



# **THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR REAPPRAISED**



EDITED BY DONAL LOWRY

# STUDIES IN IMPERIALISM

General editor John M. MacKenzie

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## *The South African War reappraised*

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*The South African  
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edited by Donal Lowry

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# CONTENTS

*General editor's introduction — page vii*  
*Notes on contributors — page ix*  
*Acknowledgements — page xii*

1	Introduction: not just a 'teatime war' <i>Donal Lowry</i>	<i>page 1</i>
2	A century of controversy over origins <i>Iain R. Smith</i>	23
3	Journalism as active politics: Flora Shaw, <i>The Times</i> and South Africa <i>Dorothy O. Helly</i> <i>and Helen Callaway</i>	50
4	<i>The Times</i> at war, 1899–1902 <i>Jacqueline Beaumont</i>	67
5	'Intermediate' imperialism and the test of Empire: Milner's 'excentric' High Commision in South Africa <i>John Benyon</i>	84
6	Boer attitudes to Africans in wartime <i>Fransjohan Pretorius</i>	104
7	The Cape Afrikaners and the British Empire from the Jameson Raid to the South African War <i>Mordechai Tamarkin</i>	121
8	African attitudes to Britain and the Empire before and after the South African War <i>Christopher Saunders</i>	140
9	'Hamlet with the Prince of Denmark left out?': the South African War, Empire and India <i>Balasubramanyam Chandramohan</i>	150
10	Pricking the 'non-conformist conscience': religion against the South African War <i>Greg Cuthbertson</i>	169
11	Kruger's farmers, Strathcona's Horse, Sir George Clarke's camels and the Kaiser's battleships: the impact of the South African War on imperial defence <i>Keith Jeffery</i>	188
12	'The Boers were the beginning of the end?': the wider impact of the South African War <i>Donal Lowry</i>	203

*Index — 247*



## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In the relatively remote southern city of Invercargill, New Zealand, a magnificent neo-classical troopers' memorial stands on the intersection of Dee and Tay streets. The visitor who, quite naturally, assumed that this commemorated the First World War would be wrong. In fact, it was unveiled in 1908 in memory of the New Zealanders fallen in the Boer War. That memorial, together with others around the former British Empire, illustrates well the manner in which the South African War became a major imperial and indeed global set of events. Moreover, the extensive debate about the causes, course and consequences of the war, which broke out contemporaneously with it, brought southern African history firmly into the mainstream of an international historiography. It has been a historiography with complex political and economic ramifications. The debate has remained fraught and lively: the Boer War has been seen by many, and in diverse ways, to illuminate the nature of British imperialism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In recent times, we have become more aware of the war's significance in women's history, through the contrasting activities of Flora Shaw, Emily Hobhouse and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, through the foundation of the Victoria League in London, through the stirring consciousness of both white and black women in South Africa, not to mention the work of the many nurses who served and died there.

Despite all that has been written about the Boer War, much remains to be said. This volume touches on a number of fresh areas. Given the old adage about the first casualty of war being truth, and given the notion that wars are not so much about what actually happens as about what people think is happening, the role of the press remains central. Several of the contributions open up new insights into the activities of the press in relation to the war. New ethnic perspectives are explored, such as the elite African vision of the British Empire, the relationship between Boer combatants and Africans, the complex stance of the Cape Afrikaners, and the ideas and involvement of Indians. In addition to a major historiographical survey, the volume also includes such wider issues as the role of the war in British strategic thinking and army planning and the strangely, if not dangerously, anomalous position of the High Commissioner. A chapter on the dissident voices within the non-conformist churches reveals both how fiercely the war was opposed and how relatively isolated such resistance was.

Yet much still remains to be studied. The other respect in which the Boer War entered the social and cultural bloodstream of the British Empire was through popular culture. The celebrations of the relief of Mafeking and of other events of the war took place in cities and towns in Britain and throughout the Empire. We need a comparative study of these remarkable popular expressions of celebration, which cannot simply be rejected as the



## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

mindless carousings of a jingo crowd. Prisoners of war are frequently another obscure area of military history. Boer prisoners were exiled to India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), St Helena and Bermuda. A few of them stayed. Another fascinating study remains to be pursued here. It is to be hoped that this volume will open up these and other areas of research.

John M. MacKenzie

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JACQUELINE BEAUMONT is a visiting Research Fellow in the School of Humanities, Oxford Brookes University. She returned to full-time historical research in 1996 after retiring from the Civil Service. She has written on censorship of the British press during the South African War and is currently writing a book on the role of the press during the war.

JOHN BENYON was until 1998 Professor of History at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg. He has published on the mechanism of High Commissionership in South Africa, including *Proconsul and Paramountcy in South Africa: The High Commission, British Supremacy and the Sub-Continent, 1806–1910* (1980).

HELEN CALLAWAY is a former Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research on Women at Queen Elizabeth House in the University of Oxford. She is the author of *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria* (1987), and co-editor of *Anthropology and Autobiography* (1992) and *Caught Up in Conflict: Women's Responses to Political Strife* (1986). She is currently writing, with Dorothy O. Helly, a biography of Flora Shaw/Lady Lugard.

BALASUBRAMANYAM CHANDRAMOHAN is Senior Lecturer in Post-Colonial Studies in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Luton. He has also taught at universities in India, Algeria and Switzerland. His publications include *A Study of Trans-Ethnicity in Modern South Africa: The Writings of Alex La Guma, 1925–1985* (New York, 1992). He is currently working on a history of Indian overseas writing, with special reference to indentured labour migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

GREG CUTHBERTSON teaches History at the University of South Africa, Pretoria. He has published in the fields of religious history, comparative US-South African historiography and war and society. He is an immediate past editor of the *South African Historical Journal* and is an international contributing editor of the *Journal of American History*.

