

# Writing on the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902: An auto-ethnographic reflective journey

By Albert Grundlingh

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## Abstract

This paper employs an auto-ethnographical approach in which one draws on one's own experiences in trying to understand one's involvement in Anglo-Boer War writing and related ramifications. Of course, such an approach can easily descend into self-indulgent puffery, but hopefully if due caution is taken it may shed some light on how the dynamics of writing on the war helped to shape one individual's exploration of the South African historical landscape.

One of the questions to be explored is how one gets to write about the war. What are the inner and often hidden impulses that drive one towards writing on the war and specific themes within that often convoluted and complex historical milieu? Equally important is the way in which research obstacles and publication issues can be negotiated. The bulk of the paper, however, deals with the wider dimensions of the writing process and how the war served as a kind of bridgehead to other topics and particularly alerted one to salient conceptual historiographical points of departure.

## Paper / notes

The term "auto-ethnographic" in this paper refers to an approach where one draws on one's own experiences in trying to understand why one has explored certain historical topics. This of course can easily descend into self-indulgent puffery – solipsism which can probably hardly be avoided, but should as far as possible be curbed. Nevertheless, the genre is not all that strange. Such writings have been called interventionist, inasmuch as they provide additional grist to the historiographical mill in revealing often submerged dimensions of certain trends.<sup>1</sup> In the South African context we have a few notable book contributions of this order: WM Macmillan for the University of the Witwatersrand, Phyllis Lewsen of the same university, A van Wyk of the University of South Africa and Hermann Giliomee of Stellenbosch University and the University of Cape Town.<sup>2</sup> My offering is far more modest in scope and intent. I

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<sup>1</sup> J. Aurell, "Making history by contextualization oneself: Autobiography as historiographical intervention", *History and Theory*, 54, May 2015, p 244.

<sup>2</sup> W.M. Macmillan, *My South African Years*. David Philip, Cape Town, 1975; P Lewsen, *Reverberations: a memoir*, University of Cape Town Press, Cape Town, 1996; A van Wyk, *The birth of a new*

only focus on my Anglo-Boer War writing and the aim is to trace the influences as well their ramifications, which formed a backdrop to some of my work. To some extent, it links up with recent work being done by Gary Baines on the Border War of 1966-1989.<sup>3</sup>

There is one additional consideration. Writing on the American historical profession, Ian Tyrrell has observed in 2005: "Historical fashions change, and with them go the fates of historians. We write about the past. Most of us hope that our research has enduring value. Yet our work often fades rapidly after we pass from the scene, to be discarded in the search of new interpretations, new debates. We have become the forgotten."<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, that is bound to be the fate of all of us. But perhaps, just perhaps, one is entitled after a lifetime in academe to reflect upon where it all started and how it developed within a certain context.

### ***Early stirrings***

How does one get into writing history? What are the wellsprings of embarking on such a venture which many outside the fold may well regard as something quite esoteric if not eccentric? It is a question which had bothered me for a long time which I think should first be addressed by exploring relevant influences in one's own life history. I happened to grow up in a bookish home, but as a callow youth did not regard myself as a bookworm. In retrospect though, I did develop a curiosity about the books in father's study at Oudtshoorn. He was awarded a PhD in History from Stellenbosch University in 1945 for a thesis on the Cape parliament from 1872 to 1910 with special reference to party politics. It was eventually published in 1969 under the Archives Yearbook series.<sup>5</sup> It was this series in particular – my father dutifully made sure that he obtained every volume – that fascinated me as I grew up, and especially when I went to university. I remember that the thought occurred to me how much history must be locked up in those volumes and I wondered how the sometimes obscure topics could in any way relate to the world of a student during the late sixties and early seventies. The connection was not easy to make. I did, however, feel that one could get some kind of grip on the linkage between past and present, especially the underlying historical antagonism between English and Afrikaans speakers which seemed to have had an extraordinary longevity, by perusing some theses which appeared relevant. These included my father's thesis which I consulted, partly out of filial interest but also youthful curiosity. My father was a mild mannered man who could be firm on occasions, but generally not given to strong opinions. So it was somewhat of a surprise to me when I came across what must have been an unusually

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*Afrikaner*, H&R, Cape Town, 1991; H Giliomee, *Historian: Hermann Giliomee, an autobiography*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> G. Baines, "Confessions of a conscript, disclosures of a historian: An autobiographical essay about the Border War" in I van der Waag and A Grundlingh (eds.), *In different times*, Sunmedia, Stellenbosch, 2019, pp 231-246.

