Striking collection provides worm's eye view of imperial war

Edward Spiers (ed.), ***Letters from Ladysmith: Eyewitness Accounts from the South African War***
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Edward Spiers, a leading historian of Britain's Victorian army and Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of Leeds, provided a taste of *Letters from Ladysmith* in this self-same journal not too long ago. In issue 1 of volume 55 (2010), his "The Learning Curve in the South African War: Soldiers' Perspectives", focused on providing, among other useful things, a worm's-eye view of the conditions and costs of General Sir Redvers Buller's blundering Natal campaign against invading Boer republican forces. As common Victorian colonial campaigns went – straightforward conquest or the swift repelling of upstart insurgents – the Natal theatre was altogether another case, anything but what Rudyard Kipling was fond of calling "a scrimmage". A mess which exposed its army's serious shortcomings, this disputed colonial territory seriously tested imperial Britain's military power. Whatever the difficulties of Zululand at the end of the 1870s or the Sudan in the 1880s and again in the 1890s, the stresses of these previous campaigns now paled by comparison. Indeed, for one disgruntled infantry veteran of British wars of "pacification", when compared to the relief of Ladysmith, the

recent engagement at Omdurman had been a picnic, leaving aside the bloodied Sudanese warriors lying beyond the blankets.

What Edward Spiers provides us with in this collection of soldiers' letters is considerably more than a collection of individual testimonies of campaigning on the eastern front of the South African War. For its value is twofold. The first is what *Letters from Ladysmith* represents – the documentation of a transitional phase in the character and identity of the British army or, to put it more plainly, the creation of a more digestible image of the ordinary soldier, a transformation from the Duke of Wellington's derisory depiction of the "scum of the earth" to Kipling's portrayal of a salt of the earth Tommy Atkins. A crucial part of this shift in popular awareness was the impact of the growth of mass literacy in the later Victorian era. By the end of the 1890s, virtually all British soldiers possessed decent basic literacy skills and had become accustomed to communicating their experiences in letters home to their families.

These accounts were also being disseminated more widely for public consumption through the national and local press, factory and trades journals, and school magazines. Simultaneously, the ranks of the standing army were augmented by waves of volunteers from the lower middle and middle classes, a phenomenon of particular significance for the war in South Africa. This gave the army – and its voices – for a time at least, a demographic gloss roughly more representative of its host society. Then, for those who aired their voices by writing home, there was the extraordinary range of Britain's local or provincial press – Professor Spiers lists about 80 newspapers from which his letters are drawn, from the *Armagh Guardian* to the *Yorkshire Post*. As an outlet for wartime testimony, the local press mattered because of its civic culture. During the conflict, provincial newspapers distinguished themselves from the national press by championing local volunteerism, local pride, patriotism and civic effort, and by keeping up interest in imperial campaigns in which there was a local investment, however drawn-out and dreary they may have turned out to be. Thus, unlike, say, *The Times,* by 1901 the *Rotherham Advertiser* was less likely to be distracted from a wartime South Africa by the Chinese Boxer Rebellion. South Yorkshire editors kept an unflagging eye on South Yorkshiremen serving in khaki. And an obvious way of reflecting that local connection was the printing of letters from soldiers at war with local roots or ties.

The lion's share of this meticulously edited collection of around 250 eyewitness letters is drawn from these minor British papers. Almost all by soldiers in the field – there are a few from civilians – they present a matter-of-fact, first-hand testimony to the ways in which the early months of Anglo-Boer warfare were viewed and felt by those shipped out to wage it. The second valuable thing about this commentary is what it does for views of that quintessential Victorian imperial epic, the Siege of Ladysmith, with its dark colonial days for British arms along with a besieged Mafeking and Kimberley. In a somewhat paradoxical way, the sharply personal perspectives provided by this compilation reduce the scale of an overblown

siege epic, while simultaneously adding an enormous crop of minute and vivid particulars to the sum, expanding understanding of how ordinary British forces reacted and responded to the Natal invasion crisis.

Take Private Edward Lightfoot's family letter of December 1899, printed in the *Liverpool Courier* in the following month. Despairing of Buller's ineffectual flailing, he concluded: "we are all heartily sick of this. We don't have much to do, and that is one good thing, for we are not strong enough to do it if we had" (p 69). These accounts are, then, unlike the self-censored or carefully-crafted reports of war correspondents. Nor were they composed with a conscious eye on posterity. Even less are they flavoured with the often posturing hindsight of the traditional war memoir. Instead, what we have is the immediacy of letter-writers who spoke in many different British voices, yet were bound by those pounding elements inescapably common to the experience of war – the immediacies of fear, rage, grief, solace, hatred, compassion and other stark emotional feelings.

In another sense, these pages depict an almost anthropological kind of khaki micro-society, with its own rhythms, dictates, compulsions, habits and vocabularies of revulsion, as when turned by hunger into "brutes" or virtual "cannibals", men swallowed their squeamishness and consumed their own horses (p 162). At the same time*, Letters from Ladysmith* is richly revealing of morally inventive ways of living and letting live. At one level, this could consist of honourable tacit truces or negotiated armistices in order to enable enemies to deal with their respective dead and to attend to the wounded. At another, it could be expressed as mild self-recrimination at stripping Boer corpses of valuables. Although recognised as improper wartime conduct, it was still, after all, "a sin to bury all the money and those watches" (p 137). Typically, there is little mincing of words among the dozens of fragmentary voices and snatches of individual personalities to be encountered in these pages.

Informatively annotated, clustered carefully into themes and topped and tailed with a crisp introduction to Ladysmith and surrounding events, and a concluding retrospective commentary on the significance of these letters, this is a striking collection. While, as the editor himself notes, the Siege of Ladysmith "is hardly a neglected topic of historical inquiry" (p 168), coverage from the British side has for long tended to focus on the blundering generals and the overall shortcomings of high command. By tilting the angle downwards, *Letters from Ladysmith* gives us a valuable worm's eye view of an imperial war that had become constipated. "This great war is going to last a lot longer than they thought" (p 180) was the sobering conclusion of one young regimental bugler early in 1900.

Bill Nasson
University of Stellenbosch