A War of White Savages, and Other Stories: Introduction

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Abstract
In 1999/2000, looking back from our vantage point at this century's turn, the Second Anglo-Boer or 'Great' South African War, October 1899-May 1902, seems (even more starkly than it perhaps did before) to have laid long shadows across southern African political and cultural history of the last 100 years. These are shadows which, even if to a lesser degree, fall across twentieth-century world history and historical imaginations also. Dismissed in the past as one of Britain's many forgotten imperial wars - though a particularly costly and hard-won one - the Boer War, and the blow it represented to imperial morale, did have profound implications for colonial rule elsewhere in the British Empire, as well as for anti-imperial and nationalist activism. And it was during 1899-1902 that 'South Africa' first became a humanitarian and human rights issue of international significance, as Barbara Harlow evocatively outlines below.

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African orderlies in the Boer War, photographed by Major Walker Tunbridge, c. 1900 (see p. 74)
In 1999/2000, looking back from our vantage point at this century’s turn, the Second Anglo-Boer or ‘Great’ South African War, October 1899-May 1902, seems (even more starkly than it perhaps did before) to have laid long shadows across southern African political and cultural history of the last 100 years. These are shadows which, even if to a lesser degree, fall across twentieth-century world history and historical imaginations also. Dismissed in the past as one of Britain’s many forgotten imperial wars – though a particularly costly and hard-won one – the Boer War, and the blow it represented to imperial morale, did have profound implications for colonial rule elsewhere in the British Empire, as well as for anti-imperial and nationalist activism. And it was during 1899-1902 that ‘South Africa’ first became a humanitarian and human rights issue of international significance, as Barbara Harlow evocatively outlines below.

Distinguished by long-range weaponry, barbed-wire entrenchments, air-borne reconnaissance, extensive photographic documentation, concentration camp installations, high civilian mortality rates, and guerrilla tactics – the Boer War, though a ‘little war’, has widely been seen as the first ‘modern’ war. It was a precursor to 1914-1918 and its shattered waste lands, and a preparation for the twentieth century’s many global engagements – as James Joyce (discussed here by Richard Brown) was to observe. Moreover, appropriately though chillingly, this apparently doom-filled conflict fell at the very cusp of the new modern age.1 As for the ‘fervourless’ Thomas Hardy pondering his ‘blast-beruffled’ ‘Darkling Thrush’ in December 1900, the fin-de-siècle hostilities, which he opposed, harboured grave portents of global devastation despite the promise that extensive imperialism and mass industrialization had once seemed to hold.2

Within southern Africa, as any number of the contributors to this special issue, South African War?, make us aware, the Boer War represented a traumatic and long-to-be-remembered phase in the clash between a number of the sub-continent’s rival and emergent nationalisms: British designs upon a united English-speaking South Africa and its wealth; Afrikaner defensiveness concerning their land, language and customs, including of course the oppression of Africans; and the increasingly more determined moves to self-determination of African people which became prominent in the years following the war, in part as a consequence of the exclusion of African rights from the post-1902 processes of nation-building.
Moreover, as Judith Brown points out in her article, Mohandas Gandhi’s ambulance work during the war in Natal in 1899-1900 would be crucial for the evolution of his ideas of passive resistance, and of his strategy of appealing to ideals of ‘British citizenship’ and duty to achieve Indian self-rule. Fascinatingly, too, as the most serious crisis in British imperial authority in a century, the conflict provided the site and occasion for potential intersections between anti-colonial nationalisms, such as we see for example in the Irish nationalist support extended to the Boers in the first year of the war.