<sup>4</sup> I. Tyrrell, *Historians in public: The practice of American history, 1890-1970*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, p 243.

<sup>5</sup> M.A.S. Grundlingh, "The Parliament of the Cape of Good Hope, with special reference to party politics", *Archives Yearbook*, II, 1969 .

bold statement for him in his thesis, namely that Britain during the war of 1899 to 1902 “trampled justice underfoot.” This awareness I thought, must have resonated down the years and accounted for intra-white tensions. It was the first academic piece I had read about the war, little knowing that I would later be completely drawn in by the writing on this conflict.

### ***Army experience***

After school I had to go to the army as part of the first intake of conscripts in 1967. I was as unprepared for the army, as the army was for the deluge of new recruits which descended on them after the introduction of universal conscription for all white males. It all seemed like organised chaos to me, without much point, but cemented with plenty of propaganda. What I can recall, is that the Anglo-Boer War was a favourite comparison with an oft-repeated claim that just as the British soldiers manhandled Boer women and children, the “terrorists” in South Africa at the time and beyond the borders will do likewise and worse. The tensions between English and Afrikaans speakers, it seemed to me, had for reasons which I could not quite fathom, been transferred to faceless “terrorists”. It also dawned on me that you were not supposed to think otherwise in the army and deviance of any kind was not tolerated. Perhaps in this realisation the first seedlings for my later work on the handsuppers and joiners during the Anglo-Boer War can be found. What intrigued me about this topic was that these groups flagrantly seemed to disregard what I in my innocence as a conscript had regarded as inviolable military conventions. In the army, those who had the slightest doubts about the apartheid policy were summarily considered as traitors to South Africa’s cause. The question of treason then, which informed my first serious academic work had deep and somewhat unexpected roots and one can even argue has become a proxy for wider issues. In retrospect, if I had not been to the army, I would have found it more difficult to understand the ramifications of apostasy.

### ***Influences as a student***

Post army, the prospects of university appeared on the horizon. I obtained a teacher’s bursary and was destined to go Stellenbosch University; my father has already booked me into his old residence “Dagbreek”. However, I never saw the inside of “Daybreak”. When I mentioned to my father that I had thought about taking History as one of my subjects, a red flag went up. That would have meant that I would be subjected to the notorious quirks of Prof Piet van der Merwe, the Head of Department, who, though a good historian had an unfortunate reputation as a most intimidating individual. This was fairly common knowledge amongst the Stellenbosch cognoscenti. For someone like me who had already developed a rebellious streak in the army, my father in his wisdom realised that Piet van der Merwe and I would not be a good match. Thus it came about that I went to the University of the Free State in 1968 where a much more accommodating Prof Jaap Oberholster, an ex- Stellenbosch student, was in charge of the History Department.

Free State was a happy choice. The university was less pretentious than what Stellenbosch had been at the time and the department was blessed with good lecturers.<sup>6</sup> Besides the avuncular Oberholster, Johann Moll, and Henning van Aswegen took teaching seriously and instilled an awareness of history as a craft. So did Tienie van Schoor, who was quite open about his Afrikaner nationalist proclivities and an acknowledged Boer war expert. It was also Johan Moll who first alerted me to the fact that ordinary people have just as much a right to feature in historical writing as leaders and other luminaries. It turned out to be an abiding lesson. Henning van Aswegen in turn opened up Africa history at an early stage and also completed a pioneering thesis on 19<sup>th</sup> century race relations in the Free State.

One furthermore came under the spell of the Free State rurality and wide open spaces. Through the Woman's Monument which we as history students visited quite often, it dawned even on the most insensitive individual that Free State had a dramatic history. This did not necessarily spark my interest in the war, but I do think that a general awareness, even if romanticised, of the "Boerness" of the Free State made me more receptive to the history of the province and in a superficial way as a student what inhabitants had to endure. If I had gone to Stellenbosch, I would have missed out on those sensibilities.

Strangely enough, I cannot recall that we were taught much war history. Just as well, because the little that we had, gave me the impression that war history only consisted of battles and the like. In our Hons year we were given long essays to research on the history of Senekal, partly because Oberholster was commissioned to write a book on the history of the town. At first glance it might not have appeared an exceptionally exciting topic, but it taught one the basics of archival research. I did the early history of Senekal and came across a local leading light, prominent in town affairs, the venerable SG Vilonel whom I was to meet again later in my Anglo-Boer War researches in a different guise as a collaborator with the British.

