
Bullet in the Heart: Four brothers ride to war (1899-1902)

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Introduction

The title of the book is quite intriguing and thought provoking. The reader is most likely to anticipate emotive accounts of individuals who traversed tumultuous phases in recorded history. When the word “war” springs to mind, one cannot help but think of the traumatic experiences of the victims, loss of human lives, destruction of infrastructure, and so forth. This book is no exception. The introduction provides a comprehensive summary of various episodes of the book. It details how the four Boer brothers navigated the complexities of the war to defend their sovereign country, particularly the Free State, against the British invasion. Three of them kept diaries. The daily entries disclosed their remarkable voices within the context of the circumstances that had overtaken them. The gradual discovery of these fraternal diaries and other war documents helped tap into their warfare experiences. These brothers from the eastern Free State were Michael, Chris, Pieter, and Lodewyk Muller. They all had the zest to capture every moment of the war and their personal experiences. During the Magersfontein battle in December 1899, Chris scrawled notes in the evening after the battle. At Colesberg, the diatribe written by Michael reflected anger, insults, and the ill-treatment he suffered at Surrender Hill. Despite their brave fighting and determination, they could not resist capture as prisoners of war. One of them did not survive.

Chris was a natural soldier, confident and brave. He rose rapidly through the ranks, unlike Michael whose military weaknesses played out during the war. He became the

captain and then commandant of the Ladybrand commando. Pieter did not keep a diary. His brothers wrote about him. According to their recollections, he was a sturdy and reliable man. Lodewyk, who was a cheerful person, rode off to the war in high spirits. He thought this would be a good adventure. He woke up to a sad reality when he lost his horse and was eventually captured. The diaries kept by the Muller brothers provided an unabridged version of their lived experiences. In that sense, they come across as very reliable sources of information. The author argues that diaries differ fundamentally from formal histories. Their authenticity is implicit for they are writing without the benefit of hindsight. There is no foreknowledge of the outcome. All that exists is the present, and that is all they record. When captured in 1900, the Muller brothers continued to diarise their daily encounters. Chris left eight surviving diaries from his experiences of the war until its end in 1902. As he completed each diary, he would send it to his parents for safekeeping. However, one of his diaries written in mid-1900 was lost, perhaps mislaid in the post, although the postal services functioned with impressive efficiency. A memoir of Andries Meyer who was Chris's close friend, helped complete his record. Colleen Muller Loesch, the granddaughter of Chris Muller, inherited all his war material. The boxes of mementos included souvenirs, letters, and photographs from Chris's POW days in Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka). He even kept the bandana flecked with blood that he used to bind up his wounded leg in 1900. The granddaughter allowed the author to use all eight of the diaries, covering the full two-and-half years of his warfare experiences. The famous victory of the Boers at the Battle of Magersfontein in December 1899 also featured prominently in the diaries. The pages of Lodewyk's single diary, a sturdy notebook, were incomplete from the beginning of his involvement in the war in January 1900 until his tragic death in Green Point Camp in mid-1900. During his active service, his writings were legible. However, after his capture his handwriting becomes quite uneven and difficult to read. When the war ended in 1902, Chris's friend Dawid Kriel, who had been with him on commando, wrote down the details of his death and funeral and returned the diary to his parents.

Michael began his diary at the end of July 1900. When he was captured, he kept a complete record of his captivity until he was shipped off as POW to Bermuda nearly a year later from Cape Town. He recorded the date and day of the week, the weather, the view, anything that struck him as important as well as his deepest feelings. It is inconceivable for Michael to have been able to capture so much, for his cloth-covered diary is slim, smaller than his hand. It measured at 13,5x8 cm. It contains more than a hundred pages of writing in his skilled handwriting. Michael began to use a few tiny sheets of almost transparent paper, gleaned from somewhere, after his notebook was full. One needs a magnifying glass

to read it. Some words are so close to the eroded edges of the pages, they can no longer be easily deciphered. Another discovered treasure was a thin journal of Michael's wife, Nelie. She had written it many years after the war. Although much of it is about domestic matters, there are pages about her experiences of the war. It gave her a voice in the war. Here the author illustrates the value and pivotal role of primary sources in the writing of history. Interacting with primary evidence such as letters and diaries enables the writer to produce authentic and original versions of histories.

Reasons for writing the book

The author's reasons for writing this book are two-fold, one quite grand and the other practical. The grander reason came from Archbishop Desmond Tutu's words: "Unless we understand each other's stories, we will never understand each other". His wise words have enabled this book to provide new insights into an old war that has had devastating consequences for many people. One interesting observation shared by the author is that English books written in the decades after the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 reflect the Anglophile position, partly because the British Empire eventually won the war. English historians were either unable to read the language of the Boers or were reluctant to access their stories, hence the one-sided view of the Boers. The British did not understand the Boer culture. Their brilliant military tactics were not recognized. The British newspapers spread propaganda that ridiculed the Boer forces.

The second reason was the author's husband, Ampie, Professor Adriaan Diederichs Muller, who is the grandson of Michael Muller. Soon after they met in Cape Town, 1997, he showed the author the diary of his grandfather. Beverley Roos-Muller decided to connect the war stories shared by the Muller brothers to greater histories beyond their individual lived experiences. She came from an Irish family and could hardly speak a word of Afrikaans. The words of an Irish philosopher Richard Kearney, 'hospitality of narratives', implying different and informed perspectives of shared events are apt in this case. Beverley became interested in the Boer culture, language, and lived experiences of the Anglo-Boer war because of her marriage. The diaries of the Muller brothers offer incisive accounts of the Anglo-Boer war and illustrate the peculiarities of their behaviour patterns amid the atrocities they endured. In the middle of the most chaotic and life-threatening moments of their lives, they could keep their heads for long enough to record their daily experiences, thoughts, and emotions. The writer contends that diaries can be both fascinating and boring. Battles are full of excitement and vigour, but war is a long affair. The endless days of

waiting for the next thing to happen on the battlefield, followed by the brothers' drawn-out months as POWs in South Africa and then in exile, were static by definition. Many entries are as dull as "Today is raining" or "Nothing happened". Unpacking them demanded much dexterity to penetrate the core of the brothers' stories, hopes, dreams, loves, challenges, courage, and grief.

Structure

The book is well structured. The opening provides a solid background that gives the reader a proper perspective. The pictures, explanatory note, and the map clearly outline the geographical location of the places mentioned in the book and set the scene for subsequent engagement with various episodes thereof. The titles of each chapter tie in with the theatre of warfare. They speak to the actual course of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. The use of pictures in the chapters help complement the entire narrative, thus making it more fascinating. The writer was able to ascertain the sequence and chronology of events in the book. The kind of stories that the reader navigates in the book evoke emotions. The author succeeded in paying attention to detail in order to ensure a comprehensive coverage of the war. The book exhibits some elements of originality because of its reliance on diaries. In the words of Albert Grundlingh, "the book is an extraordinary tale, elegantly and enthrallingly presented". Contrary to conventional approaches, acknowledgements and the author's note are right at the end of the book.

Conclusion

The book comes across as a precious and rare publication, featuring first-hand accounts of the victims of war. Max Du Preez maintains that it provides valuable insights into tumultuous times that helped shape South Africa. Beverley Roos-Muller's book is a quite interesting read that compensates for the existing gaps in the South African historiography caused by the negation of some crucial historical narratives.