

REVISITING THE CAUSES OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR.

Book review of Iain R. Smith, *The origins of the South African War, 1899-1902*.

Harlow: Longman, 1996. Paperback. xix + 455 pp. Map, notes, bibliography, and index. This review was first published on the H-SAfrica Listserv.

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Only three years before the centenary of the South African War a new book on the origins of this war, written by an historian of Warwick University, Dr Iain Smith, was published earlier this year. It was received with mixed reactions by South African historians and journalists and has attracted much attention. In Afrikaans circles it was welcomed as an unbiased work of high academic integrity. At van Wyk hailed it as an excellent and stimulating book¹ and Leopold Scholtz noted that it was well-researched and well-written². Among English-speaking historians it was praised by liberally-minded reviewers, but sharply criticized by radically inclined scholars. Greg Cuthbertson described Smith's book as a "prodigious work" and an "audacious examination" of the historiography of the South African War.³ Ian Phimister emphasized its interpretative limitations and "pedestrian" writing, and questioned the claim that extensive original research had been done. He concluded that Smith arrived at similar answers to earlier studies by asking similar questions.⁴

Smith calls the South African War "the largest and most taxing such war fought by Britain during the century of her imperial pre-eminence, and the greatest of the wars which accompanied the scramble for Africa" (p. 1). Being such a pivotal event, which laid the foundations for twentieth century patterns in South Africa, the South African War must rate as one of the best documented events

Beeld, 3 June 1996.

Die Burger, 12 June 1996.

Financial Mail, 5 April 1996.

Sunday Times, 12 May 1996.

in this country's bitterly contested history. In the 97 years since the outbreak of the war, official British⁵ and Afrikaner⁶ versions of the history of the war and many monographs have seen the light, analysing the causes of the war, its development and its results from various angles.

During and shortly after the war the first generation of histories of the war were published, including Amery's monumental series⁷, an official German version⁸ and popular histories by Doyle, Cassel, Cunliffe, Creswicke, Wilson, Davitt, Cook, De Wet, Penning, Vallentin and Van Everdingen⁹. For many years there was a scarcity in publications on the war and only a few books such as those of Reitz and Fuller¹⁰ were published.

From the 1950s a second generation of monographs dealing with the South African War started being published. English titles included the books of Gibbs, Holt, Kruger, Marais, Selby, Barbary, Martin, Belfield, Judd, Spies, Farwell, Pakenham, Warwick and Cammack.¹¹ Afrikaans monographs dealing with the war were pub-

History of the War in South Africa, 4 vols., (1906-1910).

J. H. Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, 5 vols. (1969-1983).

L. S. Amery (ed.), *The Times history of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902*, 7 vols., (1900-1909).

The war in South Africa, 2 vols. English translation, (1904-1906).

A.C. Doyle, *The great Boer War*, (1900, further editions 1901/1902); *Cassell's history of the Boer War 1899-1902*, 2 vols., (1903); F. H. E. Cunliffe, *The history of the Boer War*, 2 vols., (1901/1904); L. Creswicke, *South Africa and the Transvaal War* (8 vols., sa); H. W. Wilson, *With the flag to Pretoria: A history of the Boer War of 1899-1902*, 2 vols., (1900/1902) and *After Pretoria: The guerrilla war*, 2 vols., (1902); M. Davitt, *The Boer fight for freedom: From the beginning of hostilities to the Peace of Pretoria*, (1902); E. T. Cook, *The rights and wrongs of the Transvaal war*, (1902); C. R. de Wet, *De strijd tusschen Boer en Brit*, (1902); L. Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika: de strijd tusschen Engeland en de verbonden Boeren-republieken Transvaal en Oranje-Vrijstaat in zijn verloop geschetst*, 3 vols., (1899/1901/sa); W. Vallentin, *Der Burenkrieg*, (1903); W. van Everdingen, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*, 3 vols. (1902-1915).

D. Reitz, *Commando: A Boer journal of the Boer War*, (1929); J. F. C. Fuller, *The last of the gentlemen's wars*, (1937).