### ***Becoming an historian of war at the University of South Africa (Unisa)***

In 1972 at the age of 24 years, I was fortunate enough to be approached for a temporary junior lectureship at the University of South Africa. As a student I never seriously thought that an academic career may be in the offing, so I was understandably excited and determined to make the most of the opportunity. I started in 1973 and found the going harder than initially anticipated. Quite gormless and naive

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<sup>6</sup> For a view on the Free State History Department see H van Aswegen and P Kapp, *Verandering en vernuwing in geskiedbeskouing: 'n Gesprek oor die ervaringe van twee tydgenote*, Kleio, Pretoria, 2006, pp. 27-41.

about the chicanery of academic life, I was given a rude awakening when a grizzled veteran bluntly warned me: "Watch out, here they will cut your throat for a sixpence".

It was an apt remark, yet Unisa had much to offer. A wonderful library and the State Archives within easy reach were some of the advantages for an aspiring historian. Moreover, Unisa had with some exceptions, an intellectually vibrant array of staff, many of them bilingual. It was a growing department and in the beginning of the 1990s the staff complement was 35 people. Whilst one had to be mindful of office politics as one's career prospects could be on the line, the interaction with some solid scholars more than compensated for the downside.<sup>7</sup>

Particularly influential in my career was Burrige Spies. When I arrived at Unisa he was on the point of finishing off his magnum opus on Roberts, Kitchener and civilians.<sup>8</sup> I was most impressed by Spies as a person and a scholar. In many ways he seemed to me a worthy individual to be emulated. He could be aloof at times, but that just seemed to add to his mystique. It was at this time that I was casting around for an MA topic when I came across an article by Noel Garson from the University of the Witwatersrand who was also happened to have been Spies's supervisor, dealing with the "Het Volk" political party after the war. In the article, Garson had a passing reference to the situation of the "joiners" after hostilities were concluded.<sup>9</sup> I was immediately fired up. This seemed to a perfect topic for an MA. Even more important, it resonated with my emergent awareness that history was much more complicated than what I had earlier imagined. There were indeed new fields to be explored and new contributions to be made. Moreover, on a personal level, as indicated earlier, I also thought back on my army days and the discrepancies, which the Boer collaborators now presented in terms of what was instilled into me then as accepted military discipline.

I eagerly approached Spies. He was cautious and said that it will be a difficult topic with plenty of research and may take a long time to complete. He was nevertheless prepared to act as a supervisor. I was pleased and ready for the challenge. Being young and somewhat impetuous though, I did not fully understand the notion of "turf wars" when it came to research on the Anglo- Boer War. Researchers on South Africa's premier war formed an almost exclusive club and were tacitly very particular on who was allowed to do what. Spies had just gained entrance to the club, but to allow a young upstart to work on what was considered a very contentious issues was another matter. The concerned Unisa gatekeeper on these issues was quite a prominent researcher on especially the battles of the war, and tried all sorts of tactics to put me on a different course. Through a combination of ignorance and cussedness

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview of the Unisa History Department see A Grundlingh, "History on the hill: Aspects of scholarship and scholarly life at the Unisa History Department, 1968-2000, *Kleio*, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Published as *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer republics : January 1900 – May 1902*, Human and Rousseau, Cape Town, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> N.G. Garson, "Het Volk': The Botha-Smuts party in in the Transvaal, 1904- 1911, *The Historical Journal*, 9,1, 1966.

though, I was not prepared to deviate. There was a price to be paid for this, as I was later told that my “inflexibility” counted against me being offered a permanent position. I did eventually obtain permanent employment in 1977. The thesis was published in 1979 and reprints and a translation followed in 1999 and 2006.<sup>10</sup>

What impressed me most about Spies’s work was not only his meticulous analysis and depth of research, but the fact that he had viewed the war in a broader context. I was disabused of my earlier notion that the war was restricted mainly to warfare. Spies, without necessarily making too much of it, followed more of a “war and society” approach. This development locally and more extensively abroad was largely a reaction against the 'drum and trumpet' school of military history, a field of enquiry that may be valid in its own right, but one that often degenerates into a discussion of uniforms and badges and seldom rises above campaigns and battles - the major weakness being an inclination to divorce the fighting side of war from its socio-economic and political context. Practitioners in the field of 'war and society' therefore sought to place warfare in its total historical milieu and they shared a common interest in war as an agent of social change and in the socio-political repercussions of military service.

