

**NEWSPAPERS AS PUBLIC OPINION IN THE
SOUTH AFRICAN WAR YEARS: A NOTE
IN A WESTERN CANADIAN SETTING**

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The accurate assessment of public opinion¹ has long been the historian's bugaboo. When contemporary public opinion polls prove unreliable² what comfort can the historian seek in such indispensable sources as newspapers which, at best, tend to be somewhat unreliable, at worst misleading? Perhaps this inherent difficulty accounts for the fact that the study of public opinion has not been attractive to many historians. Although, in the words of Professor Beer, "Americans have made the subject peculiarly their own," the rest of the English-speaking world seems to have neglected it.

Yet not entirely. In South African historiography Dr. B. A. Le Cordeur's "Robert Godlonton as Architect of Frontier Opinion, 1850—1857," published in 1959,³ is ample proof of an early and continuing interest. In Canada, some ten years later, the subject was fertile enough to induce two enterprising young historians, David Gagan and Anthony Rasporich, to embark on the *Canadian History through the Press* series.⁴ The Gagan and Rasporich series concentrates exclusively on the press as a historical source; it is concerned with public opinion and the value and limitations of newspapers in reflecting it. This is due to new trends in Canadian historiography, especially rising nationalism. The latter dictates a need to determine the influence of formative events on the Canadian character and thus illuminate (in the words of Gagan and Rasporich) "not merely the thrust, but the quality of Canadian life."⁵

Among the formative events is the South African War which is a latecomer to Canadian historiography.⁶ The study of its effects on Canadian

A useful bibliography for the concept of public opinion can be found in Samuel H. Beer, "Two Models of Public Opinion: Bacon's 'New Logic' and Diotima's 'Tale of Love,'" (Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th Series, vol. 24, London, 1974, p.79, footnote 2). Beer's article is concerned with the relationship between public opinion and the art of government.

A good example of this was the wholly erroneous impression given by the poll before the Truman vs. Dewey American presidential election of 1948. Since then polling has been refined, ensuring greater accuracy.

3. Archives Year Book for South African History (Government Printer, Pretoria, Pt. 11, 1959).
4. Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, Ltd. (Toronto: Montreal).
5. Editor's Preface to the Canadian History Through the Press series.
6. Satisfactory bibliographies for Canadian writing on the South African War are few and far between. W.B. Kerr published a review article entitled "A Survey of the Literature on Canada's Participation in the South African War" in the Canadian Historical Review, XVIII, 4 (1937) pp.419—427. He mentioned four newspapers as sources — all from Toronto and Montreal, thus confirming the Eastern historians' neglect of Western sources. The comprehensive Bibliographica Canada (Claude Thibault, ed) (Longmans, Toronto, 1973) pp.407—409, provides a list of publications. However, because of growing interest in the South African War it is already somewhat outdated.

public opinion, especially in newspapers, is still in its infancy. In 1962 Peter B. Waite pioneered the use of newspapers as sources in his *The Life and Times of Confederation 1864—1867: Politics, Newspapers and the Union of British North America*⁷ (University of Toronto Press). His discussion of the role of newspapers in the making of confederation, their validity as sources, their editors and connections, is a little masterpiece of required reading. Two years later, Robert I.D. Page, also concentrating on newspaper sources, investigated "The Impact of the Boer War on the Canadian General Election of 1900 in Ontario."⁸ In 1970 he drew attention to the fact that the history of the imperial movement (including public opinion) in Canada had suffered from "an overly heavy political emphasis." He called for an explanation of Canadian "imperialism" as a "religious, moral, economic and intellectual movement as background to its political implications." His *Imperialism and Canada, 1895—1903* (1972)⁹ is an attempt to broaden the basis of historical investigation into the subject. Page's criticism applies to first-rate historians such as Carl Bergher whose substantial book *The Sense of Power: Studies in the ideas of Canadian Imperialism 1867—1914* (Toronto) was published in 1970. The latter makes no use at all of newspaper sources. Nor do Bergher's critics, such as Douglas L. Cole.¹⁰ Because of the lack of crucial sources one has a curious situation resembling a duel in which neither of the protagonists are adequately armed.

The late marriage between public opinion and the South African War in Canadian historiography has its counterpart in Britain. Here Richard Price's *On Imperial War and the British Working Class: Working-Class Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War 1899—1902*¹¹ is a fine, pioneering work which hopefully heralds others. It breaks new ground and comes complete with appendices such as "Social Composition of Battersea", and "Social Composition of C[ity] I[mperial] V[olunteers]". There is a satisfying bibliography which reflects a heavy debt to newspapers and periodicals.¹²

The work of Price, Waite and Page, incorporating newspaper opinion, is essentially an attempt to probe sentiment in large, metropolitan centres of industrialized or industrializing nations. It is partly the outcome of a general interest in urban history. This new field has developed vigorously in America¹³ and has spread to Britain.¹⁴ There are encouraging signs that historians in South Africa are applying themselves to it.¹⁵ Waite and Page

7. Chapter I, *passim*.

8. Unpublished M.A. thesis (1964) Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

9. In the Canadian History Through the Press series (Toronto: Montreal).

10. "Canada's nationalistic imperialists," (Journal of Canadian Studies, vol. 4, 1970, pp.44—49).

