houses, he writes that they are of "the

¹³⁰ Ralph, *At Pretoria...*, p. 137.

¹³¹ Anon, *War with the Boers: an account of the past and present troubles with the South African republics*, vol. 4, p. 36.

¹³² Anon, *Campaigning...*, p. 91.

¹³³ Phillipps, p. 92.

¹³⁴ Menpes, p. 65.

¹³⁵ Young, p. 126.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹³⁷ Anon, *Campaigning...*, p. 91.

¹³⁸ Carl Borckenhausen, editor of *De Express* and a republican sympathiser.

¹³⁹ ARCA: PV522, 2/1/2.

¹⁴⁰ Ralph, *At Pretoria...*, p. 137.

¹⁴¹ Anon, *War with the Boers...*, p. 36.

¹⁴² Anon, *Campaigning...*, p. 92.

bungalow type”, and “very picturesque”.¹⁴³ The “tin roofs”¹⁴⁴ of the buildings which shone amongst the green trees made an impression. The soldiers made special mention of the verandahs and *stoeps*¹⁴⁵ of the houses, because they appeared cool and inviting in the scorching afternoons of the Free State summer.¹⁴⁶ When night fell the verandahs became even more pleasant, and F.T. Stevens was probably seated on one when he experienced a moment of Bloemfontein bliss: “The air was balmy, the moon bright, in a turquoise sky, and the avenues of trees helped to make up a scene of tranquil beauty.”¹⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that Lord Kitchener (Lord Roberts’ chief-of-staff) – who arrived in Bloemfontein on 28 March 1900, having been sent to the North-Western Cape Colony to put down the rebellion that had broken out – referred to the Presidency (where Lord Roberts and his senior staff officers stayed) as “a large and comfortable house very well furnished”,¹⁴⁸ and went on to describe Bloemfontein as follows: “...a nice clean little town with broad streets, mostly redbrick houses with corrugated iron roofs, a few fairly good shops, [and] most of the houses have gardens and trees round them.”¹⁴⁹

Not all the soldiers were impressed with Bloemfontein’s appearance, however. While some changed their opinions later on, others were less impressed or not impressed at all from the first day of their stay. Again, comparisons were made with their hometowns in England. Francis Fremantle, a medical doctor who accompanied Roberts’ army, described Bloemfontein as a “moderately well-to-do town in any country, except England”.¹⁵⁰ For Trooper Stratford of the New South Wales Lancers, it was a surprise (a disappointment?) that the town “was no bigger than East Maitland or Nowra... and not nearly as big as Lismore although possessed of finer buildings”.¹⁵¹ The ‘Mounted Black’ found the town “most disappointing; and in every respect very unlike any at

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁴⁴ J.H. Birch, *History of the War in South Africa*, p. 510. Birch was an American war correspondent who wrote in detail about the British soldiers’ experiences. See also Curtis, p. 45.

¹⁴⁵ The word ‘*stoep*’ is a vernacular term for a simplified version of a verandah. In practice, a verandah is usually more ornate.

¹⁴⁶ Birch, p. 510. See also D. Bagot, *Shadows of the war*, p. 137.

¹⁴⁷ F.T. Stevens, *Complete history of the South African War, in 1899-1902*, p. 105.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Lord Kitchener to Queen Victoria (30 March 1900), published in A. Wessels (ed.), *Lord Kitchener and the war in South Africa 1899-1902*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Fremantle, p. 234.

¹⁵¹ As quoted in B.J. Bridges, *The New South Wales Lancers and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, M.A. Dissertation, University of South Africa, p. 200.

home”.¹⁵² Battersby’s opinion was equally unfavourable – he wrote that Bloemfontein was “of course, more than a camp; it is a capital, a conquered capital, though, to tell the truth, in that capacity it makes but a poor show”.¹⁵³ Some soldiers, especially those who had expected “a South African London”,¹⁵⁴ were so disappointed that they declared the town to be a “Bloomin’ fountain”¹⁵⁵ or worse, a “blooming fraud”.¹⁵⁶

7. “Wine (and beer) made glad the heart of man”: the British soldiers and Bloemfontein’s clubs and bars

The ‘Mounted Black’ writes in his diary that in Bloemfontein, the soldiers experienced “the first taste we had of spirits in South Africa”.¹⁵⁷ After six weeks of surviving on “sud water”¹⁵⁸ and some rum for strength, the opportunity to enjoy a proper ‘tot’ and ‘pint’ was welcomed. For the officers and war correspondents, Bloemfontein’s clubs and hotels were the popular watering holes. The Gordon and Ramblers Clubs and the bars at the Free State and Railway Hotels were well-patronised, but it was the prestigious Bloemfontein Club (Fig. 6) that made a memorable impression on the visitors.¹⁵⁹ The Bloemfontein Club was not only remembered as the place where Lord Roberts and his officers had their “first dinner, with its white cloth, clean plates, and abundance of food”,¹⁶⁰ but also as the venue where Roberts’ officers enjoyed their “first whiskey and soda”.¹⁶¹ Gin, vermouth, champagne and port wine were also freely available. In an account of his impressions of Bloemfontein, one of the war correspondents (probably H.A. Gwynne) who rode into town on the morning of 13 March, writes that Bloemfontein will always be associated in his mind with “a certain long, cool whisky [sic] and soda”¹⁶² which was served to him at the Bloemfontein Club. The bar and smoking room of the Club were sought-after venues where the senior officers mingled socially till late at

¹⁵² Anon, *Campaigning...*, p. 91.

¹⁵³ Battersby, p. 106.

¹⁵⁴ Anon, *Cassell’s...*, p. 803.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 807.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 803.

¹⁵⁷ Anon, *Campaigning...*, p. 81.

¹⁵⁸ *The Friend*, 17.3.1900, p. 3.

¹⁵⁹ R. Atwood, *Roberts & Kitchener in South Africa, 1900-1902*, p. 140.

