

# The death of trooper Alexander Aberline, F Squadron, NSW Imperial Bushmen at Lichtenburg 2 October 1900.

John Bottomley  
Department of History  
North West University

## *Abstract:*

Much of the history of the Anglo-Boer War is dour and brutal, as is to be expected of a three year struggle which many believed was genocidal in purpose. This war saw so many nationalities fighting against each other, and was at the same time a civil war involving Afrikaner against Afrikaner, and South African English-speakers, as well as many black combatants, fighting and dying on both sides.

Yet, there was an emotional dimension to the war, although this level has so often been lost in the 'grand overview'. This paper relates the story of one Australian combatant and his journey towards death in a foreign land. Trooper Aberline's sacrifice was to have an impact on the Boers and his legacy went far beyond his resting cross in the Lichtenburg cemetery which lies close to that of Edith Mathews who was buried nearby.

## **Lichtenberg**

*(New South Wales Contingent)*

*There was some silly fire on the flank  
And the small wet drizzling down -  
There were the sold-out shops and the bank  
And the wet, wide-open town;  
And we were doing escort-duty  
To somebody's escort-train,  
And I smelt wattle by Lichtenberg -  
Riding in, in the rain.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Raine (ed.), *Kipling. Selected Poetry* (Penguin, 1992), pp. 214-215. Like many British sources, Kipling spelt Lichtenburg incorrectly. It is also interesting that there have never been groves of wattle near Lichtenburg.

In May 1900 the siege of Mafeking ended and hostilities quickly engulfed the whole of the northern Cape and western Transvaal (this region has now been incorporated into the North-West Province). Between June and November 1900, the Anglo-Boer War evolved into its guerrilla phase, and fighting saw-sawed throughout the territory. During this period the strategically important town of Lichtenburg was occupied by both Boer and Briton for short spells. In November 1900, a large British force under Col. Robert Baden-Powell was transferred to Lichtenburg and secured the town, and much of the territory with it.

Five months later, on 3 March 1901, 400 Boers under the co-joint commands of Generals De la Rey, Smuts, Celliers, Vermaas and Lemmer launched a mounted attack on the town. In a fierce but inconclusive engagement lasting a full day and much of the night, fourteen Boers and eighteen British soldiers were killed, whilst 38 Boers and 24 British soldiers were wounded. As he rode away, De la Rey was heard to remark, "The enemy has received a good hiding and so did I".<sup>2</sup>

In his despatches of 8 May 1901, Kitchener praised the efforts of two women, Miss Edith Mathews and Miss Gertrude Hamman who tended the wounded all day, 'though the hospital was under fire'.<sup>3</sup> This is surely one of the more extraordinary despatches of the Anglo-Boer War where enemy women were praised for their brave assistance to soldiers of the Crown. Although Edith Mathews and her brother, Charles Wheatly Mathews, were of English stock and came from an English-speaking family, both were committed to the Boer cause. Charles Mathews was away on commando at the time, and fought with the Boers until the end of the war.

This incident highlights the seemingly enigmatic stance of an unknown number of English-speaking South Africans who fought for the Boers. Apart from the role played by the Mathews family, there is a smattering of evidence in this material regarding other English-speaking pro-Boers. In the siege of Mafeking, for instance, an Englishman named Spencer Drake served as adjutant to Boer general Koos (Kootje) Snijman. After an unsuccessful assault

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Kipling mistook the mimosa tree for wattle. I would like to thank Mr Jan Schutte, former curator of the Lichtenburg Museum for his tireless efforts and insight into this work. Also, Mrs Connie Reynolds of the farm 'Killarney' between Potchefstroom and Parys. A Mathews by birth and raconteur by calling, I am grateful to Connie for her generosity of spirit and total commitment to this project.

2 Gert van den Bergh, *24 Battles and Battlefields of the North-West Province* (The North West Tourism Association, 1996), p. 118.

