

New light on the camps

Ellen Ellis, *Teachers for South Africa. New Zealand Women at the South African War Concentration Camps*

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In June 1902, just as the South African War ended, 20 New Zealand women landed in Durban to teach in the concentration camps. Although they arrived so late, they were deployed to the camps, mainly in Durban. That is not the end of the story, however for, after the war, most went up to the Transvaal where they taught in a variety of town and country schools. This book explores a little-known aspect of the camps, for the staff have been largely ignored in the literature.

Although Milner's education policy was reviled for many years, more recently Paul Zietsman has described the camp schools as "beacons of light in the darkness". Eliza Riedi has placed the schools more firmly in their imperial context but Ellen Ellis has now given us a much more intimate glimpse of the lives of the teachers themselves. These

women were part of an imperial project, not only to introduce Boer children to British language and culture, but to draw the Empire closer by recruiting teachers from the other white colonies – forty each came from Australia and Canada as well. But the New Zealand group was exceptional. For one thing, these women were unique in coming from the only country that had given women the vote.

Application forms and medical examinations give us a surprising amount of detail about the women who volunteered for the camps. The size of Boer families, for instance, would have been no surprise for many of the British and colonials came from equally large families. The New Zealanders were all middle-class, mainly in their mid- to late-thirties, well-educated although only one had a university degree, and experienced. Lily Rees had a father in parliament and was able to consult the prime minister himself about the venture – she ignored his discouraging advice not to go. Several seem to have strong, even difficult temperaments – both Fanny Davis and Amy Arrow had been in trouble with the New Zealand educational authorities because of their ‘insolence’. There are some similarities with the British nurses who worked in the camps, most of whom were also in their thirties and were well-qualified, although they often had less experience than the New Zealand teachers.

What brought them to South Africa? Ellis suggests that New Zealanders participated vigorously in support for the war, sending a contingent of 6 500 men, while the women waved them off and fundraised with enthusiasm. This patriotism was not confined to whites. One of my favourite photographs is “The Maori Contingent”, a group of Maori women complete with slouch hats, bandoliers and water bottles. A handful of nurses also went from New Zealand but the teachers were part of a much more focused recruiting campaign. They were carefully selected, good health and musical ability being two of the most important criteria.

Ellen Ellis has traced each of these women from their origins and has been able to follow their careers after the war. Nan Parker chose to teach in a farm school, boarding with a Boer family. She wrote a poem which captured the New Zealand view of the South African veld, expecting a sunny sky but finding dust storms and wind. She never bonded with the Afrikaners and was forced to leave the district abruptly after a man was found murdered nearby and her hosts turned out to be the perpetrators. Ten of the women married in South Africa – perhaps one of their objectives in volunteering, for most were past marriageable age – and a number remained in the country. Allanetta McLeod married Thomas Thorne, son of Cape Town’s mayor, and lived in the Cape for the rest of her life, while her sister moved to Rhodesia. Others returned to Durban or remained in the Transvaal.

Although this is not an academic volume in that it has no footnotes, it is soundly researched and attractively presented. It is particularly refreshing to see new images of the camps for at least one of the teachers was a keen photographer. *Teachers for South Africa* is written with charm, although it is a little marred by some errors – van Riebeeck landing in 1662, for instance. Ellis is also a little confused about the naming of the Boer republics, particularly the double title of the South African Republic/Transvaal. This is

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carping, however, *Teachers for South Africa* gives us a valuable insight into an unfamiliar aspect of the camps.

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