

## ***THE BOER WAR: ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE***

### ***SOUTH AFRICA'S POST-BOER, BOER WAR*** **Bill Nasson**

Almost a century ago, Rudyard Kipling, that most ironic bard of the British Empire, despaired of the Boer War as a bad business, plainly and bleakly, 'No End of a Lesson'. Britain had prevailed in its imperialist war to crush the white colonial nationalism of independent Boer republican communities, but it had been a costly job. London's colonial war effort was characterised by humiliating military reverses, an increasing financial burden, and a rising moral fuss within domestic Liberal and other anti-war opinion over the rigour of its internment policy and other anti-guerrilla tactics which inflicted great suffering upon Boer civilians, especially women and children. The Transvaal and Orange Free State Boer Republics, products of nineteenth century migrant settler state-formation in Southern Africa, lost a bitter struggle to maintain their separatist independence from the influence and authority of the Crown. For their radical anti-British-imperialist leadership, the war was a disaster, for it broke what one scholar has nicely termed the Irish or 'Sinn Fein variety of Afrikaner nationalism',<sup>1</sup> as the die-hards or *bittereinders* could not long sustain a will or the means for a fight to the end. The war also signified more than nationalist defeat. Horrendously high mortality rates in British concentration camps, and the loss of perhaps as much as 20 percent of the tiny Boer republican populations, meant that it represented a form of historical trauma for Afrikaner society, the depth of which imperial and other English-speaking historians have perhaps rarely fully recognised.

Ideologically, the war left an immediate fissure within early-twentieth century Afrikaner society, divisions which began to bite very soon after the signing of the 1902 Treaty of Vereeniging, and which were more or less bound to result from the kind of Boer-republican 'people's war' which had been fought. At one ascendant pole, there was an accommodationist, pragmatic Afrikaner war veteran leadership, now reconciled to getting into bed with imperialism, and appreciative of the gains to be made in moving on from the bitter legacy of war to forge an inclusive Afrikaner-English white political nation. At another, there were either *bittereinders* who had jibbed at acceptance of a negotiated peace, or a sulky clump of those who had gone down to defeat, but had in a sense surrendered conditionally, bristling for any fighting opportunity to restore a shattered republican vision by other means. From the start, this restive and militant Afrikaner nationalist constituency defined itself in relation to harrowing memories of the notorious camps and scorched earth of 'The English War', flexing a combative identity against the imagined ethnic and cultural blood sacrifice of the conflict. 'By creating thousands of martyrs for the cause of the volk',<sup>2</sup> and by in one way or another touching every Afrikaner community and family in the country, war and its memory became a prime and most exact register of 'Afrikaner-ness' in the twentieth century.

In social reach and human cost, the South African War was the biggest and most modern of the numerous pre-colonial and colonial wars which raged across the Southern African subcontinent. It is the war which today still counts in national memory, however narrow the historical context of that construction; other war memories slumber on through the transmission of nineteenth-century African oral tradition, in popular rural mythologies about Shaka and the Zulu kingdom, and in the odd dreams of regaining some tribal pastoral lost in nineteenth century settler frontier or land wars. There can be no question that these fleeting oral tracings of war valour or war suffering have left little imprint upon the historical consciousness of a modern white-ruled South Africa. British regiments have long had their Zululand monuments; only at the end of the 1990s is a memorial to Zulu warriors to be inscribed on the landscape of official cultural representations of warfare.

In any wide view, political memory of the South African War counts with fairly good reason. Generating a wealth of literature, this early twentieth century colonial war's literary epitaph remains unrivalled locally, this cultural deposit perhaps making it the modest South African equivalent of an American Civil War, a British Great War or even a Spanish Civil War. In part,

that reflects the obvious contrast between the short and easy war that was imagined, and the lengthy and arduous war which was actually fought. It is, even more, an illustration of the degree to which, especially after 1902, the meaning of the war continued to be fought over between new Afrikaner colonial nationalists and unreconciled Afrikaner republicans. For the ruling elite of the new 1910 Union of South Africa, Anglo-Afrikaner reconciliation specifically required a moderation of bitter war memories; in benign nation-building rhetoric, the war became a tragedy or a regrettable imperial entanglement in that it had ruptured a natural Boer-British European settler unity. For the cosmology of disinherited and dissident republicans, on the other hand, the war was a grudge to be nursed in concentrated form. Not only had Britain trampled a republican 'nation' underfoot; ex-Boer generals like Louis Botha and Jan Smuts had become London's secondary demons, their silky collusion with imperialism nothing other than a stab in the back.<sup>3</sup> And so, as in post-1939 Spain, a war of arms was now to continue as a memorialising war of words for those to whom the Anglo-Boer War became a massive building block of a patented 'Afrikaner' history, a contagious 'myth of national origin'.<sup>4</sup>

That inflated war of words was certainly of considerable rhetorical importance to the balance of white political forces even into the early post-Second World War era, when the survival of cultivated memories of British concentration camp 'genocide' and cruel conquest through war remained indissolubly connected with the rise and eventual ascendancy after 1948 of a republican nationalist Afrikanerdom. As the emotive expression of a subordinate yet pugnacious national combination of classes, tilting at the political and economic citadels of South Africa's languid English establishment, Afrikaner war commemoration provided a moral legacy of heroic manly struggle and female fortitude and sacrifice. That reflection began in the 1900s, through pilgrimages to grave sites, the disinterring and ritual reburial of the remains of fallen combatants, the later creation of war memorials, such as the 1913 *Vrouemonument* or Women's Monument in Bloemfontein, a male-inspired shrine to female martyrdom, or the 1938 Cottesloe Boer Veterans' Monument in Johannesburg. Other components included the issuing of commemorative veterans' medals, regular wreathlaying ceremonies at camp sites, and more resurrectionary modes of expression, such as mounted parades by veterans under arms. However varied the form of this commemoration, it usually involved an inevitable transition from private or community bereavement to political symbolism through deft Afrikaner nationalist appropriation.