DOROTHY O. HELLY is Professor Emerita of History and Women's Studies at Hunter College and the Graduate School, City University of New York. Her published works include *Livingstone's Legacy: Horace Waller and*

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

*Victorian Mythmaking* (1987), *Gendered Domains: Rethinking the Public and Private in Women's History* (1992) and *Women's Realities, Women's Choices: An Introduction to Women's Studies*. With Helen Callaway she published 'Crusader for Empire: Flora Shaw/Lady Lugard', in N. Chaudhuri and M. Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (1992) and both are currently working on a full-length biography of Flora Shaw.

KEITH JEFFERY is Professor of Modern History at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown. His recent publications include 'An Irish Empire'? *Aspects of Ireland and the British Empire* (editor, Manchester University Press Studies in Imperialism, 1996) and *A Military History of Ireland* (joint editor, Cambridge pbk edn, 1997). He was the 1998 Lees Knowles Lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge.

DONAL LOWRY is Senior Lecturer in History at Oxford Brookes University. A graduate of University College Dublin and Rhodes University, he has also taught at Rhodes University, University College Chester and the University of York. He has published articles and essays on Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, loyalist and anti-colonial movements in the British Empire, and Irish foreign policy in the Commonwealth, 1922–49. He is currently engaged in a book-length study of ideological links between British colonies of settlement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

FRANSJOHAN PRETORIUS is Professor of History at the University of Pretoria. He is the author of several books on the South African War, including *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899–1902*, which has received three non-fiction awards. An English edition, *Life on Commando during the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* was published in 1999. In 1998 he was awarded the Stals Prixe for Cultural History by the Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, and he currently serves on the Central Committee for the Commemoration of the South African War.

CHRISTOPHER SAUNDERS is Associate Professor of History at the University of Cape Town. Educated at the University of Cape Town and the University of Oxford, he is the author of *Making the South African Past* (1988), *Historical Dictionary of South Africa* (1983, new edn 1998), *Writing History* (1992) and many articles on topics in South African and Namibian history. His special fields of interest include historiography, urban history and the recent political history of southern Africa.

IAIN R. SMITH is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Warwick. He is the author of *The Origins of the South African War* (1996) and, with

#### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Christopher Saunders, of the section on 'Southern Africa 1795–1910' in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, volume 3 (1999).

MORDECHAI TAMARKIN is a graduate of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London, and is Professor of History at the University of Tel-aviv. His research areas include colonial and post-colonial Kenya, the decolonisation of Zimbabwe, ethnicity and the state in Africa, the late nineteenth-century Cape Colony and ethnic relations in post-Communist eastern Europe. His publications include *The Making of Zimbabwe: Decolonization in Regional and International Politics* (1990) and *Cecil Rhodes and the Cape Afrikaners* (1990).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for this volume originated in March 1996, when I convened a conference on the subject of 'South Africa 1895–1921: Test of Empire', for the Humanities Research Centre, Oxford Brookes University. The purpose of the gathering was to examine the relationship between South Africa and the imperial and wider world from the Jameson Raid of 1895–96 to the aftermath of the First World War. Of particular concern was the international impact of the South African War itself, as well as the allegiances generated within southern Africa by British imperial power. The majority of papers in this volume, initially presented at the conference, concentrate on this theme.

I should like to thank a number of people who assisted in the genesis of this volume. I am grateful to those who attended the conference, chaired various panels and contributed comments to the discussion. Most importantly, thanks are due to the contributors to this volume for their commitment to the project. In particular, I should like to thank Emeritus Professor J. O. Baylen, Dr Julia Bush, Professor William Beinart, Professor Apollon Davidson, Dr John Darwin, Dr Kent Fedorowich, Professor Irina Filatova, Dr Deborah Gaitskell, Professor David Killingray, Professor Donal McCracken, Professor Shula Marks, Dr Alex May, Professor Andrew Porter, Dr Hilary Sapire, Dr Roger Stearn, Dr Keith Surridge, Dr Stanley Trapido, and Dr Lori Williamson. I am also indebted to Professor Elize Botha, Dr Saul Dubow, Professor Ian Fletcher, Professor Roy Foster, Dr Andrew Thompson, and my colleagues in the History Department at Oxford Brookes University, Professor Anne Digby, Dr David Nash and John Stewart, who provided encouragement and practical assistance throughout the conference and the preparation of this volume. David Elsmore, Catriona Potter and Pauline Tobin gave me invaluable administrative and secretarial assistance. Special thanks are also due to Ton Vosloo and Hannes van Zyl of Tafelberg Publishers Ltd, and to Western Wines Ltd for their assistance in convening the conference.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Introduction: not just a 'teatime war'**

Donal Lowry

October began as months do; their entrance is, in itself, an unostentatious and soundless affair, without outward signs and tokens ... Time has no divisions to mark its passage, there is never a thunder-storm or blare of trumpets to announce the beginning of a new month or year. Even when a new century begins it is only we mortals who ring bells and fire off pistols. (Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, 1924)<sup>1</sup>

