

The Anglo-Boer War and the Making of Australian Identity

Craig Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War: the war in South Africa 1899-1902*

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When many people think about Australia's role during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902, they tend to remember the controversial role (and execution) of "Breaker" Morant and Peter Handcock. However, these murderers turned martyrs were definitely not your typical Australian soldiers who came to South Africa. In total, about 16 000 men and 40 women came to South Africa in six contingents. Of these soldiers, just over 600 died – more than half of them perishing from various diseases.

Through the years, several books have been published on the role played by Australians during the War, such as J. Green, *The story of the Australian Bushmen* (1903); P.R. Murray, *Official records of the Australian military contingents to the war in South Africa 1899-1902* (1911); R.L. Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War*

(1976); L.M. Field, *The forgotten war Australian involvement in the South African conflict of 1899-1902* (1979) – and Nick Bleszynski's *Shoot straight you bastards! The truth behind the killing of Breaker' Morant* (2002), a failed attempt to expunge the Morant/Handcock stain on Australia's war record.

One hundred years after the end of the War, the first "official" history of Australian participation has now been published, commissioned by the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, that impressive memorial and museum that focuses primarily on Australia's role in the First and Second World War, but now also houses an excellent Anglo-Boer War exhibition. The exhibition includes a 75 mm Krupp gun, used by General Christiaan de Wet's commando until it was captured near the town of Parys in the Free State on 27 October 1900, by troops of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles.

Wilcox points out that the Anglo-Boer War was the first war in which people fought who called themselves Australians. It made many Australians proud of their military capacity, even though their role was relatively limited, and they did not really determine the course of the War.

The book has an interesting structure with alternating chronological and thematic chapters; for example, a review of military operations between October 1899 and June 1900 is given in Chapter 4, followed by "A day on the veld" (Chapter 5), which in turn is followed by a chapter on the military events from March to August 1900. The book starts off with a review of the relationship between Australia and South Africa before the War (Chapter 1), and a review of the long period of commitment to war, from December 1895 to May 1900 (Chapter 2).

This way of presentation means that some of the personal war experiences of Australians of the day are related in such a way that it does not obscure the narratives of the fighting and the events on the home front. Hence, there are short thematic chapters on the long sea and rail journeys to the front (Chapter 3); on a soldier's day in the veld, to which reference has already been made (Chapter 5); on the horses that the Australians sold to the British Army (Chapter 7); on the diseases that killed more Australians (and other colonial soldiers, as well as British regulars) than the bullets did (Chapter 9); on how the War influenced Australian identity (Chapter 15), and on how Australian women saw the War and what part they played in it (Chapter 11). And then, of course, it must also be remembered that South Africa was, at least to some extent, a training ground for Gallipoli and the other campaigns in which Australians fought in World War I.

Thus, *Australia's Boer War* gives a review of the military operations in which Australian soldiers participated in South Africa, but the author also describes the role played by Australian women and the thousands of Australians who fought in non-Australian units, and focuses specifically on the everyday experiences of being a soldier in the Anglo-Boer War.

The book has been beautifully produced, with 189 photographs and other illustrations, seventeen maps, an appendix with short biographical notes about 110 of the Australians who fought in the War, another appendix with a summary of the role played by each of the Australian contingents and units who were sent to South Africa, a glossary and guide to pronunciation (the latter, not always very accurate, will be a source of amusement to many Afrikaans-speaking people), 540 endnotes (including many elaborate ones), a very impressive list of sources, and a detailed index.

Book Reviews

Craig Wilcox must be commended for writing a substantial, impeccably researched and, at the same time, most readable account of Australia's participation in the Anglo-Boer War. At long last an Australian has put the crimes, punishment and death of Morant and his accomplices in their correct historical context. His strongly expressed views on the guilt of Morant *et al.* will undoubtedly upset and excite staunch supporters of Morant (both in Australia and in South Africa, where even some Afrikaans-speaking people tend to take the side of Morant against their own ancestors, motivated essentially by anti-British, and in particular, anti-Kitchener sentiments), who seek to portray these members of the Bushveldt Carbineers as victims of British treachery.

Wilcox's book is based on a large volume of records held in Britain, Australia and South Africa. This superb piece of historical scholarship must be included in every worthwhile collection of Anglo-Boer War books, as well as every Africana collection.

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