The demand of the political moment was explicit allegory. For the *bittereinder* Boer general Christiaan Beyers, therefore, the meaning of the Women's Monument lay in its utility as a condensed repository of 'memories' which could fertilise the future, preparing the soil for the rebirth of a free nation.<sup>5</sup> In similar vein, the annual attendance of coterie of commando veterans or *oudstryders* and camp survivors provided a means of bringing home to an Afrikaner public the enduring feature of a national history: survivors and veterans bobbing along as symbols of an eternal Afrikanerdom, fleshy representatives of a gritty Afrikaner struggle for survival.<sup>6</sup>

It is against this background that myths and patriotic messages expressed the message that the fatal clash between Briton and Boer was not to become just another miserable vestige of the brutalities inflicted by imperial conquest. As prominent nationalistic war poets like Jan Celliers, Eugene Marais and 'Totius' asserted after 1902, cathartic memories of the blood sacrifice of *volkshelde* or armed 'people's heroes' could kindle consciousness of a unified national identity and help to renew crucial dignity and purpose. It is perhaps not stretching things too much to see the war enshrined as the Verdun of Afrikaner society, or even as its 1905 mutiny against despotism. In this, Afrikaner nationalist writers and historians beavered away as hard as anyone to keep the war a live and burning issue within the vital social networks of religion, politics, family, and friendship.

In the first instance, in the immediate postwar years it was obviously necessary to construct a view of the republican struggle which countered the fairly ludicrous and often offensive portrayal of Boer society peddled by numerous imperialist writers. In the most vulgar of these depictions, the 'Boer' was a degraded rural layabout, an untidy pre-modern with no legitimate place in capitalist modernity, and a warring primitive who displayed cowardly or shifty fighting

qualities in pursuing a criminal war against civilising progress. These stereotypes became refashioned or inverted in comic form by nationalist children's literature in the 1920s and 1930s: the Boer commando, depicted as a bearded toad which had hopped on to General Buller's mess table, would be transformed into handsome and dashing Albert Viljoen, a princely lion-heart who had easily outwitted plodding, slum-born British Tommies. But there was always more to such decorative representations than mere counter-history, or the swapping of mythologies. For influential popular historians such as Gustav Preller, a prominent former war correspondent on the Boer side, accounts of republican doings all served an overriding purpose—to awaken 'the' Afrikaner to the Truth of Their War of Freedom and Their National Mission.

As Albert Grundlingh has emphasised, the impulse was to make a 'war of freedom' inheritance the powerful core of an immanent Afrikaner 'nationalist spirit', with a stream of robust popular histories reminding readers of the Christian Boer crusade 'against the mighty British Empire, and the suffering of women and children'. Memory of war had:

had to serve as a constant reminder of the Afrikaners' bitter fight for freedom. Although they had lost ... they were exhorted not to sacrifice a common identity as Afrikaners ... History had to be used in such a way that it enhanced patriotism and national consciousness ... Contemporary Afrikaners had to complete the historic mission of the Boer die-hards—they had to continue the fight for Afrikaner independence in the present.<sup>7</sup>

This meant placing the war in the long term perspective of Boer-Afrikaner history in general, and of a national martial spirit in particular, filled with images of an old frontier Boer republican manhood.

In practice, the devastating impact of the war upon the fabric of Boer society in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal did not make it easy going for a bookish, middle class Afrikaner nationalist intelligentsia; it took time to stitch together a meaningful sense of war and a renewable ethnic nationhood. But, once the cultural assertion of a standard Afrikaans language became buttressed by official recognition from the 1920s, magic could be worked with war writings. Much of this patriotic alchemy was pursued in popular magazines like *Die Brandwag* (The Sentinel) and *Die Huisgenoot* (The Home Companion). By soliciting rural homes for personal male and female war testimony for regular feature publication, they plumbed a rich seam of earthy folk memory of hardship, privation, and brave sacrifice. Homespun, uplifting periodical stories of conduct under conquest circulated through reading circles, public readings and magazine clubs into the 1930s and beyond. Coursing through tiny rural settlements and scattered farms, the influence of this literary pipeline looks to have been quite considerable, not least through its wide appeal to republican patriots, particularly rural women who had been a fierce repository of wartime resistance in defence of homesteads, as well as to commando veterans and their families. *Die Huisgenoot* and other magazine correspondence columns filled up with appreciative murmurs from middle-aged readers of personal wartime histories, some urging everyone who had something to say to give a day to the commemorative cause, in which their most raw and 'visionary' 1899-1902 experiences could be documented on paper.<sup>8</sup> In this genre, the war largely ceased to be a disputed and increasingly divisive national struggle against imperial domination; instead, it became resurrected in print as the unity of the pastoral Boer nation at war, a tribal defence of hearth and home by a small and virtuous Protestant people.

While relatively few Afrikaans books on the war appeared between the 1900s and the end of the 1920s, the ensuing two decades witnessed a surge of popular works, ranging from tendentious histories such as Sara Raal, *Met die Boere in die Veld* (With the Boers in the Field), to animated historical fiction like 'Mikro', *Die Ruiter in die Nag* (The Rider in the Night).<sup>9</sup> Populist writings of this kind helped to lubricate a progressively consolidated collective mentality and public memory by creating an exalted sense of an essentialist national character: hardened, tough, valiant, and wily in adversity. And, while harping on war memories of bitterness, anguish and redemptive Christian fortitude, it was equally essential to commemorate superhuman republican bravado, exemplified by the gritty epic of *bittereinder*

guerrilla resistance during 1901-2, and the seemingly clairvoyant genius of Boer guerrilla generalship in outfoxing British imperial forces in the field and keeping on the run for so long. In this overdetermined masculine legacy, 'the courage and determination of the die-hard Boer fighters revealed those character traits supposedly typical of the Afrikaner and deemed worthy to emulate'.<sup>10</sup>