#### *The guns of October*

At 6.15 on the morning of 10 October 1899, Joseph Chamberlain, British Secretary of State for the Colonies, was awakened from his sleep to read an ultimatum just received from President Kruger's government in Pretoria. 'They have done it', Chamberlain exclaimed with some relief, since it pre-empted an ultimatum which he had been preparing to send to Kruger. Now the Boers could be cast in the role of aggressor. In Pretoria the Union flag was hauled down over the British Consulate and its officials departed for British territory, along with throngs of uitlanders (foreigners) resident in the Transvaal who felt endangered by the imminent state of war. Within two days, the ultimatum having expired, the South African Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State, two of the world's smallest states, were at war with the British, then rulers of the largest empire in the world. Outside the subcontinent, it was widely expected that the conflict would be brief, with newspapers in London's Fleet Street confidently predicting that this would be just a 'teatime war'. Sir Alfred Milner, British High Commissioner at the Cape, who had advocated the 'forward' policy that had precipitated the conflict, was privately more cautious, as he told Lord Selborne, Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies:

We have a bad time before us, and the Empire is about to support the greatest strain put upon it since the [Indian] Mutiny. Who can say what may

befall us before that [British] Army Corps arrives? But we are all working in good heart, and having so long foreseen the possibility of this Armageddon, we mean to do our best in it, though it begins rather unfortunately for us. After all have not the great struggles of England mostly so begun?<sup>2</sup>

Even Milner, however, could not foresee just how great a strain this struggle would place not only on the Empire but on the imperial idea itself, for this became the largest and costliest war waged by Britain between the Napoleonic Wars and the Great War of 1914–18, even including the Crimea. It would take three years, more than £200 million and between 250,000 and 450,000 British and colonial troops to defeat an army of 45,000 to 88,000 mounted peasants, amateur soldiers aged from under fourteen to over seventy. Between 10,000 and 30,000 Africans were armed by the British in the course of the war and over 100,000 African and Coloured South Africans were required to transport the imperial forces over huge distances. These campaigns combined traditional nineteenth-century military tactics with new technology which would anticipate much twentieth-century warfare. The war demanded huge numbers of horses and mules, forcing the British to search the world for supplies. Less traditional equipment, such as field telephones, barbed wire, blockhouses and aerial (balloon) reconnaissance, was also employed by the British, while the combination of trenches, heavy artillery and smokeless high-velocity magazine rifle fire anticipated so many of the wars of the following century. From mid-1900 to May 1902, as the British faced a growing guerrilla challenge from the Boers, the conflict became a total war in which Boer civilians came to be seen as actual or potential enemies. The British resorted to farm-burning and concentration camps, which resulted in the deaths, largely as a result of poor camp administration, unhygienic conditions and neglect, of nearly 28,000 Boer civilians, of whom approximately 22,000 were children and 4,000 were women. More than 14,000 Africans, a tenth of the African refugee population, died in other camps, where conditions were generally worse than those in white concentration camps. Roughly 7,000 Boer combatants and 22,000 British soldiers died, three-quarters of the latter from disease. The tactics employed by the British bitterly divided public opinion in Britain, where they were denounced by the Liberal leader, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, as ‘methods of barbarism’, and these weighed heavily in the propaganda war waged by both sides for the support of world opinion.<sup>3</sup> As A. J. P. Taylor opined on the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war, the conflict caused in British domestic politics ‘a bitterness without parallel since the great Reform Bill and never equalled since except in 1914 during the Ulster [loyalist] rebellion ... “Pro-Boer” was a more

opprobrious epithet than ever "pro-German" became in either German war'.<sup>4</sup> The war 'started the word imperialism on a new Continental career', and it inspired an anti-war literature which would to an extent anticipate that of the First World War.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the war in May 1902, tens of thousands of Boers and their African servants were in concentration camps, and large tracts of the country had been laid waste, or were in the hands of Africans who were re-establishing their control over territory lost to the Boers in previous decades. Many commandos changed sides, so that by the end of the war perhaps one in four Boers still in the field was serving in the imperial forces. The British, anxious to end an embarrassing and costly conflict, granted generous terms to the Boers. Far from exacting an indemnity, the British agreed to pay £3 million for war damages, and the official position of the Dutch language was guaranteed, along with the return of prisoners of war, subject to their signing an oath of allegiance to the Crown. More crucially, under Clause 8 of the Treaty of Vereeniging, it was agreed that the question of extending the franchise to Africans in the two former republics would be postponed until after the restoration of responsible government. On the other hand, the Boers formally surrendered sovereignty of the republics. This was the 'British moment' in South Africa, a period in which theoretically the victors were free to remake the country as they pleased.<sup>6</sup>

Within eight years of the Boer surrender, the two British territories of the Cape Colony and Natal were joined with the defeated republics in the Union of South Africa, a self-governing dominion within the Empire, a 'sister state' of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. During these years, the British attempted to remake South Africa to suit imperial needs. Milner, assisted by his 'Kindergarten' of specially chosen, like-minded young men, set about reconstructing the mining and agricultural industries. Within a year, nearly £19 million had been paid by the British in war damages, grants and resettlement loans. Nearly 75,000 Chinese workers were scandalously imported to make up the shortfall of African labour in the mines and worked in conditions of near slavery. The railway networks were amalgamated, and a customs union and an Inter-Colonial Council were established. Sir Godfrey Langden was appointed to head a South African Native Affairs Commission which would draw up a native policy to cover the two former republics, the Cape Colony and Natal. Milner's attempts to anglicise South Africa through British immigration and the educational system failed, however, and Afrikaner political power recovered far more quickly than the British anticipated, spurred on not least by the issue of Chinese labour. In an exercise of hard-headed mutual self-interest disguised as a 'Magnanimous Gesture', Britain in 1906-07 restored self-government to the Transvaal and the