In what has almost become a mantra in my own work, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm has underlined the various dimensions of violent upheavals:

I think the profitability of the studies of social conflict requires more careful assessment... That they always dramatize crucial aspects of social structure because they are here strained to the breaking point is not in doubt. Moreover, certain problems cannot be studied at all except in and through such moments of eruption, which do not merely bring into the open so much that is normally latent, but also concentrate and magnify phenomena for the benefit of the student, while - not the least of their advantages - normally multiplying our documentation about them.<sup>11</sup>

Besides Spies’ firm guiding hand in shaping my work on the handsuppers and joiners, I also had the advantage of having Fransjohan Pretorius as a colleague at Unisa. Even at the start of his career, he had a wide reaching and in-depth knowledge of the war. I also benefited from discussions with Paul Zietsman, an unassuming scholar with a fine turn of phrase and a nuanced appreciation of the post-war politics in the former

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<sup>10</sup> *Die Hendsoppers" en Joiners: die rasionaal en verskynsel van verraad.* HAUM, Pretoria,1979. *Die Hendsoppers en Joiners: die rasionaal en verskynsel van verraad.* Protea, Pretoria,1999. *The Dynamics of treason: Boer collaboration in the South African War of 1899-1902.* Protea, Pretoria, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, 'From social history to the history of society' in F. Gilbert and S.R. Graubard (eds.), *Historical Studies Today*, Macmillan, New York 1972, p.20.

Boer republics. Similarly, colleague Greg Cuthberston with his interest in the war and religion was always available for lively discussions on the war.

### ***Some key wider issues***

If I had to single out one aspect of the work on the handsuppers and joiners that left a lasting impression on me it was the question of “bywoner” representivity amongst the joiners. As it was fairly high, in one joiner outfit as high as 72%, it went some distance to explain the social composition of the group.<sup>12</sup> This in turn helped to provide an explanation for their apostasy that included material considerations, besides idealistic ideological claims that they were merely trying to end the war to the benefit of all concerned. A few might indeed have wholeheartedly subscribed to such a view, but the fact that there were so many bywoners who were well paid for their services and were also promised land by the British after the war, helped to change the complexion of the matter. It brought another factor into play which earlier on hardly featured. I must add though that the “discovery” was not all that original. Earlier on Donald Denoon in his book “Grand Illusion” had hinted at that,<sup>13</sup> but Spies encouraged me to find considerably more evidence before he was prepared to accept the interpretation.

I had written on these issues before the advent in the late 1970s of the History Workshop at Wits which imparted a new energy to historical studies in South Africa by focusing more rigorously on social history and the importance of class.<sup>14</sup> It was a happy coincidence that my knowledge of the joiners and “bywoners” made me particularly receptive to these fresh departures in writing South African history. I increasingly started to show an interest in the research emanating from the History Workshop and in this way my forays into Anglo-Boer War history served as a bridgehead for wider explorations.

This found further expression in extending the analogy to the 1914 Boer Rebellion which also happened to have a sizeable number of poor white rebels of whom some at least had their sights set on a more prosperous dispensation should the Rebellion succeed. This ‘discovery’ if it can be called that, was first sparked by my reading of an early article by Rodney Davenport in which he had a throwaway line on the poor white presence in the rebellion.<sup>15</sup> This was enough for me to pursue the issue in further depth. Subsequently scholars like John Bottomley added to this interpretation and the question was again given an airing in 2009.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Hendsoppers en Joiners*, p 233

<sup>13</sup> D. Denoon, *A Grand Illusion: The failure of imperial policy in the Transvaal colony during the period of reconstruction*, Longman, London, 1973, pp.17-18.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, A Grundlingh, “Transcending transitions: The social history tradition in South Africa”, Inaugural lecture, Unisa, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> The issue is discussed in, A Grundlingh, Die Rebelle van 1914: 'n historiografiese verkenning", *Kleio*, 1979, pp 18-30.

