

Book Reviews

Boekresensies

A welcome and reliable companion for students and scholars

Fransjohan Pretorius, *The A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War*

Scarecrow Press, Lanham, Maryland, 2009

569 pp

ISBN 978-0-8108-7629-3

US\$29.95/€30.56

Scarecrow Press are to be congratulated for bringing out so quickly an affordable paperback edition of this volume, which will surely become a standard work of reference, a welcome and reliable companion for scholars and students alike who are working on the Anglo-Boer War. The book is a superb piece of research, scholarship, and clearly the product of many years of careful labour, reflection, and precise exposition. Embellished with maps and a chronology, it has a useful introduction and overview of the origins and course of the war, and contains over 600 cross-referenced entries, covering nearly every conceivable facet of significance in the war. The bibliography, beginning with a scholarly six-page review essay, spans 58 pages and must be the most up-to-date bibliographic source available.

The scope of the book extends far beyond the principal protagonists; their political and military leaders (all described with shrewd and perceptive commentary); their weapons; organisations; battles (again reviewed in a clear, succinct and comprehensible manner); and their tactics. By beginning with a reference to the poem, *The Absent-Minded Beggar*, Pretorius reminds his readers of the immense emotions aroused by the war in Britain, then at the zenith of its empire, and the popular support for the British soldiers and their families as reflected in the £340 000 raised by the poem. He reminds us, too, of the many distinctive features of this war: armoured trains, whose use evolved throughout the conflict and reflected a war dominated by the use of the railway; blockhouses, 50 of which remain as a legacy of “one of the most remarkable fortification-building projects in world military history” (p 47); the role of black people, including the Kgatla who fought with the British; the commando system that produced a Boer force that was a “classic example of a citizen army” (p 97); the role of women on both sides; and the contributions of Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and irregular forces in support of the imperial war effort. Mobility was crucial on the veld, hence the importance of horses on both sides, with Pretorius quoting General Koos de la Rey that “Without the horse, the Boer is a useless fighter” (p 189). Of importance, too, were the adoption of drab field uniforms and the challenges that had to be overcome in sustaining the flow of supplies and providing medical support across a vast and difficult terrain. Finally, Pretorius reflects upon the calculations among the 60 Boer delegates at Vereeniging that led to the peace settlement, and the many administrative problems that bedevilled the post-war processes of repatriation and compensation.

What makes the book even more interesting is that it exhibits the diverse interests and encyclopaedic knowledge of the author. There are fascinating sections on the art, poetry and photography of the war; the systems of communication employed on both sides; the treatment of prisoners of war; the three naval skirmishes; and the demands upon a postal service in Cape Town that had to handle the weekly arrival of 190 000 letters, 300 000 newspapers and packets and 8 400 parcels. In his excellent coverage of the three sieges, Pretorius recalls how *The Times History* described the manufacture of the “Long Cecil” gun in Kimberley as “one of the most remarkable events in the history of the beleaguered garrisons” (p 248). He also provides a balanced coverage of the concentration camps, reminding readers that the British did not invent the concept, and that the high mortality rates in white and black camps derived from various causes, even if underpinned by British maladministration and the indifference of Kitchener. He notes, too, that the conditions in the camps were one of the factors that influenced the delegates in Vereeniging, and that their memory contributed to the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism that gathered momentum in the first half of the twentieth century.

Other forms of memorial might have been mentioned (as they were in the case of Canada) inasmuch as they proliferated in Britain and South Africa after the war. They reflected the depth of feeling aroused by the war in Britain and the popularity of the volunteers involved as Britain’s “citizen soldiers” and of new formations, such as the Lovat Scouts. These memorials of course were soon eclipsed in significance by the memorials of the two world wars, and preoccupation with those conflicts undoubtedly accounts for the ebb and flow of British writing on the Anglo-Boer War (as mentioned in the bibliography). Yet in many respects those two world wars, like the military preparations during the cold war, were aberrations. Modern wars, as aptly described by General Sir Rupert Smith, are now once again “wars amongst the people”.¹ In this respect, the Anglo-Boer War is not just “the first of the twentieth century wars” (p ix) but is also the harbinger of wars in the twenty-first century. If scholars wish to reflect on the many and diverse facets of such conflicts, they might profitably begin by reflecting again upon the war in South Africa, and for this they could hardly consult a more authoritative volume than *The A to Z of the Anglo-Boer War*.

Edward M. Spiers
University of Leeds

1. R. Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (Allen Lane, London, 2005), p xiii.