3 R. L. Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War* (Canberra, 1976), pp. 310-314.

on enemy lines, Drake was accused of spying. Snijman was forced to dismiss Drake, who thereafter served as an ordinary burgher for many months until he was shot in a skirmish with Australians near Koster on 22 July 1900. Another English speaker also killed in action fighting for the Boers was Commandant Gravett who was from Boksburg on the Reef. The Boksburg commando took great pride in calling themselves 'Gravett's Guinea Fowls' (Gravett se tarentaalkoppe). Late in 1900 Commandant Gravett was hit by shellfire and died at Warmbaths.<sup>4</sup>

Of the many nationalities who assisted the Boers, the role of English-speakers has received the least attention. One can understand the reticence of the Boers - the efforts of these allies being somewhat analogous to the hated 'hensoppers' and 'joiners' - those Boers who either remained neutral or fought for the Imperial cause during the war.

This ambiguity was intensified by the fear expressed by some Boers, that 'foreigners' were fighting, not because they were committed to the cause, but because they sought republican citizenship and hoped to benefit from the war. Then there was the low self-esteem of many burghers who had long been reviled by 'outsiders' and the overseas press and were thus gripped by xenophobia towards all things 'foreign'. There was also the later mythologising of the war, especially by the more exclusive Nationalists, concocting myths in which there was no place for English speakers.

The incorporation of foreign contingents into the Boer army was no easy task - especially since some of these soldiers were not content to do their duty and either fight or die, but instead criticized the obvious inadequacies of Boer command. We get some idea of these feelings in an heated exchange between Abraham Stafleu, a Hollander who fought for the Boers in the siege of Mafeking, and General Snijman:

The general held a Christmas Day church service which I did not enjoy. I stayed in the tent of my veldcornet Hans Snijman because I didn't want to listen to a meaningless babble... The general said that the Transvaal stood alone... I waited for the general after the service and asked him whether he was aware of the contribution of other nations such as the Hollanders at Elandsplaagte, the Scandanavians at Modderspruit [Magersfontein] of the French, Germans, Russians, Irish, Italians and so on... During the argument I accused the general of being so dumb that he knew nothing of the efforts of others -or he was

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<sup>4</sup> Deneys Reitz, *Commando* (London, 1975), p. 124.

merely completely ungrateful...The general said that a nation couldn't pray for every Tom, Dick and Harry.<sup>5</sup>

Stafleu reported a conversation in a similar vein between a Captain Van der Merwe and the same General Snijman:

Van der Merwe mentioned the fact that a German count [Count H. Von Zeppelin] had come to fight on the Boer side as a regular burgher. The general answered that first the man came to learn how to fight and later he would come back and use those skills against the Boers. The captain answered that the Germans certainly didn't have to fight on the Boer side and the general was very ungrateful.<sup>6</sup>

***“A Moment fractured from the slipstream of time... was there ought to gain but heartache?”<sup>7</sup>***

This section of the paper begins with the arrival of various Australian contingents, including Trooper A. Aberline's 'F' Squadron of New South Wales Imperial Bushmen in Beira, Mozambique early in April 1900. There the Bushmen joined Lieut.-General Sir Frederick Carrington's Rhodesian Field Force. The objective of this force was the relief of Mafeking.

The first contingents of Australians had arrived in South Africa in November 1899 and continued arriving throughout the war until more than 16,000 Australian soldiers were transported to South Africa.<sup>8</sup> These were not regular soldiers but militia with anything from 36 to 80 hours of training or drill a year, depending upon the colony they came from. They arrived in small units since the British government stipulated that the units should consist of about 125 men with no more than a single captain and three subalterns to each unit. The Australian units arrived under such names as the New South Wales Lancers, New South Wales Mounted Rifles, Queensland Mounted Infantry, Queensland Bushmen, South Australian Mounted Rifles, Victorian

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5 See A. P. Smit and L. Mare, *Die Beleg van Mafeking. Die dagboek van Abraham Stafleu* (Human Sciences Research Council, 1985). Also John Bottomley, "The Siege of Mafeking and the Imperial Mindset as Revealed in the Diaries of T.W.P. (Tom) Hayes and W.P. (William) Hayes, District Surgeons", *New Contree*, 41 (September 1997), p. 93. Of the Hollander Corps, 9 died and 54 were either wounded or taken prisoner. At Magersfontein the Scandinavians fought until they were all either wounded or killed.

