

**Impressive, balanced account of the South African War****B. Nasson, *The War for South Africa: The Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902***

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The centenary of the South African War of 1899–1902 (still more widely known as the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa) stimulated a spate of publications amongst which Bill Nasson's general overview of that war (1999) was especially useful. Now, a decade later, he has revised and extensively re-written his account to include the recent literature and preoccupations of historians, and he also contributes a new, original title (of which Milner would have approved!) to the unresolved issue of what to call this war. To this new book he also brings a certain present-mindedness, finding "plenty of comparative historical resonance" not only with the American Civil War but also with more recent conflicts in the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan. Thomas Pakenham's best-selling account (1979) of this war now seems rather dated, in more ways than its title, although for detailed coverage of the military history it has yet to be surpassed. Nasson's new book carries its impressive scholarship lightly; it is up to date and engagingly written with his characteristic love of irony. It includes a select guide to further reading and an interesting collection of photographs. This is the paperback account to put into the hands of anyone interested in the war.

Nasson has trawled widely and imaginatively in the vast published literature – including newspapers – about this war, in both Afrikaans and English, and includes some fresh unpublished material, especially from participants, which he has unearthed in local and regimental archives in England. Yet this is by no means a British-led account of the war, as so many are; the focus of the book is consistently on the situation in South Africa and a very balanced treatment is given to both sides during the conflict. In tackling crisply and cogently "the historiographical Mt Everest" of the causes of the war, Nasson agrees with most others who have written recently on the subject that whilst Britain certainly provoked the war, it was not simply the result of the machinations of prominent individuals. As Tony Hopkins has nicely put it: "Although Milner helped to stir the pot, he did not supply the ingredients".<sup>11</sup> One of these was certainly the transformation of the Transvaal republic into the hub around which the future development of South Africa looked certain to revolve as a result of the dramatic development of the goldmining industry after 1886. The British did not go to war *for* gold but the war was certainly *about* gold's overarching effects. Nasson writes:

Britain's end was not the gold supply as such, but the imposition of its political will over the Transvaal, and affirming British supremacy for the laying down of a loyalist South Africa. It was not pushed by economic determinism but by the decisive need to affirm imperial political supremacy (pp 57–58)

By 1899 this required what today we would call a "regime change" in Kruger's Transvaal republic.

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11. P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2000*, second edition (Longman, London, 2002), p 326.

A certain weariness with the actual fighting is detectable in some of the recent writing about this war, but Bill Nasson knows his military onions and gives clear and succinct coverage not only to the main military deployments, statistics, engagements, reverses and advances of this war but also to the “scatter of skirmishes” which continued throughout the “hide and seek” warfare which continued after Lord Roberts had “annexed a country without conquering it” in 1900. In an account which has some fresh and incisive things to say about the Boer war effort, the work of Taffy Shearing and Rodney Constantine on the descent into banditry of increasingly isolated and fragmented commando units in the eastern Cape during the later stages of the war, and the open hostility towards them of the Cape Afrikaner farmers on whom they preyed, might have merited some coverage. So too Maritz’s attack on Leliefontein; and the account given of Smuts’s expedition to O’kiep and Reitz’s shocked encounter with the remnants of Botha’s “starving, ragged men” in the eastern Transvaal. Fransjohan Pretorius’s *Life on Commando during the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* (1999) remains the fullest account of its subject. Another invaluable work is Albert Grundlingh’s pioneering study of Boer collaborators (1979) that is now available in English translation (2006) thanks to the excellent Protea Book House, which has done so much to make work in Afrikaans available to a wider readership.

Nasson gives again a very balanced treatment of the role of blacks on both sides during the war though little attention is given to their local conflicts, some of them with each other as revealed by Bernard Mbenga (Kgatla), Manelisi Genge (Swazi) and Brian Willan (Barolong). As Nasson has written elsewhere, out of the war between Britain and the two Boer republics there developed “a desperate, undeclared civil war between rural whites and rural blacks”.<sup>12</sup> Between 1899 and 1902, war went on at many different levels in South Africa and there were battlefields apart from those which have so preoccupied military historians. Many Africans, especially within and on the borders of the republics – such as the Kgatla, Pedi, Venda, Swazi and Zulu – were fighting their own wars, over massive expropriations of land and cattle by Boer farmers within living memory. Many of these local conflicts were not created by the arrival of the British army in South Africa. They were there already, home-grown and internally-generated out of the recent South African past. The outbreak of war created a situation in which some of the conflicts endemic within South Africa flared into open warfare and became part of the Boer-British struggle. This aspect of the war is still neglected in a historiography which has always found it easier to settle for a nationalist narrative of “victimhood” and “shared suffering” at the hands of British imperialists.