¹⁶⁰ T.T. Jeans, *Naval brigades in the South African War, 1899-1900*, p. 98.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁶² *The Friend*, 17.3.1900, p. 3.

night. Julian Ralph, a regular visitor, doubted whether another “club-house so constantly crowded” could be found “anywhere in the world”.¹⁶³

The consumption of alcohol by troops was strictly controlled by military order. It should also be kept in mind that Lord Roberts was a teetotaler and tried his best to curb alcohol abuse in the British Army.¹⁶⁴ The clubs and hotel bars were off-limits for the troops. Ralph remembers how the troops swarmed like flies all over Bloemfontein to explore everything “except the drinking places”.¹⁶⁵ *The Friend* called Lord Roberts’ army “the soberest army in the world”¹⁶⁶ and noted that after their long march to Bloemfontein, the soldiers had “sat down to tea and coffee”¹⁶⁷ instead of making their way to a bar. Was this indeed the case? The sale of liquor to troops was prohibited, but according to Rev. Lowry, it could still be obtained “as a special favour on special terms”.¹⁶⁸ Referring to the “well-known ‘curse’”¹⁶⁹ that plagues soldiers, an anonymous officer of Rimington’s Scouts writes that drinking has been an “ever-present and peculiarly interesting and absorbing problem”¹⁷⁰ since the start of the campaign. Shortly after their arrival in Bloemfontein the immediate question uppermost in the minds of some troops was: “Where’s the next ‘puza’¹⁷¹ to come from?”¹⁷² According to the anonymous officer, the troops’ problem was solved by their ‘Bloemfontein admirers’ who illegally sold them liquor. But according to *The Bloemfontein Post*, the problem never got out of hand. Filson Young is of the opinion that it was rather a case of “wine (and beer) made glad the heart of man”¹⁷³ than of soldiers drinking themselves into a stupor. The availability of alcohol not only made life in Bloemfontein more bearable, but also reinforced some British soldiers’ positive experience of the town.

¹⁶³ Ralph, *War’s brighter side...*, p. 48.

¹⁶⁴ Wessels, “Frederick Roberts”, p. 171; Wessels (ed.), *Lord Roberts...*, pp. 137-139.

¹⁶⁵ Ralph, *War’s brighter side...*, p. 183.

¹⁶⁶ *The Friend*, 21.3.1900, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Lowry, p. 29.

¹⁶⁹ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 17.5.1900, p. 3.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ ‘Puza’ is an isiZulu word that means ‘drink’ or ‘to drink’.

¹⁷² *The Bloemfontein Post*, 17.5.1900, p. 3.

¹⁷³ Young, p. 122.

8. “Oh for a business in Bloemfontein!”: the British soldiers’ impressions of Bloemfontein’s shops

By 1900, Bloemfontein was well-established as the Free State republic’s main centre of commerce; and for its relatively small size, it boasted a surprising variety of stores. Most shops were located directly opposite or in close proximity to the market square, which at that time was the lifeblood of the town. There were the familiar stores such as Fichardt’s, C.W. Champion, Lewin and Friedmann, and Jenkins & Co.,¹⁷⁴ but the ‘speciality’ stores – including those of tailors, watchmakers and tobacconists, as well as “shops that sold boots”¹⁷⁵ – were also open for business. For Bloemfontein’s shopkeepers, most of them Jewish, English or German, the large number of British soldiers meant a sizeable number of potential customers. After weeks of deprivation and ‘roughing it’ in the open veld, surviving on half-rations of bully beef and biscuits, the temptation posed by shops selling desirables such as fresh bread, cigarettes, cakes and sweets was hard to resist. Initially, some shop-owners were worried about what would happen to their businesses, but soon “business was carried on as usual”.¹⁷⁶ In his diary, Lance-Corporal E.G. Chissel of the Gordon Highlanders writes that shortly after his arrival in Bloemfontein, he and his comrades “began to buy eatables”.¹⁷⁷ Although unprepared for the onslaught, Bloemfontein’s shop owners benefited greatly, and it was probably with a touch of envy towards the fortunate shopkeepers that Rev. Lowry exclaimed: “Oh for a business in Bloemfontein!”¹⁷⁸ And the soldiers shopped with such enthusiasm that the grocery stores ran out of essential goods within the first two days of the troops’ arrival. Shop owners had to put up notices that read “‘no bread’, ‘no oatmeal’, ‘no corn until to-morrow [sic]’”.¹⁷⁹ Soon ‘luxury’ items such as jam, golden syrup and chocolate also became unobtainable – at least for the troops, who had to stand back to allow the officers first choice.¹⁸⁰ Throughout the ages armies of occupation have been notorious for looting, but this was not the case in Bloemfontein. Roberts enforced strict discipline, and those who transgressed

¹⁷⁴ *The Friend*, 19.3.1900, p. 1.

¹⁷⁵ Young, p. 124.

¹⁷⁶ Letter from Lord Roberts to Queen Victoria (15 April 1900), published in Wessels (ed.), *Lord Roberts...*, p. 66.

¹⁷⁷ NAR: A768, p. 29.

¹⁷⁸ Lowry, p. 20.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Anon, *Campaigning...*, pp. 82, 88-89; Menpes, p. 67.

had to suffer the consequences. When Canadian Private Arthur N. Boylea stole a chicken on 16 March (the day after the Canadian battalion arrived in Bloemfontein), he was sentenced to 56 days' field imprisonment.¹⁸¹

By the end of March 1900, Bloemfontein's grocery stores had run out of stock completely; and it was almost impossible to replenish this stock, because the railway line was reserved for the transport of troops and military goods. After a stroll through Bloemfontein during this time, Captain Phillipps noted that "Bloemfontein gives one the impression just now of a town that has been unpacked and emptied of all its contents...".¹⁸² However, the situation improved during April, and thrifty shop owners began to cater specifically for the soldiers' needs. Advertisements informed the 'Soldiers of the Queen' and 'Imperial troops' that "Stick Plug Tobacco, Capstan Cut, Cigars, &c., &c."¹⁸³ were available; and the 'Military Officers' were invited to order "provisions, wines & spirits"¹⁸⁴ from Cape Town. Edgar Wallace could hardly believe his eyes when he saw 'Khaki serge', 'military gloves', 'Stohwasser puttee leggings', 'Zeiss glasses' and 'C.I.V. scarf-pins' in Bloemfontein's shop windows.¹⁸⁵ To Wallace, it felt almost as if he were back in London's shopping alleys. But the imported goods came at a price, and most items were beyond the means of the ordinary soldier. The troops also complained that their "little extras and necessities",¹⁸⁶ such as note-paper, candles, matches, jam, cheese and tinned herrings, were unaffordable. "Bread was dear – 6d. per loaf",¹⁸⁷ wrote Lance-Corporal Chissel in his diary. Frustration among the troops was rife; and Private G.C. Gordon complained to *The Bloemfontein Post* that "there is a general impression that we are being 'had'".¹⁸⁸