P. Gibbs, *Death of the last republic: The story of the Anglo-Boer War* (1957); E. Holt, *The Boer War*, (1958); R. Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray: A history of the Boer War*, (1959); J. S. Marais, *The fall of Kruger's republic*, (1961); J. Selby, *The Boer War: A study in cowardice and courage*, (1969); J. Barbary, *The Boer War*, (1969); C. Martin, *The Boer War*, (1969); E. Belfield, *The Boer War*, (1975); D. Judd, *The Boer War*, (1977); S. B. Spies, *Methods of barbarism: Roberts and Kitchener and civilians in the Boer republics, January 1900 - May 1902*, (1977); B. Farwell, *The great Boer War*, (1977); T. Pakenham, *The Boer War* (1979); P. Warwick (ed.), *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, (1980); D. Cammack, *The Rand at war 1899-1902*, (1990).

lished by Scholtz, Gronum and Pretorius.¹² Because of the time that had elapsed since the war, the availability of primary sources and the fact that the authors were mostly professional academics using scientific methods of history writing, these publications were in most cases more objective and analytical than the earlier ones. The divisions in South African historiography between the Afrikaans nationalist, liberal and radical (Marxist) schools were also reflected in the writing on the South African War.

Books dealing specifically with the origins of the South African War include those by Hobson, Lovell, Reitz, Scholtz, Spies, Duminy and Porter.¹³ Jeeves and Bransky contributed unpublished works in this regard¹⁴.

Significant chapters/articles on the South African War and its origins in books and journals were produced by *inter alia* Kruger, De Kock, Atmore & Marks, Etherington, Gallagher & Robinson, Garson, Marks, Marks & Trapido, Porter, Smith and Thompson¹⁵

G. D. Scholtz, *Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902*, 2 vols. (1960); M. A. Gronum, *Die Engelse Oorlog 1899-1902: Die gevegsmetodes waarmee die Boere-republieke verower is*, (1972); F. Pretorius, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog*, (1985), and *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boere-oorlog, 1899-1902*, (1991).

J. A. Hobson, *The war in South Africa: Its causes and effects*, (1900); R. I. Lovell, *The struggle for South Africa 1875-1899: A study in economic imperialism*, (1934); F. W. Reitz, *Een eeuw van onrecht*, (1899); G. D. Scholtz, *Die oorsake van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, 1899-1902*, 2 vols., (1948-1950); S. B. Spies, *The origins of the Anglo Boer War*, (1972); A. H. Duminy, *Sir Alfred Milner and the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War*, (1976), and *The capitalists and the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War*, (1977); A. N. Porter, *The origins of the South African War: Joseph Chamberlain and the diplomacy of imperialism 1895-1899*, (1980).

A. Jeeves, "The Rand capitalists and Transvaal politics 1892-1899", Phd thesis, (1971); D. Bransky, "The causes of the Boer War: Towards a new Synthesis", (1974).

D. W. Kruger, "Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902" in A. J. H. van der Walt *et al.* (eds.), *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* (1951); W. J. de Kock, "Die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902" in C. F. J. Muller (ed.), *Vyfhonderd jaar Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis*, (1968); A. Atmore & S. Marks, "The imperial factor in South Africa in the nineteenth century: Towards a reassessment", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 3, 1, (1974), pp. 105-39; N. Etherington, "Theories of imperialism in Southern Africa revisited", *African Affairs*, 81, (1982), pp. 385-407; J. A. Gallagher & R. E. Robinson, "The imperialism of free trade", *Economic History Review*, 6, (1953-4), pp. 1-15; N. G. Garson, "British imperialism and the coming of the Anglo-Boer War", *South African Journal of Economics*, 30, 2, (1962), pp. 140-153; S. Marks, "Southern and Central Africa, 1886-1910" in R. Oliver & G. N. Sanderson (eds.), *The Cambridge history of Africa* vol. 6, and "Scrambling for South Africa", *Journal of African History*, 23, (1982), pp. 97-113; S. Marks & S. Trapido, "Lord Milner and the South African state", *History Workshop* 8, (1979), pp. 50-80, and "Lord Milner and the South African state reconsidered" in M. Twaddle (ed.), *Imperialism, the state and the Third World*, (1992); A. N. Porter, "The South African War (1899-1902): Context and motive reconsidered", *Journal of African History*, 31, (1990), pp. 31-57; I. R. Smith, "The origins of the South African War (1899-1902): A re-appraisal", *South African Historical Journal*, 22, (1990), pp. 24-60; L. Thompson, "The origins of the South African War", *Journal of African History*, 3, (1962), pp. 148-50.