6 Bottomley, "Diaries of Tom and William Hayes", p. 109.

7 Janny Wurts, *Fugitive Prince, Book One; Alliance of Light* (London, 1997), p. 12.

8 Jane Carruthers, "Historical Carnival of Reconciliation': Commemorating the South African War. 1899-1902", *Mots Pluriels*, 16 (December 2000). There were 16,175 Australian volunteers, 6,513 New Zealanders, 6,500 Canadians and 535 from India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

Bushmen, West Australian Mounted Infantry, Tasmanian Bushmen and Australian Commonwealth Horse. John Brown notes that these men were ill-trained as soldiers and would not have lasted very long in a conventional war against regular, disciplined troops.<sup>9</sup>

From Mozambique, the Australian troops travelled by narrow gauge railway to Marandellas in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), a distance of 312 miles. Thereafter, the troops travelled cross country to Bulawayo also in Rhodesia, a further 280 miles. Some of the Australians were forced to march the whole 280 miles because of a lack of transport animals. Most of the Bushmen were still in Bulawayo when they heard of the Relief of Mafeking in May 1900. During the next month the Bushmen entrained and travelled the final 460 miles over the South African border to Mafeking.

Following the end of the siege of Mafeking, the combined forces of Plumer and Baden-Powell moved from Mafeking (in what was then the Cape Province) into the Transvaal near the village of Ottoshoop. During June 1900 these forces oversaw the surrender of two important towns, Zeerust and Rustenburg. Concurrently, Lord Roberts entered Pretoria and the Battle of Diamond Hill was fought and appeared to signal an ignominious end to the war.

During the month of July 1900 the area from Mafeking through Rustenburg to Pretoria remained quiet as squadrons of Bushmen, finally arrived from Rhodesia, along with other Imperial troops, roamed the territory collecting thousands of rifles and ammunition from burghers who believed the war was over.

So sanguine was Roberts that the pacification of the Boers was soon to be achieved that he withdrew Baden-Powell to the Magaliesburg to be closer to his headquarters in Pretoria. The British left only small garrisons at Mafeking, Ottoshoop, Lichtenburg, Zeerust and Elands River, all linked by convoys travelling the full length of the Mafeking to Rustenburg road.

It was at this point that what appeared to be a lost war erupted into its even more brutal guerrilla phase. General Botha sent General Lemmer to persuade the burghers of the northern Cape and Western Transvaal to once again take up arms. Military action was needed to emphasize the new initiative.

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<sup>9</sup> John Brown, *Military History*, October 2001. See also "Biographies, Trooper James Daniel Duff, Regimental No. 34, 'A' Squadron, NSW Bushmen's Contingent", *The Heraldry and Genealogy Society of Canberra*.

Lemmer made an abortive attempt to recapture Rustenburg and the Australian Bushmen played a major role in riding on the town and preventing the Boers from consolidating their position.

Baden-Powell immediately returned to Rustenburg but the initiative was lost when General De la Rey and his commando joined General Lemmer in the west and 90% of those who had taken the oath of neutrality in these districts either left their farms and rejoined commandos or surreptitiously took up arms again.