For many soldiers, shopping and browsing in Bloemfontein's shops became a popular pastime, providing some form of "entertainment indoors".¹⁸⁹ Shops that had "girls behind the counters"¹⁹⁰ were well-patronised; and the troops were eager to spend their wages on whatever was sold there. Bloemfontein's shops must have made a lasting

¹⁸¹ C. Miller, *Painting the map red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902*, pp. 117-118.

¹⁸² Phillipps, pp. 94-95.

¹⁸³ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 10.5.1900, p. 4.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.5.1900, p. 4.

¹⁸⁵ Wallace, pp. 182-183.

¹⁸⁶ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 15.5.1900, p. 3.

¹⁸⁷ NAR: A768, p. 29.

¹⁸⁸ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 15.5.1900, p. 3.

¹⁸⁹ Young, p. 126.

¹⁹⁰ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 11.6.1900, p. 3.

impression on some soldiers, because they are fondly mentioned in their diaries. Filson Young's recorded impressions as a 'customer' probably comprise the best description of his and his fellow troops' experiences of Bloemfontein's shops. Young's almost poetic prose brings those shops back to life as he recalls how "...the very smell of those stores was like magic, the characteristic odours of boots and sweets and flour and spices and tarred rope and saddlery and groceries and clothes blending into a kind of stuffy, stupefying essence that enveloped us and our common-sense, and made children of us all".¹⁹¹

9. Tommy Atkins and 'Miss Bloemfontein': the British soldiers' impressions of Bloemfontein's women

When the British soldiers marched into Bloemfontein on 13 March, Frederic Unger observed that "there were few men in the streets".¹⁹² But, as already noted earlier, there were women and girls in abundance. Was it because of *their* presence that one of the war correspondents, who did not identify himself, described the soldiers' march into town as a "strange entry"?¹⁹³ From the British soldiers' perspective it was indeed 'strange', not only to have received such an unexpectedly friendly welcome in the capital of a supposedly hostile state, but also to have been welcomed by so many womenfolk. The soldiers did not mind the attention, because apart from rest and refueling, some "much-missed female company [was] on their minds".¹⁹⁴ After a few days in Bloemfontein the soldiers seemed, in the words of a local female admirer, ready to "make an impression on the feminine heart...".¹⁹⁵ Did Bloemfontein's women meet the soldiers' expectations? Yes and no. The important point, however, is that the fairer sex influenced the soldiers' impressions and experiences of the town, just as Bloemfontein's gardens, houses, clubs and shops did.¹⁹⁶

The women who enthusiastically welcomed the troops on the day of the occupation were mostly English-speaking women or so-called 'Uitlander women', as they were labelled by the republican (Afrikaner/Boer) women. The prevailing attitude among the pro-British section of Bloemfontein's female population was not only demonstrated on

¹⁹¹ Young, p. 124.

¹⁹² *The Friend*, 22.3.1900, p. 3.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 17.3.1900, p. 3.

¹⁹⁴ T. Jackson, *The Boer War*, p. 99.

¹⁹⁵ *The Friend*, 26.3.1900, p. 3.

¹⁹⁶ Pakenham, p. 376.

the day of the occupation, but also thereafter. In a letter to *The Friend* entitled 'Tommy in a Lady's Eyes', an English-speaking woman writing under the pseudonym 'Grace Uitland' addresses the troops and officers on behalf of Bloemfontein's pro-British women. Addressing 'Tommy', she writes that "the sooner we get to know him and understand him the better for both of us".¹⁹⁷ She also addresses the officers and remarks that their "amiability, patience, and high breeding are a treat to come in contact with in a country such as this...".¹⁹⁸ A substantial group of Bloemfontein women welcomed the male visitors; and in the words of Sophie Levisieur, they were "only too glad to meet them [the soldiers]".¹⁹⁹ In response to this, the pro-republican weekly, *Uilenspiegel*, jokingly asserted that "duizenden vrouwen uit den Vrijstaat komen zich in Roberts' hoofdkwartier aanmelden en verklaren zich van hunne mannen te willen scheiden, om met Engelsche of Schotsche soldaten te trouwen".²⁰⁰ For obvious reasons, the British soldiers welcomed the female attention, and the soldiers would "bunch up together wherever there's a 'she'".²⁰¹ Julian Ralph, who was one of *The Friend's* new editors, explains their behaviour as follows: "Follow an army five months on the veld, and then you will know what it is to see a lady."²⁰²

Bloemfontein's English-speaking women's enthusiastic welcome of the British troops was, however, one side of the coin. The republican Afrikaner women and other female republican sympathisers maintained a distance between themselves and the (enemy) soldiers. At the same time, however, it seems that most British soldiers did not find Afrikaner women particularly attractive.²⁰³ To some extent, the same argument applies to black women. As in the case of their comparison of Bloemfontein to their home-towns in England, they also compared local women with English women. After an outing with British officers, Julian Ralph reports that "we saw many Kaffir women...but they could not remind us of the ladies we used to know – was it years ago? – in London".²⁰⁴ At the same time, however, the British soldiers – the officers in particular

¹⁹⁷ *The Friend*, 26.3.1900, p. 3.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ BPL: *Afric. 920LEV*, p. 76.