One such instinct was embodied in mythical representations of the Boer warrior as *volksheld* or national hero, imagery borne in a direct and undiluted way by the presence of rustic *oudstryders* or veterans. Biographies, poems, novels, essays, and popular magazines of the 1930s, such as *Huisgenoot*, turned generals like Christiaan de Wet and Koos de la Rey into household names.<sup>11</sup> Here were idealised warriors who defined the special quality of heroic Boer masculinity; this lay not in marching to order and in blind self-sacrifice (as with the British enemy), but in swift improvisation, unorthodoxy, and in mastery of the tactical retreat when the odds against one became too overwhelming. Thanks to such God-given instincts, the superior Boer warrior always knew what to do to live on in order to fight another day. Rousing literature from both non-combatants and veterans reinforced an attitude that 'true' generals, the icons of guerrilla warfare, had never been defeated militarily by British arms. Britain had prevailed solely through superior numbers and resources, and by the barbarism of a levelling war of attrition. For General Jan Kemp, all that tempered the awfulness of defeat in 1902 was that genuinely partisan and therefore 'true' republican warriors had not failed. Through veteran generals; they could continue to speak for national identity, forming a mystical, almost omnipotent brotherhood of the living and the dead.<sup>12</sup>

For nationalist writers in *Die Huisgenoot* in the 1920s and 1930s, the 'fidelity' of heroic military leadership had only been deepened by the 'treachery' of backsliding Boer soldiers who had limply surrendered, or turned traitor by joining enemy forces. In the face of 'unmanly' cowardice and a breaking of ranks, the tenacity with which *bittereinders* stuck to the battle for independence provided a calming solidity for life after war. As warriors, the toughest generals had come back undiminished, still sustaining the honest identity of men 'of the soil', and with the unquestioning conviction of saints.<sup>13</sup>

A striking feature of this manifestation of martial masculinity was its egalitarianism, refracted through a richly-layered celebration of a democratic fighting republicanism. *Huisgenoot*, *Volksblad* (People's Paper) and other widely-circulating organs of nationalist propaganda turned all Boer soldiers who had died in combat or held out as die-hards, into disciplined, gilded national heroes, placing generals and men on something like an equal footing. Highly emotive examples of valour and sacrifice were easy to come by, as the last months of the war had seen remaining Boer belligerents slowly bleeding to death. By the 1920s, there was an almost insatiable intensity to catalogue everyone who had done their bit as part of a loyal soldiering community; very young boys, the aged, and men who were amputees or otherwise disabled, became a fetish, as writers scrambled to construct various warrior lineage biographies for those who represented the touching extremities of service in defence of freedom.<sup>14</sup> A minor cult of the less than able-bodied provided a moral aura to eclipse almost anything.

As in post-1939 Francoist Civil War historiography, the overlap between popular and more scholarly representations of past war which turned history into nationalist propaganda was very marked. Through the 1940s and, for a time even beyond, much academic writing presented the war above all as a militant and emotive moral covenant of Afrikaner nationalist mobilisation. Such classic studies of the later 1940s as JH Breytenbach, *Die Betekenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (The Meaning of the Second War of Freedom),<sup>15</sup> demonstrated a war made up of godless and mendacious British and upright guardians of a freeborn Boer people, men of the elect who listened to the Prophets, and women who would continue to carry the seed of a republican freedom whose time would surely come again.

Integral to the professional promotion of an Afrikaner *volksgeskiedenis* (people's history), this gloss on the war became its historical truth, part of an 'objective-scientific' truthfulness about the Boer past furnished by leading nationalist historians.<sup>16</sup> The psychology of 'scientific' history in the inter-war decades stressed the 'truth' of a Calvinist-ordained, ethnic political

unity as one of the eternal verities of an Afrikaner 'being', registered as a mystical 'people's union' or *volkseenheid*. The volk was two things. One was an organic body, unified by a common historical culture and a racialised social metaphysics in which individuals could have no existence outside of nationhood. Another was its core historical identity, defined by a perpetual struggle against predatory foes, bent on ungodly business. As more than one historian has pointed out, the ideologies of an Afrikaner nationalist intelligentsia in the 1930s were in various ways linked to those of contemporaneous mobilising German nationalists.<sup>17</sup> The Afrikaner story became one of seamless ethnic suffering; in the nineteenth century, migrant Boer voortrekkers had been bloodied by black African savages, while in the early twentieth century, the 'Boer' had been done in at the hands of the British.

The 1920s, 1930s and 1940s provided a most fruitful environment for a dusting of war memories to be added to other staple ingredients of nationalist feeling. In 1938, the massive centenary celebration of the Great Trek and the Boer-Zulu Battle of Blood River provided a focus for South African War commemorative bonding; not surprisingly, new 1899-1902 monuments and memorials, along with wreath-laying ceremonies, formed a crucial part of 1938 'people's festivals' or *volksfeeste*, locating the armed struggle and military traditions minted at the end of the nineteenth century in the longer history of a shared nationalist past. Moreover, as the Second World War approached, radical nationalists discovered anew the fleeting late-1914 Afrikaner Rebellion, when several thousand Boer commandos had had enough of the sickly virus of Anglicisation, and had launched an armed insurrection against the state, its leaders declaring it an armed protest against the Union's collaboration with the British war effort.