The anger caused by constant violations of the oath of neutrality during this transitional period was a major factor in the implementation of the 'scorched earth' policy. In a letter written on the 28 August 1900 from Ottoshoop, the Bushmen Captain H. H. Brown of 'E' Squadron railed against the oath-breaking:

During the last few days a new proclamation has been issued warning the Boers that their property will be destroyed if they are found in arms. The necessity for something of this kind will be fully appreciated when I state that it is a common thing for the wily Boer to go out into a kopje and, unseen, pot at a wandering patrol all week and return to his untouched farm and family on Saturday evening leaving again for another few days war as it pleases him. Of course he does not bring his rifle home. This he carefully conceals. Should the home receive a visitation, he becomes a harmless farmer who wishes the war was over, "and would like a pass"... In my opinion the only way of speedily terminating the war is to declare the whole district, when they are found in arms, as rebel districts, destroy the farms and commandeer the cattle. The want of supplies would speedily bring them into submission. As soon as we leave the district some of the Boer leaders appear and give the Boers the option of joining the commandos or being shot if they refuse.<sup>10</sup>

The Boers had finished with minor skirmishing, as they showed during July 1900, when the Mafeking-Rustenburg supply route set up by Baden-Powell collapsed. General Lemmer isolated Rustenburg by holding the road near the Koster River and almost parallel to the Swartruggens mountain range.

The Battle of Selons River (also known as the Battle of Koster River) followed, when Baden-Powell instructed Colonel Airey to 'brush aside' General Lemmer, and proceed to Elands River where there was a staging post for supplies, and thereafter to return to Rustenburg with a convoy.

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<sup>10</sup> Wallace, *Australians*, pp. 287-288.

On 22 July 1900 a force of some 300 Australians, including Imperial Bushmen, was surrounded and engaged at Selons River. They remained pinned down all day until Baden-Powell sent a relief detachment from Rustenburg. Imperial casualties in this engagement amounted to nine killed with 39 wounded. Thereafter the Bushmen were kept busy building blockhouses, sangars and trenches which eventually crisscrossed the north-west and western Transvaal.<sup>11</sup>

A few days later, the focus of attention shifted to the staging post at Elands River which now held some £100,000 of supplies, amassed as a result of the disruptive actions of General Lemmer, and the inability of the Mafeking to Rustenburg convoys to get through. We gain some idea of the unpleasantness of conditions at Elands River in a letter of 15 July 1900 written by Lieutenant R.E. Zouch, 'A' Squadron New South Wales Bushmen who wrote:

We are in this dreadful place, and it is hard to say how long we will be kept here. This is the coldest place I have ever known. We have no fuel and the men only one blanket. We came here to fight, but instead we are "dumped" down by the wayside. We have had no letter for nearly six months. This place cannot be made very strong, as there is little good material for the purpose, the ground being a mess of slaty chips, but it is the general opinion that the enemy will hardly attack us at present.<sup>12</sup>

The garrison now totalled 505 soldiers, made up of 299 Bushmen, with most of the rest being Rhodesians, a few Canadians, and three soldiers from British units. This force was under the command of Colonel Hore, an officer of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards, who had commanded the Protectorate Regiment during the Mafeking siege.

Burgher resurgence had convinced Lord Roberts to withdraw his smaller and more isolated detachments including that at Elands River.<sup>13</sup> A message was sent by telegraph on Friday 3 August 1900 to the Elands River garrison stating that General Carrington (the same Carrington who commanded the Rhodesian Field Force) had already left Zeerust with 1000 men, six field guns and four pom-poms, to cover the retirement of the Elands River garrison to Mafeking. This force was expected to reach Elands River by Sunday 5 August.

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11 Johan Hattingh and Andre Wessels (eds), *Britse Fortifikasies in die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902)*, (Bloemfontein, Oorlogsmuseum van die Boererepublieke, 1997).

12 Wallace, *Australians*, p. 258.

13 Ian B Copley, "The Battle of Silikaatsnek - 11<sup>th</sup> July 1900", *Military History Journal*, 9, 3 and Ian B Copley, "The Second Battle of Silaatsnek, 2nd August 1900", *Military History Journal*, 10, 3.

