

The War for South Africa
The Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902

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Bill Nasson is already known for his *The South African War 1899-1902*, published in 1999 at the time of the centenary of the war. Since then there have been a flurry of works on specialist aspects of the conflict but no major reconsideration of the campaign as a whole. But much else has changed, in South Africa and globally, and this volume is conceived and framed rather differently from its predecessor. Only about half the book is about the battles and these are often dealt with briskly and concisely. There are none of Thomas Pakenham's grand set pieces or the "stupefying detail" found in some military histories.

The war for South Africa is set against the backdrop of the American invasion of Iraq. Nasson is alert to the similarities between these two wars, a hundred years apart. In their origins and conduct both were "clothed in deception" (p.18) in anticipation of a quick end and the desire of a great imperial power for control of vital mineral resources.

In his introduction Nasson points out that this war was transitional, "an agrarian conflict with a distinctly industrial radiation" (p. 17). This is a point worth contemplating for the tension between the old and the new permeated the clash throughout, both within and without republican society, from the contrast between the military methods of the older patriarchs and the more ruthless younger commanders like Botha and Smuts to combat, at once, a "traditional countryside war of movement" and one which was dependent

on the railway, electronic communication, aerial observation and modern firearms. In other respects, too, this was a “war of modernity” (p. 28) with echoes of the suffering and destruction of the great industrial campaigns of the twentieth century. As in the Algerian case, the notorious concentration camps were regarded by the imperialists as a means of educating country people whose way of life seemed worse than antiquated, actively dangerous in their flouting of “modern” public health practices.

One of the difficulties in dealing with this war is that the first period, with its set battles, is much easier to describe than the elusive guerrilla war. Most historians, like Pakenham, tend to concentrate on the first year but Nasson has dealt a little more even-handedly with the two parts. He has not, however, devoted much attention to the Cape invasions and such folk heroes as Gideon Scheepers receive no mention. The strength of this book, then, lies less in the military history than in Nasson’s understanding of the broader context.

Nasson is, for instance, alert to the gendered aspects although he deals with it lightly. Wartime attitudes, he points out, were often shaped by gender (p. 281). Thus, at the end, when the land was devastated and families incarcerated, what remained to the men was “to be men”; those who did not stay in the fight were not fully men (p. 246). Women like Hendrina Joubert and Hester Cronjé were doing more than carrying domesticity to the front. They were identifying actively with the republican war effort (p. 111). As one would expect from a historian who has dealt extensively with the participation of blacks, their part is treated with judicious intelligence. His discussion of the role of the *agterryers*, for instance, gives full weight to their essential role in the field, when “war is a form of work” (p. 86).

Much of the book contemplates the meaning of the war in a modern South Africa in which Afrikaners have lost the political independence for which they had been fighting. Nasson concludes that the war remains of historical significance. The last two chapters, particularly, are devoted to a consideration of the impact of the conflict since 1902, taking into account many of the recent debates. Nasson is less concerned with the role of the war in the making of Afrikaner nationalism than with its role in the making of the new South Africa. He is well aware of African, and Afrikaner, ambivalence about the meaning of the war, noting the tendency of Afrikaner writers like Antje Krog to see the war as a “hinge” of national reconciliation. He is sceptical, however, that its peace was a lost opportunity, agreeing with the argument that the alternative outcome of counterfactual history is likely to be the same as the

one that took place (p. 299). And he gives short shrift to the suggestion that blacks were merely common victims of suffering. They were also active agents, collaborating with the British, serving the Boers and acting independently; commemoration has tended to hide this from full recognition, he suggests.

References are provided both in the form of footnotes and in an annotated select bibliography in which Nasson's shrewd comments are a delight. Thus Tabitha Jackson's *The White Man's War* offers a rounded view "which may be too round" (p. 340). Above all, Nasson is known for his distinctive style and this book is a pleasure to read, with its ironic humour and elegant, concise turn of phrase.