

## **“Educated, tolerant and kindly”: Australian attitudes towards British and Boers in South Africa, 1899–1902**

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The Anglo-Boer War came at a time of renewed imperial fervour by Britain, and Australia – demonstrating loyalty to the Empire – echoed this enthusiasm. When the request for Australian troops came in late 1899, parliamentarians in almost all colonies complied, though after some debate.<sup>1</sup> In these early months of the war, enlistment by young men eager to fight for both Australia and their mother country, Britain, came quickly and in large numbers.

Australian volunteers travelled to South Africa as allies of the British and enemies of the Boers, and their initial attitudes towards the Boers were generally negative, following home front opinion in Britain and Australia. These men were labelled loyal British subjects, and as such were expected to remain firmly opposed to the Boer enemy during their entire period of service in South Africa. However, contrary to such expectations as well as past scholarship on the war, their position on the Boer forces – with whom the predominantly rural-based Australian troops felt more of an affinity compared with the British “Tommies” – eventually became less disapproving and more sympathetic. This concern extended also to civilians, particularly after the establishment of the “scorched earth policy” in June 1900, during which both Boer and African homes were burned and many inhabitants were transferred to British-run concentration camps. This study thus records initial attitudes of Australians towards the Boers expressed in their personal records, and demonstrates the transformation in the minds of some men in the latter stages of their war service.

Past scholars on Australia’s role in the Anglo-Boer War have emphasised the initial connection between the colonial troops and Britain. Wallace highlights the keenness with which Australian men volunteered to fight in South Africa for their “Mother Country”.<sup>2</sup> Chamberlain and Droogleever similarly write that Australians viewed themselves as British subjects and Australia as part of the mighty Empire.<sup>3</sup> More recent and in-depth works on the war agree with these views, but emphasise more so the later disappointment of Australian volunteers with British combat skills, which was openly and frequently expressed.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, it is clear that Australian soldiers did see themselves as essentially British, while clearly differentiating themselves from Tommies when on the war front.

This confused sense of identity among battlefield soldiers has been noted among scholars of war. Johnston has labelled the comparable dual British and Australian identity among Second World War soldiers “ambiguous”, which similarly

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1. See C. Connolly, “Manufacturing ‘Spontaneity’: The Australian Offers of Troops for the Boer War”, *Historical Studies*, 18, 70, 1978, pp 106–117.
2. R.L. Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War* (The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1976) p 1.
3. M. Chamberlain and R. Droogleever (eds.), *The War with Johnny Boer: Australians in the Boer War, 1899–1902* (Australian Military History Publications, Loftus, 2003), p xvii.
4. C. Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War: The War in South Africa, 1899–1902* (Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2002), p 235.

arose from an affinity with German troops and disdain towards “feeble” British combatants.<sup>5</sup> Fuller claims also that most of the British Empire’s First World War troops felt no direct hostility towards the German enemy while in the trenches, due to their shared experience, again demonstrating the “ambiguous” nature of soldier identity while on the battlefield.<sup>6</sup> The few analyses of Australian home and war front attitudes towards the enemy in South Africa highlight the contempt with which they approached the Boers, comparing them with “Aboriginals” and “kangaroos”.<sup>7</sup> However, little attention has been paid to Australian attitudes to the Boers once they had proved themselves gallant fighters, and the British troops a disappointment. This study suggests that in the case of these soldiers, kinship with the Boers and alienation from the British caused some to express admiration for their enemy and disdain for their allies. This therefore indicates that there was a more tangled sense of soldier identity among Australians on the South African battlefield than has previously been acknowledged.

The conclusions presented in this study arise from the examination of the archived letters and diaries of 73 individual Australian soldiers writing from the battlefields of the Anglo-Boer War. For some of these men, only one letter or diary was archived, but others wrote a daily journal of their experiences, or over a hundred letters home to Australia. Although this is a small number of the more than 16 000 Australians who fought in the Anglo-Boer War, it is still possible to discern distinct patterns of opinion in this collection of personal records, including attitudes towards those whom they encountered on the battlefield. It should be emphasised also that it is not possible to attribute common threads of opinion to all Australians in South Africa. Many soldiers did appear also to reject any sympathetic view of the Boers, most famously demonstrated by the execution of Morant and Handcock of the Bushveldt Carbineers for the murder of Boer civilians while on active war service.<sup>8</sup> However, it remains necessary to acknowledge that not all soldiers felt this way about the Boers, and that some did alter their position on the enemy during their time in South Africa.

Some context is required to explain the findings presented in this study adequately, in the form of an explanation of the Australia these soldiers lived in at the turn of the nineteenth century. This includes its relationship with Britain and adoption of British ideas towards the war, particularly their attitudes towards the Boers. Important also are expressions by Australians that openly demonstrate their personal bond with Britain, and adoption of dehumanisation towards the Boers. The transformation of such attitudes into criticism of the British Army, and a sense of solidarity with the Boer forces, or sympathy with civilians, is the core of this article. This raises the above question about Australian soldier identity during this war.

The late nineteenth century brought a new eagerness for imperialism in Britain, which was closely connected with the rise of Social Darwinism from the

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5. M. Johnston, *Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II* (Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2013), pp 131–132.
  6. J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914–1918* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990), p 40.
  7. Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War*, pp 19, 330.
  8. M. Carnegie and F. Shields, *In Search of Breaker Morant: Ballalist and Bushveldt Carbineer* (H.H. Stephenson, Armadale, 1979), pp 139–142; L.M. Field, *The Forgotten War: Australian Involvement in the South African Conflict of 1899-1902* (Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1979), pp 170–173.

mid-nineteenth century, providing an ideological foundation for warfare and subsequent colonisation in the name of the Empire. Disseminating this information among the British public in the late nineteenth century was what Paula Krebs labels the “New Journalism”, and describes as “cheap sensation-oriented jingoist reporting and editing”.<sup>9</sup> During the Anglo-Boer War, such papers were characterised by extreme pro-war propaganda, strictly and cleverly controlled by the British high commissioner in South Africa, Sir Alfred Milner.

