

The Boer War and the Media (1899–1902)

Abstract

The South African War that broke out in October 1899 was both very old and very new. It was a traditional war, the last of the old-fashioned British imperial wars, with cavalry playing a significant part. But it was also a very modern war, for instance in the British Army's use of railways to subdue the Boers in the early months of 1900, or the use of trench warfare by the Boers along the Modder river. It was disturbingly new in the way that it changed in the autumn of 1900 from a war between armies to a guerrilla war against a civilian population, most distastefully so in the British concentration camps set up to house Boer women and children. Above all, it was a distinctly contemporary war in its impact on the media, especially the newspapers, and in the interaction between the media and those participating in the fighting. It was a significant war, far bigger than originally expected, and was therefore big news. The British Army, ill-prepared for the original Boer invasion of Natal, at first numbered 75,000 troops. In the end, the British and imperial forces totalled 450,000 with contingents from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and India. The British lost 22,000 men, 13,000 of them from disease. The Boers lost about 7,000 in the field, while another 27,000 (many of them very young children) are estimated to have died in the concentration camps. There were also about 20,000 black and 'coloured' Africans who died in concentration camps, though this was little reported at the time. So it was a major episode in British military history. The impact on British opinion of the relief of Ladysmith and especially of Mafeking in 1900 was quite overwhelming. In a frenzy of 'jingo' celebration, the verb 'mafficking' entered the language. In these circumstances, the consequences of the Boer War on the media and its representation of war were inevitably massive.

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The war in South Africa owed its impact in part because it was the first major British war since the advent of mass literacy after the 1870 Forster Education Act. There was a mass readership anxious to read the popular press, while technical advances in telegraphy and news gathering had transformed the methods and scope of the British newspaper industry. The most famous example of this was Alfred Harmsworth's *Daily Mail*, first produced in 1896 at a cost of just one halfpenny.¹ Instead of the traditional, relatively restrained reporting of such newspapers as *The Times* or the *Daily News*, there was now a vibrant press catering for the masses, and one far less elitist and deferential. Thus it was that in the first twelve months of the war, to September 1900 when it seemed the war was over and the British had won an easy military victory, the press coverage of events in South Africa was immense, far more so than in any previous war. In the summer of 1900 there were fifty-eight newspaper reporters in South Africa, up to twenty from *The Times* alone.² The *Daily Mail* sent out a range of correspondents, of whom the most famous was the novelist Edgar Wallace, later to be the author of *The Four Just Men* (1906) and *Sanders of the River* (1911). They also used the first woman war reporter, Lady Sarah Wilson, who sent dispatches from Ladysmith during its long siege, and who was briefly captured by the Boers after being used by Baden-Powell to convey secret messages. In early 1900 the daily circulation of the *Mail* reached over a million, a record for any newspaper anywhere in the world at that time.³

The Times devoted a particular effort to reporting on the war in South Africa. It had enjoyed a special reputation for war reportage since the dispatches of W. H. Russell during the Crimean War in 1852–5. It believed itself to have a particular authority and was anxious not to be outdone by the Reuters news agency, even though *The Times* reporters also tried to make use of local press agents for their work.⁴ *The Times* employed a wide range of reporters, covering a variety of themes, not only military ones; among the more distinguished were Perceval Landon and the youthful Leopold Amery. At first, its writers were intensely one-sided in their writing. They focused on the gallantry of the British troops on the veldt, and presented coverage of the sieges of Ladysmith, Kimberley, and (especially) Mafeking in idealized, almost romantic terms. In Kimberley, where Cecil Rhodes himself took part, *The Times* simply published pro-Rhodes propaganda, much of it drawn from the hero-worshipping diary of the Hon. Mrs Rochfort Maguire. The main *Times* reporter in Mafeking, Angus Hamilton, a man of liberal instincts, was repeatedly

¹ See J. Lee Thompson, *Northcliffe: Press Baron in Politics* (London, 2000).

² Tabitha Jackson, *The Boer War* (London, 1999), 80–1.

³ Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 65ff.

⁴ Jacqueline Beaumont, 'The Times at War, 1899–1902', in Donal Lowry (ed.), *The South African War: A Reappraisal* (Manchester, 2000), 72–3.

censored, and once briefly dismissed, when he ventured on a more balanced treatment of the Boers.⁵ In the last eighteen months of the war, up to the peace concluded at Vereeniging in May 1902, *The Times* largely dismissed reports on the high rate of deaths of mothers and children in the concentration camps. So far as the deaths there were acknowledged at all, the emphasis was placed not on the British commanders but on the inadequacies of the Boers as mothers in terms of their knowledge of hygiene and nutrition. Emily Hobhouse, whose graphic reports drew the attention of the world to the atrocities in the concentration camps was largely ridiculed as a meddling spinster—or, in the bachelor Kitchener's memorable phrase, 'that bloody woman'.⁶

Eventually, even the imperialist *Times* came to adopt a somewhat more balanced view. There was, after all, the need to compete with other newspapers in the accuracy of its reporting, and the British military disasters of November 1899 to January 1900 could hardly be concealed. Increasingly, the military astuteness and patriotic fervour of the Boer soldiers was conceded: indeed the very first military encounter at Tulana hill in the first few days of the war had thrown an ominous light on the Boers' tactical ability. But in general *The Times* made little effort to be objective. Its editor, George Buckle, after all, was an uncritical devotee of Cecil Rhodes and a passionate defender of the Uitlanders, whose demand for the franchise in Johannesburg had originally led to the war. Other newspapers offered different and fairer perspectives. *The Times's* official *History of the War*, published after hostilities had ended under the distinguished editorship of its chief war correspondent, Leopold Amery, was a far more worthy production.

