

Another gem from a masterful military historian

Edward M. Spiers, *Letters from Kimberley: Eyewitness Accounts from the South African War*

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This is another gem from Edward Spiers, Professor of Strategic Studies at the School of History, University of Leeds. A leading authority on the Victorian army, Spiers recently co edited *A Military History of Scotland* that received the Saltire

Prize for the best book on Scottish history in 2012 and the Templer Medal from the Society for Army Historical Research. A grant from the Scouloudi Foundation in association with the Institute of Historical Research made the publication of *Letters from Kimberley* possible. It is the second book by Spiers on eyewitness accounts from the South African War or Anglo Boer War. The first, entitled *Letters from Ladysmith: Eyewitness Accounts from the South African War*, contained letters from the Natal front from the outbreak of the war on 11 October 1899 till the relief of Ladysmith on 28 February 1900 and after.

Soon after the outbreak of the war the Boers laid siege to these three important towns Mafeking and Kimberley in the Cape Colony and Ladysmith in Natal. Kimberley, a few miles from the north western border of the Orange Free State Republic, was besieged on 14 October. It was only to be relieved 124 days later, on 15 February 1900, by Major General John French and his Cavalry Division, which formed part of Lord Methuen's relieving force. Kimberley did not possess the strategic significance of Ladysmith, nor did it have a charismatic leader like Colonel Robert Baden Powell in Mafeking, but, known as the "Diamond City", it was the largest and wealthiest town invested. Ironically it was also the temporary home of arch enemy of the Boer republics former prime minister of the Cape Colony, Cecil John Rhodes, who had made a fortune in the diamond and gold industries. He entered the town the day before the outbreak of war. Equally ironically, his friend, Dr Leander Starr Jameson, was besieged inside Ladysmith on the Natal front. Spiers quotes Arthur Conan Doyle, war correspondent during the Anglo Boer War, who wrote of "the painful but notorious fact" that "considerable friction" existed "between the military authorities [Colonel Robert Kekewich and his chief staff officer, Major O'Meara] and a section of the civilians, of whom Mr Rhodes was chief".

In this book, Spiers has included some 261 carefully selected extracts from letters about the siege of Kimberley (first hand accounts) written by soldiers and civilians, and a handful of Boer prisoners, which were published originally in 99 British metropolitan and provincial newspapers. These newspapers include: *Essex County Standard*, *Lancashire Daily Post*, *Leeds Mercury*, and *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*. The letters cover the British experience from all the major regiments and support arms engaged, both in the relief forces and inside Kimberley, and include material on the pursuit of a retreating General Piet Cronjé until his capture with 4 000 Boers at Paardeberg on 27 February 1900. There are also letters and extracts from siege diaries from the English speaking community in Kimberley. They include letters from the mayor; a range of military personnel in the Kimberley Rifle Volunteers, Kimberley Light Horse, the Town Guard, Cape Mounted Police; and women, with one first hand account of living in the mines.

Extremely valuable is that Spiers places each letter in its proper context with some excellent introductory and explanatory paragraphs. Where these letters refer to principal individuals or events, or err in their commentary, the letters are annotated. Perspectives from a few enemy letters that appeared in the local newspapers are sometimes added. Full references with subheadings, including the title of the newspaper and the date, are given with each letter. The letters or topics are numbered and where more than one extract comes from the same letter on different topics, links to previous passages are identified by reference to those numbers.

The basis of the selection consists of letters from soldiers in the relevant infantry of the line battalions sent to family and friends at home, and then passed on to the local press, usually about four weeks or more after despatch from South Africa. The newspapers readily filled their columns with "Letters from the Front" among other material. These (nota bene) uncensored letters attracted editorial attention by virtue of their local interest, particularly for the provincial newspapers; their often blunt and graphic phraseology; and their readiness to make points about commanders, battles, the enemy, and campaigning generally that would never be found in official despatches. Some Lancastrian newspapers eagerly followed the fortunes of the men of the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, half of whom were besieged in Kimberley and the other half in the relief column.

In his Introduction, Spiers assesses the siege and its significance. This is followed by six chapters with extracts from letters and editorial comments on the defence of Kimberley; the advance of the relieving force through the battles of Belmont, Graspan and Modder River; the Battle of Magersfontein, where the Highlanders "marched to their graves"; the beleaguered and bombarded Kimberley; and the relief of Kimberley and the subsequent surrender of Cronjé. A final chapter assesses the significance of the siege through the eyes of contemporaries and subsequently, in understanding how the participants coped with the challenges of a siege and securing its relief.

The extracts from the letters, Spiers explains in his Introduction, are reproduced in their original form to reflect the feelings of residents during and after the siege, and of officers and other ranks as they struggled to cope with the demands of modern warfare. They indicate how newspapers and their editors came to understand and respond to events in connection with the siege. They also provide first hand commentary on events on the battlefield, particularly the challenges of crossing fire zones swept by smokeless powder, flat trajectory, and magazine rifles, as at Modder River and Magersfontein. These letters shattered the widespread under estimation in Britain of the highly mobile and well armed Boers, adept at field craft, and, as at Magersfontein, entrenched under the skilful direction of General Koos de la Rey. The letters also testify to the way in which imperial Britain was able to recover from initial defeat, and to exploit the passivity of the Boers by deploying massive military forces across the seas and forwarding them rapidly to the front by rail. They also reveal, says Spiers, some of the social effects of the war, such as the displacement of refugees at the beginning, and the destruction of homes and property by both belligerents.

This reviewer's choice extract was already spotted by the writer of the fly leaf: Spiers states in his explanatory note (p 88) that for most Highlanders the enduring memory of the Battle of Magersfontein was lying prostrate on the veld unable to move after the unexpected Boer fusillade from the concealed trenches. As a Seaforth sergeant observed (p 88):

There was nothing for it but to lay down and pretend to be dead, and this I did about 5.30 a.m. till, I suppose six p.m., the sun pouring down on me all the time, and not a drink of water all day, and dare not stir hand or foot, and expecting every instant to be my last. I could hear nothing but the cries, moans, and prayers of the wounded all round me, but I daren't so much as look up to see who they were. Shots and shells were going over me all day from the enemy and our side, and plenty of them striking within a yard of me I mean bullets, not shells and yet they never hit me. I believe

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some of our fellows went off their heads and walked right up to the enemy's place, singing till they dropped them.¹

In a recent chapter on the Anglo Boer War, this reviewer juxtaposed the experiences of a British soldier, Herbert Unwin of Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry, at Spioenkop, taken from Spiers' previous book, *Letters from Ladysmith*,² and a young Boer combatant, Deneys Reitz. Spiers has produced a remarkable book and it is highly recommended for the reader who enjoys social and military history. There is now the onus on him to compile that third volume in what would be a magnificent trilogy – the siege of Mafeking. It is something to look forward to from the desktop of a brilliant historian.

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