Many prominent rebels had been 1902 *bittereinders*, with rebellion rhetoric drawing heavily on an inherited, dreamy language of republican 'restoration' and 'no surrender'. It spoke of a mystical nationalist past in terms which seemed to speak directly to a present new 'Boer' crisis; and, in due course, later 1930s nationalist discourse ran the upswings of 1899 and 1914 into an embalmed line of heroic *volkshelde* and selfless armed martyrdom.<sup>18</sup> Like the war, the 'Rebellion' had illustrated a truth about Afrikaner national honour: it was preserved best in adversity. Inculcating and anchoring an irreproachable nationalist 'truth' in these years was the resonance of a *Vryheidsoorlog* (War of Freedom), a pervasive term first coined in the 1880s, after the Boers had defeated the British at the 1881 Battle of Majuba. Retrospectively, therefore, the 1880-81 Transvaal War became represented as the *Eerste Vryheidsoorlog* (First War of Freedom), an epic tribe of Israel struggle for justice and independence in the promised land. As a living parable, this imagery went on to season the second major conflict. The confection of a *Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (Second War of Freedom) served to affirm the key place of this war in the long uphill slog of a republicanist Afrikaner nationalism. A commemorative grammar of war remembrance linked with Afrikaner survival through apartheid, to form a kind of coordinated moving front.

This was all, in a way, a doctrinal preface to Afrikaner nationalism's elevation to power through the National Party electoral victory of 1948. Its achievement of political control changed the picture: there was now a diminishing need to bolster bitter social memory of the 'English War'. Having lent a helping ideological hand, the war's commemorative boom underwent a gradual deflation through the course of the 1950s and 1960s; public memory grew more mellow, and the meanings of the war became less touchy an issue in national white politics. At the most general level, the earlier course of that public memory in the aftermath of Union had always been more about prickly cultural boundaries and partisan allegiances than about any common war heritage. After all, for English-speakers and Afrikaner advocates of post-1910 white reconciliation, possessing and rallying around an Anglo-Boer War memory was bound to prove tricky, for commemoration and reconciliation had become squarely opposed social processes. Any wider commemoration of the fallen could not avoid raking up the more controversial questions of the war's sectional course and consequence. Accordingly, the civic worthies of 'English' cities like Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg maintained a mostly muted observance, although in the 1930s and 1940s it was not always possible to avoid becoming embroiled in bitter local quarrels with nationalist Afrikaner dignitaries and war veterans over the 'misuse' of commemorative processions and gatherings to express anti-English 'anger' and 'hatreds',<sup>19</sup> or at the deriding of civic protocol by 14 excluding mayors from annual memorial invitations. As a pained correspondent to the

*Natal Witness* put it in 1939, the emphases in Afrikaner ceremonies were 'neurotic' and 'fixated', when the need was for life to go on, and for the war to be left behind, a 'sad happening' of 'our unlucky past'.<sup>20</sup>

Why was there less of a fixation after the end of the 1940s? Apart from the National Party's political triumph, any answers to this question can probably be little more than conjectural. But a few reasonable suggestions can be made for why exaggerated nationalist reminders of the moral lessons and animosities of the war weakened appreciably in the immediate post-Second World War decades. In part, this was because many Afrikaners, including poorer whites, found themselves enjoying unprecedented prosperity under post-1948 National Party rule. Various Afrikaner interests were specifically secured by the apartheid state, through such measures as a political purge of English-speakers in the Union army and the police, the statutory elevation of Afrikaans, and the reinstatement to command of Nationalist military officers who had resigned on South Africa's 1939 declaration of war against Germany. In such satisfying circumstances, continuous brooding over the privations and losses of the 'English War' inevitably became a less important element of nationalist propaganda.

There were also other significant factors of decline. One, commencing in the early 1950s, was the increasing tendency of the new ruling nationalist elite to extend the frontiers of war commemoration. Both World Wars (previously remote from official republican Afrikaner culture) were now to be commemorated by Afrikaner nationalism; this essentially political dedication even saw the erection of a new monument on the Somme in 1952.<sup>21</sup> More 'universal' than the South African War, these wars encoded a particular commemorative intention for prime ministers like DF Malan and JG Strydom: to affirm the national sacrifice and legitimate aspirations for freedom of a European South Africa, inscribed within the free and democratic order of what Malan called a 'timeless' tradition of just wars to preserve Western civilisation.<sup>22</sup>

Another factor was the long-awaited satisfaction at the achievement of a national South African Republic and its withdrawal from the British Commonwealth at the beginning of the 1960s: at least in spirit, the old Boer Republics could waltz again. Another was the need to shuffle English South Africans into a more companionable and inclusive pan-white supremacist nationalism, in which emergent Afrikaner industrial and financial classes came to share interests with an established English elite. This duly produced a thaw in war sentiment by the 1960s, with a decreasing tendency for staunch Afrikaners to crudely associate English-speakers with the old brutishness of imperial conquest. Whereas in the earlier 1900s the anti-British case embodied by urban 'Boer' war monuments had caused acrimony and division between Afrikaans and English whites in cities like Johannesburg, by the mid-1960s some larger annual remembrance services had become communal, jointly organised and attended by armed services representatives and members of both English and Afrikaner cultural bodies and war veterans' associations.<sup>23</sup> Still, some residual Afrikaner war sentiment had a knack of breaking through with disconcerting force over monument observance of colonial English fallen, with English newspapers like Johannesburg's *The Star* and the *Natal Witness* rounding on the Afrikaner press for disagreeable diatribes against any honouring of the old enemy. What they had in mind were individuals like JJF du Toit, chairman in 1964 of an umbrella committee of Afrikaans cultural groupings, and not one for letting bygones be bygones. In August, he came out against the very idea of a combined, transcendent commemoration of the fallen, declaring that to 'commemorate men who died for a British imperialist interest' along with patriots 'who died in defence of the Boer republics' was akin to burying nineteenth-century Transvaal President Paul Kruger, and the capitalist imperialist, Cecil Rhodes, 'in one coffin'.<sup>24</sup>

By the early 1970s, such minor key memory of the war as an ideological totem had largely migrated to more rural and conservative Afrikaans social constituencies, including a khaki-shirt, nationalist ultra-right which continued to maintain a communitarian, 'volk' ethos through pistol clubs and rifle associations, para-military youth camps and regular commando drill. The movement of opinion was gradual, almost imperceptible through the late-1960s, and took wing in response to crucial shifts within the body walls of a nationalist Afrikaner 'volk'. As Afrikaner capitalism became increasingly less statist and more driven by market economy

imperatives, so heavily indebted groupings (like smaller farmers in the Orange Free State and Transvaal) or statutorily-protected urban manual workers began to feel the pinch of a capitalist modernisation. Their interests no longer fully guaranteed by National Party political patronage and redistributive subsidies, more marginal, insecure, and conservative Afrikaans constituencies gravitated towards more extreme and purist Afrikaner political parties and populist movements. Mostly dormant through the fattening 1950s and 1960s, classic 'Boer' traditions of resistance and a warring identity were now reinvented and re-imagined, given a new lease of life by men and women who, by the late 1970s, had been elbowed out of the core modernising Afrikaner nationalist constituency.