²⁰⁰ *Uilenspiegel: Humoristisch-satiriek Weekblad*, 31.3.1900, p. 74. "Thousands of Free State women went to Roberts' headquarters and declared that they wanted to divorce their husbands so that they could marry English or Scottish soldiers." (Free translation)

²⁰¹ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 11.6.1900, p. 3.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ W. Nasson, Tommy Atkins in South Africa, in P. Warwick (ed.), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, p. 133.

²⁰⁴ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 11.6.1900, p. 3.

– found the republican women’s animosity towards them offensive. In response to their attitude, Ralph published a teasing letter addressed to ‘Miss Bloemfontein’ in *The Friend*. Addressing his letter to the “Belle of the Boer aristocracy”,²⁰⁵ he informed her that the British soldiers knew that she easily changed her lovers and therefore reminded her that “soldiers are reported not to mind a little coquetry, when they are far from home”.²⁰⁶ He continued: “You might have been hateful to us and we could not have blamed you, for we came...with blood in our eyes and weapons in hand, fancying that you would cling to your old love, and never dreaming that he would run away and leave you unprotected in this placid and pretty little boudoir that you have set up here. And you did take note, didn’t you, my dear, that when we found you deserted all for love, we changed from lion to lamb, from blustering warrior to soft-spoken wooer?”.²⁰⁷ Ralph concluded his letter with an invitation: “Draw closer, Miss Bloemfontein. Let our arms touch and the thrill of ardent friendship vivify our new relation. You do like us British, don’t you, dear?”²⁰⁸

Julian Ralph’s invitation to Bloemfontein’s republican women went neither unnoticed nor unanswered. In response to Ralph’s letter, Elsa Levisieur addressed “A Loveless Letter”²⁰⁹ to ‘Mr Englishman’, informing him that the ‘Miss Bloemfontein’ he referred to in his letter is actually ‘Miss Uitlander’, a lady who “comes from your own ‘far coundree’”.²¹⁰ Elsa made no secret about her own lack of appreciation for the British soldiers: “...do you fully realise that I am not pleased to see you, that I hate to have you here; I, a real daughter of the soil?”²¹¹ But time softened attitudes; and gradually, certain republican women’s animosity towards the British soldiers started wearing off.²¹² The officers and war correspondents made house calls; and ‘Halevy’, the Levisieur residence,²¹³ was also visited. In her diary, Elsa Levisieur writes about a visit from Julian Ralph, Mr W. Bleloch, also a war correspondent, and a Captain Shaw-Taylor. After they had discussed “all things from feelings to philosophy”,²¹⁴ she broke

²⁰⁵ *The Friend*, 17.3.1900, p. 3.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *The Friend*, 20.3.1900, p. 3. For the original letter, see FSPA: A507/15, Letter from Elsa Levisieur, alias ‘Miss Bloemfontein’, to ‘Mr Englishman’, published in *The Friend*, March-April 1900.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Schoeman, *Bloemfontein...*, p. 171.

²¹³ The house, which is known today as Halevy Heritage Hotel, is situated in Markgraaff Street.

²¹⁴ WMBR: 6032/1, p. 88.

the news that she was the one who had written the 'loveless letter' to make the British soldiers feel ashamed of themselves. Julian Ralph informed her that "you cant [sic] make Englishmen feel ashamed of themselves...especially when they are the conquerors".²¹⁵

Ralph and company's experience of the visit was not unpleasant. According to him, they "spent a pleasant hour"²¹⁶ in Elsa's company. The Leviser women did not find the soldiers too unpleasant either. Sophie Leviser later writes that "we found cultured clever men among the officers"²¹⁷ and "got to know many of those men, some of them very charming and all of them delighted with our girls".²¹⁸ Many Bloemfontein women, including republicans, were indeed charmed by the soldiers, especially the officers; but the self-assuredness and arrogance of the British was not appreciated by all. Some female residents found these attitudes offensive: Gustav Fichardt's wife, Caroline, writes in a letter to her daughters Ella and Maude that she could no longer bear "the assurance of these people...".²¹⁹

10. "In the midst of war we are in [sic] peace": the British soldiers' experiences of life in Bloemfontein

At around sunset on 13 March, officer Charles E. Hands found himself in an easy-chair on the Bloemfontein Club's verandah, enjoying the cool air. "It is all so perfect and peaceful and beautiful...",²²⁰ he writes in *The Bloemfontein Post*. "It feels like some enchanted island of content...and it was only this afternoon that we took Bloemfontein."²²¹ Soon after the occupation, life for the soldiers had settled into some kind of routine. There was no immediate danger to be warded off, as most of the Boers had retreated and were in a process of reorganizing and re-strategizing.²²² It was probably during this time that Francis Fremantle observed that "the general air of the town is peaceful with a preponderance of the male sex, chiefly in khaki".²²³ *The Friend* also remarked that the soldiers appeared to be "perfectly happy and contented"²²⁴ and

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²¹⁶ Ralph, *War's brighter side...*, p. 161.

²¹⁷ BPL: *Afric. 920LEV*, p. 86.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²¹⁹ As quoted in M. Bidwell, *Pen pictures of the past*, p. 75.

²²⁰ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 10.5.1900, p. 3.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² A. Wessels, *The Anglo-Boer War...*, p. 53.

²²³ Fremantle, p. 234.