Early on the morning of Saturday 4 August, however, the Boers opened fire on the Elands River garrison with 12 pounders, pom-poms and maxims. It was estimated that 1,700 shells fell on the Imperial positions that first day, and never entirely ceased for the following 12 days. In the initial offensive, before the Imperial force was able to dig in, the defenders suffered 32 casualties out of their total force of 505 men, i.e., 15 % attrition. General Carrington's relief force came within view of the Elands River post only to be driven back - initially some seventeen miles to the Marico River. Thereafter, with Boer forces in constant pursuit, Carrington ignominiously retired all the way back to Mafeking. Once there, Carrington telegraphed the Imperial command that he believed the force at Elands River would have no choice but to surrender.

Baden-Powell with another column of 1000 Australian Bushmen and Rhodesians, also turned away from Elands River and marched towards Pretoria because he erroneously believed the Elands River garrison had been successfully relieved by Carrington. On 8 August (5 days after the siege began) the Boers under De la Rey called on the garrison to surrender. Once again, on the following day, De la Rey offered surrender to the Imperial troops. This was refused and the Elands River battle developed into one of cannons, trenches, sniping and attrition - much like the Mafeking siege and with similar results.<sup>14</sup>

It was now that Kitchener, through sheer luck, intercepted a message from General De la Rey to General De Wet asking for assistance with the Elands River siege, which made it clear that Colonel Hore and his men were continuing to resist. Kitchener immediately despatched a strong force under Brigadier Genl Broadwood which turned aside from chasing De Wet and marched nearly 50 miles from the Vaal River to the relief of the Elands River garrison. In this engagement, lasting thirteen days and nights, 22 men of the garrison were killed and 58 wounded, whilst the Boers lost four men.

It appears that Trooper Aberline's 'F' Squadron was part of Carrington's relief column which failed in its mission and retreated to Mafeking. Conditions during the withdrawal were far from idyllic as Lieutenant A.C.M. Gould pointed out from Ottoshoop:

I suppose you have seen by this time about our engagement at Elands River. We attacked them on Sunday (I think it was about the 6<sup>th</sup>). After fighting

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<sup>14</sup> Lionel Wulfson, "Elands River: A Siege Which Possibly Changed the Course of History", in *South African Military History Journal*, 6, 3.

all day we had to retire. Then on the Monday they attacked the camp, and we made a running fight of it. This lasted all day. We had a rough time of it. Started off from the camp on Sunday about four o'clock in the morning, riding all day long excepting when we had to fire or attack any place. No dinner or tea. When we had to retire we made a forced march and were riding until past one the next morning (Monday), fed horses and lay down to sleep. Up again four o'clock, and in the saddle from five, all day until seven p.m. then some tea and bully beef and two biscuits. We saddled up a little after eight o'clock and were off to Zeerust.

It was a quarter to four on Tuesday morning before we reached camp, and that without a halt all the way. The horses and men were knocked up. Every man Jack of us went to sleep in the saddle time after time, and would wake up with a start. I myself saw about 20 men fall off their horses, so you can see we did not have an easy time of it. I had my horse shot under men on Sunday, and on Monday had two bullets through my haversack. We had a little fighting back to this place and then returned to Mafeking.<sup>15</sup>

The focus, as far as the Imperial Bushmen were concerned, now shifts to Mafeking and Carrington's attempts to break out of this place of refuge. Carrington soon attempted another march northwards but was only able to reach Zeerust, 71 kilometres from Mafeking, with seventeen of his men already wounded by snipers. There he overruled Lord Edward Cecil, the District Administrator and a prominent figure in the Siege of Mafeking, and insisted on the evacuation of all Imperial forces to Mafeking, with the loss of great quantities of food and clothing which fell into Boer hands.

On his return to Mafeking, Carrington was ordered to once again return to Zeerust - this was to be his third attempt at a break-through. This time his column marched only as far as Ottoshoop, some 40 kms from Mafeking, before being halted by severe resistance. Over the next two weeks, the Imperial Bushmen were involved in continuous and often fierce engagements in this area.