In a host of small ways, a far-right populism began to course through the 1980s, bearing the old imprint of combative War of Freedom memories: shared by people in organised rural circles, by those attached to fundamentalist Protestant religious tributaries, by scattered clusters of rural army reservists attached to a 'Boer commando' identity, and by right-wing Conservative Party leadership, this was a hostile and isolationist message. Attempts to reform the apartheid economic and political system were a 'craven' capitulation to Anglicised and other enemies of the Afrikaner nation: had 'true' memories grown so short that Lord Kitchener had been forgotten? Had Afrikanerdom's national memory forgotten the scarring of the 'the Boer nation' by war, and its lesson of unstinting republican vigilance? Oppressive war had 'made' an Afrikaner people, and this was a defining legacy which could not be displaced.<sup>25</sup>

In this sense, the ground so well watered by the Afrikaner nationalist project in earlier decades continued to bear fruit as war memory continued to be invoked and manipulated. Indeed, even when well past its zenith as a generalised mobilising cult of commemoration, the embers of 1902 could be stoked by moments of crisis, most especially by the combustible terminal turn of apartheid by the 1990s. In a striking 1993 observation, the quixotic Afrikaner historian, Floors van Jaarsveld, concluded that 'Afrikanerdom has suffered two great defeats in its history: the first at the beginning of the twentieth century in the war with Britain, which inflicted a military defeat on it, and the second at the end of the twentieth century—a political defeat at the hands of Africa'.<sup>26</sup> Renewed elements of a *bittereinder* resistance aesthetic took shape around this view, as British imperial domination became African domination, with African National Congress President Nelson Mandela its odious High Commissioner; for its ultra-right, Afrikanerdom once again faced the prospect of complete deracination in a unitary mongrel state. 'Again', intoned Ferdi Hartzenberg of the Conservative Party, 'dark days have come to our people'.<sup>27</sup> In turn, to his right, there was a rekindled yearning for a Transvaal and Orange Free State Boerestaad or *Volkstaat* (People's State) to secure the endangered bloodlines of ethnic self-determination. In one memorable burst of unvarnished Anglophobia, Robert van Tonder of the Boerestaad Party called for authentic 'Boers' to consecrate a pure 'Boerestaad' as posthumous revenge upon Queen Victoria, who had seen to it that 'our Boer republics were crushed in 1902 and other "peoples" were forced to live with us in one state'. This had amounted to a 'declaration of civil war' but then, as now, 'civil war' could not defeat Afrikaners, as, 'after all, it was the Afrikaners who invented it'.<sup>28</sup> In Van Tonder's historical universe, the South African War boiled down to an attempt to exterminate a fellow-people, a 'civil war' in which Afrikaners had survived the fire through their imagined creation of a guerrilla 'people's war'.<sup>29</sup>

Equally noteworthy were the pricks felt during the first visit of the Windsors since the 1940s, the 1995 tour of Elizabeth II in the wake of South Africa's recent Commonwealth re-entry, and its transition to majority rule. Reviving old war words and images, an incensed Boerestaad Party formally declared the Queen unwelcome in an imagined 'Boerestaad of Transvaal and the Free State'. From a 'dynasty of conquerors', she was 'the great granddaughter of a cruel queen', whose invading armies had not only 'destroyed our Boers' freedom', but had also committed 'the infamous holocaust in which a sixth of our people were murdered in concentration camps'.<sup>30</sup> Other Afrikaner responses were less apoplectic, if still chastening, even when from non-nationalist quarters. Thus, blustery ANC parliamentarian, Carl Niehaus, called upon the Queen to observe a more inclusive act of South African war remembrance by commemorating Boer dead. 'If she is going to lay wreaths at World War II and World War I graves here', he declared, 'she ought also to lay wreaths on the graves of the tens of thousands of women and children who died in the camps'.<sup>31</sup>

Through the 1990s, a dissenting Boer War flank engaged on a number of fronts, not so much against the old enemy of rampant Englishness, but against a dawning age of racial equality and majority rule, and against now despised National Party leaders for yielding to a tide of racial and cultural cosmopolitanism. At one tragi-comic pole there was, for instance, the armed seizure of Pretoria's nineteenth century Schanskop Fort and military museum, a symbolic place in thrall to Boer commando heritage and its militarised republican reference. Under the *Vierkleur* or flag of the old Transvaal Republic, a militant knot of right-wingers protested against multiracial national political negotiations, their sole purpose seen as a selling off of the 'sacred' assets of Afrikaner sovereignty. After their arrest and conviction for illegal armed occupation, their khaki-clad leader, Willem Ratte, wrote furiously from gaol to contest his English press depiction as some right-wing anachronism. What outweighed this was a First Anglo-Boer War antecedent. In his torrential and powerful manifesto, Ratte insisted:

Were the Boers of 1880 called right-wingers, for resisting the imperialist British occupation? Then, as now, you had an alien regime lording it in Pretoria over our people, whose gutless president had betrayed and handed over his sovereign state. Then, as now, the new (neo) colonialist administration pretended to be God's gift to the supposedly 'dirty and dumb Dutchmen', and tried its best to smear the pro-independence party as only a few backward 'Don Quixotes tilting at windmills'. Our struggle has nothing to do with right or left ... this being incidental, like religion in the Irish-British conflict, but everything to do with a nation having an inherent right to be free.<sup>32</sup>

