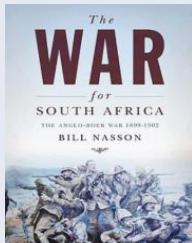


The war for South Africa

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The war for South Africa: The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902

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Review Title:

The war for South Africa

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It is a remarkable fact that the centenary of the Union of South Africa last year passed by largely unnoticed by the South African public. Though the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 attracted the attention of the media, the most important consequence of the war, that South Africa became a unified political entity in 1910, was forgotten. However, 110 years ago, the societies of South Africa were at war with each other, fighting to determine who should control the region and what sort of political system should prevail. The British victory in the struggle ensured that, instead of an ill-fitting assortment of Boer republics, African kingdoms and settler colonies, there would be a unified state, knitted together by barbed wire, blood and blockhouses. The new state had some seemingly irreconcilable political differences to manage – protecting the interests of British imperialism whilst simultaneously placating embittered Afrikaners and politically frustrated Africans – but its failures should not obscure how significant unification was, nor that unification was made possible by, and influenced by, war.

There are thus good reasons for us not to forget the war that made South Africa; and Bill Nasson's book is a fresh, lively and thought-provoking reminder not to do so. It is, without doubt, the best general study of the war now available. Though Thomas Packenham's *The Boer War* is still immensely enjoyable, Nasson's book has a more even coverage of events and is more up to date. *The war for South Africa* is a complete re-write of Nasson's earlier book on the subject, *The South African War, 1899–1902*, written over a decade ago. The present book has benefited from an engagement with much of the new literature that was produced around the centenary of the war, in 1999, and also reflects some of the debates surrounding that centenary. Even 10 years ago the intelligentsia of the New South Africa were questioning the war's relevance to the nation, and some of Nasson's most perceptive writing records that debate. With his customary love of the absurd and his sardonic sense of humour, Nasson's views are far from being politically correct. But there is a lot worth ridiculing when ill-informed politicians attempt to make usable heritage out of a complex and contested past.

The causes of the war have long been a favourite topic to set as an essay question for students of South African history. Nasson's treatment of this question is exemplary and brief. He deals with the relationship between capitalism and imperialism most succinctly, pointing out that whatever the role was that was played by gold and mining interests, the fundamental question was 'Who was South Africa for?' It boiled down to Boer independence versus British control. The claims of Africans were seen as being largely irrelevant. Because Nasson is primarily a social historian this is not, primarily, a military history and he takes care not to lose sight of what impact the war was having on society at large. He does not allow himself to get bogged down in the sort of detail that delights military historians. Instead Nasson briskly discusses the tactics and strategies that evolved as the war took on a life of its own. His is a narrative that downplays the glory and heroism of men in combat to concentrate on the sufferings of ordinary men and women. There are few heroes or villains in these pages. The sieges of Ladysmith, Mafeking and Kimberley, that so inspired the Victorian public to eulogise their plucky defenders, are here portrayed as largely inconsequential. There are no lavish, set-piece battle accounts. Some well-known characters do not feature at all in this history (Kipling, Sol Plaatje) whereas other, lesser-known actors are promoted to our attention (Robert Kekewich). But whoever or whatever Nasson discusses is enlivened by his judicious writing, well spiced with telling quotes and quirky observations.

Nasson's chapters on the aftermath of the war and its impact on South African memory and the heritage industry are particularly impressive. If a nation's political maturity can be judged by the way in which its politicians interpret a complicated and divisive past then we have some way to go until adulthood. In his discussion of the causes of the war Nasson keeps one eye on contemporary events, such as the Allied invasion of Iraq or intervention in Afghanistan. When is it permissible to force war on another country? How does one ensure that one wins the peace after the war as well as the war itself? To what extent is it possible to distinguish between combatants and civilians in military strategy? All of these questions make the South African War a very modern war, a war not just of the 20th century but of the 21st century too. In the end, it seems,



'Colonial troops and African auxiliaries at a blockhouse.' Reprinted from *The War for South Africa*, courtesy of the National Army Museum, London.

if the questions are too hard to answer, the temptation is for politicians to forget about the past completely or to get it spectacularly wrong in the name of inclusive nation building.

Nasson's conclusions are, throughout, objective and fair. This is not a revisionist history with new accusations of atrocious conduct or revelations of genocidal intent. Nor is it an apology for either side. There are no moral pronouncements or value judgements. It is, instead, a careful, subtle reading

of the historical context in which actions took place. The military historian John Keegan has reminded us that war is a cultural activity. This means that, when we study wars, we must understand the cultures of those who fight them if we wish to understand the ways in which they are fought. Nasson has this broad, cultural empathy and he shares it with us in a fast-moving, energetic prose style that entertains whilst it instructs and that eschews the use of cliché. This is an outstanding history of the war by an outstanding historian.