In Britain, derogatory descriptions of the Boers began appearing in the press from the outbreak of the First Anglo-Boer War in 1880. Before the Second Anglo-Boer War began, Algernon Charles Swinburne published a poem called “Transvaal” in *The Times*, in which he encouraged British citizens to “scourge these dogs, agape with jaws afoam. Down out of life”, referring to the Boers.<sup>10</sup> All but a few British press publications were filled with anti-Boer propaganda, portraying Boers as the very clearly defined “other”.<sup>11</sup> As a result, by 1899 many in Britain truly believed that Boers were collectively plotting against the Empire.<sup>12</sup>

Australia’s relationship to Britain at the time was one that was in the process of transformation and was characterised by debate between Imperialists, Federationists and between them Imperial Federationists – who wanted self-government, but acknowledged the seemingly essential role of Britain in Australia.<sup>13</sup> This was heightened by the tension between pro-war and pro-Boer during the war. Federation in 1901 cemented Australia’s link to Britain, although the bond with Britain was assumed from when hostilities were threatening to break out in South Africa.<sup>14</sup> The fear of many in the Australian colonies that refusing to participate in the war would reduce the security they relied on from Britain directly contributed to not only the publicly expressed opinions of parliamentarians, but also the content of Australian commercial newspapers, and thus to the pro-imperial image of the war distributed to the general population, many of whom did still see Britain as their home country.<sup>15</sup>

The Australian commercial press closely followed Britain’s “New Journalism”, as noted by George Arnold Wood, Sydney academic and historian who formed the Anti-War League in January 1902: “All Australian journals get their cables from one source – a source apparently in connection with the most sensational section of the London Jingo press.”<sup>16</sup> Supporting this, the pro-war newspaper *Border Watch*, based in Mount Gambier, South Australia, openly stated on 4 October 1899 (one week before the war’s commencement): “Great

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9. P.M. Krebs, *Gender, Race and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), p 9.
  10. A.C. Swinburne, cited in D. Judd and K. Surrige, *The Boer War: A History* (IB Tauris, London, 2013), p 259.
  11. S. Popple, “From ‘Brother Boer’ to ‘Dirty Boers’: Colonizing the Colonizers through the Popular Representations of the Boer in the *British Illustrated Journal*, 1899–1902”, *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 5, 2, 2012, p 137.
  12. J.H. Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life: The British Empire at the Turn of the Century*, (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1982), p 208.
  13. C.S. Blackton, “Australian Nationality and Nationalism: The Imperial Federationist Interlude, 1885–1901”, *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, 7, 25, 1955, pp 1–2.
  14. See Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War*, p 16.
  15. For information about Australia’s security fears, see Field, *The Forgotten War*, pp 2–3, 8.
  16. G.A. Wood, cited in K.S. Inglis, “The Imperial Connection: Telegraphic Communication between England and Australia, 1872–1902”, in A.F. Madden and W.H. Morris-Jones, (eds.), *Australia and Britain: Studies in a Changing Relationship* (Frank Cass, London, 1980), p 34.

Britain and her colonies are practically unanimous in the view that the war now recognised as inevitable against the Boers is not only justifiable, but necessary, in the interests of the Empire.”<sup>17</sup> Publications did exist that openly rejected the need for Australian involvement from 1899, such as the traditionally outspoken, anti-imperial magazine *The Bulletin*. In general, however, commercial newspapers in the Australian colonies echoed the ultra-jingoistic sentiments found in British newspapers of the time.

During wartime, the dehumanisation of the enemy is an essential component of military training, highlighted by Joanna Bourke, who claims that the effectiveness of this technique lies on two levels – in the creation of both an “uncivilised”, as well as an “inhuman”, enemy.<sup>18</sup> Not everyone who enlists or is conscripted for military duty has had ingrained in them the will to kill. Humans living in most twentieth-century societies are taught and abide by certain rules – of which the prohibition of murder is foremost. It is difficult to reverse such deeply entrenched standards, but this is necessary to encourage a soldier to kill other human beings in battle. Richard Holmes concurs, arguing that if soldiers are put in a position to see commonalities between themselves and the enemy, they find it more difficult to kill.<sup>19</sup> Such dehumanisation or “animalisation” is also used on the home front, as exposing humans to differences between themselves and the enemy will make them more likely to support hostilities against them, and less likely to provoke sympathy.

In his analysis of British illustrated journals, Simon Popple demonstrates this by examining the transformation of the Boer character from “Brother Boer” to “Dirty Boer” during the war. Boers were also white Europeans, so “otherness” had to be established based on their behaviour rather than skin colour, which led to a general focus on their lack of hygiene and barbaric “uncivilised” nature.<sup>20</sup> Boer women were not exempt from such negative portrayals, with numerous articles in British journals – particularly focused towards women – highlighting their lack of hygiene, which in the later years of the war also provided a foundation of blame for Boer child deaths in British concentration camps.<sup>21</sup> Despite the many similarities between Australia and South Africa, particularly their shared transformation of a black country into what Lake and Reynolds describe as a “white man’s country”, including direct adoption by South African lawmakers of Australian anti-Asiatic migration laws – such dehumanisation of the Boers was to be extended to Britain’s Australian allies.<sup>22</sup>

Australian newspapers closely followed this lead. Hawkish Australian newspapers of the time, such as *The Argus* from Victoria and *The Bunyip* from South Australia, often included articles describing the Boers with terms such as “insolent”, “corrupt” or demonstrating “inhumanity”, to illustrate their allegedly

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17. ‘Is War with the Boers Justifiable?’, *The Border Watch*, 4 October 1899, p 1.

18. J. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (Granta Books, London, 1999), p 231.

19. R. Holmes, *Firing Line* (Penguin, London, 1987), p 361.

20. Popple, “From ‘Brother Boer’ to ‘Dirty Boer’”, pp 147–148.

21. Krebs, *Gender, Race and the Writing of Empire*, p 50. See also E. van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History* (Jacana Media, Auckland Park, 2013), p 227 for similar views within the concentration camps.