At another eccentric pole, an October 1992 Kruger Day commemoration saw a sliver of rough-hewn Englishness regain some lustre in right-wing nationalist Afrikaner life. In a cameo of bonding between Afrikaner and English ultra-right interests, indefatigable ex-Rhodesians and new English-speaking adherents of the Conservative Party lumbered into the Vaal River to retrieve rocks from a Boer concentration camp memorial, reputedly torn down in spite by departing British soldiers in 1903. Under the solemn gaze of a crowd of several thousand, the rock was piled up close to the official Paardekraal camp monument, thereby atoning symbolically for past desecration. Hailing it as 'the greatest conciliatory gesture by English-speaking countrymen since before the Boer Wars', Conservative Party leader Andries Treurnicht announced that 'the time has certainly come for all English-speaking patriots to let bygones be bygones, and to join hands with the Boer to resist the common enemy of black domination'.<sup>33</sup> This, as it happens, was a droll gesture from someone who had spent a good chunk of his political career railing against the perniciousness of English influence in South African life.

In innumerable other ways, fragments of the old imperial connection entered the grain of radical nationalist war remembering in the later 1990s. In April 1998, for example, there was gleeful Afrikaner press appreciation of news from Ireland of opposition in Listowel to the raising of a plaque to commemorate Kitchener's birthplace, because of his ruthless prosecution of the closing stages of the war. One typical correspondent noted that it would be received with 'great satisfaction by Afrikaners in general, but particularly by descendants of the Boers who fought against Kitchener's barbarism'. Several others invoked the obvious analogy, declaring that Kitchener's concentration camp policy had been the genocidal work of a British 'Hitler' in South Africa; Paardeberg was an Auschwitz, a war crime never to be forgotten. JA Marais, 'son of a Boer father' exiled and imprisoned with other captured soldiers on St Helena island, and 'a mother who was interned in the Klerksdorp concentration camp', urged on the campaigning idea of a republican Irish-Afrikaner 'war crimes tribunal for Kitchener' in 1999, as the most meaningful 'commemoration of the outbreak of the Boer War'.<sup>34</sup> It was all caught sublimely by a *Sunday Times* call for Britain's Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to apologise for his country's 'appalling concentration camp record', in the light of public contrition before the Irish for the potato famine, and Indians for the Amritsar massacre. In response, a correspondent cautioned readers against expecting much sentiment, for while there were 'many Irish and Indian voters in the UK', there 'is no Afrikaner vote'.<sup>35</sup>

Such flickerings can probably be seen as being among the last thorny episodes of an antique Afrikaner past, dredging up for a self-conscious and ailing 'Boer' minority, the nostalgias, iconography and resentments of a world in steep decline. For isolationist politico-military bodies like the *Wit Wolve* or White Wolves, there was a knowing sense of things sliding away, as some displaced farmers and alienated blue-collar workers clung doggedly to a *volksisch* memory of the war. In a sulphurous style which was on the way to becoming almost formulaic, *Afrikanerveerstandsbeweging* (Afrikaner Resistance Movement) leader, Eugene Terreblanche, likened black political demands to those of the English *Uitlanders* (foreigners) who had been so unwelcome a blot upon Paul Kruger's Transvaal Republic. Terreblanche growled that not to grant Afrikaner 'freedom' in an autonomous people's state would be 'to play with fire', as British statesmen had discovered in the 1890s. Sceptics were referred to Thomas Pakenham's major 1979 history, *The Boer War*. A redemptive English work of 'truthful' war scholarship which, in his view, gave the Boers their due and more, Terreblanche recommended it as being as admirable as Shakespeare, therefore 'not part of any English conspiracy'.<sup>36</sup>

Within the AWB on the extreme white right, the coming of black majority rule represented 'a second invasion', requiring the invoking of a national Boer state defence. This produced overstatement: a heightening of the inclination to clip about under arms on horseback, in a steely display of the Boer commando tradition of bearded masculinity, and a ginging up of the key tribal bonds of kinship and language. Because of the danger to 'authentic' Afrikaners from untrustworthy news editors, slippery National Party politicians and meddling American imperialists (Washington having now replaced London), the call was for a 'return' of 'the generals', for nationalist Afrikaners had historically always looked to their toughest and sharpest military men, the de la Reys and de Wets, for salvation. Something of that vindicated old martial spirit was now again urgently required.<sup>37</sup>

Just how much things turned on emotive memory of the ashes of 1899-1902 could be glimpsed in puffy Conservative Party talk of an imminent *Derde Vryheidsoorlog* (Third War of Freedom), the cocky use by the AWB and Boerestaat Party of the old Transvaal republican flag and its admonitory anthem, *Ken u die Volk* (Do You know the People), in swiping gunshots at the British Embassy in Pretoria in 1990, and in a bomb attack on Melrose House, where Boer leadership had signed its surrender in May 1902. Back where it all started, radical ideologues of national purity demanded the reclamation and renewal of the old Boer Republics. This was not something to be created, for historically they had already been in full, legitimate existence, based on a Boer occupation which had 'enjoyed internationally recognized independence until 1902'.<sup>38</sup>

In a further poignant echo from the early 1900s, there was denunciation of reformist National Party leadership as *verraiers* (traitors) to the cause of Afrikanerdom for having submitted to the ANC. Fringe politicians to their right went for the government as 'a lot of traitors', guilty of appalling 'treachery' and 'acts of treason against its own people'.<sup>39</sup> The base appeal of the notion of 'national treachery' was to a form of atavism, a bitter replay of the closing moments of the Anglo-Boer War which had produced a full-blown split between Boer *hensoppers* ('hands-ups'), opting for peace rather than going on to the wire) and *bittereinders*, some of them stiff-necked women, who wanted to hold out against imposed peace terms. In other words, here again were some leading Boer 'generals' turning traitor through premature capitulation or spineless surrender. The chief modern incarnation of this yellow behaviour was, of course, President FW de Klerk, who in 1997 tellingly let slip in London that he had bowed to the inevitable necessity to 'surrender the right to national sovereignty'.<sup>40</sup> In terms of the conventional nationalist content and discourse of Afrikaner history, the very term 'surrender' has long been peculiarly pregnant in partisan meaning; through his treacherous submission, de Klerk had in effect become guilty of complicity in the monstrous crime of war against the freedom of his own nation.<sup>41</sup> Equally, this seizure of the didactic precedent of 1899-1902 war memory may well be seen as perhaps the final historical moment when the fires of traditionalist nationalist bitterness and self-righteousness could still be fanned by the historical stimulus of the moral relevance of the South African War.

