

Woman's Endurance

**A.D.L., B.A., Chaplain in the Concentration Camp, Bethulie, O.R.C.,
1901, *Woman's Endurance***

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First published in 1904 in Cape Town by S.A. News. Co. Ltd., *Woman's Endurance* is the journal kept by August Daniel Lückhoff from 21 August to 24 October 1901, while he worked as chaplain at the Bethulie

concentration camp, one of around forty such camps established by the British military during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). The original preface by D. de Villiers, retained in this reprint, indicates that the book's initial publication was funded by the Boer Relief Committee, and proceeds from the book were donated to the orphanage at Bethulie. Published in a spirit of reconciliation and humanitarianism, *Woman's Endurance* did thus not appear in 1904 as part of emergent Afrikaner proto-nationalism, unlike many other war and camp personal narratives published post-war. De Villiers described the book as "a true and touching 'Diary'" that reveals "that our South African women were the heroines of the late deplorable war", and indeed he hoped that it would therefore, "bring us all nearer to one another in sympathy and love."

Fransjohan Pretorius' new introduction to this reprint rightly emphasises Lückhoff's diary as "a very important – and amazing – document" (p iii). Notably, it is one of the very few camp diaries written during the war itself (rather than retrospectively), and it provides a vivid snapshot of camp life during the disastrous three month period which saw Bethulie camp staff, including Lückhoff, attempting to grapple with a wave of devastating epidemics and consequently with large numbers of deaths, particularly of children. Lückhoff's diary also reveals the extent to which he was affected by what he witnessed during the course of his employment at Bethulie camp – his departure in October 1901 was brought about by a breakdown of his physical and mental health. His depiction of Bethulie in September 1901 suggests the deep impression made on him by the camp inhabitants' suffering: "For the very essence of sorrow and misery, come here! For weeping, wailing mothers, come here! For broken hearts, come here! For desperate misery and hopelessness, come here!" (p 16).

Lückhoff's original introduction, replicated in this reprint, explains the diary's origins: "The thought suggested itself the very first day that I might desire, in after years, to recall my experiences in Camp, and so I decided to keep a diary. This thought, and this alone, prompted me in the matter" (p 1). The diary thus records Lückhoff's daily experiences in the camp, focusing on his chaplaincy work amongst the camp's inhabitants. His primary duties were visiting the sick in hospital and their tents, distributing invalid "comforts", conducting funerals and church services and holding prayer-meetings. Typical entries record the tent numbers visited that day and the progress or otherwise of the sick: "383 much better; smiled this morning when I entered. 339; great tribulation; six deaths in one week. 440; girlie; sweet face; wonder if she will die or live; very, very bad; Cloete. 288; Mrs. Venter; young wife; sick; five children

sick; gave beef tea and Benger's Food" (p 8). The cumulative effect of these daily staccato-like descriptions of sick and suffering children, women weeping for their sick or dead children, the struggles to obtain wood for coffins and Lückhoff's own sense of inadequacy as he attempts to provide comfort and reassurance, strongly conveys the misery of camp life during the height of the epidemics. Indeed, many diary entries attest to the emotional effects witnessing this misery had on Lückhoff himself: "How can one's hard [sic] remain hard? Can one be unmoved when you see weeping, stricken mothers kneeling in anguish beside their infants' graves?" (p 20). At one funeral, that of a Mister Van der Merwe, Lückhoff was completely overwhelmed by grief, commenting afterwards, "made a fool of myself at the graveside; but really could not contain myself" (p 44).

In spite of his deeply empathic response to the hardships faced by camp inhabitants, there were also times when Lückhoff railed against them in frustration, commenting for example, "Filth and stench in some tents almost unbearable" (p 19) and, "Fighting grimly with uncleanliness; the idea that it is dangerous to wash with measles; rot!" (p 9). It is clear that the unhygienic habits of some camp inhabitants did contribute to the spread of disease and thus the high mortality rates. This point has however remained contentious in the historiography of the camps, dominated as this has been by Afrikaner nationalist interpretations that have sought to emphasise British wrongdoing and responsibility in the camps. Even Pretorius' introduction here, although it plainly states, "the unhygienic habits of some camp inhabitants must be blamed" (p vii), is eager to emphasise that, "[t]he main cause of the deaths, however, was the inadequate control of the camp administration" (p viii).

It is evident too from the diary that the majority of deaths occurred not in the camp hospital, described in many post-war testimonies as a place of mistreatment and even murder, but in inhabitants' tents. Commenting on the reluctance of some mothers to admit their children to hospital, Lückhoff's frustration is evident: "Mother in mortal dread of seeing child sent to hospital; but what foolishness! Selfish, and altogether dangerous policy" (p 29). Such remarks are balanced by his equally despairing attitude towards the camp administration, according to Lückhoff made up of individuals who showed a "total absence of sympathy of any kind!" (p 29). Lückhoff depicted many Boer people struggling to adapt to the enormous changes imposed by the war and by camp life, and interestingly comments: "When a person decides and is determined to die, the chances of recovery are very poor indeed" (p 14). In his work of visiting the sick and dying, one of his greatest sources of

aggravation was the morbid fascination on the part of some camp inhabitants with deathbed scenes: “Saturday, August 31. – Glum; just returned from dying boy, Herklaas ... Found some more inquisitive onlookers. Some folks will put themselves to endless inconvenience to be able to witness a deathbed. They revel in it. I am vexed in my soul, and feel as though I could knock down everyone of them” (p 15). In *Woman’s Endurance* there thus emerges a nuanced depiction of camp life which recognises the enormity of the suffering experienced by Boer inhabitants, but which acknowledges good and bad on both sides, and fails to valorise Boer women or morally oversimplify what occurred in the camps in the manner of so many post-war narratives.

This nuanced quality results in no small part from the diary’s production at the time of the war. As Lückhoff himself commented, “What was written was done hurriedly, on the impulse of the moment – in fact, scribbled down without, of course, any regard to style, language or form” (p 1). It is precisely this diary’s immediacy and lack of polish that makes it such an interesting and moving read, attesting as it does to one man’s experience of what he calls “a veritable valley of desolation” (p 16). *Woman’s Endurance* offers those concerned with the history of the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War valuable personal, “at the time” insights into these events, inscribed with individual and particularised emotional responses, rather than the generalised and politically-informed statements that dominate many post-war narratives.

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