As we are now in a position to see more clearly, not only militarily, therefore, but in terms of the making and breaking of political identities and national perceptions, the Boer War would prove formative and form-giving across the twentieth century. It brought, as Andries Oliphant’s Plaatje perceives, a new age, that ‘will change things forever’. In addition, the war made and consolidated key nationalist, imperial and other political careers which were to mark the century. Within, and on the edges of, the arena of the conflict, Emily Hobhouse and Olive Schreiner, amongst others, were to clarify issues of women’s rights in criticizing imperial injustices. Rudyard Kipling, hosted by one of the architects of 1890s Anglo-Boer tensions, Cecil John Rhodes, would not only lambaste the imperial neglect that the war to him exemplified, but worked briefly as a war correspondent in the Free State, reliving the embattled excitements of his days in the Punjab. It was also during the Boer War that Winston Churchill, working like Kipling as a journalist, would begin to hone his image as a ‘never-say-die’ Englishman in the narrative of his escape from Boer prison. Other prominent commentators on the war, such as Michael Davitt, Arthur Conan Doyle, and the campaigner W.T. Stead, from their different political vantage points, would see the contest, as did Kipling and Churchill, as teaching stern military, political and humanitarian lessons for the future, and would build public platforms on the basis of this advocacy. Their debates, carried out in public and private meetings, and across the pages of the expanding popular press and the proliferating reviews of the day, produced a voluminous archive of discussion on the war and its many challenging issues – imperial loyalty, monopoly capitalism, the ‘native question’, conscription and national preparedness, women’s and human rights.

It was famously a war that involved non-South African colonials as deeply as it did metropolitans – and was in this sense close to being a ‘world’ war. Along with his home-bound colleague Henry Lawson, and others, ‘Banjo’ Paterson, the Australian popular poet and yet another war correspondent, represented his country’s involvement in the conflict as a further forging of Australian mateship. Within a different nationalist camp, John MacBride, later ‘vainglorious’ hero of 1916 in Ireland, developed his military reputation fighting not many miles away from, but on the opposite side of, the stretcher-bearing Gandhi and his team at
Ladysmith – MacBride’s rationale being that to support the Boers was to strike against the Empire, Ireland’s foe. Further to the north, Robert Baden-Powell, dedicated reader of *Kim*, invented canny and unscrupulous stratagems for white survival under siege in Mafeking, and later, arguably, filtered this survival ethos into the ethics of the world-wide Boy Scout Movement. And Solomon T. Plaatje, co-father-to-be of the African National Congress, worked as a translator, scribe and spy on Baden-Powell’s payroll, surveying these stratagems from the inside and storing them up for future meditation. These and other prominent personalities move into and out of the essays collected here, demonstrating very clearly the extent to which the ‘ragtag’, ‘shadow-changing’ and heterogeneous cast of this ‘unremembered war’, to quote Sheila Roberts, was also remarkably cosmopolitan and internationally connected.

As no doubt for other children growing up white in the apartheid South Africa of the 1960s, my own school playground was, over half a century on, still imprinted with the after-shocks of the conflict, being regularly the site of an always eventually violent game called ‘Boer War’. This game, which was played with far more relish even than ‘Cowboys and Indians’, uniformly set ‘English’ children, who by and large had shoes to wear, against Afrikaner children who tended to go barefoot. As I remember, the barefoot ‘Boers’ generally had the upperhand: they ‘always play dirty’, it was whispered. And, indeed, not far from our school battlefields lay real-life Boer War sites where it was possible to visit and to stand imagining how these ruthless white natives, the Boers, had brutally ambushed brave Tommies, firing at them from *kranses* that they alone had had the skills to reconnoitre and invest. Although us immigrant and settler children tended to side with ‘the Inglush’ when playing out the war, standing on those baking, wind-whipped stretches of veld I found it difficult not to feel a sneaking identification with the Boers. Though ridiculed as indolent primitives and ‘unlettered savages’ for over a century in the British press and travel writing, Boer men and women had managed through their local knowledge and expertise with firearms to hold off the massed power of the British imperium in these same apparently non-descript fields.

