

## **From South African veld to Western Front trenches**

### **Rodney Atwood, *General Lord Rawlinson: From Tragedy to Triumph***

Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2020

xii + 316 pp

ISBN 978-1-4742-4698-9 (hardback), 978-1-3501-5113-0 (paperback), 978-1-4742-4700-9 (ePDF), 978-1-4742-4699-6 (eBook)

R600 (paperback), R550 (eBook)

Henry Seymour (“Harry” or “Rawly”) Rawlinson was born at Trent Manor, Dorset in England, on 20 February 1864. He was educated at Eton, and entered the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, in 1883. His military career spanned the later years of Queen Victoria's long reign, the Edwardian era, the Western Front campaigns during the Great (First World) War of 1914 to 1918, and the crisis faced by the British Empire in the 1920s. He joined the King's Royal Rifles in India in 1884. His first service in the field was during the British invasion of Burma (today Myanmar) in November 1885. He entered the Army Staff College, Camberley, in 1893. He then served under Lord Kitchener in the Sudan in 1898, including at the battle of Omdurman. He was in the field throughout the greater part of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902. After the war he worked at the War Office, as Commandant of the Army Staff College, and at Aldershot. Then followed various positions during the First World War.

Although Rawlinson spent only approximately two-and-a-half years of his Army career of some 42 years in South Africa, it was thanks to his work on the South African veld that he cemented his reputation as a staff officer and commander, which in due course, led to other appointments (and concomitant failures and successes in the First World War). As an influential staff officer, and as a successful column commander in the field against the Boers, he contributed towards the ultimate (controversial) British victory, and as such, should not be ignored by South Africans. For good reason he was, many years ago, included in the *Dictionary of South African Biography* (volume IV, Durban, 1981).

Thus far, only one biography on Rawlinson has been written, namely by Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, *The Life of General Lord Rawlinson of Trent* (London, 1928), while *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914–1918* (Barnsley, 2004) was written by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson. Mark Jacobson was the editor of *Rawlinson in India* (in the British Army Records Society's source publication, Volume 19; Stroud, 2002). Nearly a century after Henry Rawlinson's death, it is appropriate that this eminent soldier's life and career should be researched for the purpose of a new biography. Rawlinson was a child of his time; a fervent supporter of the British Empire and of all that British imperialism stood for. The current debates about colonialism and all its consequences are to be welcomed, and will benefit from informed debate; and one should not criticise something one does not understand. By studying the life and times of people such as Henry Rawlinson, one can gain a better understanding of what they believed in, what drove them, and what they achieved – for better or for worse.

Rodney Atwood's Rawlinson biography consists of a brief introduction (pp 1–4) and thirteen chapters, of which two are devoted to Rawlinson's role during the Anglo-Boer (or South African) War. In Natal, Rawlinson served under General George White, and with him, was besieged in Ladysmith for 118 days. He then joined Lord Roberts's staff in Bloemfontein, and took part in the advance to Pretoria, where he continued with staff work. In December 1900 he accompanied Roberts back to Britain, but the new commander-in-chief in South Africa, Lord Kitchener, asked Rawlinson to join his staff, which he did in March 1901. Soon, he commanded a successful British mobile column in the Western and Eastern Transvaal, and from July 1901 also in the Orange River Colony (as the former Orange Free State Boer republic was called after annexation), chasing after the elusive General Christiaan de Wet. On 14 April 1901, at Goedvoorzicht, he fell into Boer hands, albeit just for a few minutes. Towards the end of the war, he was back in the Western Transvaal, where he was present at the last major clash of the war, i.e. at Roodewal (Rooiwal, 11 April 1902). From 1 April 1901 to 31 May 1902, Rawlinson's columns had covered more than 8 000 km in pursuit of Boer commandos. After the conclusion of the peace (31 May 1902), Rawlinson accompanied Kitchener back to Britain.

