

Vivid and varied impressions of the Anglo Boer War

KAREL SCHOEMAN (editor)

Witnesses To War. Personal Documents Of The Anglo- Boer War From The Collections Of The South African Library

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Karel Schoeman has assembled and edited an anthology of documents relating to the war of 1899 to 1902 held by the South African Library in Cape Town. He states that the selection was made at random from material in the Library, but that 'the writings of the famous or prominent have as far as possible been avoided'. Virtually all the people quoted were living in some part of South Africa during the war. Two intriguing letters written from abroad that are included, may be noted: an anonymous letter from Tasmania addressed to 'the Hon WP Schreiner, Premier and Traitor of the Cape' and a letter written by the poet, Algernon Charles Swinburne, from London to Sir Henry de Villiers the Chief Justice of the Cape Colony concerning the behaviour of the Boers towards British subjects and black people. Schoeman has arranged the documents into eight broadly chronological sections.

Dutch documents have been reproduced in their original. English translations have been provided, not immediately after the Dutch original, as may have been more suitable, but in a separate appendix. Schoeman has proved himself in many previous publications to have great insights into Free State history. He explains here that the number of documents in the anthology relating to that region reflect the nature of the holdings of the South African Library rather than his personal interest or preferences. Similarly the lack of documents written by black, coloured or Indian witnesses can be ascribed to the absence of such material in the Library. The book is attractively produced and the copious illustrations, also from the Library's holdings, provide an apt visual complement to the text.

Each document is prefaced by a brief explanatory introduction providing some background information on the author and on the contents of the document. Schoeman states that no attempt has been made to explain every reference in the documents. Nevertheless many readers may feel that the editorial comments could profitably have been fuller and more detailed.

The succinct introductions are useful and generally reliable, but the author does slip on occasion. The date of the British occupation of Johannesburg is correctly given as 31 May 1900, but Pretoria was not occupied on 5 July 1900 as is stated (p. 69) but exactly a month earlier - the caption to a photograph on p. 54 gets it right. Joseph Chamberlain was, of course, not Foreign Secretary (p. 71) but Colonial Secretary. The proclamation quoted on pp. 90-91, threatening to deport Boer women and children living in Pretoria beyond the British lines, was issued in July 1900 and not as is implied, in 1901. Moreover, Schoeman is wrong in stating that

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the threat was 'never carried out' - more than 400 women and children were indeed sent to the Boer commandos in the field in July 1900.

The documents published in this anthology illustrate the wide range of material in the South African Library relating to the Anglo-Boer War. They also provide vivid and varied impressions of that conflict that are probably unknown even to most experts in the field.

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