²²⁴ *The Friend*, 26.3.1900, p. 3.

that they gave the impression that they had “walked these streets since the creation”.²²⁵ From a distance, Bloemfontein indeed resembled a peaceful green island in a sea of white tents with a strip of open veld that served as a kind of no-man’s-land between the town and the camps. There were two ‘Bloemfonteins’: the town itself, and around it the tented military camps which housed more than 30 000 troops.²²⁶

Regarding the British soldiers’ social lives, the class differences between troops and officers – the so-called ‘nobs’ – were more obvious in Bloemfontein than in the veld, and this reality certainly influenced their experiences of Bloemfontein. Considering that most officers were members of the British upper class and many of them were also titled aristocrats, including Lord Roberts, Lord Acheson, Lord Downe, Lord Stanley, the Earl of Dudley, the Duke of Westminster, and Lord Castletown, the British class system was transplanted to Bloemfontein with relative ease. The ‘genteel’ atmosphere of West London – Kensington, Belgravia, Mayfair – was ‘duplicated’ in Bloemfontein. Because of the class distinction and the culture of privilege that was associated with the upper class, it is not surprising that during the time of the occupation, the officers and their needs determined who was entitled to what. In his memoirs, Noel Roberts writes that some officers were so far removed from reality that they “hardly saw, much less understood what went on around them”.²²⁷ Apart from being the self-assured new rulers of Bloemfontein, the military elite also determined the social lives of almost everyone below them. The elite led active social lives, which included military balls and formal dinners hosted in Government House (Fig. 7). At one such dinner, hosted by the war correspondents in honour of Lord Roberts on 28 March, the three-course menu included dishes such as ‘Boiled Salmon’, ‘Roast Sirloin of Beef’, ‘Roast Turkey’, ‘Fricassee of Chicken’ and ‘Cabinet Pudding’.²²⁸ The officer class managed to transplant to Bloemfontein a style of living that was not only characteristically English, but also on a par with what they were used to at home.²²⁹

Throughout the occupation the Bloemfontein Club remained the centre of the officers’ and war correspondents’ social lives. More than 200 newspaper correspondents were

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ Schoeman, *Bloemfontein...*, pp. 161-162; Stevens, p. 106; ARCA: PV522, 2/1/2.

²²⁷ ARCA: PV522, 2/1/2.

²²⁸ FSPA: A349, Menu with signatures of British officers and war correspondents, 28.3.1900. For Roberts’ speech delivered on this occasion, see Wessels (ed.), *Lord Roberts...*, pp. 63-65.

²²⁹ Schoeman, *Bloemfontein...*, p. 161.

in South Africa during the first months of the War. Lord Roberts was admired by the press, and he knew how to use the press for publicity and to promote himself. Many correspondents accompanied Roberts' army.²³⁰ The Bloemfontein Club's visitors' book is a time capsule of the occupation; and the names of those who paid a visit are a silent testimony of the event: 'Major Rimington – London', 'Bennet Burleigh – Daily Telegraph London', 'Percival Landon – "The Times" London', 'W Bleloch – London Standard', 'Lt. Colonel Wollaston – Lord Roberts' staff', 'Major Cuthbert – Scot's Guards',²³¹ etc. Even before the occupation, the atmosphere at the Club resembled that of a typical English 'gentlemen's club'; and it was not long before the Club was unofficially renamed 'the English club' or 'the officers' club'.²³² An evening at the Club typically entailed drinks at the bar, followed by a formal dinner. After dinner, the gentlemen would retreat to the Club's "moonlit verandah"²³³ to enjoy cigars while watching a military tattoo on the market square. For Lieutenant Moeller the Club was an "interesting place"²³⁴ where he could rub shoulders with the best company that the British Empire could offer, including important visitors from England, war correspondents and officers. Captain Phillipps, who was a regular at the Club, had ample spare time to observe the coming and going of visitors, and he made the observation that "at the Bloemfontein Club the chance has occurred, and certainly never before, in any time or place, could you have seen such representative gatherings of the British race..."²³⁵

The situation of the ordinary troops was, of course, less favourable, and not even comparable to that of their superiors. But this does not necessarily mean that their experiences were negative. It appears that the troops had accepted the class system of that time and did not expect anything better. Trooper Vernon Lambert's opinion, expressed in a letter, probably reflects the general feeling among the troops: he remarked that he had nothing to grumble about and had "to take the rough with the smooth".²³⁶ In the camps around town, the troops entertained themselves by staging informal 'smoking concerts' showcasing their talent. The town hall, renamed the

²³⁰ Wessels (ed.), *Lord Roberts...*, pp. 33-34.

²³¹ FSPA: A559, Visitors' book of the Bloemfontein Club.

²³² Schoeman, *The Bloemfontein Club...*, p. 11.

²³³ Jeans, pp. 100-101.

²³⁴ Moeller, p. 28.

²³⁵ Phillipps, p. 92.

²³⁶ As quoted in H.J. Ogden, *The war against the Dutch republics in South Africa: its origin, progress, and results*, p. 192.

Vaudeville Theatre, was also a popular venue for variety concerts. Local singing stars Florence Fraser and Elsa Leviser, alias 'Miss Bloemfontein', were well received, but the real stars of these concerts were the troops themselves. Not lacking confidence, many troops were born entertainers. Was it after one of these concerts that 'Grace Uitland' observed that "Tommy's faith in himself is boundless"?²³⁷ Apart from performing 'patriotic airs' such as 'Soldiers of the Queen', 'When the Boys Come Home', 'Ordered to the Front', 'A Soldier's Tear' and 'Tommy Atkins', they also recited poetry by Rudyard Kipling.²³⁸ The military concerts and tattoos held in the late afternoons on the market square were also eagerly attended by troops in order to enjoy the "pleasures of martial music".²³⁹ Compositions with names like 'Viva Victoria', 'Light Cavalry' and 'Guards' were performed. The opportunity to employ these concerts as propaganda instruments was not lost on the military elite; and it was after one such performance that a 'patriotic Britisher' remarked that when "God save the Queen was played at the conclusion, all civilian heads were bared, while all officers on the stoep of the Club saluted, and the soldiers stood at attention".²⁴⁰

The ordinary troops were, of course, excluded from the officers' social circuit, but there were other options for 'entertainment indoors'. The soldiers eagerly visited the so-called 'Soldiers' Homes' (Fig. 8) which consisted of reading and entertainment rooms set up for the troops by churches, including the Wesleyan Church and the Church of England. The 'Homes' offered "papers and magazines a few years old",²⁴¹ as well as stationery for the troops who wanted to write letters home. Letter-writing was a popular pastime among the newly literate troops,²⁴² and many hours were spent writing about their impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein. According to the historian Thomas Pakenham, the soldiers' experiences must have been positive, because their mail "poured out a stream of reassurance".²⁴³ The 'Homes' were well frequented, not only for the purpose of letter-writing, but also for the tea, coffee, buns and sandwiches that

²³⁷ *The Friend*, 26.3.1900, p. 3.