22. M. Lake and H. Reynolds, *Drawing a Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), pp 6–7, 125–126.

uncivilised character.<sup>23</sup> The decidedly “pro-Boer” newspaper *The Bulletin* reported unfavourably on this tendency by commercial newspapers, saying that such allegations made of the Boers were almost always untrue.<sup>24</sup> It seems the propagandist techniques used to incite soldiers to kill the enemy were also used to encourage a population to back a war their country was involved in.

The archived letters and diaries from the Anglo-Boer War reveal ample evidence that soldiers relied on this dehumanisation or “animalisation” of the enemy to fuel their eagerness to kill, a clear consequence of military training. However, such expressions were more common in the first stages of service – attitudes towards the enemy definitely tended to shift as these soldiers became more familiar with them and with conditions of the conflict.

Some Australian soldiers on the war front were not immune to the dehumanisation of the Boers. Private Watson Augustus Steel of the 1st New South Wales Mounted Rifles, upon arriving in South Africa, expressed physical distaste for the Boers in his diary:

I therefore had my first view of the fighting Boer. We kept complete silence. They are a wild, uncouth looking lot such as one might have seen in New South Wales 30 years ago, in such isolated localities as the Abercrombie ... They were dressed in all ends of clothing and looked dirty and sullen.<sup>25</sup>

The letter and diaries by Australian soldiers in South Africa frequently contained complaints about their appalling living conditions.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is likely that such a description would fit not only the Boers, but also some British and Australian troops. Therefore, Steel could have used such descriptions of the Boer soldiers to justify combat against them. Lieutenant George Harris, of Winston Churchill’s unit – the South African Light Horse – used similarly demeaning terms when expressing his feelings towards the Boers. Less than three months after arriving in South Africa he expressed his attitude towards the enemy in a letter to his mother:

A small lot of our fellows went on to another house and were fired on and a sergeant shot so we shot two Boers and burnt the whole farm down. This is the only way to treat the brutes and what is keeping on the war so long is that we are treating them too well.<sup>27</sup>

A singular feature of Anglo-Boer War soldiers’ letters was the tendency to liken Boer attributes to those of animals rather than humans, constituting another part of dehumanisation. Holmes, while speaking of this process, reported that in nineteenth and early twentieth-century wars, such as the First World War, some

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23. See “Boer Inhumanity”, *The Argus*, 15 March 1900, p 5; “Canting, Hypocritical and Insolent”, *The Argus*, 16 March 1900, p 6; “Town Tattle”, *The Bunyip*, 6 October 1899, p 2.

24. “War Literature and Other Matters”, *The Bulletin*, 20, 1029, 4 November 1899, p 8.

25. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales (hereafter SLNSW), MLMSS2105, W.A. Steel Diary, dated 29 February 1900 (presumably 1 March 1900).

26. See, for example, SLNSW, FM4/2210, C. Holme, Letter, 16 March 1968; SLNSW, CY3423, W.H. Barham, Letter, 17 January 1900; State Library of Victoria (hereafter SLV), MS11729, F. Stocks, Letter, 25 September 1901; State Library of South Australia (hereafter SLSA), D6427(L), S. Jones, Letter, 27 January 1900; SLSA, D7334(L), A. Wellington, Letter, 14 September 1901; SLNSW, MLMSS2105, W.A. Steel, Diary, 26 January 1900, 13 February 1900; Australian War Memorial (hereafter AWM), PR01964, D.St.G. Rich, Letter, 29 June 1901, 18 January 1902; SLSA, PRG57/10, C.S. Sabine, Letter, 25 August 1900; SLSA, PRG248, F.H. Howland, Diary, 16 October 1900.

27. AWM, 3DRL 7472, G. Harris, Letter, 15 July 1900.

soldiers exhibited amazement when encountering a distinctly human-looking enemy.<sup>28</sup> This helps explain why they made such comparisons in their letters and diaries. In a similar vein, Trooper Charles Cawthorn of the 4th Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen adopted the language of hunting when describing battle against the Boers in his diary, using phrases such as “out again this morning but have no luck” when referring to being out on patrol.<sup>29</sup> If the reader was unaware that Cawthorn was at war, it could easily be assumed that he was on an animal hunting expedition. Similarly, Surgeon-Lieutenant James Harold Patterson with the 5th Victorian Rifles wrote: “we surrounded a farm suppose [sic] to contain Boers but the birds had flown just before we got there.”<sup>30</sup> Sergeant Arthur James Vogan of the Prince of Wales Light Horse Regiment used similar terms when describing female Boers: “The younger women are often decidedly good looking, that the race is a healthy, animal one is beyond question.”<sup>31</sup> Such instances suggest that training and propaganda did impact on some Anglo-Boer War soldiers’ initial perceptions of the enemy.

The impact of dehumanisation on these soldiers is further demonstrated by comparing their initial perception of Boers with those of black Africans. The transformation of the Boer character by the British press also necessitated a similar change in the way African subjects were considered. They were portrayed not as an enemy, but as a group who needed both imperial headship and the promise of security from uncivilised Boer colonisers, who – according to John MacDonell, chairperson of the South Africa Native Races Committee during the war – didn’t have the British “fundamental principles” regarding the appropriate use of imperial roles.<sup>32</sup>

There is evidence in the Australian commercial press that the general opinion towards Africans was one that followed the traditional belief in the hierarchy of races, but descriptions of Boers were often similarly, or more, derogatory, thus illustrating the need for and use of dehumanisation. Demonstrating this is an article entitled “Kruger and Krugerites” in the newspaper *Border Watch* from Mount Gambier, South Australia on 4 November 1899, which said “...the young Boer party, like the Kaffirs they conquered, know nothing outside their own cattle kraals”. The critical opinion of both Boers and Africans is evident here, as is the closeness of Australia and Britain. There is no doubt that before and during the war, both groups were dehumanised, but with differing intentions and reasoning.