The general impression of the reporters or commentators on the war is that they were a remarkably distinguished group of writers. They comprise a fair range of the literary elite of *fin de siècle* Britain. Rudyard Kipling, already celebrated as poet and storyteller, operated variously in Cape Town and Bloemfontein. He was given special briefings by Roberts, Milner, and Baden-Powell, amongst others. One legacy was his famous poem, 'Boots'—'We're foot-slog-slog-slog-sloggin' over Africa'. As with the Jameson Raid in 1895, he was compelled to observe that the early months of the war proved to be 'no end of a lesson' for the British Empire and its vaunted reputation. In addition to Kipling, as noted, there was the famous novelist, Edgar Wallace, working for the *Daily Mail*, while Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, of Sherlock Holmes fame, contributed two contemporary books of observation of the campaign on the basis of his work in the field hospitals

⁵ Raymond Sibbald, *The War Correspondents: The Boer War* (Stroud, 1993), 130 ff.

⁶ See Brian Roberts, *Those Bloody Women: Three Heroines of the Boer War* (London, 1991); Jennifer Hobhouse Balme, *To Love one's Enemies* (Cobble, BC, Canada, 1994).

on the veldt. Another contemporary account was by Erskine Childers, later famous as author of the spy story, *Riddle of the Sands*, who served in the City Imperial Volunteers in early 1900.⁷ On the Liberal side, the *Manchester Guardian* employed J. A. Hobson, whose *War in South Africa* formed the basis for his famous study of imperialism (1902),⁸ which was to exercise so powerful an influence on Lenin amongst others, while the *Daily Chronicle* had the prominent radical journalist, Henry Nevinson who operated in Ladysmith during the siege. A lesser but interesting figure was E. W. Smith who covered the events in Ladysmith for the *Morning Leader*, whose work brought him a special medal from the Queen.⁹ Ultimately the most celebrated journalist of them all was the 26-year-old Winston Churchill, whose reports for the Unionist *Morning Post* first captured nationwide attention for him, and who used his ambiguous status, part soldier, part reporter, with subtle, self-publicizing skill.¹⁰

What could and did they report? Certainly these journalists were much handicapped by the work of the British censors, especially those based in Cape Town. Here, military censorship of letters and telegrams home was supplemented by civilian vetting by the local Postmaster-General's department. However, things did loosen up a good deal when Roberts took over as Commander-in-Chief at the start of 1900.¹¹ Newspapers continued to complain, however, that Reuters was given privileged treatment and access to news. By March 1900, for all the work of the censors, there was fierce criticism of Buller, White, and other British generals, whose incompetence had led to so many disastrous defeats down to that at Spion Kop. Leopold Amery in *The Times*, like other journalists, directed fierce attacks on General Buller, though an element in this may have been that pro-Roberts journalists would inevitably have criticized Buller, a supporter of Roberts's great rival in the high military command, Sir Garnet Wolseley.¹² On balance, the savagery of the fighting did eventually get across to readers. The heavy British casualties in the disaster at Spion Kop, for instance, were certainly given the fullest coverage.

As in all cases, the newspapers showed a distinct difference between their editorials and their factual reporting. The editorials at first, on

⁷ See Andrew Lycett, *Rudyard Kipling* (London, 1999), 434ff.; Margaret Lane, *Edgar Wallace: The Biography of a Phenomenon* (London, 1938); Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Great Boer War* (London, 1900); Erskine Childers, *In the Ranks of the C.I.V. : A Narrative and Diary of Personal Experiences with the C.I.V. Battery in South Africa* (London, 1900).

⁸ J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London, 1902).

⁹ Papers of E. W. Smith, Harry Ransom Humanities Center Library, Austin, TX.

¹⁰ See his book, *London to Ladysmith, via Pretoria* (London, 1900).

¹¹ Jacqueline Beaumont, 'The British Press and Censorship during the South African War', *South African Historical Journal* No. 41 special issue (November 1999), 267–89.

¹² Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), 73–4. The British generals were split into two 'rings', the 'African ring' headed by Wolseley, and the 'Indian ring', headed by Roberts.

the Liberal side no less than on the pro-government side, tended to deal in stereotypes. After all, the overwhelming majority of British newspapers were imperialist and pro-war to the very end. Until 1901 there was no 'pro-Boer' newspaper in London; a leading radical critic like H. J. Massingham was removed from his post as editor of the *Daily Chronicle* early on during the war. London journalists invariably presented the Boers as primitive and backwards, isolated rural people. They were often described in animal terms as 'herds' or 'flocks', whose defeat by the superior civilization of the British was an inevitable result of social Darwinism and the influence of the scientific principle of natural selection.