<sup>16</sup> Die Rebelle van 1914: 'n historiografiese verkenning", *Kleio*, 1979, pp 18-30; J Bottomley, “The Orange Free state and the rebellion of 1914: “The influence of industrialization, poverty and poor whiteism” in R Morrell( ed.), *White but poor: Essays on the history of poor whites in Southern Africa*,

In addition, the war conceptually added yet another arrow to my bow when the question of historical representation started to surface in South African historiography during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. This allowed me to explore the war in 20<sup>th</sup> century Afrikaner consciousness. I sought to provide an explanatory overview of Afrikaans versions of the war as these started to emerge as a part of a wider process of ethnic mobilisation, and to demonstrate how the changing symbolic function of the war in Afrikaner nationalist consciousness meshed with broader socio-economic and political developments. I found this a rich vein to pursue, as subsequent work on the Woman's National Monument would testify. Furthermore, an opportunity too good to be missed, presented itself with the centennial reframing between 1999 and 2002 of the remembrance of the war.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Publications and more wars***

My work on the war fortuitously led to invitations to contribute to a number of volumes dealing with aspects of the conflict. A trailblazer in this respect was the Burrige Spies and Peter Warwick edited volume in 1980 with an international cast which opened up a vast array of innovative themes. This was followed by a similar volume aimed more specifically at the South African market edited by Fransjohan Pretorius. In 2002 I was also involved as a co-editor in a volume dealing with some new departures on the writing of the war, and the same year contributed to a book on the impact of the war. As if this was not enough Bill Nasson and I acted as editors for a book in 2013, richly illustrated, and focusing on some new work and revisiting older issues.<sup>18</sup> I must confess, at one point in my career I thought that I must have been conscripted for life to keep on writing on the war. Although I had published on a number of other non-war related topics, the war seemed to keep on returning. It was not a completely unwelcome guest though.

My interest in the Anglo-Boer War spilled over into other wars, more specifically South African black people and the First World War. I had initially hoped to work on black people and the Anglo-Boer War, but quickly realised that with excellent work being done by Peter Warwick and Bill Nasson the field had become oversubscribed. So in somewhat predictable fashion perhaps, I moved onto the next war.<sup>19</sup> I also later dabbled in the Second World War,

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1880-1940, Unisa Press, Pretoria, 1992; A Grundlingh and S Swart, *Radelose Rebelle? Dinamika van die 1914-195 Afrikanerrebellie*, Protea, Pretoria, 2019

<sup>17</sup> "The war in 20th century Afrikaner consciousness" in D. Omissi en A. S. Thompson, *The impact of the South African War*, Routledge, London, 2002; "The National Women's Monument: The making and mutation of meaning in Afrikaner memory of the South African War", in A. Grundlingh, G. Cuthbertson and M-L. Suttie (eds.), *Writing a wider war: Rethinking gender, race and identity in the South African War*, Ohio Press, 2002. "Reframing remembrance: the politics of the centenary commemorations of the South African War of 1899-1902", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 2, June 2004.

<sup>18</sup> P. Warwick and SB Spies (eds.), *The South African War; Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, Longman, London, 1980; F Pretorius (ed.), *Scorched Earth*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2001; A Grundlingh en B Nasson (eds.), *Die oorlog kom huis toe*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2013. (Also available in English).

<sup>19</sup> *War and society: Participation and remembrance: South African black and coloured troops in the First World War, 1914-1918*. Sunmedia, Stellenbosch, 2014.



investigating the level of Afrikaner participation in the war, and later still even tried my hand on a topic related to the Border War of 1966-1989.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

I can look back upon a number of intriguing issues I was privileged to research and analyse. Moreover, as a kind of bridgehead it helped to open up other topics for investigation. I might not have had as many students on the war as one would wish for, but those that I did have stand out. Carel van der Merwe as a Ph D student produced a remarkable thesis on General Ben Viljoen, soon to be published. On MA level, Nikke Strydom has written on a topic which is often mentioned in the general literature, but remained unpacked until she completed her innovative work on children and the war.<sup>21</sup>

The war has not only opened up academic vistas, but in the process I have also met some individuals who have enriched my personal life. Overall, embarking on that journey many years ago, has ultimately led me to many unexpected places of the mind.

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<sup>20</sup> The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and ethnic identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939-1945", *Journal of African History*, 42, 1999. "Caught in the crossfire: The Progressive Federal Party and Defence Force politics in the 1980s", in A Grundlingh and I van der Waag (eds.), *In different times: Reflections on the South African Border War*, In the press.

<sup>21</sup> Carel Van der Merwe's book will appear under the title: *Kansvatter: Die Rustelose lewe van Ben Viljoen*, Protea, Pretoria, 2019. Nikke Strydom's thesis is "Kinders in die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902) Konsentrasiekampe: 'n Ondersoek na die moontlike invloed van voeding en belewenis. MA, Departement Geskiedenis, Universiteit van Stellenbosch, 2017.