Also, Australian soldiers in South Africa occasionally wrote generously about Africans. For example, Private Alexander McQueen wrote to his family of African soldiers: “They are very dignified & picturesque in speech.”<sup>33</sup> This further demonstrates the power of dehumanisation, particularly at a time when the public perception in the British Empire of Africans was so markedly different from that of whites.

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28. Holmes, *Firing Line*, p 368.

29. AWM, PR85/056, C. Cawthorn, Diary, 11 May 1901.

30. National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA), MS3663, J.H. Patterson, Diary, 6 December 1901.

31. SLNSW, MS113, A.J. Vogan, Diary, June 1901.

32. Krebs, *Gender, Race and the Writing of Empire*, p 123.

33. SLV, MS9662, A. McQueen, Letter, 15 March 1900.

Australians fighting in this war had a very clear view of their bond with Britain. The body of letters and diaries investigated rarely, if ever, mention the possibility of overall British defeat. Private Watson Augustus Steel wrote in his diary on 15 May 1900, less than four months after arriving in South Africa: “Those who doubt the military strength of Britain should see it here, and this is only a portion of it. It is open to doubt whether any nation in the world could have done the same.”<sup>34</sup> It should be mentioned that such positive reports appeared in early 1900 (a time notable for its consecutive British victories), but it is significant that direct negativity about Britain’s ability to fight in this war was not found in the personal records.

There is also evidence in the personal records of Australians fighting in South Africa that they felt a direct connection with Britain. For example, when speaking of some stamps he had “commandeered”, Private Alexander McQueen referred to: “the stock belonging to the Orange Free State, taken over by *our* Government” (emphasis added).<sup>35</sup> Equally significant were the words of Private R.J. Byers, fighting in the 1st Victorian Contingent: “There is a lot of talk of us going *home* to England to parade before the Queen, after the campaign is over; I hope we do” (emphasis added).<sup>36</sup> The words of McQueen and Byers suggest that although they were Australian, they were essentially fighting for their mother country, Britain. Although some soldiers were no doubt originally from Britain, the bond clearly still existed, yet it is noteworthy that both of these sentiments were written in the first three months of active service in South Africa when initial impressions of Britain had not been significantly tainted by events on the battlefield. Still, Byers is a singular example, however, as his military records also indicate that he had an Australian coat of arms tattoo on his right forearm, indicating his patriotism. Despite this, on his attestation form, when asked whether or not he was a British subject, Byers indicated that he was.<sup>37</sup> This indicates that the “ambiguous identity” of Australian Second World War soldiers as highlighted earlier by Johnston can be applied to these soldiers, which could also perhaps have led to the resultant impressions towards the Boer forces.

Although soldiers rarely spoke critically about Britain itself, their impressions of individual British officers or rank and file soldiers (Tommies) were readily apparent in their writing. Annoyance was frequently directed at officers, and can often be related to the degree of the soldier’s own physical discomfort, including factors such as hunger, lack of sleep, lack of access to mail from home – all facets of high soldier morale.<sup>38</sup>

Such negative views extended also to the Tommies, which can be partly explained by the circumstances surrounding Australia’s entry, as well as its role, in the war. Given Australia’s relatively small army, the invitation from Britain to join them in each war came with the hope of gaining a token ally – a supporting force that was not expected to significantly influence the overall course of the war. The Australian colonial governments in power at the beginning of the war were, on the whole, prepared to accept these invitations on the basis of further promise of

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34. AWM, MLMSS 2105, W.A. Steel, Diary, 15 May 1900.

35. SLV, MS9662, A. McQueen, Letter, 18–19 May 1900.

36. SLV, MS9691, R.J. Byers, Letter, 29 October 1899.

37. National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), Canberra, B4717, R.J. Byers, Boer War dossier.

38. See, for example, AWM, PRO1964, D.St.G. Rich, Letter, 13 October 1901; SLSA, D5425, J.H. Wadham, Diary, 6 July 1901; SLSA, D6338, J.A. McBean, Diary, 30 April 1902.

security from a world power. Nonetheless, Australian soldiers proved themselves invaluable, as the inadequacy of British military formations became clear when faced with the South African climate, terrain, and also the guerrilla nature of warfare from March 1900, resulting in particular requests by Britain for additional Australian mounted infantry. For example, in a letter to the British Secretary of State for War, St. John Brodrick, the commander of the British Army in South Africa, Lord Kitchener wrote: "I shall be very glad indeed to have the Colonials they are splendid men and most useful."<sup>39</sup>

Australians did consider their combat skills to be superior to those of the British rank and files, demonstrating their keen regimental spirit, which Leese claims can instigate loyalty to the contingent, and to the armed forces in general.<sup>40</sup> Australian soldiers occasionally expressed their regimental spirit through comparisons between the fighting abilities of the Australian and British troops. Gammage claims that Australians believed they were superior to the British, due to "the rigours of life in the bush", which had "refined the [Anglo-Saxon] race".<sup>41</sup> Private Watson Augustus Steel in particular felt this was a great source of pride. He wrote in his diary while in military hospital: "the Jewish nurse rated me and told me that I was soon to die. On telling her I was an Australian, I think she altered her opinion."<sup>42</sup> Here Steel is frank about his physical superiority, as an Australian, over British troops. It is clear, then, how Steel felt about his own military prowess. Private William Hamline Glasson of the Bushveldt Carbineers wrote in a letter to his mother: "A lot of Imperial Yeomanry have been going up lately, they seem a very ordinary crowd, not to be compared with the Australian troops."<sup>43</sup> Trooper Herbert S. Condor of the 3rd Queensland Mounted Infantry expressed his opinion of the British troops as childlike figures compared with the Australians:

The tent mates here "the Tommies" are terribly afraid of lightening [sic], cover over the steel and hide the looking glass. Some of them even cover their heads over. I told them they ought to live in Australia, "thunderstorms" there, are what you might call "thunderstorms".<sup>44</sup>