But the reporting of events on the front soon became more balanced. There arose growing admiration for the social and moral qualities of the Boer peoples of the republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. After all, British readers were familiar with the emotionally powerful account of African farm life written up in the famous work of the South African feminist, Olive Schreiner. 'Pro-Boers' who opposed the war tended to project the Boers romantically as models of energetic, Protestant, freedom-loving and family-loving people, somewhat in the way that the Protestant Swiss, William Tell and all, was depicted in British Liberal writing and mythology. It was almost their necessary myth, to be used in their critique of the political and social inadequacies of the British at home. The Boers were sympathetically written up by authors like Childers and Amery, and (if allowed) by Angus Hamilton in *The Times*. Childers was unable to fathom the bitterness towards the Boers felt by a South African recruit to the British Army. There had never been evidence of the Boers mistreating their British prisoners of war. He formed 'a friendly impression of the enemy we were fighting'. J. A. Hobson, normally critical of Boer backwoodsmen and their culture, nevertheless praised the 'simplemannered, plain living Boer farmers' as historically necessary victims of cosmopolitan/Jewish capitalism.¹³

Most remarkably, these views were shared by many British Army officers in the field. They found the Boers to be doughty enemies whose qualities, physical and moral, they respected.¹⁴ The Boer enemy, a vigorous and manly type, was often compared very favourably with the cosmopolitan and shifting population in the goldfields of the Rand whom the British were supposedly defending (anti-semitism played its part here when depicting Johannesburg as 'Jewburg'). Certainly the Boer

¹³ Stewart Weaver, 'The Pro-Boers: War, Empire and the Use of Nostalgia in Turn of the Century England', in George K. Behlmer and Fred M. Leventhal (eds), *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia and Identity in Modern British Culture* (Cambridge, 2000), 52–3; Childers, *In the Ranks of the C.I.V.*, 252–3.

¹⁴ Keith Surridge, "'All you Soldiers are what we call Pro-Boer": The Military Critique of the South African War, 1899–1902', *History* 82 (1997), 582–600.

fighting men compared well with the often physically feeble recruits to the British Army, whose poor quality in terms of health was later to be condemned by the Committee on Physical Deterioration in 1904 and its call for a healthier, more 'efficient' population.¹⁵ The treatment of the Boers in some of the writing and reporting during the war anticipated the political settlement eventually agreed with them when the Union of South Africa came into being in 1910. The Boers, unlike Kipling's 'lesser breeds without the law' were fit to exercise freedom. There was an obvious racial aspect to this. The Boers were, after all, white men, and hence by definition more civilized than black adversaries such as the Zulus, or indeed the black and coloured population in Cape Colony and Natal, which supported the imperial cause. Blacks, even though they patriotically embraced the British point of view, were seen as akin to savages. Certainly they were not supposed to be armed (even though armed Barolong played, for example, an important role at Mafeking). For one thing, the black tradition, it was believed, was to be ungentlemanly in war and to take no prisoners.

A striking feature of the role of the press during the Boer War was the unusual degree of interaction between the newspapers and the main participants. This was especially true of Lord Roberts, a most accessible commander-in-chief. He was a media-friendly man, as he had been since he had won fame in marching from Kabul to Kandahar during the Afghan wars in 1880, which made him an imperial hero. One of his close friends was the right-wing Welsh journalist, H. A. Gwynne, then working for Reuters in South Africa. Roberts frequently held relaxed press conferences with reporters and allowed them to travel freely behind the British lines. He believed that all publicity must be good publicity. On the other hand, happy journalists who sent their reports back to Britain often found that Roberts's own doctored reports had got there first! As a result he built up his own image substantially. Writers like Childers made much of his popularity among the rank and file soldiers, and of his courage when his son was killed in action. Roberts's media consciousness was never seen to better effect than in the heavy press coverage of his own triumphant march into Pretoria, the captured capital of the Transvaal, on 5 June 1900. It was even rumoured that Buller's parallel advance in Natal had been deliberately slowed up by Roberts so that the glory of his own running up the flag in Pretoria should not be in any way overshadowed. It all made bad news for his implacable enemy—not the Boers on the veldt but Sir Garnet Wolseley back in London.