The division of ‘Boer’ and ‘English’, which was evidently based on class as well as culture and a long-remembered history, ran through the white political party structures, rhetoric, and voting patterns, both of the 1960s, and across the century, influencing economic policies and most social arrangements. Yet, in so far as the 1899-1902 conflict played havoc with the lives of tens of thousands of African and non-African civilians, its repercussions also reached much further than the laagers and enclaves of white society. Was the South African War then a ‘white man’s war’ only? Is the war indeed correctly named a ‘South African War’?

In recent commemorative discussion of the war events, for example during a large international conference, ‘Rethinking the South African War’, held in Pretoria in 1998, questions such as these have become almost
as customary as the phrases themselves. It is pointed out, for example, that the war was a conflict between white colonialist war-lords, at the beginning of which it was agreed that blacks remain unarmed (for reasons of preserving racial ‘dignity’). Not having involved the majority of South Africans, in what sense then could the war merit the title ‘South African’? Was it not yet another of the many bloody struggles over land which have repeatedly taken place on the subcontinent – as Liz Gunner’s story, for example, strikingly emblematizes. Furthermore, could it not be argued that the ‘South African War’, as such, had begun with the first European incursions at the Cape, and ended with the democratic elections in 1994?

And as far as commemorating the 1899-1902 centenary was concerned, many South Africans had understandably become wary of war commemorations used as bases for identity, especially considering the egregious consequences of Afrikaner nationalist myths of the Boer as colonial victim (outlined here by Marita Wenzel).

Yet, even granting these persuasive arguments, the stark figures testifying to the widespread involvement, both active and passive, of South Africans of all races in the ‘Anglo-Boer’ War, do insist upon attention. First there were the approximately 26,000 ‘irreconcilable’ Boer women and children who died in British concentration camps, whose suffering has been relatively well documented – by Emily Hobhouse, amongst others. But in addition there was also the huge number of black people interned as victims of the war, often as servants to the Boers, whose suffering was till relatively recently obliterated from official histories. Africans also participated actively in a variety of capacities, and on both sides of the conflict. In 1899, for example, 12,000 black agterryers or auxiliaries (grooms, cooks, and other servants), allegedly unarmed, rode away to war with the Boers, while, for their part, the British are on record for having had about 14,000 black transport riders in their military employ. But these figures do not even begin to speak of the many scouts, spies and cattle-rustlers, trackers and blockhouse guards, upon whom supply lines and military intelligence on both sides rested – a reliance that Andries Oliphant’s story, prizing open the interstices of Sol Plaatje’s Mafeking Diary, vividly dramatizes. Some historians in fact put the number of Africans in British military employ at as high as 100,000. But, then again, these figures also do not take account of the crowds of people displaced by the war, such as, most famously, the 7,000 Zulu workers on the Johannesburg Reef, who were left to walk home, under the guidance of the Natal Native Agent, John Sidney Marwick, once war was declared.

It would be worth revisiting the South African War from our centennial, and millennial, perspective, if only to reread and re-evaluate the participation of this vast mass of (alleged) bit-part actors, both assistants and victims, consorts and collaborators; to see how and to what extent their involvement and legacy changes the accepted picture of the war. Because from their point of view the Boer War did indeed resonate across
the length and breadth of what is now the South African nation. With an eye to their significance, it is then immediately noteworthy that the contributions to this collection – fictional, non-fictional, and poetic – are almost without exception preoccupied with the less-than-official, sidelined or subordinated participants in the war, with its untold, buried, and neglected stories. Here we are faced with messy history, the 'war without glamour', to adapt Emily Hobhouse's phrase, such as it was mostly experienced by marginal players and 'others': non-white women and men, and white women.

The Boer War was a modern war not only technologically, as already described, but in going a considerable distance towards establishing the right of (white) women to participate in military conflict in an auxiliary capacity, in particular as nurses, as well as establishing their right to speak out more generally concerning women’s war-time roles and responsibilities. However, it was due to its massive impact on civilians, that the Boer War most urgently raised debates concerning gender identity, sexual conduct, and women’s rights in war, in particular war under colonialism. As a conflict that was in certain respects perpetrated upon women, the Boer War also became the occasion of unprecedented protest from women. In Miriam Cooke’s terms, as cited by Sylvia Vietzen, this war disrupted the traditional War Story by radically confusing war and home fronts.