Trooper Charles Cawthorn also criticised the British inability to fight:

Our horses...are likely to carry the next lot of Tommies, who don't know a horse from a bar of soap, to the front. I hope the first Tommy who mounts mine gets planted on his head in the nearest mud-hole.<sup>45</sup>

The skills exhibited by many Australians ironically often resulted in resentment by those who became weary of being chosen above the British for more dangerous military operations. Private Watson Augustus Steel said of the British soldier in his diary: "He was brave, with a great sense of discipline and duty, dogged and humane, but he has no initiative and want of ambition explains

39. SLNSW, PR7055, Lord H. Kitchener, Letter, 4 January 1901.

40. P. Leese, *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2002), p 30.

41. B. Gammage, "The Crucible: The Establishment of the Anzac Tradition", in M. McKernan and M. Browne (eds.), *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace* (Australian War Memorial in association with Allen & Unwin Australia, Canberra, 1988), p 150.

42. SLNSW, MLMSS2105, W.A. Steel, Diary, 6 June 1900; and see also W.A. Steel, Diary, 14 October 1900.

43. SLNSW, MLMSS3858, W.H. Glasson, Letter, 10 April 1901.

44. AWM, PR84/131, H.S. Condor, Diary, undated.

45. AWM, PR86/056, C.F.E. Cawthorn, Diary, 21 April 1901.



the want of individual initiative he has so frequently shown in this conflict.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Lieutenant Colonel Percy Ralph Ricardo of the 1st Queensland Mounted Infantry, wrote of a recent defeat: “The whole show does not reflect much credit on the British arms, we lost 5 guns & a lot of prisoners and all because the British tommy will not scout.”<sup>47</sup> Steel and Ricardo were relatively generous – Private R.J. Byers wrote to his mother after a conversation with a Boer prisoner:

The Boers can generally tell when they are fighting Australians, as the bullets whistle ever so much closer than the Tommie’s [sic] bullets do. And also when our troops are advancing, he says that the Australians ride like wildfire ... the Boers reckon they would rather meet 100 Tommies than 20 Australians. One wanted to know why the Horsetralians were called Horsetralians; and the only conclusion they could come to, was, that it was because they were all so used to horses. I do not know what part they are came [sic] from, but they did not know very much.<sup>48</sup>

In the same letter, he said of the British forces: “It seems they can’t do without the Australians and Canadians, who have already done most of the dirty & most dangerous work”, thus demonstrating his view of the abilities of colonial troops compared with the British. Lieutenant Patrick Lang of the 4th Imperial Contingent supports this in his diary:

My private opinion is that the Australians here are getting more than their share. Of course it is a compliment in a way, & we undoubtedly ... are more capable than the Yeomanry, but we never get any credit. The Australians here don’t growl at being given a larger share of any danger going – but in addition to getting this, we get a great deal more than our share of night work, such as outposts and convoy duty, & our men are often run [sic] very short as regards sleep.<sup>49</sup>

Lang later wrote: “Many of these Yeomanry appear never to have been on a horse before, & it will be weeks before they have learnt to ride well enough to go on the trek.”<sup>50</sup>

It is clear, then, that the esteem with which the British were held by the Australian troops is not consistent with the more general opinion of the British Army as the most powerful on earth. The above comments can be explained by the fact that Australian troops signalled the need to the British Army for mounted infantry troops, rather than the more traditional cavalymen who were unsuited to the Boer tactics and the South African terrain. However, this comparison by Australian soldiers of their combat skills and those of the British can be partly attributed to the need – as recognised by Leese – for pride in one’s unit, or perhaps, cultural group, as shown by the frequent references to their distinctly separate status as Australians within the overall British force.

While the British were proving to be a disappointment to the Australian troops, a transformation was also occurring in the way these men viewed the Boer enemy. Bartlett claims that after the frequent initial period of excitement in the minds of some on their way to the battlefield, some soldiers enter a second phase

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46. SLNSW, MLMSS892, W.A. Steel, Diary, undated. See also SLNSW, MLMSS2105, W.A. Steel, Diary, 3 May 1900.  
47. SLNSW, MLMSS1561, P.R. Ricardo, Letter, 5 May 1900.  
48. SLV, MS9691, R.J. Byers, Letter, 18 August 1901.  
49. AWM, PR85/40, P.H. Lang, Diary, 9 February 1901.  
50. AWM, PR85/40, P.H. Lang, Diary, 15 April 1901.

of discontent with their place in the war.<sup>51</sup> This is often caused by the contrast between pre-war impressions of combat and the actual battlefield. Similarly, Dawson, concentrating on British soldiers in the First World War, mentions the “nightmarish horror” that results from having such an unrealistic notion of war.<sup>52</sup> Janet and Peter Phillips agree, maintaining that “the shock of war was probably greatest to those who came to the battlefields filled with a romantic and make-believe view of war, and of death in war”.<sup>53</sup> Also, Fussell argues that not only is the act of war very distinct from its aims, but so are soldiers’ expectations of war and its reality – and as such all wars can be labelled “ironic”.<sup>54</sup> This discrepancy can adversely affect the soldier’s opinion of the worth of the war he is fighting.

However, it is not only disillusion that a soldier experiences after the initial period of enthusiasm that ends when reaching the battlefield, or soon after. Often, they can also start to feel sympathy or respect towards the enemy. Gammage found that Australian soldiers fighting in the First World War often reached a point where they began to see the opposing German soldiers as human beings, after realising that their respective circumstances were much the same.<sup>55</sup> As mentioned earlier by Holmes, one of the aims of military training is to ensure that soldiers feel enough hatred towards the enemy to allow them to be able to kill other human beings.<sup>56</sup> Thus, if instead soldiers begin to sympathise with or understand the enemy, they will cease to enjoy or tolerate their role – to kill enemy soldiers – and consequently begin to resent the war itself and their position within it. Such feelings often emerged after the first few months of military service.