This media consciousness applied even more strongly to the hero of Mafeking, Colonel Robert Baden-Powell. Reporters shied away from

¹⁵ Bentley Gilbert, *The Evolution of National Insurance in Great Britain* (London, 1966), 88 ff.

awkward questions such as why he was in Mafeking anyway, and glossed over the fact that most of the time the siege of Mafeking was almost totally uneventful. Instead they focused on Baden-Powell's personal qualities, as they perceived them. He himself ensured that hostile reports of his command at Mafeking were suppressed, while he used his own local journal, the *Mafeking Daily Mail*, to promote his own qualities and prestige. He was romanticized by Kipling, Conan Doyle, and by besotted journalists for his humanity, his calm and resourcefulness, his 'impish' good humour (he himself took part in humorous music-hall sketches in entertainments for the Mafeking population on Sunday nights). Also emphasized was his typically English love of sport. For instance, he promoted cricket and football matches amongst the British troops, while his reports from Mafeking often featured cricketing metaphors, such as '200 Not Out'. He was depicted as the classic strong, silent type, a child of nature who blended imperceptibly into the veldt, and enjoyed the dark of the night. He was described as 'Impeesa', the African name for 'the wolf who never sleeps'. His style and appearance were highly distinctive and geared to self-publicity, notably the bush hat he wore on his head, later adopted by the Boy Scouts. Even Queen Victoria was moved to object to his self-publicity when some emergency postage stamps issued at Mafeking included the head of Baden-Powell rather than that of the Queen. In the new cinematography, Baden-Powell achieved iconic status. By contrast, his many negative qualities on which later historians have focused—his probable pederasty and undoubted racism in his brutality towards the black population at Mafeking (many blacks were thrown out from Mafeking, often to die on the open veldt, to preserve food rations for the white population; others were executed for stealing food)—were never mentioned.¹⁶

After the siege of Mafeking came to an end, the Army itself tried to give Baden-Powell a lower profile, by sidelining him to lesser command. But his romantic legendary status was assured after the delirious excitement of the siege and relief of Mafeking. After the war, his heroic role was carried on into the woodcraft culture of the Boy Scouts in 1907. His book *Scouting for Boys* became almost a sacred text. Its origins lay in a short work, 'Aids to Scouting for NCOs and Men', that he had written during the siege of Mafeking. *Scouting for Boys* became a cult book, widely publicized by Baden-Powell's close friend, Rudyard Kipling. It was a romanticization of the outdoor life, militarism with right-wing 'patriotic' overtones linked with the need for national military service. In the interwar years, the massed scout jamborees at Gilwell Park were to become the more benign

¹⁶ For a severe view, which others contest, see Pat Hopkins and Heather Dugmore, *The Boy: Baden-Powell and the Siege of Mafeking* (Rivonia, South Africa, 1999).

British version of *Jeune Nation* or the Hitler Youth. Kipling also proclaimed it as a form of social control, imbuing the sons of the working classes with the right patriotic ideas. In return, Baden-Powell's postwar invention, the Wolf Cubs, drew heavily on the mystique of Kipling's *Jungle Book*.

Of the other British commanders in the field, even Kitchener, who took over the command of the British armies after Roberts departed in August 1900, had tried in the past to make some use of the press after his triumph over the Mahdi at the battle of Omdurman in the Sudan in 1898. But his great journalist friend, G. E. Steevens, to whom he may well have had a homosexual attraction, was to die of typhus during the siege of Ladysmith.¹⁷ Kitchener later became furiously angry with the *Daily Mail*—with good reason, one may add—when it appeared to impede his efforts to conclude an early peace settlement with the Boers in 1901. A repressed, introspective, inarticulate man, he never enjoyed a good rapport with the media. On one notorious occasion in the Sudan, he swept aside the assembled corps of pressmen with the words, 'Get out of my way, you drunken swabs!'

This was even more true of the red-faced, stolid General Sir Redvers Buller, whose military reputation became perhaps even more dismal than he deserved as a result. On the other hand, even Buller showed some limited awareness of the press. Thus, in stage-managing his entry into Ladysmith at the end of the siege, his ceremonial handshake with General White, the defender of Ladysmith, and his 'order of the day' on 3 March 1900 on how this was a 'glorious page' in the annals of the British Empire, Buller too had the media in mind.¹⁸

In general the Boer War was a seminal and crucial period in the evolution of the British press. It launched a new phase in Britain's self-definition and self-image. Thus, the young David Lloyd George's great coup in January 1901, when he persuaded the Quaker cocoa magnate George Cadbury to buy up the *Daily News* and to convert it overnight from a Liberal Imperialist to a 'pro-Boer' newspaper, was an important event in the rise of the new radical progressivism of the Edwardian age. The distinguished editor of the *News*, Sir Edward Cook, was cast into outer darkness.¹⁹ The impact of the press was most evident in the early part of the war, down to what was seen as the inevitable British victory with the capture of Pretoria. Conan Doyle's book, which was concluded in

¹⁷ Philip Magnus, *Kitchener. Portrait of an Imperialist* (London, 1958), 136. Steevens appears in Giles Foden's attractive historical novel, *Ladysmith* (London, 1999). For Kitchener's criticisms of the reporters, see Field Marshal Lord Carver, *The National Army Museum Book of the Boer War* (London, 1999), 239.

¹⁸ Pakenham, *The Boer War*, 367ff.

¹⁹ Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press, Volume I* (Hamish Hamilton, 1981), 398ff.