Empire loyalty also remains an embarrassing and neglected aspect of this war today as a new exercise in nation-building gets underway in South Africa. Many Cape Afrikaners in the 1890s found no conflict between their Afrikaner identity and their loyalty to the British Crown and repeated attempts to mobilise them into the Afrikaner republican cause during this war largely failed. And, as Nasson himself and others have shown, most of the African population looked to a British victory to improve their lot. Many, like Abraham Esau, lost their lives because of their imperial loyalty. The British Empire being no more, the whole larger imperial context of this war is tending to be increasingly marginalised. This war was a formative event in the history of South Africa and of the Afrikaner people but it does not *only* belong there. As recent publications have demonstrated, it also has its place in the history of Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the British Empire/Commonwealth, the history of European imperialism, the

12. B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899–1902* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), p 120.

history of warfare and the history of Africa – to name but a few. These larger aspects of the war are not brought out by Nasson who rather chooses to devote the thematic last three chapters of his book to the costs and significance of this war (for Britain and South Africa); to British and Boer ideas about and attitudes towards each other; and to the current preoccupation of historians with “memory” (Liz Stanley calls it “post/memory” to distinguish it from the actual memory of those who experienced the war) and commemoration of this war, again mainly in South Africa.

Albert Grundlingh, Liz Stanley and Helen Dampier have all recently contributed fresh ideas and analyses to this “after-life” of the war and how it has been remembered and commemorated. The focus of Stanley and Dampier has been on its most controversial aspect: the civilian concentration camps established by the British military for Boers and blacks as part of an anti-guerrilla strategy involving a “scorched earth” policy initiated by Roberts but extended and intensified by Kitchener during 1901. During a century of writing about these camps, the focus has been understandably but almost exclusively on the deaths in these camps (three quarters of them were of children under 16 years and measles epidemics were the greatest killer) with the same suspect statistics and carefully selected photographs endlessly recycled. What has been strikingly lacking from historians has been fresh, dispassionate, thorough and empirical investigation into what actually happened in these camps, utilising the wide-ranging evidence about them in British and South African archives. Now, at last, this has been done by Elizabeth van Heyningen, who has not only presented her very revisionist findings in a string of recent articles and a forthcoming book full of new evidence and fresh analysis, but has also established a database which will be of immense assistance to future study of this fraught and much mythologised subject (<http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/mss/bccd/index.php>).

In his new book, Nasson summarises the basic facts about the camps before focusing on “the key question ... [which] is not that of how horrendous the camps were, but, rather, of whether they were effective in bringing on Boer surrender” (p 245). In “military terms”, he states, they may have been a mistake, lengthening rather than shortening the war by freeing commandos “from assuming responsibility for their families”, and thereby extending their capacity to resist. “In the longer run, though, there can be little doubt that civilian internment was a considerable contributory factor to the ending of armed resistance” (pp 246–247). Utilising Smuts’s address to his Boer comrades at the Vereeniging peace negotiations, Nasson argues persuasively that the devastating impact of the high Boer civilian mortality in the camps “seemed to be threatening the very reproductive future of the Boer people ... Developing a momentum of its own, demographic awareness became one of the more compelling restraints against continuing the war” (p 247). He also concludes that “African resistance and collaboration with the imperial occupation certainly played its part in pushing the Boers into surrender” (p 249). Nasson admits to finding the details of the Vereeniging peace negotiations “too tedious to document” (p 255) but the terms eventually agreed were, by the standards of the day, very magnanimous.

Whilst acknowledging that part of the significance of this war is that it made possible the post-war reconstruction and unification of South Africa, Nasson gives this short shrift. Milner’s achievement here has tended to be underrated. Not only did his administration lay the foundations of the modern South African state, it also proved far more effective than Kruger’s had been at winning not only the co-operation of the gold-mining industry, but far larger contributions from it to the state’s revenue and

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development – a policy continued by Botha and Smuts. In abandoning the British expectation of a war indemnity and instead extracting many millions from Britain for the post-war reconstruction of South Africa, Milner – a self-declared imperialist – emerges as a proconsul more preoccupied with getting the British government to subsidise rather than exploit its new Crown colonies in South Africa.

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