Thus on 16 and 17 August Carrington's Australians were again in action in the battle of Buffels Hoek which took place a few kilometres beyond Ottoshoop. Interestingly enough, there were clear hints during this battle of the terrifying situation that troops would face only fourteen years later, during the First World War. The Imperial Bushmen were ordered to take a kopje with bayonet. Advancing to within 500 yards of the Boer positions, they dismounted. It was at this point that the Boers turned a maxim upon the deploying troops and

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<sup>15</sup> Wallace, *Australians*, pp. 281-282.

‘it seemed to rain lead for a few minutes’.<sup>16</sup> The Imperial forces then fixed bayonets and charged the machine-gun position. They were successful and 36 Boers were captured in this engagement. It would not be so easy during the next war when there would be much less room to manoeuvre. In the Buffels Hoek engagement the British lost 50 killed, wounded or missing.

Carrington’s third sortie bogged down and it was only two weeks after setting out from Mafeking that his troops were able to reach Zeerust. On 1 September Carrington was transferred to Bulawayo to again supervise the movement of troops from Beira through Rhodesia to the frontline. He was almost court-martialled for his ‘disreputable’ retreat from Elands River to Mafeking, and his troops, especially the Australians, were greatly antagonized. The retreat was described as ‘something no Australian who took part will ever forget’. In 1904 he retired from military service, his career in ruins.

***“These times of rank chaos and shattered equilibrium.”***<sup>17</sup>

For the next week the Imperial Bushmen were engaged in mopping up operations in what had become a very hostile region of the Transvaal. The dangerous nature of this task was referred to by Trooper James Rawlings of ‘C’ Squadron Imperial Bushmen who wrote:

The patrol work is worse than a big battle, for one never knows from what house or kopje he is going to be shot at. Any house we are shot at from is soon burned down. On Saturday last we burned down 11 houses.<sup>18</sup>

On 9 September 1900 a column led by Major-General C.W.H. Douglas, which included Aberline’s ‘F’ Squadron Imperial Bushmen, set out along the Ottoshoop - Lichtenburg road. In five engagements with the enemy over as many days, 50 prisoners were captured, along with wagons and flocks of animals.

Captain Ham wrote from Rustenburg on 31 October describing the trying conditions associated with patrolling during what was the wet season on the highveld - those conditions so movingly described in Rudyard Kipling’s poem:

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<sup>16</sup> Wallace, *Australians*, p. 283.

<sup>17</sup> Wurts, *Fugitive Prince*, p. 418.

<sup>18</sup> Wallace, *Australians*, p. 288.

I cannot give you a long description of our trek. Just let me say that we are having part of the African wet season which everybody dreads here. During the time we have been out on this trek it has poured in torrents for five nights. We have no tents and get into camp at all hours wet through and through. We cannot light a fire but make a meal from a dry biscuit and squat about in the mud anywhere shelter can be gained, waiting for the order to start next morning, which generally comes about three o'clock. We ride in our wet clothes next day until the sun dries the saddle and our garments. This has occurred on five successive nights, so you can imagine the time we are having.<sup>19</sup>

The column reoccupied Lichtenburg on 13 September 1900 and, leaving behind a small garrison, rode on to Leeupan some 35 miles to the south-west, where it clashed with General Lemmer's commando, capturing a field gun and pom-pom and taking some prisoners.

On 25 September, the column turned towards Rustenburg. Three days later, a patrol including Trooper Aberline was out scouting, when an engagement with the enemy took place during which nearly all the Bushmen were either wounded or killed. This incident was reported by Trooper James Collins who wrote to his mother in Hay, New South Wales from Waterkloof near Rustenburg, on 7 October 1900. This letter was subsequently published in the *Hay Standard* of 21 November 1900:

On 28 September 11 of our men were out scouting near Lichtenburg when they saw 200 Boers at a farmhouse. When they got within 200 yards of it the Boer leader, Lemmer, came out with a white flag behind his back, being under the impression that he and his commando were about to be captured by our men whose numbers he had over-estimated. On finding that our men were so few he changed his mind and ordered his men to fire. Instead of our men surrendering, they galloped away and 9 of them were shot. I think 5 will die. They were not expected to live when we left them at Lichtenburg hospital. Alick Aberline was one of them. The doctor told us he is sure to die. He is shot through the stomach with an explosive bullet. All were shot with either soft-nosed or explosive bullets. If they hit you, then you are not much good supposing you do live... P.S. I have got Alick Aberline's dog and will try and get him back with me if I can. I am the only one left out of the 4 now.