September 1900, described 'the end of the war' as having taken place with the formal surrender of the Boer forces.²⁰ By now, the number of reporters in South Africa was being thinned out as signs of boredom set in and public attention focused instead on new excitements such as the Boxer Rising in China. On the other hand, the press also launched the mounting reaction against the war in 1901–2, as will be seen shortly. The war in general created a new kind of reciprocal relationship between pressmen, proprietors, editors, and journalists, and the political world, which helped to generate that curious admixture of racialism, patriotism, anti-corruption, and anti-semitism that characterized the era of Lloyd George's dominance in British politics between 1906 and 1922 and of which he himself was part patron, part victim.²¹

Apart from the extreme importance of the newspaper press during the Boer War, another distinctive feature of the war was its importance for photography. Cameras were now far more widely used than in any previous war. The invention of the Eastman Kodak in the late 1890s was a revolution in itself—cameras could now be carried and used easily by anyone. The Folding Pocket Camera, with its cartridge film, was the first to be mass-produced.²² The cheap 'Brownie' camera was invented in 1900 with its simple machinery and roll-film; 150,000 such Brownies were sold in the course of that first year. This meant that light hand-held cameras could be carried by soldiers and journalists alike: E. W. Smith of the *Morning Leader* carried a small camera with him in his knapsack as he wrote his reports.²³ There had been photography of wars for many years, of course, during the Crimean War in the 1850s and very much in the course of the American Civil War in 1861–5. But the visual reporting was largely then by specialist professionals or agencies. By contrast, many of the major photographic records of the Boer War were by amateurs, notably in the case of the photography of the thousands of little victims in the Boer concentration camps.

The visual images of the Boer War were of the first importance. In a quite new way, it was a war you could see and not just read about. The trauma of the British military catastrophe of Spion Kop was brought home directly by the grim photographic evidence of stretcher bearers carrying away hundreds of British corpses, Scottish Highlanders above all. Illustrated magazines like *Pearson's War Pictures* achieved large sales in 1900; the *Illustrated London News* capped its photographic reporting by sending an artist to Ladysmith to provide a visual coverage of events during the

²⁰ Conan Doyle, *The Great Boer War*, ch. XXIX.

²¹ See G. R. Searle, *Corruption in British Politics, 1885–1930* (Oxford, 1987), 80ff.

²² Emanoel Lee, *To the Bitter End. A Photographic History of the Boer War* (Harmondsworth, 1895, republished Pretoria, 2001), 1–11.

²³ Smith Papers, Austin, TX, loc. cit.

siege.²⁴ The use of visual record extended into the early cinemas and newsreels. Moving pictures of men like Roberts, Kitchener, and especially Baden-Powell were shown in the music halls to build up patriotic fervour and elevate the reputations of the commanders. Baden-Powell in particular benefited from this treatment. When his picture appeared on a film screen in a music-hall, the cheering might last for fully half an hour, holding up the playing of 'God Save the Queen' to official embarrassment.

This media treatment was part of a broad projection of the pro-war imperial ethos in popular culture. The music-halls resounded to patriotic songs like 'Goodbye Dolly Gray'. Young children in distant north Wales learned little jingles like:

Lord Roberts and Kitchener, General Buller and White
Went out to South Africa to teach the Boers how to fight.²⁵

Sport was enlisted for the cause, especially football and cricket matches. It was noted that cricket started being played by representative South African sides while the war was still in progress in 1901–2, although it should be noted that cricket was overwhelmingly a game of the white South Africans of British stock, not of the Dutch-speaking Afrikaaners. How wide an impact this imperial propaganda had on the population has been much debated amongst historians. Richard Price is prominent amongst those who believe that it was largely middle-class people who rallied to the 'patriotic' propaganda. It was young men like white-collar 'clerks' who were prominent in the celebrations of the relief of Mafeking.²⁶ But, for all the reservations about the war in the working-class world, until the middle of 1901 public opinion would appear to have been strongly pro-war in most of England and even more so in Scotland, where engineers, doctors, missionaries, and others had linked the Scots with imperial greatness. This was true to a lesser degree in Wales, however, where Lloyd George became a powerful voice of anti-war dissent and where the Welsh-language newspapers increasingly showed fellow feeling with the Boer republics almost as fellow victims of English colonialism.²⁷ The Labour movement was divided. Ethical socialists like Keir Hardie and the Independent Labour Party, strongly attacked a capitalist, imperialist war,²⁸ less volubly did the Marxist Social Democratic Federation, whose leader H. M. Hyndman always had a jingoist streak. However, the Webbs,

²⁴ Bill Nasson, *The South African War* (London, 1999), 243ff.

²⁵ I was taught this song by my grandmother (then aged around 65) in Wales during the Second World War. My other grandmother had a large painting in her dining room of Colonel Mahon being greeted by Baden-Powell at the relief of Mafeking.

²⁶ Richard Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class* (London, 1972), 132 ff.

²⁷ Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Wales and the Boer War', in *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (Cardiff, 1995), 52–3.

²⁸ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Keir Hardie: Radical and Socialist* (London, 1975), 104ff.

Shaw, and other leading Fabians endorsed the war as a facet of 'national efficiency' while Robert Blatchford's socialist newspaper, the *Clarion*, was aggressively 'patriotic'.