²³⁸ Kipling was also known as the 'Soldiers' Poet' and became famous for patriotic poems such as 'Tommy' and 'The absent-minded beggar'. See R. Kipling, *Sixty poems*, pp. 46-52. Kipling also penned the famous music-hall ballad 'Bobs', which ensured Lord Roberts' fame and hero-worship amongst the British public. See *Rudyard Kipling's verse: inclusive edition 1885-1918*, vol. 2, pp. 200-202.

²³⁹ *The Friend*, 17.4.1900, p. 3.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ Anon, *Campaigning...*, p. 88.

²⁴² Beavan, p. 221. Towards the end of the Victorian era the level of literacy in the British Army improved.

²⁴³ Pakenham, pp. 376-377.

were served by church ladies. Some of the 'Homes', like the one in St George's Street, had cool gardens that offered relief from the heat. Furthermore, the 'Homes' were used as venues for informal concerts and sing-alongs, during which the tunes of 'working class songs' such as 'Goodbye Mother Annie' could be heard from afar.²⁴⁴

Barely two months after the occupation, *The Bloemfontein Post* informed its readers that Tommy Atkins was "quite as much at home as if he had always lived here [in Bloemfontein] – and having a delightful time".²⁴⁵ This is confirmed by Private W. Scott who saw his friend Lance-Corporal Chissel some weeks after the occupation and noted that the latter was "looking well, and as fat as ever owing no doubt to his being here [in Bloemfontein for] six weeks...".²⁴⁶ In the same vein Private J. Wilde of the 2nd Norfolk Regiment reported in a letter that he and his comrades were well-fed and "getting round all right again"²⁴⁷ after the hardships they had endured. But these observations only reflect one side of the coin, and maybe war correspondent Wallace's impression of Bloemfontein during this time provides a more accurate description of reality. Wallace, who keenly interacted with all kinds of people in town, could not help receiving "a sense of unfitness of things; you know you are in the midst of it all, and yet you feel out of it..."²⁴⁸

Julian Ralph also received the eerie impression that "...in nothing was there a suggestion that a war was on...".²⁴⁹ Did Captain Phillipps experience the same uncomfortable feeling when he proclaimed that "in the midst of war we are in [sic] peace"?²⁵⁰ Were some soldiers (the officers?) so untouched by the War that they considered themselves to be on an island of content while a war was raging around them? One could argue that the soldiers' mostly positive experiences of Bloemfontein were the result of their efforts to recreate a familiar world in an environment that remained, at best, a foreign colonial world far removed from the comforts of home. For many troops, everyday military life, even in Bloemfontein, was frustrating and depressing.²⁵¹ Furthermore, for a sizeable proportion of Bloemfontein's residents, the

²⁴⁴ Johnson, p. 171; *The Bloemfontein Post*, 22.6.1900, p. 2 & 29.6.1900, p. 2; Lowry, pp. 27-28.

²⁴⁵ *The Bloemfontein Post*, 19.5.1900, p. 3.

²⁴⁶ NAR: A768, p. 30.

²⁴⁷ As quoted in Ogden, p. 192.

²⁴⁸ Wallace, p. 184.

²⁴⁹ Ralph, *At Pretoria...*, p. 147.

²⁵⁰ Phillipps, p. 94.

²⁵¹ Nasson, p. 137.

British soldiers remained the occupiers, the invaders, the outsiders. Despite Bloemfontein's apparent 'Englishness', there was still "a great deal of Boer spirit left";²⁵² and it did not go unnoticed. Mortimer Menpes was probably speaking on behalf of others, too, when he observed that, on first entering Bloemfontein with Lord Roberts, he had thought that "there was more loyalty";²⁵³ but a month in the town had subsequently changed his impression: "the Kaffirs alone were pleased to see us".²⁵⁴

11. "Bloemfontein is a town of hospitals": the British soldiers and the enteric fever epidemic

The British soldiers' Bloemfontein also had its dark side. Henry Johnson wrote that "the triumphal occupation of Bloemfontein forms the bright side of a picture which has a reverse side, dreadful and heartbreaking...".²⁵⁵ Johnson refers to the outbreak of the devastating epidemic of enteric fever (as typhoid was then called) among the soldiers. When the British forces entered Bloemfontein they were not only exhausted and underfed, they also carried disease. For weeks they had had little or no fresh drinking water, and they had been obliged to rely on "pea-soup coloured water"²⁵⁶ taken from half-empty dams and rivers. While advancing towards Bloemfontein they also drank water from the Modder River which was polluted by decaying horse carcasses and dead bodies thrown into it by the Boers during the siege at Paardeberg.²⁵⁷ The water, described as an "uncanny mixture of mud and microbes",²⁵⁸ was unsuitable for human consumption. By the time Lord Roberts' army arrived in Bloemfontein, hundreds of troops had already taken ill with the fever. To worsen the situation, Bloemfontein's water sources were also woefully inadequate for such a large army after the sabotage of the waterworks at Sannaspos by the Boers. In a desperate bid to solve the problem, old wells were re-opened and additional water was obtained from the Renosterspruit.²⁵⁹

²⁵² *The Bloemfontein Post*, 19.5.1900, p. 3.

²⁵³ Menpes, p. 66.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ Johnson, p. 175.

²⁵⁶ Phillipps, p. 91.

²⁵⁷ B. Farwell, *The great Boer War*, p. 241; J.C. Hopkins and M. Halstead, *South Africa and the Boer-British War*, vol. 1, p. 426.

²⁵⁸ *The Friend*, 29.3.1900, p. 3.

²⁵⁹ FSPA: MBL 1/1/1/9, Minutes: meeting of the Bloemfontein Town Council, 5.4.1900, p. 480.