Three of the wounded troopers from the engagement of 28 September were brought to the hospital at Lichtenburg.<sup>20</sup> The three were J.J. Fahey, A.B.

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<sup>19</sup> Wallace, *Australians*, p. 324

<sup>20</sup> During the Anglo-Boer War the hospital was on the ground which is now a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise opposite the city hall.

Mackellar and A. Aberline, from 'F' Squadron. These men all subsequently died from their wounds.

***“Here where the elements lent no man or woman contrived artifice”<sup>21</sup>***

During that chaotic period from the middle of 1900, when neither side was able to claim advantage, Edith Maud Mathews tended Boer and Briton alike in the small hospital near the town centre. Her presence in Lichtenburg, like that of Trooper Aberline, had been achieved by a somewhat circuitous route.

One of her ancestors, Charles Mathews, born in 1724, rose to become Commander-in-Chief of the British Mediterranean fleet. Her line then moved through booksellers, church ministers and comedians. Their African odyssey began with Charles Wheatley Mathews who was born at Lowestoft, Suffolk, in 1826 and emigrated to South Africa as a young man.

In Uitenhage, Charles married Eliza Jane Mathewson, of Scottish descent. Thereafter the newlyweds moved northwards to the farm Vaalbank, in the Colesburg district, where Charles Mathews was appointed Deputy Sheriff.

It was here that their first child, Edward Henry Mathews, was born on 10 May 1856. The subsequent marriage of this son with Nella Barkly was to produce nine children, including the Charles Wheatley Mathews whom we have already met serving with the Boers during the Anglo-Boer War, and his sister Edith Maud Mathews, the nurse in our story, who was born on 8 May 1881 - four months after the death of her grandfather.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Grandfather Mathews and his wife moved yet again to the farm Suffolk near Hopetown just before the first diamond was discovered in March 1867. Thereafter, in association with Lorenzo Boyes, William Grimmer and others, Charles Wheatley Mathews entered into an agreement with Waterboer, chief of the Griquas, for the right to engage in mining on Griqua territory. These rights were later transferred to an English company entitled “The South African Diamond and Mineral Company Ltd” with Sir Alfred Slade as chairman.

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<sup>21</sup> Wurts, *Fugitive Prince*, p. 462.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Mrs Connie Reynolds, Killarney, July 1999.

Following one of his sons who had gone on a bartering expedition into Bechuanaland, grandfather Charles Mathews arrived in Mafeking. There he heard that a certain Dr. Stonehouse, who owed him £1,500 was but a short distance away in Lichtenburg. Grandfather Mathews proceeded to the town to find Dr. Stonehouse and was so impressed on arrival in Lichtenburg, that he decided to make it his home. He immediately purchased forty erven, between Melville and Scholtz Streets, and later three farms, Soetmelksvlei, Lilydale and Kareeboschbult. Charles Mathews then went back to Hopetown to collect his family.<sup>23</sup>

Lichtenburg was founded on 25 July 1873 by proclamation of the then State President, T.F. Burgers.<sup>24</sup> The Mathews family was thus one of the founding families of the town and Charles Mathews was its second Civil Commissioner. He died in January 1881 at 54 years of age, just before his granddaughter Edith Maud Mathews was born.<sup>25</sup>

In the Lichtenburg hospital nineteen years later, Edith Mathews was moved by the character and suffering of the dying Trooper Aberline as she nursed him over four days from 28 September until he died on 2 October 1900. A month later, when she was able to get an address, she wrote to his parents.<sup>26</sup> This letter was published in the *Melbourne Age* of 25 June 1900. It is interesting to note that the following male child born to the Aberline family in Manly, New South Wales was christened Alexander Mathew Aberline - in honour of the two participants in our story:

*November 1900  
Mrs Aberline,  
Australia*

*After waiting for a month, at last I have obtained your address. I thought you might be glad to hear from one who, though an utter stranger to you, yet God granted to be at the bedside of your dying son, and before I tell you of him I want to tender my sympathy to you and the family. I know such a loss must be very great. I might mention that I am not a professional nurse, only an amateur trying my little for my country and my people. The hospital belongs to the so called Boers. Your son*

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23 Interview Mrs Connie Reynolds.