On the other hand, the media coverage did have an important effect in helping to stimulate anti-war sentiment in the later stages of the war. Emily Hobhouse's graphic description of the mass deaths in the concentration camps in 1901 was fully reported in the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Speaker*, and other Liberal journals and had a powerful impact on opinion.²⁹ They followed earlier accounts of the mass burning of Boer farmhouses to cut off domestic support and supplies for the Boer commandos. Hobhouse's reports described a catastrophe of near genocidal proportions conducted by the British Army under Kitchener. They showed that the British, incapable of protecting the health of their own troops, thousands of whom died of disease, were totally at a loss in dealing with problems of malnutrition and mass disease that spread like wildfire in the cramped and insanitary conditions of the concentration camps. With horrific news (and pictures) of the mass burial of thousands of tiny children and their mothers, imperialism lost the moral high ground. Campbell-Bannerman, the Liberal leader, in a devastating phrase, spoke of 'methods of barbarism' being used by the imperial forces in South Africa. Hobhouse was relatively innocent of the ways of the media, but she spoke to others far more adept, notably Lloyd George with his important links with key Liberal journalists like A. G. Gardiner.³⁰ Her devastating findings soon had an immense impact on the public consciousness.

One important readership group that was much influenced as a result was that of women.³¹ The Boer War, indeed, with its massive cruelty inflicted on Boer mothers, was a key episode in the politics of gender in Britain. Women, after all, were prominent on such bodies as the South Africa Conciliation Committee, along with the more forceful Stop the War Committee led by the newspaper man, W. T. Stead. The great debate over the camps between Emily Hobhouse and Millicent Fawcett, opponents in the woman's suffrage debates as well in their judgement on the concentration camps in South Africa, was above all a debate between women. At first Hobhouse denounced the camps for attacking women who were essentially innocent non-combatant bystanders. Later on, notably in her famous *Vrouwen-Dag* (Women's Day) speech at Bloemfontein in 1913, she was to argue that, on the contrary, the camps showed that the women had indeed been combatants, that they had fought and suffered alongside their

²⁹ Balme, *To Love One's Enemies*, 220ff.; Rykie van Reenen (ed.), *Emily Hobhouse: Boer War Letters* (Cape Town and Pretoria, 1984).

³⁰ Stephen Koss, *Fleet Street Radical* (London, 1973).

³¹ See Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George, Keir Hardie and the Importance of the Pro-Boers', *South African Historical Journal* No. 41, special issue (November 1999), 307-9.

menfolk during the war, and therefore that they should now in justice receive the full privileges of citizenship, including the vote (not necessarily in itself a popular view amongst Boer men). She devoted much of her time after the war to trying to build up the skills and self-esteem of Boer mothers, for instance by encouraging cottage industries such as lace-making. Her own close friendship with the pioneer socialist feminist, Olive Schreiner, was another powerful influence in changing opinion.³²

As soon as the war was over, the British media were pivotal in voicing disgust with the concentration camps and the colossal loss of life that resulted: one-quarter of the entire population of Boer women and children in the two Boer republics lost their lives in the space of around fifteen months. Henceforth imperialists like Joseph Chamberlain were swimming against the tide of opinion and the public conscience. In the general election of January 1906, another press issue arose to depress the imperialist cause still further. This was the issue of 'Chinese slavery', indentured Chinese labourers in the mines of the Rand in South Africa.³³ Trade unionists and others denounced the use of cheap non-union labour in this way and alleged that Chinese workers might in time be introduced into British factories and mines also. Cartoonists in 1906 made much use of alarming depiction of Chinese labourers with their narrow eyes and pigtailed, with the fullest use of racist stereotypes. It all reinforced the part that the media played in leading the way in promoting an increasingly negative, guilt-ridden view of the once-glorious war in South Africa.

It is difficult to say much about the Boer newspapers: they were published in Dutch, of course, and were mostly suppressed after the capture of Pretoria in July 1900, to resume publication only at the very end of the war. One specific category of South African newspapers, however, that might be noted was that catering for black or coloured people largely in Cape Colony. Papers like the *South African Spectator* of Cape Town promoted a strongly pro-British attitude in the mistaken view that the Empire would adopt a more liberal policy towards their social and economic status after the war. They urged the need for black combatants to fight in the British Army alongside white troops and turned Abraham Esau, a pro-British black leader murdered by local Boer republicans in January 1901, into a legendary folk hero. The British, inevitably, viewed this ambiguous source of black support with great reserve, for all their public professions of sympathy for the African majority. For instance, press and other accounts by the British authorities, from Baden-Powell downwards, deliberately played down the major role played in defending Mafeking by black

³² Emily Hobhouse to Mrs Steyn, 30 October 1913, cited in Reenen, *Emily Hobhouse*, 393, notes that Olive Schreiner was not invited to the unveiling of the Boer Women's memorial at Bloemfontein in 1913.