Orange River Colony.<sup>7</sup> The issue of Indian immigration and the outbreak of the Zulu or Bambatha Rebellion in 1906 fostered a greater sense of common interest among the formerly warring 'white races', while African solidarity was encouraged by the ruthless suppression of the Zulu revolt.<sup>8</sup> During these years the foundations of a modern capitalist state were created and the essential elements of white supremacy and segregation enshrined in the constitution and politics of the new dominion.<sup>9</sup> After 1910, Britain effectively abdicated its responsibility to uphold the rights of African, Coloured and Indian citizens of South Africa to the new dominion government in Pretoria, rights which Britain had claimed to uphold in the South African War. Following Union, while African and Coloured territorial and electoral rights were eroded, a 'new South Africa' was presented in imperial and international circles as a miracle of 'racial reconciliation' between the two white races, a unity symbolised by the two identical towers and concave colonnade of the Union Buildings in Pretoria, designed by Cecil Rhodes's architect, Sir Herbert Baker.<sup>10</sup>

### *South Africa's 'Great War', or an imperial 'little war'?*

It is not surprising, therefore, that the origins of the South African War should have attracted more attention from historians and aroused more controversy than perhaps any other issue in South African historiography.<sup>11</sup> Even the question of what term to use to describe the war has provoked argument. It has been called the 'Anglo-Boer War' or the 'Boer War', but these terms do not convey the divisions among Afrikaners during the conflict, and, moreover, they exclude the involvement of African, Coloured and Indian South Africans. To Afrikaners it has been described as *die Engelse oorlog* ('the English War'), or *die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* ('the Second War of Freedom' – as distinct from 'the First War of Freedom'/'First Anglo-Boer War'/'Anglo-Transvaal War' of 1880–81), or even *Milner se oorlog* – 'Milner's war'.<sup>12</sup> The term 'South African War' has generally been used throughout this volume because, firstly, it was the title most widely used at the time of the war, when the term 'South African' (used much as 'southern African' is today) described the geographical extent of the conflict. Secondly, the term underlines an aspect of the war which historians are increasingly coming to appreciate: namely, that it was in some respects a 'civil war'. Opinion on the war was as divided among white Afrikaners, Africans, 'Coloureds' and English-speaking white South Africans as these communities were from each other. As Bill Nasson puts it, this was South Africa's 'Great War': 'a war which would be crucial to the historical formation of

modern South Africa as were the Civil Wars to England and the United States of America'.<sup>13</sup> In [Chapter Two](#), Iain Smith surveys a century of controversy surrounding the origins of the war and in particular the argument that gold rather than geopolitical or strategic factors shaped British policy towards the Transvaal in the drift towards war. He argues that such an assertion cannot be supported by the archival evidence. Unless new evidence can be found to support the contrary case, the gulf between these approaches is likely to remain as wide as ever.<sup>14</sup> As with other major conflicts, less attention has been paid to the consequences of the conflict and particularly its impact on the creation of the Union in 1910. It is likely that this period will now attract greater scholarly concentration, and become a major focus for debate.<sup>15</sup>

In the drift towards war and after its outbreak, the power of public opinion, as Milner in particular was keenly aware, was central. Media warfare was a developing feature of the age. It had played a central part in the Spanish-American War in 1898, and this blurring between war and journalism is further illustrated by the number of soldier-journalists serving on both sides of the conflict, among them Winston Churchill, Erskine Childers, Colonel de Villebois-Mareuil, Colonel Eugène Maximov and Colonel Arthur Lynch.<sup>16</sup> The South African War, it should be noted, was one of a number of conflicts of the 1890s and early 1900s fought by expansionist imperial powers in the full or partial view of the world's press; among them, the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, the Italian defeat by the Ethiopians in 1896, the British victory over the Mahdists at Omdurman in 1898, the Chinese Boxer Uprising of 1900, the Spanish-American War of 1898, the Philippine-American War of 1899–1904, the American-backed secession of Panama from Colombia in 1903 to ensure American control of the Canal, the Herero and Maji Maji revolts in German South-West Africa and East Africa in 1904–06, and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. A number of reporters directly experienced more than one of these conflicts.<sup>17</sup> Winston Churchill had covered the Spanish counter-insurgency in Cuba in 1895 for the *Daily Graphic*, and the Australian Arthur Lynch had reported on the Ashanti campaign of 1898 for the *Evening News*, before forming the Second Irish Transvaal Brigade in 1900. E. F. Knight had served as a war correspondent in Matabeleland, Madagascar, Sudan, Greece and Cuba. After losing an arm in the South African War, he went on to cover the Russo-Japanese War and Turkish campaigns in the Balkans.<sup>18</sup>

Two contributions to the volume focus on this aspect of the conflict. In [Chapter Three](#), Dorothy O. Helly and Helen Callaway portray the remarkable South African career of Flora Shaw, the first woman to gain a

professional position on *The Times*, its first and only Colonial Editor and the most highly paid woman journalist in London at that time. Shaw had a wide command of complex political and economic issues and, although she later joined the anti-suffrage movement, she thought of her journalism as 'active politics without the fame'. Like Alfred Milner, she worked under W. T. Stead at the *Pall Mall Gazette*, where she was impressed by the political power of journalism. Her articles did much to prepare British opinion for confrontation with the Boers, and the evidence suggests that she was at the heart of the Jameson Raid conspiracy, if not the link between Rhodes, whom she hero-worshipped, and the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain. She strongly supported Milner's policy in 1899, and tried to sway international opinion in February 1900 with a series of articles on Great Britain and the Dutch republics which were translated into French, German, Hungarian, Swedish and Spanish. In all, 40,000 copies were distributed in Britain, Europe, the dominions and the USA. This was the only serious attempt to meet European and American pro-Boers on their own home ground. In [Chapter Four](#), Jacqueline Beaumont examines the expensive operation mounted by *The Times* in order to cover the war, at a time when it was struggling with falling circulation. The paper remained the most influential paper in Fleet Street, an importance accepted by editors of other newspapers and by its political opponents. She describes the immense practical problems in satisfying an almost insatiable public appetite for news, including an ever-changing team of reporters and official censorship, which was applied haphazardly and often made reporting meaningless, especially after Kitchener became commander-in-chief.

