

Book Reviews

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Boekresensies

**Shifty Burghers –
*Hensoppers and Joiners in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal***

**Albert Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason: Boer Collaboration in the South African War of 1899-1902*
Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2006
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Almost thirty years ago, Albert Grundlingh, now Professor of History at the University of Stellenbosch, published his weighty MA dissertation in Afrikaans, entitled *Die 'Hensoppers' en 'Joiners'*, an exhaustively-researched, detailed and probing analysis of the experience of Boer collaboration with the British during the Anglo-Boer or South African War of 1899-1902. The dustjacket of that volume had a photograph of a very debonair-looking author. What a pity that the re-issue of the original Afrikaans text does not include a new picture for comparative historical interest. The appearance at last of this historiographically important text in good, plain English translation (by Bridget Theron) is to be lauded. Not only does it render an invaluable service to notoriously monolingual English-speaking scholars of the war. Beyond that, in more general terms, a classic work of originality and distinction should now find a more prominent place in any list of essential reading on the complex and contested terrain of white politics in pre-Union South Africa.

As Professor Grundlingh points out in a foreword to this new English edition, back in 1979 this was seen as a cheeky volume, bold and robust in its undermining of an orthodox Afrikaner nationalist war historiography which stressed the pristine and heroic nature of republican Boer resistance to British imperial conquest. He also reminds a new readership that his intentions had been rather more modest, arising from a concern to move beyond the limitations of nationalist scholarship in order to provide a less simplistic depiction of ordinary Boer stratagems in wartime, ranging from involvement in hostilities to neutrality.

Pointing out that since his book first appeared, Afrikaner nationalist history writing has more than just lost its bite, Albert Grundlingh is rightly critical of the growth of any new post-apartheid “master narrative” in which the Afrikaner experience is reduced to that of clear-cut villainy. Deliberate incomprehension and outraged disapproval are not the most helpful sentiments upon which to undertake serious historical inquiry. His refreshing argument is that in some ways, Afrikaners were rather unexceptional, for, as “in any other society Afrikaners had their heroes and dissidents; moreover, at times it is not always that simple in telling them apart”. Addressing the thorny issue of Boer collaboration and treason is an especially fruitful way of exploring such meanings and tensions.

The Dynamics of Treason considers the fate of shifty Orange Free State and Transvaal burghers in the period from 1900 to 1907 – men commonly denounced as faithless and backsliding for having appeased the British invader by surrendering voluntarily (*hendsoppers*) or, even worse, by becoming their armed fellow-travellers (joiners). Unlike the die-hard or *bittereinder* samurai who refused to throw in the towel until they were on their last legs, those who gave up or joined British ranks as collaborating combatants had abandoned the republican war effort. In effect, they stabbed it in the back and turned themselves into the guilty men of an otherwise noble and sacrificial Boer struggle for independence and freedom.

Professor Grundlingh’s interpretation of this profound crack in the republican fighting front is perceptive, as well as admirably dispassionate. Orange Free State and Transvaal soldiers were not tied down to some universal wartime principle of command and obedience. Nor were republican forces in the field exactly famous for a strict disciplinary regime. Burghers who ordinarily ran their farms as they liked, were not the kind to be bossed about, and leaders had to tread cautiously when punishing offenders. After all, “the Boer was not a professional soldier, but a civilian with farming and family concerns” who was unlikely to make military honour and submissive duty his personal religion. This was not a promising ethos within which to cultivate high morale and unbending discipline, something exploited by British command in its issuing in 1900 of proclamations to demoralised burghers of the overrun republics to lay down their arms and swear an oath of neutrality. Recognising that about him lay “fertile ground for defection”, Lord Roberts lacerated the enemy war effort by opening a lenient space for Boers to migrate from the war and return to their homes to live peaceably in territories which had already been restamped as British

colonies. The depth of division within Boer society provoked by this development would go on to have searing and deeply unhappy consequences for the rest of the war and its political aftermath.