Numerous examples can be found in the archived records that demonstrate both respect for the fighting abilities of the enemy as well as compassion for civilians. In most cases – for both wars – this occurred after the soldier had been on the front for a significant amount of time, thus indicating that negative feelings towards service can also cause, or be caused by, a closer connection with the enemy. Eight months into his service, Private Stan Jones of the 1st South Australian Contingent wrote to his brother Hedley (who later fought in the Anglo-Boer War himself): “The Boers are scattered nearly all over the country now ... in fact the Boer army was very much underestimated at first.”<sup>57</sup> This is a clear reaction to the confidence with which the British, and Australians, entered the war. For the small Boer forces to overrun those of Britain, a world military power, had seemed unthinkable at the beginning of the war. This opinion dramatically changed after the Boers proved themselves resilient and effective fighters.

Some Australian soldiers met the Boers on a more personal level. In his diary, Private Watson Augustus Steel wrote – under a sub-heading of “My friend the enemy” – of a meeting with an Afrikaner man:

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51. F.C. Bartlett, *Psychology and the Soldier* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1927), p 179.
  52. G. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Routledge, London, 1994), p 56.
  53. J. Phillips and P. Phillips, *Victorians at Home and Away* (Croom Helm, London, 1978), p 175.
  54. P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1975), p 7.
  55. B. Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (Penguin Books, Victoria, 1975), p 223. See also Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, p 40.
  56. Holmes, *Firing Line*, p 361.
  57. SLSA, D 6427(L), S. Jones, Letter, 18 July 1900.

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After enquiring about my health, and asking my nationality he told me he had served in the field against us, had guarded Australian prisoners, and had drunk their health in his tent, that he was against the war, was intermarried and connected with Dutch and English families, but being a burgher was compelled to fight ... I found him educated, tolerant and kindly.<sup>58</sup>

Trooper John T. Jennings of the Victorian Rifles wrote in his diary of a meeting with a Boer five months after his service began:

Camp at a farm and had a conversation with a Boer (a nice young fellow about 18 years) who fought against us at Colesberg. He told me he had a Martini Henri rifle but was not allowed to shoot at long range as the black powder he had would give away their position to us but he had to wait until the enemy came near and then shoot.<sup>59</sup>

The level of familiarity between Jennings and the Boer soldier is clear, as the South African man was willing to divulge combat details. However, Jennings' words later in the same diary entry reveals that this man was reluctant to fight in the war, which may explain why such a conversation was possible: "He said he was commandeered to fight two months ago and was then left alone for three months for which he was glad."

There is evidence that Boers fought on the British side – most of these being *hendsoppers*, or soldiers who had surrendered to the British and ceased to fight, commonly identified as traitors by the majority of the Boers. Albert Grundlingh, in his study of *hendsoppers* and *joiners* – the latter referring to those who co-operated with the British forces during the war – asserts that surrendered Boers began offering their help to the British forces from June 1900, officially as guides and unofficially as informers about the movements of fighting burghers, or even combatants.<sup>60</sup> Bill Nasson claims that by the end of the war, the number of these men had reached 5 500.<sup>61</sup> Private William Hamline Glasson wrote about Boers in the Bushveldt Carbineers in a letter to his mother:

Our corps is made up principally of Australians & strange to say a few Boers, who the early part of the war were fighting against us, of course we keep our eyes on the gentlemen, one fellow has already been shot for opening his mouth too wide.<sup>62</sup>

Although *hendsoppers* did appear in various British units, in his discussion of the Bushveldt Carbineers – in which both Glasson, as well as Harry "Breaker" Morant, fought – Wilcox claims that they were often despised by Australian volunteers, many of whom viewed them as "traitors" and "cowards".<sup>63</sup> Despite this, close contact with Boers may still have encouraged some of the kinder expressions regarding the enemy in the archived personal records.

Such positive feelings towards the enemy were sometimes linked with a soldier's view of his own role in the war. Private William Hamline Glasson served

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58. SLNSW, MLMSS892, W.A. Steel, Diary, undated.

59. AWM, PR87/65, J.T. Jennings, Diary, 21 March 1900.

60. A.M. Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason: Boer Collaboration in the South African War of 1899-1902* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2006), pp 221–223.

61. B. Nasson, *The Boer War: The Struggle for South Africa* (The History Press, Stroud, 2011), p 235.

62. SLNSW, MLMSS3858, H. Glasson, Letter, 8 August 1901. See also SLSA, D6427(L), S. Jones, Letter, 24 December 1899.

63. Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, p 280. See also W. Woolmore, *The Bushveldt Carbineers and the Pietersburg Light Horse* (Slouch Hat Publications, McCrae, 2002), p 67.

longer in South Africa than most other Australians, staying in South Africa after his first tour ended in 1901 to work on the railways, then joining the Bushveldt Carbineers in May 1902 after finding the employment dull. He wrote to “Dolph” (a reference to the property “Godolphin”, at which he once worked – incidentally, with the infamous Morant) in August 1902, his fifteenth month of military service in South Africa: “I have seen enough to satisfy me that the Boers are not so bad as they are painted when you take into consideration some of our actions.”<sup>64</sup> It must be noted, however, that his letter was written in early 1902, when Roberts and Kitchener’s “scorched earth policy” had been in place for over a year, which may have provoked more sympathy than during earlier phases of the war. Many soldiers expressed disgust that their duty involved burning Boer homes and moving civilians to the confines of British-built concentration camps.<sup>65</sup> It is also noteworthy that those commenting on the enemy were generally common soldiers, who, in the case of the Anglo-Boer War, were usually rural workers, thus having most in common with Boer soldiers.

