

## HANDS-ON ARTICLES

### WHAT'S IN A MONUMENT? – THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Mr Simon Haw

*Retired History subject advisor*

*KwaZulu Natal*

*simonhaw@telkomsa.net*

#### **Introduction**

One of the heritage assessment standards in Grade 11 calls for learners to be able to analyse public representations such as monuments and museums. In this paper I analyse the way in which the Natal Volunteers' Monument commemorating Natal colonists who died fighting in the South African War (1899 – 1902) presents in a very concrete form a particular interpretation of the war and of those who died fighting in it on the side of Great Britain. It is a striking example of the way in which monuments and museums are not neutral and require a critical approach on the part of not only learners but also the general public.

To provide a context for the Natal Volunteers' monument I should mention that this is just one of a number of colonial monuments and statues which grace the centre of Pietermaritzburg, the capital city of KwaZulu-Natal and until 1910 the capital of the Colony of Natal. These monuments include the statues of Queen Victoria and Sir Theophilus Shepstone and war memorials to those colonials who died in the Langalibalele Rebellion of 1873 and the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879.

I posit that most monuments and statues tend to blend into the background and are seldom even noticed much less interrogated by the citizenry busily going about their daily rounds. I suggest that some of the questions one could ask of a monument are:

- What is it commemorating?
- Whose perspective is being put across?

- How is this being done?
- What does it show us about society at the time?
  - Elites – Who was in charge? Who had the power?
  - *Weltanschauung* – What does the monument show us about such things as the values and attitudes of the people – more especially the establishment – at the time the monument was being planned/unveiled? This would extend to the symbolism used in the monument, which would tend to show the beliefs and cultural symbols of the people at the time.

## Researching the Monument

In order to research the monument, I first read up on it in a useful little book entitled *Historic Pietermaritzburg* by Steve Camp, published by Shuter and Shooter in 2001. This gave the date of the unveiling as February 1907. Using this as a reference point, I next consulted the relevant issues of both *The Natal Witness* and *The Times of Natal*. These old newspaper proved extremely useful in that they contained not only a full account of who was responsible for the design and execution of the monument, including the sculptor, but explained the symbolism of the various panels on the monument. Further, they gave a detailed account of the unveiling ceremony, including the full text of the speech of the Natal governor Sir Henry McCallum.

## Analysis of the monument

I will now turn to a more detailed analysis of the Natal Volunteer's monument. The monument stands in a walled garden opposite the Pietermaritzburg City Hall. Image 1 (on page 3), gives an idea of the overall appearance of the monument.

The monument is fairly conventional in its form. For our purposes, the four bronze panels decorating the faces of the monument and to a lesser extent the figure on the top are the most important elements. The sculptor was George Wade, a London sculptor who was a protégé of Sir Joseph Boehm, the sculptor whose statue of Queen Victoria provided the model for the Pietermaritzburg statue, which is to be found a few hundred metres from the monument. Wade started life as a barrister and only became a sculptor at the age of 35. Another well-known public work produced by the artist is the statue of the Cameron Highlander in Inverness, Scotland.

It will shortly become clear from my analysis of the panels that Wade operated within the paradigm of high imperialism, which could see no wrong in the mighty British empire and those who served its ends.

Image 1: Natal Volunteer's monument



Source: S Haw, 2010

The first panel which will be examined in more detail is that facing the City Hall. A close-up of this panel follows:

Image 2:



Source: S Haw, 2010

In this first panel, Britannia (female figure symbolising Great Britain) is seen reading the Boer ultimatum (not present any more). The figure to her left with the imploring look and her hand on Britannia's shoulder is the colony of Natal, begging the great mother to come to her rescue from the Boer "warmongers". The other female figures represent the colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, who rallied to the cause. The black supplicant in the servile crouching position on the left is a telling indication of the racial attitudes prevalent at that time.

It is difficult to imagine a clearer indication of the way a monument can graphically offer a biased interpretation of an event. The monument unambiguously interprets the war as having been caused by the Boers through their ultimatum, thereby absolving the British Imperium of all blame.

The next panel we will look at reinforces the message of Britain's imperial grandeur and her moral stature. It shows St George the patron saint of England slaying the dragon – a clear analogy with Great Britain taking on and defeating the Boer "dragon".

Image 3:



Source: S Haw, 2010

The next panel turns to consider those who had died fighting in the war. The recumbent figure is the dying hero. The female figure represents the watcher. The upper part of the panel shows heavenly figures waiting to welcome the dear departed to his glorious rest. The image ties in well with the whole narrative of worthy sacrifice, which was dealt such a profound blow during the senseless carnage of the First World War. It echoes in sculpture the well-known phrase "*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*" (It is sweet and fitting to die for the fatherland).

Image 4:



Source: S Haw, 2010

The next and final of the four panels shows the blind figure of justice holding aloft the scales (missing at this stage) and with her sword at hand. The figure to the left and slightly behind justice is Mercy. Mercy is balancing the scales with her left hand and guiding the sword of justice back into its sheath with her right.

Image 5:



Source: S Haw, 2010

Finally the figure on the top of the monument shows the angel of peace sheathing her sword.

Image 6:



Source: S Haw, 2010

The narrative of the monument therefore is that the Boers caused the South African War by sending the ultimatum and invading British territory and that Britain and its supporters hold the moral high ground. Anyone who has studied the war would recognise the point of view being presented here as at best highly simplistic and at worst as a flagrant disregard for the truth, but he or she needs to remember that our present perspective is informed by over one hundred years of hindsight.

### **The paradox of the unveiling**

The extreme irony of this monument was that the ultra-partisan, jingoistic interpretation of events inherent in the imagery of the monument had already become something of an embarrassment by the time the monument was unveiled in 1907. By that time, the new British government which had been ushered in by a landslide victory in 1906 was headed by Sir Arthur Campbell-Bannerman, the leader of the Liberal Party who had described the tactics used by the British during the guerrilla phase as “methods of barbarism”. Perhaps more importantly various domestic pressures, including an expensive and unnecessary war against poll tax rebels (the Bambatha Uprising of 1906) (For an accessible account of the rebellion readers should refer to *Remembering the rebellion: the Zulu uprising of 1906* by Jeff Guy, published by University of KwaZulu-Natal Press 2006) had inclined a large constituency from both sides of the conflict towards a union between the two defeated republics and the two crown colonies, which three years later was to find fruition in the Union of South Africa.

As a result the governor of Natal, Sir Henry McCallum, in delivering his speech at the unveiling of the monument on Saturday February 16, 1907 spends the first part praising those who have died for their sacrifice in a noble war and the second part trying to reinterpret the monument in a way which will make it a symbol of unity rather than division between the two white races – a very difficult thing to do with this particular monument and one at which he does not really succeed.

### **Conclusion**

It is important for teachers to make learners aware of the way in which monuments reflect a version of the past, current among the power elites at the

time the monument was erected.

It always surprised me that the monument to those who died at the Battle of Ulundi in 1879, contains a plaque to the brave warriors who died defending the old order. It certainly seems to show a generosity of spirit which is not apparent in the interpretation presented by the monument we have just examined. However, I discovered later that the monument, a domed mausoleum, was constructed long after the war had been fought.