

## The Long Toms of the Anglo Boer War

LOUIS CHANGUION, *Silence of the guns. The history of the Long Toms of the Anglo-Boer War* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2001)

188 pages, richly illustrated

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This, surely, must be one of the most enjoyable books published during the commemoration of the Anglo-Boer War. And it is yet another book from the admirable Nicol Stassen's Protea Book House.

Changuion has been cherishing this topic for a long time and people fortunate enough to have heard his fascinating lectures on the issue will certainly not be disappointed by the final product. It is indeed a very readable book, combining two other essential elements for a successful product, *viz.* thorough research and meticulous field work.

There have been earlier attempts to record the fascinating history of the four Boer 155 mm Creusot garrison guns, the most notable being the publications of Darell Hall (*Long Tom* and *The Hall handbook of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*). But with Changuion's book we have the expert researcher and writer on the job, and a man who knows how to tell a good story.

Originally intended to guard the four forts erected outside Pretoria after the Jameson Raid of 1896, the guns saw their fate change once the war had broken out in 1899. They now had to accompany the Boer forces to the battle front and in this role the legends about them had their origin. The author therefore sets about answering in detail questions such as: Were the guns (soon called "Long Toms", possibly because of the name "155 mm Lang" given to them by the Transvaal State Artillery) really as formidable as the Boers made them out to be? Did they really outclass the British guns – in range as well as in accuracy and effectiveness? Why are there no Long Toms (except for four replicas) to be seen anywhere? How did they disappear? Were they destroyed by the Boers themselves, and what happened to them or their remains after the war? Is there still a complete Long Tom somewhere in the United Kingdom?

The book is divided into two sections. Part One discusses the Long Toms in action during the war. It consists of four chapters covering the Boer offensive (October – November 1899), the first and second British offensives (November 1899 – January 1900 and February 1900 – September 1900), and the guerrilla phase of the

war (September 1900 – May 1902). Part Two reflects on the situation a hundred years later – how the author has managed to get some answers to the above-mentioned questions. It has a clever title – “Putting it back together again”, almost as if a fine replica has been built, but it actually takes the reader step by step in unravelling the mysteries of the Long Toms and discerning between fact and fiction or myth. The author impresses with his honesty – if he doesn’t know he explicitly says so.

A problem that the author frequently was confronted with was the inaccuracy of personal accounts which also meant that these were often very misleading. The greatest discrepancies appeared about the destruction of the Long Toms. Quite a number of places are mentioned where these guns were supposedly destroyed. We are told that often these discrepancies are due to a lack of knowledge and therefore there is sometimes confusion with other guns, especially with the 75 mm QF field guns.

Having been present in Bloemfontein in May 1999 when the author met Dr Pieter Thiel, grandson of the man who blew up the last Long Tom on 30 April 1901 *and* who kept a diary in which he described the dramatic episode, I was curious to see how the author would treat the fate of the last Long Tom. I wasn’t disappointed. The last minutes of the life of this artillery piece is given in vivid and colourful detail. So are other issues, like “Kitchener’s composite Long Tom”, and the author’s tracking down in the United Kingdom of the sawn-off muzzle of one Long Tom appropriately nicknamed “The Jew”.

Seven appendices contribute to the value of the publication – the strength of the Transvaal State Artillery at the beginning of the war, technical details of the Long Toms, the ammunition and gun drill of a Long Tom, replicas and scale models of the Long Toms, and the war memorial in Haenertsburg (the author modestly does not tell that he was responsible for it) which commemorates all the wars in the area and is also a monument to the Long Toms.

The beautiful illustrations (with excellent captions) and the maps increase the value of the publication. Some illustrations are used twice, e.g. the Long Toms being repaired in Pretoria (pp. 56 and 157), Lood Pretorius (pp. 14 and 131), Villebois-Mareuil (pp. 55 and 73), Ben Viljoen (59 and 108), and the remains of the Long Tom at Komatipoort (pp. 121 and 144), but this can be regarded as functional. Curiously enough, confusing Gen. J.P. Snyman with Comdt. J.D.L. Botha has occurred in one of the reviewers recent publications as well.

This is a splendid book which – wait for the cliché - deserves to be on the shelf of all collectors of Anglo-Boer War books and students of this fascinating period in South Africa’s history. It does indeed add value and pleasure to my own collection.

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