There is one case, however, when an Australian officer expressed open admiration for a Boer. Lieutenant Patrick H. Lang wrote in his diary of a visit to the home of General Louis Botha, commander of the Boer forces, and later prime minister of the Union of South Africa:

Spent a good time at Commander Botha’s house. They seem very nice people, & Miss Botha is rather pretty for a Boer girl ... these were educated Boers. They say thought [sic] that the Boers liked the Australians, but they could not understand why on earth they had come out to fight.<sup>66</sup>

Lang’s description clearly sets these Boers apart from those described earlier by Australian soldiers such as Steel and Glasson, as does a later entry in his diary in which he wrote:

Really, the well-bred Dutch people here seem awfully nice, & as a rule do not bear us malice (or at least they don’t show it – I hope this is not due to fear). Here are we fighting against this woman’s husband who is now an outlaw from his family & country, yet the wife treats us with courtesy & kindness. It makes you feel a bit of a brute.<sup>67</sup>

Lang’s admiration does not seem ill founded, although it is significant to note the class difference between Botha’s family and the Boers earlier referred to, which almost certainly would have increased Lang’s appreciation. Still, this case does demonstrate the observed closeness between some of the Boer and Australian forces.

Most Australians who enlisted to fight in South Africa were rural workers, due to the drought persisting in the late nineteenth century, so many out of work saw military service as a way to earn a living.<sup>68</sup> Thus, Australian soldiers soon realised that their background and fighting style were more similar to the Boers’ than to the traditionally trained British. Australian mounted infantry troops were in demand – particularly during the guerrilla phase of the war – because of their greater ability compared with the British to cope with the terrain and fighting style

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64. SLNSW, MLMSS 3858, H. Glasson, Letter, 19 January 1902.

65. See, for example, SLSA, D7334(L), A. Wellington, Letter, 17 February 1902.

66. AWM, PR85/40, P.H. Lang, Diary, 20 October 1900.

67. AWM, PR85/40, P.H. Lang, Diary, 13 November 1900.

68. Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War*, pp 32, 327.

of the Boers. The British were eventually forced to adapt their own soldiers to match the Australians, and so prove a more effective force against the guerrilla Boers. Private Watson Augustus Steel expressed this in his diary six months after first arriving in South Africa: “The pastoral Boer has shown what he can do and has been best met by Irish and Scotch farmers [sic] sons, Canadian cowboys and, Australian yeomen and bushmen”.<sup>69</sup> This perceived resemblance to their foes would certainly have prompted soldiers to describe them in such positive terms.

During the Anglo-Boer War, many expressions of empathy appeared in the letters and diaries after the introduction of the “scorched earth policy”, during which predominantly women and children were ejected from their homes, a source of supply for the Boer forces, which were then burned. But some soldiers openly expressed pity for Boer women and children well before this date. Private Stan Jones wrote to his family about Boer women six months after his military service began:

Of course some of them are pleasant enough to look at but at present they all seem to carry a sad and troubled look, as they are very much concerned about the War. If you enter into conversation with them you find that they have had their husbands, brothers or sons shot in the War and this is the cause of their trouble. Although they are the wives and daughters of our enemies, one can't help but sympathise with them.<sup>70</sup>

Shortly after arriving in South Africa, Jones was very open in a letter home to his mother about the Boers being “a bad lot”.<sup>71</sup> It appears that when faced with the realities of the war, his opinion altered. Private Watson Augustus Steel expressed a similar sense of uncertainty regarding the guilt of civilians in his diary: “The saddest incident in the war was that these women and children should suffer, even though they sought, and forced the conflict”.<sup>72</sup> Such words used by Australian soldiers in South Africa are not unusual, but the frequency with which Anglo-Boer War soldiers mentioned enemy civilians in kindly terms is noteworthy.<sup>73</sup> Lieutenant Patrick Lang even wrote in his diary of a Boer civilian who came to them for help for his ill wife, which was gladly provided.<sup>74</sup>

Scholars have also noted the increased importance of duty to soldiers who are experiencing dissatisfaction with their place on the war front. Bartlett claims that those at risk of suffering from anxiety neuroses are often focused on the concept of duty as an attempt to rid themselves of “the dishonourable thoughts of an easy way to safety” – namely, ceasing to fight.<sup>75</sup> He also maintains that this occurs predominantly after a soldier's initial phase of fighting, when “depression”, “strain” or final resignation to the task sets in.<sup>76</sup> Thus, a soldier's concentration on his duty is often the result of dissatisfaction with their situation in, or reasons for fighting a war.

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69. SLNSW, MLMSS2105, W.A. Steel, Diary, 30 June 1900.

70. SLSA, D6427(L), S. Jones, Letter, 19 May 1900.

71. SLSA, D6427(L), S. Jones, Letter, 24 December 1899.

72. SLNSW, MLMSS892, W.A. Steel, Diary, undated.

73. See also AWM, PR84/131, H.S. Condor, Diary, undated; AWM, PR01964, D.St.G. Rich, Letter, 5 July 1901; SLSA, PRG57/10, C.G. Sabine, Letter, 25 August 1900; AWM, PR86/40, P.H. Lang, Diary, 13 November 1900.

74. AWM, PR86/40, P.H. Lang, Diary, 29 December 1900.

75. Bartlett, *Psychology and the Soldier*, p 190.

76. Bartlett, *Psychology and the Soldier*, p 178.

During the Anglo-Boer War, many soldiers expressed reluctance when ordered to burn Boer homes and move civilians to concentration camps as part of the “scorched earth policy”. In line with the scholars mentioned above, some explained their compliance by falling back on the concept of duty – perhaps to motivate themselves to carry out such atrocities, or lessen some of the guilt associated with having to commit them against innocent women and children. This was usually found in the archived personal records of the rank and file, who were most often on the front lines taking the “scorched earth” orders from superiors. This is demonstrated in a letter written by Private Alan Wellington to his friend Philip Thomas Teer in his eleventh month in South Africa:

We even burn the farms down now, beside taking the cattle etc & we burn the veldt down as we go. We take the women and children out of the houses & burn the farms in their faces. I had a horrible experience one day, I had to go in a house & carry an old lady that couldn't walk out & help to put her in a wagon, she cried like a child. It was hard for me to have to do it but Phil *it was my duty I had to do it* (emphasis added).<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, Trooper Herbert S Condor wrote in his diary:

Came across another valley and burnt all the farms, some of the Boer women abusing us in a terrible manner, telling us we only fight women and destroy their homes. I'm very sorry to see the women turned out but there is nothing else for it.<sup>78</sup>

Both of these examples demonstrate the use of the “duty” justification for committing violence that, clearly, they themselves did not entirely agree with.