³³ Henry Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in late Victorian Britain* (London, 1968), 96–9.

contingents such as the 500 armed Barolong people and the Cape Boys' Regiment, let alone black scouts or runners who supplied key military intelligence. It was felt important to preserve the public myth that this was solely a white man's war.³⁴

Whereas the British newspapers focused on home readers, the Boer propaganda effort by contrast, through their newspapers and international agents, was directed internationally in the hope of foreign support and perhaps even military intervention. Men like the ubiquitous W. J. Leyds, Kruger's Foreign Secretary and envoy in Brussels, operated with some sophistication. They had particular impact in France, though here reactions may have been influenced partly by sore feelings after the French had been humiliated by Kitchener in the so-called Fashoda incident in 1898. Even so, French republican sympathy was strongly enlisted in solidarity with the Boers, and accounts of British brutality made a powerful impact.³⁵ There was at least one very prominent French volunteer, Colonel Georges Comte de Villebois-Mareuil, who fought with the Boers, was promoted to General, and then was killed in a rash 'last stand' in April 1900. The British press became very angry at French joy on hearing of British disasters during the 'black week' in December 1899 and some suggested sending virile young Englishmen across the Channel to teach the French a lesson—perhaps a precursor of that cherished feature of the modern English scene, the football hooligan! There was a spate of anti-French books with some postulating a future war with France conducted via a putative Channel tunnel. When President Kruger went into exile he was ceremonially received by the President of the French republic, Emile Loubet.

Elsewhere the Boer propaganda won many friends, in Germany where Kaiser William II wired his support, in The Netherlands (of course), in Russia. In the United Kingdom, the Nationalist Irish were almost totally hostile, whereas Protestant Ulster was strongly imperial and supplied leading Generals such as Kitchener and French. When the news of 'black week' was announced in the House of Commons, the Irish Nationalist MPs stood up and cheered: after all, they wanted the Boers to win. The war led the Parnellite and Anti-Parnellite factions, divided since the O'Shea divorce case ten years earlier, to reunite at Westminster in 1900 under the leadership of John Redmond. In Ireland itself, a broad swathe of intellectual and cultural leaders, Maud Gonne, G. E. Moore, Lady Gregory, and W. B. Yeats

³⁴ Bill Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War* (Cambridge, 1991); Justin Cartwright, 'Mafeking Revisited', *Guardian*, 21 July 2001. Since this article was written, two immense volumes on the Siege of Mafeking, edited by Iain Smith, have been published by Brenthurst Press, Johannesburg.

³⁵ Donal Lowry, 'The Wider Impact of the South African War', in Lowry (ed.), *The South African War Reappraised* (Manchester, 2000), 214–15. Villebois-Mareuil has been said to have provided the model for his cousin, Edmond Rostand's version of the dashing fictional hero, Cyrano de Bergerac, in 1897.

amongst them, identified strongly with the Boer cause, though not all for the same reasons.³⁶ The United States, an especial target for Boer propaganda, was more complex in its response. Whereas Irish-Americans and other ethnic minorities were passionately pro-Boer, the US Republican government tended to favour Britain both on grounds of the naval security provided by the British Navy in the Atlantic, and on grounds of 'Anglo-Saxon' kinship. Theodore Roosevelt, who became President in 1901 on the assassination of President William McKinley, was a warm supporter of Liberal Imperialism and of Cecil Rhodes in particular.³⁷

The involvement of the media in the Boer War went on long after the war ended in May 1902. After the war, the British media attempted to project the chivalrous, almost light-hearted nature of the war. The appalling bloodshed of Magersfontein, Colenso, and Spion Kop, the atrocities of the concentration camps, were forgotten. It had almost been fun, especially when the Boer commandos took centre stage in 1901–2. They were depicted (not least in Wales) rather like enterprising rugby three-quarters, running rings around their stolid English opponents. The journalist, E. W. Smith, was to note that the Boer War totally lacked the sustained horror of the Great War of 1914–18. Major-General Fuller was to write in *The Last of the Gentleman's Wars* in 1937 that 'by fighting in a sporting way we endowed the war with a chivalrous atmosphere'. The Afrikaaner Deneyz Reitz's famous book *Commando* commended English officers and men for their general humanity on the field of battle.³⁸ Meanwhile, in Australia, imposing war memorials in various cities, especially the one beside Government House in strongly anglophile Adelaide, became testimony to the new Commonwealth's sense of being a fully participating member of the great British Empire, fostering the myth of the 'Independent Australian Briton'.³⁹

The enduring symbol of a 'good war' was Colonel Baden-Powell, the symbol and leader of the cult of 'boy scouts' and the outdoor ethos of the 'illimitable veldt'. The Boy Scouts became internationally renowned as a global youth movement spreading the gospel of wholesome God-fearing patriotism. It became powerful in Africa, black and white: Baden-Powell was to be buried in Kenya, a particular stronghold of the scout movement. Conversely, the Boers projected the war, along with the Great Trek and the Battle of Blood River in 1838, as central to their folk myth as a people—

³⁶ For the interesting reactions of W. B. Yeats see Roy Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life. Volume I* (Oxford, 1997), 222 ff.