In [Chapter Five](#), John Benyon revisits the character and function of Milner as High Commissioner. While acknowledging the need not to overstress the role of personality, Benyon echoes J. A. S. Grenville in describing the combination of Milner and Chamberlain as a 'fateful partnership'. He analyses their common Liberal Unionism, 'constructive imperialism' and mentality of social engineering born out of the crisis over Irish home rule in 1886, and he examines the evolution of the office of High Commissioner in South Africa before Milner's arrival and how it differed from other proconsular posts in the Empire. For all of Milner's apparent power, however, not least in helping to bring the about war, Benyon suggests that local South African circumstances after 1900 proved too much for an office which was now, with the conquest of the Boer republics, theoretically even more powerful. Milner himself admitted that he was 'building on sand'.

An enormous number of books about the war were written during the twentieth century, mostly for the popular market, and the volume of

production can be expected to increase dramatically in the centenary years, 1999–2002, to cater for public demand. Much recent scholarly research, however, has yet to filter through to counter the general perception that the conflict was simply a 'white man's war', or as Rayne Kruger put it in his popular account of 1959 (still in print): 'a war fought across the breadth of a vast region, the majority of whose inhabitants were mere spectators'.<sup>19</sup> During the last three decades of the twentieth century there was a historiographical revolution in scholarly approaches to the war and it is now no longer possible to depict the struggle simply as a war between the British and the Boers.<sup>20</sup> As Jeremy Krikler, Bernard Mbenga and others have shown, at the close of the war, large areas of the Transvaal were reverting to African control, as local conflicts with different and deeper roots were fired by the collapse of Boer authority. Other scholars are currently engaged in detailed research into the impact of the war and the involvement of Africans in other regions of South Africa.<sup>21</sup> In [Chapter Six](#), Fransjohan Pretorius describes the impact of this participation on the development of Boer attitudes to Africans during the war, as well as the extensive role played by Africans in the Boer forces. African involvement sometimes led to intense friendships between them and their Boer employers, but, as he suggests, it would always remain an unequal relationship.

In hindsight, it seems remarkable that it ever became possible to portray the war as a conflict between whites. Among the reasons given by the Boers for their decision to surrender at Vereeniging were the extensive African military campaigns being waged within the borders of the republics. The *Times* official historian of the war noted that Africans also played a 'by no means unimportant part in the Boer military system'. He acknowledged their fighting role, as well as their employment as spies, transport drivers, trench-diggers and servants, and he estimated that 10,000 Africans were attached to the Boer forces on a regular basis.<sup>22</sup> In 1903, Jan Smuts warned the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, about 'the grave character of the Native question' resulting from the circumstances of the war:

[The] events of the late war, and especially the political and social upheaval to which it has led, have tended to unsettle the minds of the Natives and to create a spirit or feeling among them which must be a matter of grave concern to the white population of South Africa. [We] feel that it is necessary by a firm though a just administration of the law to make it plain to the Natives that the war altered the relations between the two white races but not between the white and coloured population of the country.<sup>23</sup>

By 1928, however, the South African delegate to the League of Nations Disarmament Conference in Geneva could declare without any apparent irony:

We have had wars in South Africa between civilised peoples, but, thank God, the savage hordes of Africa have never been dragged into those wars ... Is it too much to hope that, under the guidance of the League, we shall, in the near future, meet in order to agree among ourselves that those ... whose well-being and development form a sacred trust of civilisation, shall not be used to strengthen military forces which are already deemed by many to be excessive for the purposes of peace and goodwill in the world?<sup>24</sup>

Another challenge to the 'white man's war' approach to the conflict has come from research into the role of women. Although white women were not enfranchised for a generation after the war, they played a central part in the conflict. At the outbreak of war, the responsibility for maintaining and defending the farms, and the nursing of the wounded fell on Boer women and, with the destruction by the British of some 30,000 farmhouses, this burden became even more acute in the concentration camps, where 4,000 Boer adult women died. Helena Wagner of Zeerust is reputed to have fought in male disguise alongside the commandos in Natal. Hendrina Joubert, wife of the Transvaal Commandant-General, was said to have advised her husband in planning his military campaigns, while Annie Botha, wife of General Louis Botha, was used as an intermediary in negotiations between Roberts and Kitchener and the Boer leadership. Generally, the British attributed Boer determination to continue the struggle to the tenacity of the women, and the military high command considered deporting leading Pretoria women from the Transvaal. African women also bore the brunt of life in African 'refugee camps', where conditions were even worse than in the white concentration camps. White English-speaking South African women shared the privations of men in the sieges of Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking, as did Russian and other foreign nurses on the Boer side. Dorothea Fairbridge helped to support the imperial war effort with the foundation of the Guild of Loyal Women, while Olive Schreiner did much to publicise the reasons for her opposition to the war. At an international level, women also exerted a profound influence on public opinion on both sides of the war, from Queen Victoria and Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands to Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Rosa Luxemburg, Emily Hobhouse and, as already mentioned, Flora Shaw.<sup>25</sup> A large body of research is currently being undertaken on topics ranging from nursing to concentration camp life, the publication of which should shed far greater light on the impact of women during these years.<sup>26</sup>