24 ZAR *Staatscourant*, 19 & 26 August 1873.

25 These families included the Greeffs, Du Preez, De la Reys, Mathews and Maartens. See letter by Gretha du Preez, *Die Noordwester*, 18 May 1956.

26 Copy of letter by E. Mathews - Mrs. Aberline, November 1899, available at Lichtenburg Museum.

*with four of his companions was brought here by some of his own people because they were mortally wounded and could not be taken on to the field hospital. They were all in very great pain, poor lads. Your son was a general favourite in the wards. I always used to call him 'My Laddie,' which he seemed to like very much.*

*One day after dressing wounds and giving the young man something to drink, your son asked me to hand him a photo which he had in a case in his pocket. After taking it out of the case and gazing at the portrait he closed his eyes and pressed the photo against his breast; he always kept that photo next to his bed. One afternoon when one of his wounded companions had died, he called me to his bedside and said: 'Poor Mother. How I wish I could be back with you in Australia.' So I told him we were going to make him quite well and send him back to Mother.*

*We all expected him to pull through, but God willed it otherwise. I tried everything to make his last hours pleasant and everything I thought you would have done had you been with him. I sat on his bed fanning him and gave him everything he asked for. Once he looked sad and despondent, so I said, 'Poor Laddie, you will be better tomorrow.' Fixing those large blue eyes on me he said, 'I'll be on the way to the happy land.' I said, 'You are looking forward to it!' He replied, 'Yes.' He did not want me to leave his bed. If I knelt before his bed fanning him he would say, 'You are too good spoiling me in that way.'*

*I thought I would spoil him for your sake. I remained at his bed holding his hand until he died. He fixed those large blue eyes on me until I closed them. There I remained. I could not leave my Laddie. I thought my heart would break and those tears that fall for your people as well as my own dropped on the face of that Laddie whose Mother and sisters were so far away. I kissed him for all your sakes. Tell his sisters that I tried to be a sister to him. I am only nineteen and he twenty, so he must have adopted me for one, and we try to be even kinder to patients coming from the other side, because their loved ones are so far.*

*We had him buried in the graveyard, his name marked with a cross on which is written his name and regiment. His coffin was covered with beautiful wreaths. I attended to his grave as if it were one of my own people, so don't trouble about that. I pray God that He will comfort you all, as He alone can comfort.*

*Edith Matthews  
Lichtenburg*



Photograph of the grave of Edith Mathews in Lichtenburg cemetery.



**Photograph of the grave of rooper Aberline in Lichtenburg cemetary**

The final chapter of this saga took place during those ten years that Edith Maud Mathews lived, after nursing Trooper Aberline, until she died during childbirth on 22 August 1910. Edith married a Fred Gardner and had three children. Her first child was a boy named Colin who died soon after birth. Her second child was a girl Iris who died in her teens of appendicitis. This child together with little Edith, the youngest of the three children, was brought up by their grandparents following the death of their mother. Little Edith married a Martin Ockerman and had three children, all of whom are alive and living in South Africa:

*I have forgotten a hundred fights,  
But one I shall not forget -  
With the raindrops bunging up my sights  
And my eyes bunged up with wet;  
And through the crack and the stink of the cordite,  
(Ah, Christ! My country again!)  
The smell of the wattle by Lichtenberg,  
Riding in, in the rain!<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>27</sup> Raine, Kipling, *Selected Poetry*, pp. 214-215.