³⁷ cf. Kenneth O. Morgan, 'The Future at Work', in H. C. Allen and Roger Thompson (eds), *Contrasts and Connections. Bicentennial Essays in Anglo-American History* (London, 1976), 262–3, citing the New York journal, the *Outlook*.

³⁸ E. W. Smith MS autobiographical fragment, in Smith papers, Austin, TX, Folder 1/11; Eversley Belfield, *The Boer War* (London, 1937), xxv.

³⁹ Of 28,777 Dominion troops serving in the war, 16,310 came from Australia.

witness the Afrikaaner war memorial at Bloemfontein, which features both a giant sculpture of a Boer woman and child, and a casket of the ashes of Emily Hobhouse. Indeed, Hobhouse, as a humane upper-class Englishwoman, was appropriated by the Boers as a particular symbol of international support. She had become the close friend of General Smuts, as well as of Olive Schreiner. In the fullness of time, her name was given to a new settlement in the Orange Free State, while the Nationalist government in the 1980s actually attached her name to a submarine, which would surely have horrified this radical pacifist.

The media in both Britain and South Africa used the military prestige of the commandos, especially of Botha and Smuts, to further this image. Smuts in particular came to be seen in Britain as a personal symbol of the Commonwealth partnership, a kind of philosopher king, a gallant adversary in 1900, a political leader with Botha after the Union of South Africa came into being, finally a member of the Imperial War Cabinet under Lloyd George (an old pro-Boer) in 1917–18 who took his place in the peace conference at Paris and the Treaty of Versailles.⁴⁰ The defeat of Smuts by the Nationalists in his old age in the 1948 South African elections, a year after he had hosted a visit by the British royal family to his country, was seen as the end of an era. On the other hand, Afrikaaners drew very different conclusions about the war. To many of them, men like Smuts appeared rather as traitors to the good old cause. A symbolic point of reference came in autumn 1914, just after war broke out, when a government led by Botha and Smuts imprisoned old Boer leaders like de Wet for treason and also saw Fourie executed and de la Rey shot.⁴¹ The clashing interpretations of the war resulted in a supreme struggle for the soul of the Afrikaaner people, with the Smuts legend giving way in time to the victory of the Nationalists and the apartheid regime in 1948.

For 97 years, from 1902 to 1999, the media representation of the Boer War took the form of trying to create a sanitized impression of a 'gentleman's war', a war that led to reconciliation and in which, morally, there were no losers. The fact that the outcome was the permanent riveting of white supremacy upon the black population, in Cape Colony and Natal as well as the Boer republics of Transvaal and the Free State, was swept aside. Even in the era of apartheid, a relatively benevolent view of the Boer War was sustained, difficult though that was after events at Sharpeville and Soweto.

⁴⁰ See Lloyd George's comments on Smuts in his *War Memoirs, Volume I* (London, 1934), 1032–4 ('a fine blend of intellect and human sympathy') and on Botha in his *Truth about the Peace Treaties, Volume I* (London, 1938), 256–60: 'The great head, the steady, dauntless, understanding eyes full of fire and light, the deep, husky, commanding voice—as I sat opposite him for hours, I found myself drawn to gaze upon him. I thought of him leading his men in a charge and I felt I would rather be by his side than facing him.'

⁴¹ G. H. Le May, *The Afrikaaners: An Historical Interpretation* (Oxford, 1995) for an interesting discussion.

But, at the time of the centenary of the war in the very different era of Nelson Mandela and a free 'rainbow nation', the war had become a huge embarrassment. The Boer War and its legacy, its very centrality in the Boer myth, was strongly contested. For most South Africans, it now seemed merely a local war between two of the white tribes of Africa. One problem was what the war should be called. Names such as the South African or even the Anglo-South African war were now more politically correct than the older designation of the 'Boer War'.

The commemoration of the war's centenary in 1999 thus created a huge dilemma for all South Africans as they emerged from the apartheid era.⁴² More and more emphasis now was placed on the long-neglected role of black Africans during the war, the impact of war in terms of loss of life and the disruption of their social and economic existence, and their betrayal by the British government when negotiating the Union in 1910—as, indeed, socialists like Keir Hardie had spelt out at the time. By 1999 it was no longer clear what the centenary of the war was trying to remember or honour. A major historical conference at Pretoria in August 1998 (at which the present writer took part) focused on social, gender, ethnic, and medical aspects, rather than the actual fighting. When the Queen visited South Africa in 1995, she was asked (in vain) to apologize for the concentration camps during the war, just as she had been asked to apologize to the Maoris of New Zealand and the aborigines of Australia. Media reporting of the war in South Africa 100 years earlier had turned from a reporting of events into a jumble of fiction and fact, legend, symbolism, and stereotype. It had acquired an embarrassing half-life of its own. One hundred years after the event, the media presentation of the Boer War of 1899–1902 had to begin all over again.

⁴² See Elsabe Brink and Sue Krige, 'Remapping and Remembering the South African War', *South African Historical Journal* No. 41, special issue (November 1999), 404–21.