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The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War. A Social History

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Elizabeth van Heyningen

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HC Bosman's Oom Schalk Lourens describes finding his farm after the peace. He knew it by "the hole under the koppie where I quarried slate-stones for the threshing-floor... everything else was gone". He went on "my wife came out of the concentration camp and we went together to look at our old farm. My wife had gone into the concentration camp with our two children, but she came out alone. And when I saw her again and noticed the way she had changed, I knew that I, who had been through all the fighting, had not seen the Boer War".¹ There were, of course, two Boer Wars after December 1899. The first lasted until the fall of Bloemfontein and Pretoria and Lord Roberts's triumphant return to England in December 1900. The second lasted from the early months of 1901 to the peace of Vereeniging in May 1902. This was the guerrilla war carried on by the commandos, whose dependents were taken,

¹ HC Bosman, *The Rooinek* (Mafeking Road, Johannesburg, CNA, 1949), pp. 150-151.

by force or consent, from their farms and “bywoner” (squatter) homes in the war zone into hastily established, chaotic refugee camps, where some 28 000 or more white women and children, men too, died, with 15 000 or more Africans. This was the war Schalk Lourens, despite fighting at Sanna’s Post and Dewetsdorp, did not see.

It is a feat of Elizabeth van Heyningen to have illuminated for us the camps where Schalk Lourens’ children died, with sympathy and without rancour, with criticism of the administration, civilian and, worse, military, and the inmates, but also understanding of the degree of blame due to social history and the practice of medicine. She reveals also the attempt to create to “create a British world”, the male-dominated social order, class structures of landowning Boers and “bywoners”, and the influence of British pro-Boer lobbying, pacifism and the social welfare concerns shared with the loyalists.

Van Heyningen’s vision of the camps is far-removed from the understandably bitter polemics of many studies in Afrikaans or a few biased rejoinders in English. Her prose is a model of clarity and eloquence. Despite the degree of technical detail – of administration, logistics, finance, diet, disease and death, and her discussion of relations between Boers and British and their differing lifestyles, she is always eminently readable. This reader’s copy of the book is disfigured with pencil-marked extracts: apt summaries and quotations, even characteristic apophthegms.

Early on we learn that, before Kitchener’s “scorched earth” destruction had begun, “Boer leaders had in fact taken their first difficult decision in the policies that would lead to the camps: to leave their families to fend for themselves”. Such statements are supported by evidence. General Louis Botha is quoted: “we must not think of our wives and children any more but must fight for our independence” (p. 48). He was not to know what the terrible outcome would be.

Near the end is another of her judgements: “The British were well aware that this dreary isolation was bad for morale... in their eyes education, sport and celebration also had the virtues of introducing the camp people to British values and cultural institutions, to prepare them for the British world they would inhabit after the war” (p. 216). “Celebrations”? At the turn of 1901-1902 there were Christmas and New Year and in June 1902 the coronation of King Edward VII (despite its postponement until August due to his emergency appendectomy). An old lady in the Irene camp was reported to have said: “I

have served President Kruger a long time and got nothing, and now the new king, as soon as he is our king thinks of the old people and gives us a dinner, he is the king for me” (p. 268).

With the commendable balance she shows throughout, she quotes the Bloemfontein camp superintendent who “was surprised to find the people keeping themselves aloof as they did”. He supposed “one can hardly expect the people to become loyal and enthusiastic members of the empire all at once”. The author’s judgment is acceptable: “however hard the officials worked at creating a British world in the camps, the Boers clung to their identity”. It took General Hertzog’s De Wildt speech of 1912 to articulate the rejection of imperialism except where of benefit to South Africa and to assert “the importance of nationalism to the Dutch-speaking people” and express the hope that perhaps one day he would preach nationalism also to the English-speakers.²²

A major difference between Van Heyningen and even her worthiest predecessor, Burrige Spies (*Methods of Barbarism*, Cape Town, 1973) and, on the black camps, so neglected even by Emily Hobhouse, Peter Warwick’s outstanding *Black People in the South African War, 1899-1902* (Cambridge, 1982), is her study (and that of Professor Iain Smith, on the Transvaal camps) of the camp registers. Their database - <http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/mss/bacd/index.php> - is still far from complete. She has been through the “mass of papers of the Military Government Pretoria files”, Orange River Colony camp reports, Chamberlain-Milner correspondence, many private collections, even invaluable letters of the Ladies Committee which visited the camps officially, late in 1901.

Between them Van Heyningen and Smith unearthed material which, as expressed by Van Heyningen, bring to life the role of the politicians, British army leaders (Kitchener the most culpable), civil administrators, doctors, nurses, teachers – and, in far the greatest measure, the 136 000 or more men, women and children in their wretched suffering in the white and black camps, where disease ended so many young lives. The densely packed material, always readable, will prove of endless value in the study of the political and social consequences of war as it affected non-combatants. These were mainly white and subject African women and children.

²² DW Kruger, *South African policies and parties, 1910-60* (Cape Town, 1960), pp. 65-67.

We are shown Emily Hobhouse, in a brilliant portrait, not as anti-imperialist and pro-Boer but as a “passionate pacifist” (p. 118) who brought to light “the plight of the camp families”, which might never have happened without her heroic contribution. Van Heyningen explains that a Wellcome Trust grant accounted for the fact that “a social history of medicine is at the heart of this book” (p. xi). Yet the story she tells rises above medical science and social history. Two examples reveal the horror of war as Emily Hobhouse reviled it. Hobhouse quotes one Aletta du Toit: when the soldiers burnt Mrs G’s farm “she went almost frantic, fell down on her knees before the officer, and took hold of his hands, and cried: ‘Oh, look at your soldiers carrying out my beautiful furniture. See what they are doing’”. For they had made a big fire and were heaping on to it her pillows and feather beds... tables, chairs, clocks etc. “‘What are they doing?’ she cried out, ‘what are you doing with my things?’” (pp. 104-05).

Elizabeth Neethling told of “a child in Volksrust camp recovering from measles” (as so few did). “Oh, so pale, so thin, so emaciated! In its trembling little hand it holds an empty jam tin containing a little black, bitter coffee, in the other a bit of half-baked bread... the only meal until next day...”. Neethling was a “post-war romanticizer” and Hobhouse sought to appeal to middle-class supporters but their accounts ring sadly true. Van Heyningen herself continues: “Most terrifying of all was the disease that ate away the faces of their children. It was hardly surprising that some Boers believed that the British were murdering them with ground glass or blue vitriol in the sugar and hooks in the meat” (p. 123).

Elizabeth van Heyningen has done more than rid us forever of the ground glass and hooks. She has shown, in all essential detail, the “refugee” or “burger camps” as many contemporaries called them, to have been the unavoidable result of the second, guerrilla phase of the war. They were not “concentration camps” as the world later knew them, but miserable places of vital relief, for whites and, far worse, for blacks, where disease added so many thousands to the death toll of the war itself, and which, with the miseries of camp life, created a bitterness that this book should help to alleviate.