Sexual, national, and race anxieties, and their implications for early feminism, are at the centre of Carolyn Burdett’s searching discussion of Olive Schreiner’s *Trooper Peter of Mashonaland* (1897), an ‘allegory story’ which was in many ways, as Burdett says, a ‘literary preface’ to the war and its abuses. The headteacher Mary Moore presented by Sylvia Vietzen, too, was concerned with colonial women’s affiliations and duties in war-torn Natal, and, though in her case ideas of civilization and military honour were rather differently inflected from those of Schreiner, she shared with her a profound feeling of frustration at not being able to act more decisively as part of the war effort.

As is standard in most wars, including the frontier skirmishes Malvern van Wyk Smith outlines as the backdrop to nineteenth-century Boer identity, ideas of national and military honour rest four-square on images of femininity, in particular images of sexual purity and resilient motherhood, as well as on ideals of manliness such as concerned not only Conan Doyle or W.T. Stead, but M.K. Gandhi. In South Africa in 1900, however, these conventional symbolisms were put under severe pressure by several factors – first that women were bearing the brunt of the war (in fact some Boer women were serving alongside their husbands in the trenches), but also that many of these women were African (a fact that was perhaps obliquely though unselfconsciously acknowledged in the exoticized images brought home by Australian soldiers, which David Dorward looks at in his essay). The situation was then even further complicated when self-aware and outspoken women like Olive Schreiner,
Emily Hobhouse and (to an extent) Millicent Fawcett, became publicly involved in protesting against the abuses of the war, and against colonial injustices more generally.

However, whereas Emily Hobhouse tended to concern herself exclusively with the plight of white women, Olive Schreiner's intervention was perhaps even more remarkable for its time, in that she began, though implicitly, to open out some of the contradictions in white women's self-determination, and to do so in ways that intriguingly anticipated 1980s issues in 'Third World' feminism. In Trooper Peter, and elsewhere, she pointed out that European women's concerns with their rights and sexuality, led to an obligation to recognize also the humanity, and therefore the colonial violation of, non-white people, and especially the suffering of women. Splits in identity and identification generated under empire are also evident in Mary Moore's writing, though her loyalty is very differently situated. As self-assertion for Moore was always linked to imperial duty, her view of otherness represents an interesting layering, based on a rationale of relative loyalty, in which the 'boers', who of course disputed British supremacy, were ranked lower than the seemingly more tractable blacks.

Sheila Roberts's Researcher in 'My Danie Theron' speculates that the time may come when the Boer War is remembered most vividly in certain circles for the nightmares and fantasy figures which it spawned. And, as James Joyce was aware, perhaps one of the most memorable and well-rehearsed texts to come out of the war, as well as the song 'Dollie Gray', was for many years Kipling's subscription poem, 'The Absent-Minded Beggar', with its controversial insinuations concerning the neglect of its troops by Britain. War finds in mythic and literary symbols the forms through which to recognize itself. So there is probably no accident in the fact that a number of this issue's contributions are interested in retellings, 'ordinary' stories, and obscured voices, the dark and padlocked rooms of history, as Steven Matthews puts it. Stephen Gray's 'Dead Man's Disclosure' and Jon Stallworthy's 'A Round', for example, excavate the ground of reimagined history, and the imaginary history of objects, as well as the blurry edges of recorded history itself. In the context of occluded and hidden legacies, it also can't but be significant that two of the fictionalized 'small histories', Roberts's and Oliphant's, feature charismatic Boer War spies. Theron and Plaatje's weaving in the no-man's land between the opposing sides, is richly emblematic of much of the intermingled 'normal' activity of daily African life that ran on throughout the war, and with which the early Afrikaners, as van Wyk Smith shows, had long involved themselves.