The essential way in which the South African War has been remembered is sectional—Afrikaner nationalist, political, and polarising; and, over the course of the present century, that war commemoration as political vision has passed through a number of phases, variously inflected by changing material and psychological contexts. This present consideration of war remembrance arises in an increasingly contradictory climate of commemoration. On the one hand, the dawning 1999 centenary of the war provides for an obvious surge of war remembrance and deliberation over its meaning. On the other, the centenary coincides with the obvious displacement of Afrikaner nationalist power—by a post-apartheid political order. At the time of writing, it is perhaps never more obvious that shifting historical contexts affect rooted ways in which war is popularly remembered and commemorated. As external repositories of public memory, war memorials and monuments now face a future in which they are divested of symbolic 'Boer' 'party' and 'political' power accrued in the nationalist apartheid era; they may, as some scholars have recently argued, be transmuting into open 'texts', mnemonic reminders of how a particular South African community (no longer special, nor privileged) viewed the place of a defining war in its history.<sup>42</sup>

Nor is this the only issue worth consideration. In a changing society directed by the liberation aristocracy of a black African nationalism, busily creating its own national mythologies of martyrs and liberators, what will happen to national memory of a historical Anglo-Boer War, in a context in which the position of the country's black majority has long been to dissociate itself from a perceived 'white man's war'? One possibility is that the war may inevitably come to be remembered as an increasingly remote episode from a vanished European imperial age. As the Johannesburg *Sunday Independent* put it on the centenary of the 1895 Jameson Raid on the Transvaal, that madcap moment of imperial buccaneering which Winston Churchill considered to be the real start of the Anglo-Boer War: 'with this tumultuous century drawing to a close, hindsight puts the do-or-die battle between Afrikaners and English-speakers into its proper, smaller context. White men were never going to win indefinite control of this African continent'.<sup>43</sup>

In some ways, there can be little doubt that perpetuation of the war in the public spaces of historical memory will wane, a revivalist centenary notwithstanding. It is even conceivable that with the disappearance of a distinctively constituted Afrikaner 'political nation', the war may come to have little meaning at all as core national political heritage. Even the key arenas of war are already not what they were, unlike say, the Somme or Flanders. The Orange Free State, seminal to freehold Boer republican identity since the mid-nineteenth century, has had to fall in with African nationalist times, losing its revered Dutch 'Orange' stamp in 1994 to become the Free State, and shedding Afrikaans in favour of English as its sole official language three years later. Its fighting sister Transvaal has also been administratively dismembered, retitled and demarcated as new territorial entities with chunky non-colonial names like Gauteng and Mpumalanga. Sanitised of their Boer republican identity, on a simple map reading the old warring territories have become the provinces from nowhere a century later.

At the same time, other impulses seek not so much to deflate war remembrance as to recompose it, through detaching its Boer commando and concentration camp past from conservative nationalist Afrikaner history and imbuing it with new national patriotic meanings. In this, the purpose of crafting a new vision of the war is to structure consensus. Accordingly, an ANC judge of the South African Constitutional Court has reclaimed idealism and the universal story of human freedom as the shared meaning of the South African War. Sliding together the language of the present with that of the past, Judge Albie Sachs asserted his personal 'pride in the heroic struggle of the Boer fighters in the history of the world and in our history'. Any history of a liberal human rights culture had to 'take into account the fate of the women and children in the concentration camps. So much of Afrikaans history is part of the struggle for freedom. *Vryheid* (Freedom) has real resonance and meaning'.<sup>44</sup> Assimilation of the war to a more inclusive new South Africanism is a model illustration of how a present political agenda seeks instinctively to re-invent or re-imagine the past, so that the Anglo-Boer struggle is to be remembered through a new lens of understanding as one of a series of South African Wars, in which 'virtually all ethnic groups' played a shared role, thereby forging 'the common historic destiny of all South Africans'.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, outside of elite cultural and academic missionary circles, the South African Anglo-Boer conflict remains what it has always been, a segmentary war, and one not felt to be a shared legacy, let alone a shared tragedy. In any final analysis, it is hard to see how it could ever be otherwise in a colonial country of such limited commonalities. The South African War is not, and has never been, an American Civil War, a 'never-to-be-forgotten moment' in 'the collective consciousness that makes Americans American'.<sup>46</sup> It produced no Stephen Crane to mythologise a tragic war as a national rite of passage to 'manhood' for both the Blue and the Gray. Instead, it produced an ideological memory as far removed from a single encompassing statehood as could be imagined. In our own time, it is this cultural heritage, sentimentalised or institutionalised, which is now fast trickling away. In the longer run to come, the war may continue its present shift away from a white nationalist-inscribed nationalist commemoration of a sense of 'Afrikaner' self, to more anodyne remembrance as historical heritage, or as a site of pilgrimage for British and Commonwealth regiments to honour the sacrifice of their fallen. At the same time, the official, state-sponsored commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the war points to a new avenue of South African nationalist affirmation. The post-1994 ANC Government has, bizarrely, 'licensed' the war, declaring that it be termed the Anglo-Boer South African War, so as to reflect greater involvement by both white and black. War commemoration, in the words of the deputy Minister of Arts and Culture, Ms Bridgitte Mabandla, is to represent an 'exercise in nation-building through inclusivity, promoting reconciliation, presenting a balanced picture of the war, and raising heritage awareness'.<sup>47</sup> More particularly, in another vintage round of nationalist re-ordering of history, the core focus of the centenary is to be black suffering and sacrifice during the war years: Africans are to join Afrikaners as the carriers of victimhood. While the war has not been seen as a 'white man's war' for some years now, it may now become a 'black man's war'. All this is a fairly long way from the struggle of Afrikaner generals to resolve the fate of a white nation, but it would be another inventive turn in the cultural negotiation of South African War commemoration.