For anyone who wants to know how muddled, uncertain, disruptive and traumatic it was to be living through wartime pressures in a belligerent society from 1900, here is a most complete and comprehensive answer. Throughout, the author's primary concern is to recover and analyse the nuances, subtleties and ambiguities of the behaviour of those for whom the conflict brought loss of will, disaffection and disengagement. Not surprisingly, there is no overarching explanation of why "slack burghers" (nice term) gave up to duck the possibility of capture as prisoners of war. Some feared deportation overseas. Others concluded that sustaining the struggle was futile, given the odds stacked against them. Some wealthier landed burghers laid down their arms for fear of risking their material possessions. Equally, men of little or no means responded to Roberts' carrot. Still others, including poorer *bywoners*, had little ideological commitment to the republican cause, and – more half-heartedly or duplicitously – some who caved in, did so in the knowledge that they would ditch their neutrality oath in the event of a change of fortunes. For these, surrender was a distinctly incomplete act.

Summarising just these interests alone scarcely does justice to the scope and penetration of this book. Its author deals thoroughly with the formation and spluttering activities of burgher peace committees and the Boer peace movement, increasingly dismayed by the continuing bloody-mindedness of their pro-war republican citizenry. Professor Grundlingh is equally assured in his account of the life of those burghers who took the further step, often precarious, of actually getting into bed with British forces. Letting go of any republican identity, several thousand burghers made their choice, enlisting in British service as guides, scouts, guards, various burgher corps, and in more substantial bodies, the Orange River Colony Volunteers and the National Scouts. Regarded fairly as turncoats or traitors by defiant *bittereinders*, such "joiners" or *verraaiers* (traitors) had to pray that they would not fall into the vengeful hands of commandos. They could not expect to be killed with kindness. The intimidating weight of their treason in persuading despairing republican leadership to make peace eventually was not negligible. According to General Christiaan de Wet, far worse than "the mighty army of England" was the danger posed by "such lousy scum among my own people".

Against a self-aware historiographical background, Albert Grundlingh looks at what this all added up to from two poignant concluding

perspectives. When it came to postwar repatriation, Britain's wartime Boer collaborators did not find themselves coming up too short. While not singled out for extravagant reward for their active support of the imperial camp, their compensation dividend was handy. Those who had served in British forces received a considerably bigger bite of the cherry than ordinary surrendered burghers and *bittereinders*. At the same time, that better postwar deal aggravated another, far more painful residue of tension between *hensoppers* and "joiners" on one hand, and resolute *bittereinders* on the other. Hardly surprisingly, loyal burghers regarded disloyals as the most contemptible cause of their loss in 1902.

Still, Afrikaner society did not remain rent asunder, locked into the settling of grudges and old scores. *The Dynamics of Treason* contends that a number of powerful forces worked to overcome divisions and to re-establish associational ties. A conciliatory Louis Botha, for one, was all for letting bygones be bygones in the interest of forging Afrikaner unity. *Het Volk* and the church lifted their skirts to make room for previously dissident kith and kin. The passing of time healed once bitter wounds. British actions also helped. By passing over the National Scouts to parley with the *bittereinders*, collaborators were spurned by their former masters. Being left in limbo eased their social reintegration. Surrendered burghers and *bittereinders* also found common cause in shared grievances over war compensation that had not met expectations. No less significant was the emergence within the ranks of collaborators of a stridently confessional impulse, in which some of those who had been treasonous, confessed their guilt publicly, denounced their past sinning with Roberts and Kitchener, and pleaded for forgiveness from their people.

It cast a spell which worked. By 1906, the author concludes, "the disloyal burghers that had deserted from Afrikaner ranks during the melting pot of the war had been brought back into the fold and were accepted as part of the volk". There is no better writing about the tangled web that was Boer collaboration during the South African War than is to be found here.

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