Across the twentieth century, Boer War history was routinely used as a treasure chest of cultural and ideological totems with which to shore up apartheid xenophobia. If the effect of a collection such as this is to displace those unfortunate symbols in any way at all, it will have made some
contribution to current efforts to rework and restyle the nation’s history. This is a time when South Africans are much concerned with the work of remembering and reconciliation, and the possibilities of catharsis. In this context, it may be that the revisiting of this South African War will become an important test-case for how to reapproach a divisive, over-mythologized, and yet still painful history.

I owe many people thanks for having helped in different ways to make this Boer War issue possible. Particular thanks are due to Anna Rutherford and to Shirley Chew: to both, for having gratified my insatiable fascination with the Anglo-Boer War, and to each respectively, for having granted, and suggested to me, the opportunity represented by this special issue. I am also immensely grateful to the indefatigable Glenda Pattenden, and to Susan Burns, for having immeasurably smoothed my path as editor. Derek Attridge too gave valuable pointers in finding my way. In South Africa, I could not have done without the early advice of Greg Cuthbertson at UNISA, the editor of what promises to be an extremely exciting collection of historical essays about the war, as well as John Vinsen, who became an infinitely generous correspondent regarding the ‘underbelly’ of the war. To the helpful and insightful guides who took me round some of the Natal battlefields, especially Gilbert Torlage, and to the more literary guides, David Attwell, Bill Bizley, Margaret Daymond, Johan van Wyk, also many thanks. I am very grateful to the Centre for Creative Arts at the University of Natal, Durban, in particular to Ad Donker, Michael Chapman, and Claire Hull, for having put me up for two months in 1998 to enable me to carry out background research on the war.

As for my Natal ‘family’, the Phipsons, and especially Carol, even to begin to suggest what I owe them would be impossible. Many, many thanks, too, to Steven and to Thomas, in particular for their incredible patience in playing with plastic horses for hours on a street bench in Ladysmith, in a snow-bearing wind, during a Boer War tour.

But perhaps most of all I would like to thank the contributors to this Kunapipi special issue, South African War? Some of the contributors I knew beforehand, and they obligingly agreed to write specially for the issue. Others I met through the eye-opening discussions that have taken place across the past year or so about new research on the war, discussions that they then committed to paper; yet others, hearing of the issue through the Internet or by word-of-mouth, wrote to ask whether they might express their own particular fascination for the war by contributing. On the evidence of our various interactions it would seem that the Boer War is indeed in its only partially ‘unremembered’ way re-entering a zeitgeist. That this issue is the wide-ranging and varied collection of writings that it is, is due to them, and something to serendipity: thank you so much.
NOTES


4. Amongst others, 1999 commemorative conferences were held in Potchefstroom, South Africa, in April, and in Leeds, UK, in October.

5. Is it worth noting in this context that the majority of the contributors to this special issue on the war are white, while around half of them are South African, or South African-born?

6. Helen Bradford, 'Gentlemen and Boers: Afrikaner nationalism, gender and colonial warfare in the South African War', UNISA Conference tabled paper (Pretoria: UNISA, 1998; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), gives a stirring account of the fierce resistance, far fiercer in some cases than that of their men, put up by Boer women, especially during the guerrilla phase of the war, and of how this contribution changes perceptions of the war as a white man's battle. For a detailed and often-cited account of the internment camps, see also S.B. Spies, *Methods of Barbarism?* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1977).

7. The most extensive study of the part played by black South Africans in the war, remains Peter Warwick, *Black People and the South African War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). However, as Helen Bradford points out, Warwick draws on only a handful of Afrikaans/Dutch sources.


11. See, for example, Shula Marks, *Divided Sisterhood: Class, Race and Gender in the Nursing Profession in South Africa* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994).

Indian lookout, probably 'Mr Singh', at the siege of Ladysmith, 1899