Recent research on the war has also highlighted an aspect of the conflict which had become somewhat obscured by wider historiographical developments during the last thirty-years of the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s, as much of what had been regarded as 'Imperial and Commonwealth History' broke up into national or regional histories of the successor states of the British Empire, historians in South Africa, Canada, Australasia, India and in other parts of Africa, reacted against what was regarded as a metropole-focused, 'top-down' school of history, in which the imperial centre both proposed and disposed of imperial policy, and relegated the so-called 'colonial periphery' to the role of little more than a passive observer in the process. The inhabitants of this 'periphery', particularly those outside the corridors of power – indigenous peoples, women and the poor – were thus deprived of meaningful historical participation. More than thirty years on, South African historiography can be said to have long shed such a 'peripheral' perspective. Some scholars, however, have remained concerned that what remains of 'imperial history' might, however inadvertently, reconstruct a distorted imperial view of South African history and thus reproduce, and reintroduce into academic approaches, a colonial mentality and outlook.<sup>27</sup>

Yet imperial history, as it developed during the 1970s to 1990s, represented not least by other volumes in the *Studies in Imperialism* series, has much to gain from a dialogue with the South African historiographical tradition about the nature of imperialism and segregation. In the 1970s and 1980s Donald Denoon alerted Australian historians to the value of comparative history of settler-dominated societies.<sup>28</sup> Over the same period, anthropologists, historians of art and social scientists became aware of the benefits of comparative work on South Africa and Australia.<sup>29</sup> Other scholars have argued that empire in general and South Africa in particular played an essential part in the construction of 'metropolitan' Britishness in the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> Saul Dubow's 1997 analysis of South African colonial nationalism in the years before Union, for example, also demonstrated the usefulness of comparative reference to other white-dominated British colonies, while retaining the centrality of regional distinctiveness, but as he pointed out, 'the task of reintegrating imperial and indigenous South African histories in the post-South African War era is only beginning'.<sup>31</sup>

However much metropolitan authority may have been circumscribed by local conditions, it should be recalled that the coherence of the British Empire seemed real enough to many of those who lived within its borders, and this perception of metropolitan and imperial strength often informed the political actions of colonial subjects. Ironically, there remains a major gap in our understanding of

the white English-speaking South Africans, particularly those living in the Cape and Natal, the communities to which British officials primarily looked for support.<sup>32</sup> Not only colonists of British and European origin, however, but ‘subject peoples’, largely excluded from equal treatment by local imperial authorities, looked to the Crown and Whitehall to uphold or enhance their rights. Membership of the Empire often produced deep allegiances based originally on self-interest or self-defence, but the term ‘collaboration’, with its somewhat pejorative Second World War connotations, does not always adequately convey the complex nature of these relationships and sentiments.<sup>33</sup>

Three contributors to this volume deal with the relationship of Cape Afrikaners, black South Africans and Indians in South Africa and India to the British Empire in the years before and after the South African War. As has already been noted, no community in South Africa in 1899–1902 was monolithic, least of all the Afrikaners, who were divided by region, class and allegiance. In [Chapter Seven](#), Mordechai Tamarkin argues that Cape Afrikaner identity could combine local patriotism, a sense of solidarity with their republican cousins to the north, attachment to the economic benefits of imperial membership and a sincere sense of loyalty to the Crown. Before the Jameson Raid of 1895–96, Cecil Rhodes had been adept at courting such sentiment through his connections to J. H. Hofmeyr and the Afrikaner Bond. Even after the Raid, leading Cape Afrikaner politicians, including S. J. du Toit, the Afrikaans language activist, were reluctant to condemn Rhodes, until he demonstrated no sign of repentance. The Raid, then, was not the crucial turning point in the Cape Afrikaners’ relationship to the Empire.<sup>34</sup> Cape Afrikaners had developed, Tamarkin argues, a liberal, ethnically inclusive, concept of empire which ran directly counter to the ‘race-patriotic’ vision of Alfred Milner. To Milner, the Cape Afrikaners, like the French Canadians, were not to be trusted, whatever their protestations of loyalty to the Crown. This prejudice continued to be shared, apparently, by General Louis Botha as Prime Minister of the Union, and the Governor-General, Lord Buxton, long after the war:

Botha has always thought rather badly of the Cape Dutch as a whole, and often spoke to me privately about their action, or rather inaction, at the time of the Anglo-Boer War. He considered them in intelligence and courage greatly inferior to the Transvaal or Free State Dutch, and derided them as much too afraid for their own skins. I am inclined to think from what I have seen of the Dutch-speaking section, especially in the back-veldt parts of these three Provinces, that he is about right in his comparison. The Cape backveldt Dutch are more ignorant, more backward than their fellows in the other three Provinces, and a much smaller proportion of them can talk or even understand English.<sup>35</sup>



In [Chapter Eight](#), Christopher Saunders describes the developing allegiance of the African elite to the Empire and an ideal of imperial citizenship before and after the South African War. While America provided a model for self-help, he points out, imperial Britain was the African elite's most important external reference point, and these sentiments remained prominent in the African press even after the disappointments of Union and into the 1920s. This sense of allegiance also motivated the African nationalist Sol Plaatje to plead the case for 'the land of his fathers' with British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, in 1919. Lloyd George, a Welsh-born erstwhile pro-Boer, was moved to write a strong letter on Plaatje's behalf to his old friend, General Jan Christiaan Smuts, but nothing came of the intervention.<sup>36</sup> The intense sense of betrayal which followed the South African War was central to the development of African politics in the decade before Union and for a generation afterwards, and the Coloured population of the Cape felt a similar sense of disappointment.<sup>37</sup> Such memories, however, died hard. When, after the outbreak of the Second World War, the veteran liberal politician Margaret Ballinger toured the Eastern Cape to try to drum up support for the war effort, she was asked by a speaker at New Brighton in Port Elizabeth:

Why should we fight for you? We fought for you in the Boer War and you betrayed us to the Dutch. We fought for you in the last war. We died in France, in East Africa ... and when it was over did anyone care about us? What have we to fight for?<sup>38</sup>

In [Chapter Nine](#), Balasubramanyam Chandramohan examines the impact of the war on Indian allegiances in South Africa and in India. As in the case of the African elite, there was a traditional Indian elite belief in British justice and the potential benefits of imperial citizenship which stretched back to Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858, and this conviction was encouraged not least by the young Mohandas K. Gandhi. South African Indians were reluctant to abandon their sense of imperial loyalty, which Gandhi managed to combine with admiration for Boer heroism, in spite of repeated disappointment, just as they were slow to recognise their common subordinate status with Africans within the Union.<sup>39</sup>

Clearly, the war had a most profound impact on Afrikaner nationalism in the twentieth century, helping especially to unify a disparate people around a common experience. It was, however, a problematic element in nationalist mythology, often dividing as much as it unified.<sup>40</sup> The fact that perhaps a quarter of all Boers in arms at the end of the war were fighting for the British added to the difficulty of employing it as a central myth. Although, according to Albert



Grundlingh, those Boers who joined the British forces were reintegrated into Afrikaner society within a decade, it would be useful to know more about the processes of reconciliation and reintegration, given the hatred surrounding such people at the time.<sup>41</sup>

When the National Party came to power in 1948, the war became diminished in importance in the interests of white Anglo-Afrikaner unity. Nevertheless, white unity and a common anxiety about the African majority could not always dampen Anglo-Afrikaner nationalist animosity. Although Boer fears of African uprisings were instrumental in persuading them to surrender in 1902, and were clearly a factor encouraging the process of unification, these considerations did not dissuade significant numbers of Boers from joining an Afrikaner rebellion in 1914, or large numbers of white workers from taking part in major strikes between 1913 and 1922.<sup>42</sup> It is important, moreover, not to underestimate the extent to which Afrikaner nationalists defined themselves against British imperialism in the three decades before 1948, and the mobilising, inflammatory power of memories of the war and of the camps – a memorial process, like the war itself, in which Afrikaner women were central.<sup>43</sup> It should be recalled that in these decades, and as late as the 1950s, the terms ‘race’ and ‘racialism’ usually referred to the bitter animosity felt between English-speaking South Africans and Afrikaners, rather than to the wider relationship between the white minority as a whole and the black majority; this was usually described as the ‘Native Question’. In the interwar period, one-third of Afrikaners were classified as ‘poor white’, and almost two-thirds of Afrikaners were employed by English-speaking South Africans. In 1922, during the failed campaign to incorporate Southern Rhodesia into the Union, one opponent of the scheme, Mrs Boddington, publicly described Afrikaners as ‘neither black nor white’ but ‘mentally deficient’ and ‘really worse than animals’. Such views, with their racial overtones, were not uncommon among English-speaking South Africans in the years of the Depression.<sup>44</sup> In 1930, N. J. van der Merwe, founder of the Republican Union within the National Party and as much a cause of political anxiety to his party leader, General Hertzog, as to the British, reflected the continuing Afrikaner sense of grievance:

When I think of the struggle of the past, when I think of the thousands of sacrifices which today lie under the ground, of the women and children who today lie under the ground, of the women and children who died in the camps, of which I myself as a child was witness, when I think of more than one who died on the battlefield or even hung on the gallows, when I think of Steyn and de Wet, then I say: In truth, No! They did not die to see their

posterity submit to the British Crown ... Then I hear a voice cry out from the bloodstained soil of my fatherland: 'Trek on! Not far enough!'<sup>45</sup>

The liberal journalist Marq de Villiers later recalled the childhood significance of such invocations of the memories of the camps:

[We] would be taken once a year to the small rise outside town on which stood a simple stone obelisk ... we all understood why we were there. The obelisk was a memorial raised to the women and children who died in the camps. It is perhaps the most emotional symbol the Afrikaners have, transcending the massive Voortrekker monument in Pretoria or the monument to the Afrikaans language erected outside Paarl. The Vrouemonument (Women's Monument), as it is called, is a symbol of oppression; it is a symbol of the hatred of the world, of the imposition of alien ways, and most of all it is a symbol of how the outside world, the British and Milner in particular, misunderstood the Afrikaner spirit.<sup>46</sup>

