

A first-hand account of war brought to life

Albert Blake, *Boerekryger: 'n Seun se Hoogste Offer*

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It is perhaps a truism, but wars might be short or long in duration, but their legacy, as we know, lives on seemingly forever, with the event itself being re-fashioned, re-interpreted and re-evaluated for decades afterwards. The South African War of October 1899 to May 1902 has left a legacy that has persisted for more than eleven decades after the Peace of Vereeniging.

Much has been written of course on how it shaped the political milieu of South Africa and the division it has sown between all groups of those living in South Africa. The damage which that short conflict wrought on what can be referred to as the “collective psyche” of South Africa is, as we know, not limited to the white minority. As has been well established, it was the conflict that arguably helped to usher in the 1913 Land Act and the virtual permanent disenfranchisement of the black majority. Unity among whites was deemed more important than the rights of African peoples. Then again, is that surprising, given the times and attitudes prevailing more than a century ago? One indisputable fact to come out of the South African War was that, geographically the present South Africa is what it is thanks to that conflict, a fact blithely forgotten in 2010 with the centenary of the Union of South Africa.

It is in this context that one reads and indeed welcomes Albert Blake's latest work, *Boerekryger*, coming in the wake of his equally compelling *Boereverraaier*. There are of course many studies that readers will be familiar with, such as C.J. Barnard's *Die Vyf Swemmers*; Fransjohan Pretorius' *Kommandolewe Tydens die Anglo-Boere Oorlog* and *The Great Escape of the Boer Pimpernel*; Lodi Krause's *The War Memoirs of Commandant Ludwig Krause, 1899–1900*; and of course Deneys Reitz's *Commando*, to mention but a handful of first-hand accounts of the war or narratives relating to the actual fighting, as opposed to the broad sweep of the Pakenham classic *The Boer War* and Bill Nasson's masterful *The War for South Africa*.

This latest study by Blake is a narrative based mainly on the diary of Henning Viljoen from Heidelberg. Blake gives us a reading of Viljoen's diary, having chosen the most riveting and revealing parts, amply contextualizing the events such as the battles at Chrissie's Lake on 6 February 1901, Bakenlaagte in October of the same year, and the skirmish that saw the author of the diary decapitated by a British shell on 6 March 1902 – in full view of his father. Deftly, Blake has interspersed the first-hand accounts with background material on the mood of the times, with the political machinations and conflict of personalities as these pertain to the Henning Viljoen diary.

What is more, there is a consistently rigorous thread of historiographical awareness running throughout Blake's commentary. He makes mention of the fact that all too often the Boers were portrayed as heroes, when in fact there were those who were heroes but also many who were not. Then there were those who were less than enthusiastic about the war and had other priorities. He addresses the issues of *hensoppers* and *joiners*, and his chapter relating to the infamous Morley's Scouts (subtext: a bunch of self-seeking murderous marauders) is particularly chilling. Executions of would-be traitors are also mentioned, where Henning Viljoen had witnessed these; Blake contrasts them with references to the *bittereinder* mentality and provocatively interrogates the fighting spirit that saw many a Boer fight on, despite the insuperable odds facing them. Blake comes to the conclusion that the religious element is not to be discounted and draws a parallel with the religious conviction and zeal that spurred many Boers to continue fighting; he also mentions Boers who fought not out of religious ardour but who merely believed that their cause was just. After decades of hagiography that has informed much of the writing on the Anglo-Boer conflict, especially from Afrikaner academics, it is refreshing that in *Boerekryger*, Blake aspires to a more realistic and dispassionate account of the war. He takes account of the significance of the war from the vantage point of present-day South Africa and reminds us that while the war played a vital role in forging an Afrikaner identity, this does not mean that certain unpleasant facts and attitudes must be swept under the proverbial carpet. Lack of discipline, mistakes and errors in judgment all contributed to the Boer defeat.

What Blake has achieved is a subtle balance between the broader picture, the intimacy and immediacy of the diary and a recounting of the events as they are described in the diary. So, he has more than edited the diary, but when it makes sense to do so he allows the diary to speak for itself. His use of Wilhelm Mangold's diary is also very effective. Another all too common irritation that marks much Afrikaner history writing of a previous era is the positivist notion that the facts are an end in themselves and hence speak for themselves, i.e. that they do not need a wider interpretation. In other words, the significance of facts often tended to be glossed over with the emphasis falling instead on the facts themselves, as if the authors were too hesitant to venture an opinion. Blake, along with a group of prominent Afrikaner historians today, has avoided this trap, and has also taken Afrikaner historiography to much more fertile soil when compared to Afrikaner history writing of yore.

Blake's study also reflects a more sober appraisal of current South Africa and consequently his concentration on the human aspects of the conflict, the woeful destruction and suffering it brought about, is much more poignant for the very reason that it is not a political diatribe.

Engagingly written in an Afrikaans that is readily accessible, that skilfully avoids being *hoogdrawend*, Blake has also taken note of the linguistic features of the diary and the mingling of Dutch expressions in the

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Afrikaans of the day, making references to the sense of humour which now comes across to the reader as dated and quaint.

One error though, seems to lie in the photographs. An image which adorns Ludwig Krause's account of the war (referred to above) is labelled as a photograph of Ludwig (Lodi) Krause, taken from a publication by the Van Riebeeck Society (1996). It appears in Blake's book as a photograph of Commandant Johann Kriegler of the Heidelberg Commando. This error, if it is indeed an error on the part of the author or the publishers, symbolises how precarious our hold is on the past.

That said, Blake's study is an invaluable and multi-faceted contribution to our understanding of the war; this he has achieved by bringing a first-hand account of the war to life while all the time respecting and interrogating his sources and by maintaining a suspense and vigour in his narrative.

Wilhelm Snyman
University of Cape Town