## Endnotes

1. Deryck Schreuder, 'The Power of Colonial Nationalism in Shaping Post-Colonial South Africa', in John Eddy and Deryck Schreuder (eds), *The Rise of Colonial Nationalism, 1880-1914* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 55.
2. Alan Lester, *From Colonization to Democracy: A New Historical Geography of South Africa* (London: Tauris, 1998), 68.
3. GD Scholtz, *Die Ontwikkeling van die Politieke Denke van die Afrikaner, Deel vi, 1910-1924* (Pretoria: Perskor, 1979), 215-36.
4. Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Building a Nation from Words: Afrikaans Language, Literature and Ethnic Identity, 1902-1924', in Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido (eds), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London: Longman, 1987), 109.
5. Albert Grundlingh, 'The National Women's Monument: The Making and Mutation of Meaning in Afrikaner Memory of the South African War', unpub. paper, Rethinking the South African War 1899-1902 Conference, University of South Africa Library, Pretoria, August 1998.
6. Elsabe Brink and Sue Krige, 'Remapping and Remembering the South African War in Johannesburg and Pretoria', unpub. paper, Rethinking the South African War Conference, 1998.
7. Albert Grundlingh, 'War, Wordsmiths and the "Volk": Afrikaans Historical Writing on the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 and the War in Afrikaner Historical Consciousness, 1902-1990', in E Lehmann and E Reckwitz (eds), *Mfecane to Boer War* (Essen: Renz Verlag, 1992), 52.
8. *Die Huisgenoot* (Pretoria, Cape Town), 19 August 1924, 30 March 1932.
9. Sara Raal, *Met die Boere in die Welt* (Kaapstad: Nasionale Pers, 1938); 'Mikro', *Die Ruiters in Die Nag* (Kaapstad: Nasionale Pers, 1941).
10. Grundlingh, 'War, Wordsmiths', 45-46.
11. Kobus du Pisani and Louis Grundlingh, "'Volkshelde": Afrikaner nationalist mobilisation and representations of the Boer Warrior', unpub. paper, Rethinking the South African War Conference, 1998.
12. JCG Kemp, *Vir Vryheid en vir Reg* (Kaapstad: Nasionale Pers, 1941), 86.
13. *Die Huisgenoot*, 18 August 1923; 25 March 1935.
14. *Die Huisgenoot*, 14 July 1937; 6 December 1940.
15. JH Breytenbach, *Die Betekenis van die Tweedevryheidsoorlog* (Johannesburg: FAK, 1949), 16.
16. Louis Grundlingh, 'Politics, Principles and Problems of a Profession: Afrikaner Historians and their Discipline, c1920-c1965', *Perspectives in Education* (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) 12:1 (1990/91), 6-14.
17. T Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid, and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Lester, *Colonization*, 98-100.
18. Sandra Scott Swart, 'The Rebels of 1914: Masculinity, Republicanism and the Social Forces that Shaped the Boer Rebellion', unpub. MA thesis, University of Natal, 1997, 143-46.
19. *Die Burger* (Cape Town), 21 February 1937; 19 August 1940. Signs of such fractiousness continued into the 1960s: *Die Transvaler* (Pretoria), 14 July 1963; *The Star* (Johannesburg), 19 August 1964; Brink and Krige, 'South African War'.
20. *Natal Witness*, 14 August 1939.
21. *Delville Wood Commemorative Brochure* (Johannesburg, 1952): this presented South Africa as a European nation, with a war record of willing sacrifice for liberty through all its modern conflicts.
22. *Die Burger*, 17 November 1952.
23. *The Star*, 27 July 1965; *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), 2 September 1966.
24. *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 August 1964.
25. *Die Burger*, 22 June 1989.
26. *Beeld* (Johannesburg), 12 February 1993.
27. *Die Burger*, 17 December 1993; *Rapport* (Johannesburg), 20 December 1993.
28. *Beeld*, 18 January 1993; *Aida Parker Newsletter* 163 (1993): 2. A far right, Transvaal-based opinion newsheet of the 1980s and early 1990s, rumoured to have been established with conservative US foundation funds.
29. *Die Burger*, 21 March 1995.
30. *Cape Times*, 21 March 1995.
31. *Cape Argus*, 23 March 1995.
32. *Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg), 31 December 1995.
33. *Weekly Mail* (Johannesburg), 16-22 October 1992.
34. *Rapport*, 12 April 1998; *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), 5 and 19 April 1998.
35. *Sunday Times*, 26 April 1998.
36. *Sunday Independent*, 21 December 1995: the reference is to Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979).
37. *Die Volksblad*, 6 October 1994.
38. Johann van Rooyen, *Hard Right: The New White Power in South Africa* (London: Tauris, 1995), 43.
39. *Patriot* (Pretoria), 5 April 1991; *House of Assembly Debates*, col 106, 6 February 1990.
40. *Cape Times*, 19 February 1997.
41. *Patriot*, 7 June 1901.
42. Brink and Krige, 'South African War'.

43. *Sunday Independent*, 31 December 1995.
44. Cited in Grundlingh, 'War, Wordsmiths', 54.
45. *Cape Argus*, 1 October 1996.
46. Noah Andre Trudeau, *Out of The Storm: The End of the Civil War, April-June 1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 422.
47. *Cape Argus*, 11 October 1999.