The last three chapters deal with periods in which large bodies of opinion in that 'outside world' seemed to be on the side of the Afrikaner republicans rather than British imperialism. In Britain itself, the churches played a central role in the formation of public opinion. J. A. Hobson, Liberal critic of the conflict, included them in an almost conspiratorial triumvirate of 'Press, Platform and Pulpit'.<sup>47</sup> In [Chapter Ten](#), Greg Cuthbertson demonstrates that the term 'pro-Boer' is problematic when it comes to describing the attitude of non-conformists who were more anti-war than pro-Boer and who were more concerned with the apparent injustice of the British cause than with weighing the justice of the Boer campaign. Non-conformist opinion was deeply divided, moreover, and it included much vociferous support for the war. He also shows that the failure of the anti-war faction within non-conformity was due not only to internal divisions but also to middle-class pretensions and declining influence within the working class. While non-conformists had been generally opposed to Britain's imperial expansion before the 1880s, by the late 1890s many had become keen imperialists, and the pro-Boer faction was often associated in the public mind with eccentrics, 'vegetarians', pacifists and temperance enthusiasts. Cuthbertson concludes that only a remnant actively opposed the war. Dr John Clifford, Baptist leader and Fabian, and Dr John Watson, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of England, were unusual in their determination that African rights should not be forgotten. Nevertheless, Clifford, in common with many of those critical of the war, believed in a benevolent empire. During the Spanish-American War of 1898, widely regarded as a Protestant crusade against a 'medieval' Catholic power, he told his congregation that the conflict had 'converted the people of the USA from what I may call an insular power

into an imperial power; using that term in the best sense'.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the moral power of nonconformity should not be underestimated. It assisted in providing a moral spotlight on imperialism in these years and, it should be recalled, it was from non-conformists that Gandhi learned his Christianity which he incorporated into his eclectic political philosophy.<sup>49</sup>

Turning from the 'church militant' to the 'Empire militant', in [Chapter Eleven](#), Keith Jeffery examines the impact of the South African War on imperial defence. He argues that if the war demonstrated British weakness in the short term, it also conveyed the determination to uphold imperial authority and prestige regardless of world opinion. Moreover, while the conflict made little impact on British strategic thinking, British defeats and revelations about the physical deterioration of the nation gave much greater urgency to the question of army reform. The war also encouraged a much greater assertiveness on the part of the self-governing colonies and dominions. Indeed, in spite of its profound political impact, the war has been all but forgotten in the public memories of the former dominions, even in Canada, where the war had made such a crucial political impression, and where the last surviving British veteran of the war died in 1993 aged 111.<sup>50</sup> The Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood vividly captures this forgetfulness in a description of a Toronto street in the late 1980s:

I continue along Queen Street ... Right here there's a group of statues, coppery green, with black smears running down them like metal blood: a seated woman holding a sceptre, with three young soldiers marching forward grouped around her, the legs wound with bandage-like puttees, defending the Empire, their faces earnest, doomed, frozen into time. Above them on a stone tablet stands another woman, this time with angel wings: Victory or Death, or maybe both. This monument is in honour of the South African War, ninety years ago, more or less. I wonder if anyone remembers that war, or if anyone in all these cars barging forward ever even looks.<sup>51</sup>

The wider impact of the war is surveyed in the final chapter of this volume, which examines the extraordinary rise of pro-Boer movements in Europe and America during the South African War, fed by a mixture of Anglophobia and a highly idealised image of the Afrikaners. The Boers could be recreated in the image of a far wider ideological range of European and American opinion – from anti-industrial aristocrats to socialists and anarchists – than in the case of the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. International brigades were formed to fight for the Boers, and the struggle was keenly followed by figures as diverse as Rosa Luxemburg, Mark Twain, Millicent Fawcett, Sun Yat-sen, Tsar Nicholas II, the young Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the aged Pope Leo XIII. The

war was, moreover, twinned in contemporary imperial and anti-imperial minds with the Spanish-American War of 1898. Aided by a rapidly globalising and syndicated system of world news, the conflict was keenly followed by Theodore Roosevelt and other leading American politicians, and for a time it had a disruptive effect on the internal ethnic politics of America. The pro-Boer movements were remarkable examples of the power of public opinion, but the processes of forgetting these connections and the international decline of the romanticised image of the Boers were equally extraordinary. Indeed, it is difficult to find in the twentieth century an equivalent disintegration into pariah status of such a once near-universally acclaimed, almost legendary, media-built reputation.

On the British side, too, the conflict drew volunteers from Canada, Australia and New Zealand, as well as the United States. If the South African War offered the British little practice for the immensely greater conflict which erupted in 1914, it became the chief political and military template for the handling of the issue of Irish independence in the years 1916 to 1921 and beyond. More generally, as Keith Surridge has argued, the South African War had a lasting impact on all future counter-insurgency campaigns, providing the model particularly for the operation of civil-military relations.<sup>52</sup> The conflict provided crucial formative influences in the lives of individuals who would later achieve prominence on an international and inter-imperial stage, from Winston Churchill and Leo Amery to Baden-Powell and Mahatma Gandhi. If the Boers were not, as the writer James Joyce fancied, 'the beginning of the end of the British Empire', in the revolutionary inspiration they provided to other nationalist groups, they played no insignificant part in its evolution and 'downfall'. If Gandhi learned his Christianity from the non-conformists, the Irish guerrilla leader Michael Collins was inspired by the guerrilla warfare of General Christiaan de Wet, with whom he corresponded. Collins in turn inspired Jewish guerrillas in the Palestine Mandate, where the latter confronted British veterans of the South African and Irish conflicts, and he also influenced the Indian nationalist Chandra Bose. De Wet, General Koos de la Rey, Smuts and Gandhi also fascinated the young Nelson Mandela. In 1963, among incriminating documents found in his possession before the Rivonia Trial was a quotation from de Wet: 'I would rather stand among my own people in a manure heap than live in a palace among strangers'.<sup>53</sup> Later, the Afrikaner nationalists' universally reviled policy of apartheid, however, provided a central argument for the Empire's shadowy afterlife in the form of the Commonwealth, with the end of apartheid hailed as the post-imperial organisation's greatest success. The wider British Empire