Five of the biography's thirteen chapters are devoted to Rawlinson's role during the First World War, from his frustrated endeavours at Neuve Chapelle (March 1915), Aubers Ridge (May 1915), Festubert (May 1915) and Loos (September-October 1915), to the Somme (July-November 1916; as General Officer Commanding, GOC, of the Fourth [British] Army), and all the way to Amiens (August 1918) and beyond. At the Somme, the South African attack at Delville Wood, took place under his overall command. Like most World War I generals, Rawlinson struggled to find the path to success in a conflict of unparalleled scope and destructiveness, but eventually he won a series of spectacular conquests, thus making no small contribution to the ultimate Allied victory. The officers under whom Rawlinson served, as well as many of those who served under him, were veterans of the Anglo-Boer War.

After the war, Rawlinson organised the evacuation from northern Russia of those Allied troops who had taken part in the Russian Civil War, and then, in 1920, he became commander-in-chief of the British Indian Army. His reforms included the process of 'Indianisation', which meant that henceforth, Indian soldiers could get commissions in an army that formed the basis of British power. He died unexpectedly, on 28 March 1925, while still in office in India; a servant of the British Empire right to the end.

Atwood has done meticulous research for his biography of Rawlinson. Not only has he consulted a vast volume of archival sources, as well as a large number of secondary sources (see the Select Bibliography, pp 297–305), but from the no fewer than 1 384 endnotes (pp 241–296, which ideally, should have been included as footnotes at the base of the relevant pages) it is also clear that he has exploited the sources to the full.

A few small mistakes have crept in; for example, the “Long Tom” guns were of 155-mm (not 135-mm) calibre (p 33); Maritzburg (map, p 37) must be Pietermaritzburg; Roberts's army suffered more than 1 000 deaths from enteric (typhoid) fever (p 45) – in actual fact, many more died from typhoid, for example, in Bloemfontein alone some 1 600 perished; Simon's Town, not Simonstown (p 71); Deneys, not Dennis, Reitz (p 247, Chapter 2, note 14); and on p 166 the town of Middelkerke must be spelled correctly and consistently (i.e. not as Middelkerk or Middlekerke).

*General Lord Rawlinson* forms part of the Bloomsbury Studies in Military History series (with Jeremy Black as senior editor), which includes diverse titles, such as on D-Day, the First World War, the British Army in India, the 1711 expedition to Quebec, the Battle of the Atlantic, war and state-building in modern Afghanistan, postwar Japan as a sea power, and Australian soldiers in the Anglo-Boer War and Vietnam War.

The history of what is today South Africa, especially in the years 1795 to 1910, is inextricably linked to that of the British Empire. But the influence that British imperialism had on South Africa and all its people, lingers on to this day. In the light of the present 120th anniversary of the Anglo-Boer War, the most devastating war to be fought in South Africa, and in the wake of the First World War centenary – a war that caused divisions in South Africa, but a war in which South Africans also played a relatively small but important role – it is worthwhile revisiting the career of a committed career soldier, such as Henry Rawlinson. Rodney Atwood's *General Lord Rawlinson: From Tragedy to Triumph* is an excellent biography and is highly recommended.

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### **Bold new interpretation of Cape burgher identity**

**Teun Baartman, *Cape Conflict: Protests and Political Alliances in a Dutch Settlement***

UCT Press, Cape Town, 2019

206 pp

ISBN 978-1-77582-256

R300.00

Teun Baartman's *Cape Conflict: Protests and Political Alliances in a Dutch Settlement* offers a bold new interpretation of burgher identity, protests and political alliances in the eighteenth-century Cape Colony. Informed by exhaustive research, the work sets out a compelling revision of the history and motives of the Cape burgher protest movement of the late 1770s and 1780s. Baartman challenges a long-standing historiographical tradition, which has characterised the burgher protesters as Cape patriots and the protest movement as a harbinger of proto-Afrikaner nationalism. The