

Bill Nasson and Albert Grundlingh (eds), *The War at Home: Women and Families in the Anglo-Boer War*

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This beautifully illustrated book will appeal to a wider audience with a general interest in the Anglo-Boer War, though the volume concentrates on the experiences of women, children and families during the conflict. The haunting images tell a story about the trials and tribulations both Afrikaans and black South Africans faced in the concentration camps throughout the country and make a contribution to the history of the period in their own right. The chapters have been organised in such a way that various thematic aspects surrounding the Anglo-Boer War are systematically addressed.

The first chapter establishes the background of the tension between the British and Boers, simultaneously stressing the importance of the concepts of Afrikaner nationalism and patriarchy. Chapter 2 adds to this context by discussing the strategic scorched-earth policy adopted by the British troops. Chapter 3 has a women-centred approach, addressing Nonnie de la Rey’s life during the war. The next chapter explores the quotidian in the concentration camps, while chapter 5 focuses on the interplay between British doctors in the camps and the Afrikaans women’s medical knowledge. Chapters 6 and 7 look at specific populations interned in the concentration camps, with the former exploring children’s experiences and the latter, the roles and experiences of black South Africans. Chapter 8 turns to a discussion of the role of humour and how it was used as both a defence mechanism and as a means of resistance by the Boers. Chapter 9 then details the creation and planning of the Women’s Monument in Bloemfontein, followed by Chapter 10 which discusses the contextual meaning of the monument from its construction in 1913 through to the present day. The book ends with a chapter on Emily Hobhouse’s speech at the inauguration of the Women’s Monument. All these chapters make use of captivating and thought-provoking images. As primary sources, these photographs give the “invisible actors” the women and families a much stronger representation than is the case in related works. Most of these images have not been used before when exploring the Anglo-Boer War. As such, the work offers a new approach on how we understand the impact of the war on women and families, and also acts as an informative snapshot of life during the period.

One of the gems in this book is Zelda Rowan’s chapter on Nonnie de la Rey. This chapter on the wife of the Boer commander, Koos de la Rey, gives the reader an opportunity to learn more about a woman who refused to become a victim during the war. She was self-sufficient and could make bread, candles and other commodities while being a fugitive in the veld for 18 months, leading her six children and three servants away from danger. Themes such as her relationship

with the British troops and the origins of the identity of the *volksmoeder* (directly translated as the “mother of the nation”) emerge, leaving the reader with a sense of admiration for Nonnie’s strength and determination. There are other sporadic descriptions of women’s experiences in the concentration camps scattered throughout the book, supported by illuminating first-hand accounts. This at times breaks the seriousness and sombre feelings a reader might otherwise experience when reading about the concentration camps, however some of these accounts are also harrowing, with women appearing as helpless victims. One of these narratives, in particular, is incorporated into Jan van der Merwe’s contribution in the second chapter, which explores the Havenga Report on rape.

Several important themes emerge throughout the book. Race is a central point of historical analysis in both Van Heyningen’s and Nasson’s chapters. These chapters demonstrate that the Anglo-Boer War often took the form of an “us versus them” scenario where both black and white South Africans were oppressed by the British. Moreover, Afrikaner nationalism and patriarchy also emerge as significant themes, especially in the chapters by Grundlingh and Rowan. Both themes are important for understanding how the Afrikaner opposition organised itself against the British. In addition, religion is discussed as a prominent theme by Duff, specifically in relation to the activities of the Dutch Reformed Church and how religion played an influential role in the raising of children in the concentration camps. Duff’s chapter also discusses the role of class, showing how children were treated differently by British soldiers depending on what class they belonged to. The innocence of children in the concentration camps is poignantly captured through the discussion of the toys available to them – one example which stands out in particular, is that of a simple screw with which three year old Japie Berg used to play.

Lastly, the theme of imperialism is strongly echoed in the final chapter. The book ends with Emily Hobhouse’s speech at the inauguration of the Women’s Monument in 1913 in Bloemfontein. While her speech reflects the role of British imperialism and its shortcomings through the establishment of the concentration camps during the war, she also highlighted the need to recognise the important role women played in society during the conflict. This speech was a wonderful read, but this reviewer would have liked to have read more on Hobhouse’s perspectives on the war, the concentration camps and how this affected families in the camps. The individual contributions by the authors are excellent pieces, independently written, and each provides a unique perspective on a dire and tragic period in South African history. The different methodologies used throughout the various chapters demonstrate the diversity of “voices” at play during a politically turbulent period, including those of women, children, black and white South Africans.

While numerous, captivating stories of women and their families in the Anglo-Boer War are included, there are other women’s stories that have been excluded – these could have contributed greatly to this book and its overall purpose. The aim, as noted, is to explore the role of women and families during the Anglo-Boer War, however at times the reader is left wondering why families and women do not always take centre stage and feature more prominently in this volume. What, for instance, were the experiences during this period of women

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such as Issie Smuts, General Jan Smuts' wife? Instead of being placed under house arrest by the British troops, she wanted to be sent to the concentration camps so she too could bear the hardship of what other Boer women were enduring. And what of Olive Schreiner, who, while living under the political turmoil of the war, published pro-Boer works such as *An English South African's View of the Situation* (1899) and *Eighteen-Ninety-Nine* (1900), both of which allowed an international audience to be exposed to the horrors of the war? The role and resilience of such women were later enshrined in the Women's Monument in 1913 and by incorporating these individuals the discussion of this Monument towards the end of the book could have been enhanced, specifically in the chapters by Johan van Zyl and Albert Grundlingh, who address the creation and the underlying meaning of the monument.

Nonetheless, *The War at Home: Women and Families in the Anglo-Boer War* makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on the Anglo-Boer War, demonstrating diverse experiences and forwarding a valuable, new approach to our understanding of the period. This is an excellent book for the wider public. It offers new insights on the concentration camps and the experiences that women and families had to endure. It is a beautiful book to have in one's collection. It also has the ability to spark an interest in the Anglo-Boer War generally, encouraging the reader to learn more about South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century.

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