There was no cure for the disease, and Bloemfontein's hospital and medical staff could hardly cope with the magnitude of the disaster. It was during this time that Lieutenant Moeller noted in his diary: "Lots of fever about just now, and Bloemfontein is evidently a hotbed of it."²⁶⁰ The New Zealand nurse Bessie Teape, who worked in No. 10 General Hospital in Bloemfontein, also referred to the town as "a hotbed of fever...with no sanitary arrangements whatever...buildings covered black with flies, and patients covered with vermin".²⁶¹ Apart from the conversion of public buildings, including schools and the Raadzaal²⁶² (i.e. seat of the Free State parliament), into hospitals (Fig. 9), tented field hospitals were also put up on the outskirts of the town. Because of the multitude of tents, Erskine Childers received the impression that "Bloemfontein is a town of hospitals".²⁶³ The consequences of the disease were devastating: between 8000 and 9000 men – many of them "Yeomanry and C.I.V. chaps"²⁶⁴ – contracted the disease and almost 1600 eventually succumbed to it.²⁶⁵

In their writings the troops, officers and war correspondents not only mention the terrifying experience of suffering from the disease, they also point out that even to be a mere observer of the "long string of stretchers which morning after morning passed through the camp and wended [sic] their way down the hill to the field hospitals, with their burdens of fever"²⁶⁶ was bad enough. Later the 'long string of stretchers' became a "constant succession of funeral parties"²⁶⁷ making their way to the cemetery on Monument Hill (Fig. 10). For some soldiers, the once 'pretty' and 'picturesque' Bloemfontein had turned into a graveyard. In a letter to his brother-in-law, Private R. Arnold of the 17th Lancers reported that it was common to "see our fellows digging between 20 and 30 graves at a time".²⁶⁸

²⁶⁰ Moeller, p. 32.

²⁶¹ Quoted in J. Crawford and I. McGibbon (eds), *One flag, one Queen, one tongue: New Zealand, the British Empire and the South African War 1899-1902*, p. 131.

²⁶² Known today as the Fourth Raadsaal.

²⁶³ Childers, p. 71.

²⁶⁴ Trooper V. Lambert as quoted in Ogden, p. 192.

²⁶⁵ Farwell, pp. 241-243; Conan Doyle, pp. 370-371; Schoeman, *Bloemfontein...*, p. 164; Jackson, pp. 102-103. See in general also J.C. de Villiers, *Healers, helpers and hospitals: a history of military medicine in the Anglo-Boer War*, vol. 2, pp. 106-112.

²⁶⁶ Jeans, p. 100.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ As quoted in Ogden, p. 192.

Ironically, the funeral processions moved along the same streets on which the soldiers had marched during their triumphant entry into Bloemfontein. The route to victory had become the route of the dead. Wrapped in blankets because there were no more coffins left, the deceased were buried with their few belongings. Typically, a soldier would be interred along with “his slippers, his iron mug, his boots, his haversack, and the very stretcher on which he lay”.²⁶⁹ Added to this already dreary picture was the overwhelming stench. Rudyard Kipling remembers that the smell, which was “more depressing than the stench of human carrion”,²⁷⁰ was all over Bloemfontein. Few, if any, soldiers were left untouched by the smells and sights of the epidemic. Needless to say, the British soldiers’ impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein were not unaffected by the tragedy. For Filson Young, the same Bloemfontein that was at first “simply a paradise to us”²⁷¹ later became “associated with disease and death”.²⁷² The ‘British soldiers’ Bloemfontein’ had become the British soldiers’ “Bloeming-typhoidtein”.²⁷³ In his memoirs, the ‘Mounted Black’ writes that the “gruesome sight”²⁷⁴ of the epidemic had become unbearable and that he and his comrades “all felt glad to think that the time fixed for the great advance northwards was drawing near”.²⁷⁵ That day arrived on 3 May 1900, when Lord Roberts and an army of more than 20 000 soldiers left Bloemfontein for the next phase of the campaign: the capture of Pretoria.²⁷⁶

12. “A place of attainment, a goal, a resting-place”: the British soldiers’ memories of Bloemfontein

Were the British soldiers’ positive impressions and experiences of Bloemfontein mostly superficial and soon forgotten after they had returned home? Or were these impressions lasting? Many British soldiers’ sentiments about Bloemfontein were rather mixed, and although traumatic, the negative experience of the enteric fever epidemic had not obliterated the positive memories of their stay. The military doctor T.T. Jeans

²⁶⁹ Lowry, p. 37.

²⁷⁰ Kipling, p. 155.

²⁷¹ Young, p. 127.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ Farwell, p. 243.

²⁷⁴ Anon, *Campaigning...*, p. 91.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ For Roberts’ march from Bloemfontein to Pretoria see, for example, Breytenbach, pp. 413-549; Amery, vol. 4, pp. 102-164.

sums it up best in his observation, shortly before his departure from Bloemfontein, that although the sad memories of the epidemic “are now the most striking”,²⁷⁷ he feels sure that “in a year or two, the remembrance of our stay in this town will only conjure pleasant memories...”.²⁷⁸ It appears that the soldiers did not forget Bloemfontein after they had returned home. Despite the negative impressions and experiences of some soldiers, most of them concluded that Bloemfontein would always be fondly remembered for various reasons. Filson Young writes that Bloemfontein “will always be thought of as a place of attainment, a goal, a resting-place”.²⁷⁹ For H.F.P. Battersby, Bloemfontein was “a place of green harbourage”²⁸⁰ amidst the ravages of war. And Rev. Lowry’s final impression of Bloemfontein was that of “a prosperous and promising little city”.²⁸¹

13. Conclusion

With hindsight one can argue that by the time the British Army occupied Bloemfontein on 13 March 1900 they had already won the War. It is true that while Roberts rested his exhausted troops in Bloemfontein, the Boers decided to change their strategy and resort to guerilla warfare; that General Christiaan de Wet pulled off a stunning victory at Sannaspos near Bloemfontein (31 March 1900);²⁸² and that the War would still drag on for more than two years, with much destruction, death and trauma (with special reference to the British scorched-earth policy and the concomitant establishment of internment camps for white and black civilians). But by mid-March 1900, the Boers had been outmanoeuvred and heavily defeated (Paardeberg), and were on their way out of Natal and the Cape Colony. They were psychologically unsettled and demoralised, and would never even try to recapture Bloemfontein (or later, Pretoria). Moreover, they never fully recovered from their defeats at Paardeberg and on the Thukela River, or from losing the Free State’s capital city – and, later, also that of the Transvaal.