11. London, 1972.

12. pp.252—256.

13. For one of the latest summaries of progress in this field see Stephan Thernstrom, "Reflections on the New Urban History," Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Granburd, (eds.) *Historical Studies Today*, New York, 1972, pp.320—336.

14. On 15th September 1972 the Royal Historical Society held a conference on urban history in Oxford. Some of the papers were published in the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, vol. 23.

15. For the South African scene see F.A. van Jaarsveld, "Stedelike Geskiedenis as Navorsingsveld vir die Suid-Afrikaanse Historikus" (Publikasiereeks: Die Geskiedenis van die Afrikaner aan die Rand R3, Johannesburg, 1973).

themselves reflect an Eastern Canadian concern for urban history.¹⁶ In the Canadian West, which comprises Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, the subject has taken root, especially in the latter province, at the University of Calgary.¹⁷



Yet, in spite of this enthusiasm for urban history which helps to direct the attention of the historian towards newspapers as public opinion, there is still a reluctance to grapple with them on a large scale. The reluctance is traditional, whether in Canada or elsewhere, and is not attributable to a paucity of newspapers — indeed, it is probably due to the formidable mass of material available. By the turn of our century the early areas of European settlement¹⁸ in Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand had given rise to flourishing urban centres such as Toronto, Montreal, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Sydney, Melbourne, Wellington and Auckland. These had less population and lacked the degree of industrialization and social complexity enjoyed by the Old World. Yet there are richer newspaper sources in most colonial countries than their relatively short histories would seem to admit. New Zealand, which may be reckoned as the most distant and slowest growing British colony of settlement, sported 193 newspapers in 1910, of which 67 were dailies.¹⁹ During the first half of the 19th Century there were thirty-five newspapers in the Cape Colony, Orange Free State and Natal. By 1900 the number had increased significantly, especially after 1886, the year of the foundation of Johannesburg.²⁰ Australia enjoyed a multiplicity of newspapers. In 1950 it was calculated that in little more than a hundred years, New South Wales alone had thrown up at least 800 newspapers, of which only 163 remained.²¹ In 1901 there were 116 daily newspapers in Canada, most of them published in the East. There were seven in Montreal, six in Toronto and five in Halifax. Smaller cities such as Kingston, Charlottetown, Peter-

16. Most of the urban historians (for obvious demographic reasons) are concentrated in Eastern Canada. They include John Taylor (Carleton University, Ottawa); J. Tulchinsky (Queen's University, Kingston); J.M.S. Careless (University of Toronto) and G. Stefler (University of Guelph, Ontario).
17. The History Department of the University of Calgary offers two courses: "Urban Society in Prairie Canada" and "Studies in Canadian Urban History." (The Gagan and Rasporich Canadian History through the Press, referred to above, originated at the University of Calgary.)
18. India is excluded from this discussion because few Europeans settled there. On 28 May, 1906 Lord Minto (Viceroy, 1905–1910) wrote to the Secretary of State: "The want of permanent residence among the British Population tells against it. It is a fleeting population always looking ultimately to home." (Quoted in John Riddy, "Some Official British Attitudes towards European Settlement and Colonization in India up to 1865" in Donovan Williams and E. Daniel Potts (eds.), *Essays in Indian History in honour of C.C. Davies*, (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1973), p.17.
19. A.H. McLintoch (ed.), *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* (I.R.E. Owen, Government Printer, Wellington, N.Z., 1966), II, 668.
20. *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*, (Nasou Ltd., Elsie River, Cape, 1973), VIII, 188.
21. *The Australian Encyclopaedia*, (Michigan State University Press, 1958), VI, 312.

borough and St. Catharines sported three each.²² Thus, colonial urban centres had fewer people than in the metropolitan centres of Britain, but they were relatively well served by newspapers per capita.

Equally, some of the more distant towns along the frontier of settlement in Canada had proportionately more newspapers per capita than, say, Toronto or London. Calgary, Alberta, founded in 1875, many thousands of miles from the more densely populated eastern seaboard of Canada, was, in 1899, "a handsome little city, of 4 500 people."²³ It had two newspapers: *The Daily Herald* (afterwards *The Calgary Herald*) and *The Alberta Tribune*. The days of ravaging inflation of the Twentieth Century, which were to force presses to amalgamate and put many newspapers out of business, were still far off.

The influence of the *Herald* and the *Tribune* in a small, isolated community (one of many on the prairies, equally well served with newspapers) is difficult to assess accurately, yet it must have been considerable. The *Herald* was Conservative, the *Tribune* Liberal; hence they had opposing views about federal policy in Ottawa. However, their sentiments about the South African War were virtually unanimous. A cursory survey of some attitudes reflected in the *Herald* may serve as an apéritif.