Some soldiers in the sample exhibited pride in their ability to continue fighting the Boers under such difficult conditions, and attributed this to their dedication to duty. Again, such expressions were usually found in the archived personal records of soldiers – those who were required to do the most physically and emotionally challenging work, and for whom there would have been a greater need to justify potential actions. Private Stan Jones wrote as mentioned above: “War is a cruel affair and it is terrible to think that so many valuable lives should be lost, but I suppose it cannot be helped as the Boers are a bad lot”.<sup>79</sup> By describing the Boers as a “bad lot”, Jones is justifying his own actions as a soldier fighting in a “cruel” war. Although many of the examined soldiers openly expressed dissatisfaction when carrying out tasks that they found psychologically difficult, they often explained their willingness to do it in terms of their duty, implying that they did not have a choice. As Trooper Jack Cock of Bethune’s Mounted Infantry said: “We must go through this time at any price whatever the loss is.”<sup>80</sup>

As outlined earlier in this paper, many past examinations of Australian involvement in the Anglo-Boer War have emphasised soldier loyalty to the British Empire, and connected this to a clear aversion towards the Boer enemy. However, an analysis of the personal records alongside twentieth-century scholarship on soldiering reveals that these accounts are overly simplistic and that Australians in South Africa had a more nuanced opinion of the Boers. Australians volunteered as a mere subsidiary force to the British forces, but soon the rural background of many soldiers overshadowed the British lack of adaptability to Boer guerrilla

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77. SLSA, D7334(L), A. Wellington, Letter, 17 February 1902.

78. AWM, PR83/131, H.S. Condor, Diary, undated.

79. SLSA, D6427(L), S. Jones, Letter, 24 December 1899.

80. SLV, MS13385, J. Cock, Letter, 1 January 1900.

combat and the harsh South African terrain. Derision towards the British forces can be frequently seen in the soldiers' personal records from the war front, which led to many defining themselves clearly as Australians after observing the differences between them and the Tommies and expressing admiration for the Boer forces when their similarities became apparent. This more often occurred in the latter stages of service, after the first few months of adaptation to the war front, highlighted by Bartlett and Fussell, among others cited above. However, some also spoke generously of the British Empire, with many considering themselves true British subjects.

Johnston's claim of "ambiguous identity" among Australians in the Second World War can therefore be directly applied to those fighting the Anglo-Boer War. However, in this case the relative incompetence of their British allies led to disillusionment and self-differentiation away from these troops, and a clear connection with the Boer enemy. This suggests a deeper kinship between these men and the Boer enemy, thus presenting a more complex view of Australian soldier identity during the Anglo-Boer War.

### Abstract

The Anglo-Boer War marked Australia's first experience of actual combat, with the participating colonies to serve as a "token" ally of the British against the seemingly corrupt Boer forces. Men initially enlisted eagerly, viewing the British Empire as their natural ally and the Boers their enemy, encouraged by military attitudes and Australia's commercial press, which – closely following Britain's jingo newspapers – ensured these views characterised the atmosphere from which these men left for the South African battlefield. After encountering the harsh South African terrain, however, the attitudes of the Australian troops towards others on the battlefield soon altered dramatically. This was caused partly by the eventual realisation by these men – most of whom were from a rural background – that they had more in common with the Boer combatants than the British Tommies. This caused many Australians to reject the official portrayal of the British and Boer forces by the military and commercial press, openly revealing disdain for their allies, and admiration for the enemy in their warfront letters and diaries. This challenges traditional perceptions of colonial forces in this war as loyal British subjects and presents an alternative view of Australian identity on the South African battlefield.

**Keywords:** Anglo-Boer War; soldiers; Australia; Britain; South Africa; identity.

### Opsomming

Die Anglo-Boereoorlog het Australië se eerste ervaring van werklik gewapende stryd aangedui, met die deelnemende kolonies om as 'n "simboliese" bondgenoot van die Britte teen die skynbaar korrupte Boeremagte te dien. Mans het aanvanklik gretiglik aangesluit, aangesien hulle die Britse Ryk as hulle natuurlike bondgenoot beskou het, en die Boere as hulle vyand. Hierdie gesindheid, gekweek deur die atmosfeer waaruit hierdie mans na die Suid-Afrikaanse gevegsfront vertrek het, is aangewakker deur militêre houdings en Australië se pers wat Brittanje se bjingo-nuusblaaie nougeset nagevolg het. Na hul kennismaking met die ruwe Suid-Afrikaanse terrein het die houdings van die Australiaanse troepe teenoor andere op die gevegsterrein baie goue dramatiese veranderinge ondergaan. Dit is deels weens die uiteindelijke besef deur hierdie manne – van wie die meeste uit 'n landelike agtergrond afkomstig was – dat hulle meer met die

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Boere-vegters gemeen gehad het as met die Britse Tommies. Dit het meegebring dat talle Australianers die amptelike voorstelling van die Britse en Boeremagte deur die militêre en kommersiële pers afgekeur het deur openlik in hulle gevegsfront-briewe en dagboeke minagting vir hulle bondgenote en bewondering vir die vyand openbaar het. Dit daag tradisionele persepsies van koloniale magte in hierdie oorlog as synde lojale Britse onderdane uit en bied 'n alternatiewe gesigspunt van Australiaanse identiteit rakende die Suid-Afrikaanse slagveld

**Sleutelwoorde:** Anglo-Boereoorlog; soldate; Australie; Brittanje; Suid-Afrika; identiteit.