²⁷⁷ Jeans, p. 100.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ Young, p. 121.

²⁸⁰ Battersby, p. 116.

²⁸¹ Lowry, p. 15.

²⁸² Breytenbach, pp. 196-225; J.E. Rabie, *Generaal C.R. de Wet se krygsleiding by Sannaspos en Groenkop*, pp. 5-30; C.R. de Wet, *Three years war (October 1899-June 1902)*, pp. 84-92.

When Lord Roberts and his army entered Bloemfontein on 13 March 1900, they had no idea how long the War would still continue, how long they would stay in Bloemfontein, what reception they would receive, or what to expect of the town itself. As a matter of fact they expected the worst, because until then they had marched through a hostile state populated mostly by pro-republicans whose sympathies lay with the Boers. All they knew was that Bloemfontein was a place of great importance for Lord Roberts' campaign and that its occupation by the British would be of great symbolic value for the British war effort. Some of the soldiers already had a picture of Bloemfontein in their minds, based on what they had heard, or on what they had seen in English publications. Others based their rather negative preconceptions of the town on what they had read in pro-British newspapers, or what they had experienced themselves on their way to the capital. Consequently, the British soldiers' expectations regarding Bloemfontein were characterised by uncertainty, as they were heading for the capital of an enemy republic. It would be an understatement to say that the reception which was bestowed on the British soldiers in Bloemfontein took all of them, including Lord Roberts, by surprise. In a sense it was an anti-climax, because there was no trace of the Boers who had so bravely fought the British forces earlier in the campaign. The Boers had abandoned their trenches and retreated. This was the first surprise. The second surprise was the nature of the reception that awaited them inside the capital: instead of being met with sullen faces, they were greeted by jubilant crowds who welcomed them as liberators rather than conquerors. And there was yet another surprise: Bloemfontein was predominantly English-speaking, and not Dutch-speaking like the rest of the Boer republic.

Although they were exhausted and starving when they arrived, the British soldiers' triumphant entry into Bloemfontein on 13 March had set the stage for an experience that many of them chose to fondly remember for the rest of their lives. Apart from the symbolic value that the occupation held as a major achievement for the British war effort, the soldiers' personal impressions and experiences of the town itself also comprised an intrinsic aspect of the occupation of Bloemfontein. In their diaries, journals, memoirs and letters they describe Bloemfontein as 'pretty', 'picturesque', 'pleasant', 'peaceful', 'tranquil', 'an oasis', 'paradise' and 'a breathing place' – words that reflect pleasant and positive impressions and experiences of the place. The soldiers found Bloemfontein to be a town that not only looked like home, but also felt

like home. For many soldiers, Bloemfontein looked and felt 'English' – a place that was recognisable, re-assuring and comforting amid the uncertainties of war. And soon after the onset of the occupation, Bloemfontein – which already had so many characteristically English features – was even further 'anglicised' by Lord Roberts and the military establishment. All of this set the stage for the creation of the 'British soldiers' Bloemfontein'.

The 'British soldiers' Bloemfontein' was a place that delighted and surprised – in more than one respect: the relative ease with which Bloemfontein was taken from the Boers, the enthusiastic reception on the day of the entry, the gratitude expressed by the black residents, the 'Englishness' of the gardens and houses, Bloemfontein's shops that looked like those in Britain, the attention bestowed on the troops by some Bloemfontein women, and the general atmosphere of peace and contentment in a town that was surrounded by hostile Boers. Despite the suffering and hardship caused by exposure to a harsh climate, starvation, deprivation and the tragic consequences of disease, most soldiers shared Filson Young's memory of Bloemfontein as 'a place of attainment, a goal, a resting-place'. For seven short weeks, Bloemfontein was indeed just that for many exhausted (and ill) British soldiers. But afterwards they had to continue their march northwards, and after the fall of Pretoria (5 June 1900), had to deal with an increase in Boer guerilla activities until peace was eventually concluded on 31 May 1902. In the course of the War at least 22 450 white British soldiers died (including some 14 000 who succumbed to disease),²⁸³ and more than 1800 were buried in Bloemfontein. Many others who had enjoyed Bloemfontein's sights and hospitality during March to May 1900 would later perish in the War and end up buried in other war cemeteries scattered across the South African war zone.

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²⁸³ Wessels, *The Anglo-Boer War...*, pp. 62-79.

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- 1) Lord Roberts, 1900. (Photograph: National Museum, Bloemfontein)
- 2) The British army's entry into Bloemfontein, Church Street, 13 March 1900. (Photograph: National Museum, Bloemfontein)
- 3) British soldiers marching down Maitland Street, 13 March 1900. Note the onlookers. (Photograph: National Museum, Bloemfontein)
- 4) The green oasis in the veld: Bloemfontein, 1900. (Photograph: National Museum, Bloemfontein)

- 5) British officers and sisters in the garden of the Greenhill Convent, Green Street, Bloemfontein, 1900. (Photograph: National Museum, Bloemfontein)
- 6) Where the officers socialised: the Bloemfontein Club with its famous verandah, 1900. (Photograph: National Museum, Bloemfontein)
- 7) Lord Roberts (with white moustache) and officers attending a formal dinner in Government House, 1900. (Photograph: National Museum, Bloemfontein)
- 8) Where the troops socialised: the St George's Street Soldiers' Home. Note the garden. (Photograph: Museum Africa, Johannesburg)
- 9) Soldiers sick with enteric fever inside the Raadzaal which was turned into a hospital, 1900. (Photograph: National Museum, Bloemfontein)
- 10) Memorial and Garden of Remembrance for the British and colonial forces who died during the Anglo-Boer War, President Brand cemetery, Bloemfontein, 2013. This cemetery is the final resting place of more than 1800 British soldiers. (Photograph: National Museum, Bloemfontein)