The editor of the *Herald* was an Englishman, John Young, who had settled in Calgary in the 1890's. Hence the predominant note of loyalty to Queen Victoria and the concept of empire is hardly surprising. On 7 March 1899 an editorial commented on a paper read by Sir Robert Griffith at a meeting of the Royal Colonial Institute, in which he pointed out that the Queen ruled over 13 million square miles of territory, inhabited by 420 million people, 50 million of whom were English-speaking. Accuracy of figures is irrelevant. What is important is that a handful of pioneers in the Canadian West, as inhabitants of the North West Territory (which in 1904 was to become Alberta) felt themselves to be part of a global confraternity ruled by a "regular Royal Queen" (in the words of *The Gondoliers*). Loyalty to Queen Victoria was a constant strain in both newspapers. To celebrate the seventy-ninth anniversary of her reign, the *Herald* sported an editorial headed "The Queen, God Bless Her!" She was "the foundress and protectress of her great Dominion," "the wide ruling Empress of a Greater Britain." The Queen's birthday was appropriately celebrated in Calgary. The festivities were "most successful", "a large concourse of people" enjoyed "a great day". "Taken all round", the *Herald* concluded, "it was perhaps the greatest day in Calgary's history."²⁴

In contrast to the image of a great brotherhood presided over by her gracious Majesty, was that of "The Awful Boer"²⁵ who denied true Englishmen rights in the Transvaal, thus forcing Britain to intervene.²⁶ The Boers were "rabid and uncultured burghers."²⁷ As relations with the Transvaal

22. Page; *Imperialism and Canada, 1895—1903*, p.15.

23. *Herald*, 16.8.1899.

24. *Herald* editorial, 25.5.1899.

25. *Herald* editorial, 26.5.1899.

26. *Herald* editorial, 18.10.1899.

27. *Ibid.*

deteriorated, the readers of the *Herald* could identify themselves with Joseph Chamberlain as he cranked up emotions against Kruger: "No British subject," the *Herald* reported the Prime Minister of Britain as saying, "can suffer injustice anywhere without awakening a responsive cord in our most distant colonies which stand shoulder to shoulder in maintaining the honor and interests of the empire."²⁸ When war broke out, there was enthusiastic support of the British cause. Early in October 1899 a meeting took place in the Alexander Hall where Major-General Hutton, from the East, explained a scheme for "the reorganisation of a force of mounted riflemen in the North West." Hutton had no commission to recruit for a Canadian contingent for the South African War, but the applause whenever the subject was mentioned was commentary enough on Western emotions.²⁹

To what extent the *Herald* and the *Tribune* helped to generate this enthusiasm in the little world of Don Camillo is problematical. One can reasonably assume that it must have contributed towards the response which was reflected in its pages. Certainly a stereotyped image of the Boer was initially created; its subsequent importance for Western Canada still awaits investigation. Equally, newspaper opinion in both East and West might shed light on the relationship between Canadian "imperialism" and Canadian nationalism, a problem which has been raised by Douglas L. Cole.³⁰

For these and other problems a great deal of basic research into newspaper opinion throughout Canada must still be done. The subject is still in its infancy, particularly in the Canadian West. Here the subject has been woefully neglected. Of late there have been probes,³¹ reflecting an increasing interest in other parts of Canada.³² Hopefully not too many years will pass before a picture emerges of what the early Western settlers read in their newspapers and how they responded. Piecing together the Canadian mosaic of public opinion will take longer. The finished product may contain some surprises. (The West, it seems, developed an admiration for Generals Louis Botha and J.H. (Koos) de la Rey.)³³ Soon, perhaps, an assault will develop on Australian, New Zealand, South African and British sources. Finally one may yet see that long overdue book by Percy Verance: *The South African War: Opinion in Britain and the Empire: a study in illusion and reality* (Pretoria, 1989).

28. *Herald*, 28.8.1899.

29. *Herald*, 9.10.1899.

30. "Canada's 'nationalistic imperialists'," (*Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 4, 1970, pp.44-49).

e.g. Stanley Gordon, a graduate student at the University of Calgary, is working on "Western Canada and the Boer War."

32. e.g. Desmond Morton, "Colonel Otter and the First Canadian Contingent in South Africa 1899-1900," in Michael Cross and Robert Bothwell (eds.), *Policy by other means: essays in honour of C.P. Stanley* (Toronto, 1972), pp.95-120.

33. I am grateful to Stanley Gordon for this information and to Professor Henry Klassen for his comments on my article.

Note: Since the acceptance of this article by *Historia* there has been another contribution to the historiography of newspapers and public opinion in Canada with the publication of Carman Miller's "English-Canadian Opposition to the South African War as seen through the Press," (*Canadian Historical Review*, vol. LV, no. 4, Dec. 1974, pp.422-438).