Some researchers such as Warwick¹⁶ and Nasson¹⁷ have recently started moving away from the perception of the war as exclusively a white man's war and have started investigating the participation in the war by black and coloured people and the impact of the war on their communities. Because of the shift in focus the term Anglo-Boer War has now been dropped by most academics in favour of the term South African War.

What then is the purpose of publishing another book on the topic, especially when it contributes little by way of new evidence or interpretations? The answer is that Smith's book is a commissioned assignment, being part of a series on the origins of wars. It must be conceded that Smith executed his assignment in a thorough manner. He wrote a readable, unbiased account of the origins of the South African War, based on solid research.

In chapter 1 Smith discusses the roots of the Anglo-Boer conflict before and during the nineteenth century. Chapter 2 deals with the consequences of the discovery of gold in the Transvaal. In chapters 3 and 4 the Jameson Raid and its aftermath are revisited. Chapters 5 to 9 focus on the buildup of tension between the British and Transvaal governments after the appointment of Sir Alfred Milner as British High Commissioner to South Africa. This tension centered around the Uitlander question, it is the refusal of President Kruger's government to accede to demands by the British government to grant full democratic rights to the mainly British immigrant population on the goldfields of the Witwatersrand. These chapters do not put new theories forward, but new evidence from inter alia the Bank of England archives is used to reinforce the critique of anti-imperialist Marxist writing. The final events leading to the outbreak of war are dealt with in chapter 10.

As the narrative unfolds it becomes clear how the British government and particularly Milner deliberately provoked conflict with the Transvaal. Smith nonetheless writes: "Milner may have helped to stir the pot, but he did not supply the ingredients" (p. 415). The war was in his view brought about by governments, not individuals. Smith supports the view that no war is inevitable. He emphasises

P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, (1983).

B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's war: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902*, (1991).

that the South African War was long in the making (p. 390), the “culmination of Britain’s increasing involvement in South Africa during the previous 30 years” (p. 405). However, he seems to contradict himself when he concludes that Britain did not necessarily seek war.

Smith’s old-fashioned approach, maintaining a strong narrative line, is a fresh breeze. He shies away from the people’s history and class analysis approaches. Instead he focuses on politics, and particularly the high-level diplomacy between the British and Transvaal governments. In the preface (pp. xi-xii) he clearly states his purpose of looking at the war through the “official mind”, the records of government officials and decision-makers. In the conclusion he once again justifies his approach by stating: “Wars occur because of the breakdown of relations between governments. That is why I followed the traditional path, in this book, of devoting much attention to the relations, and the eventual breakdown of relations, between the British and Transvaal governments between 1895 and 1899” (p. 390).

The concluding chapter, the most important in the book, is analytical and interpretative in nature. In it Smith takes issue with some historians and the myths created by them regarding the origins of the war. He rejects the theory, put forward by the British imperialists who wished to justify the war, that the Afrikaners intended to extend their dominion over the entire South Africa (pp. 391-393).

He challenges the Hobson thesis that the war was in essence a capitalist war to promote the economic interests of the mine-magnates and their cohorts. He argues that the role of the mining houses in the buildup to the war has been exaggerated by Marxist historians and that the mine-magnates were in fact disunited. Smith rejects the notion that the war was essentially fought by the British to gain possession of the gold of the Rand mines or to protect their trading interests in southern Africa (pp. 408-412). He refutes the perception that the Germans posed a real threat to British economic and strategic interests in the subcontinent (pp. 406-407). However, he seems to miss the point that the British government exploited this perception, however false it may have been, in their rationalisation of the war.

Although Smith does not completely reject economic explanations

for the war (p. 405) he sides with J. S. Marais' ¹⁸ approach of placing British supremacy rather than economic interests centre-stage (pp. 396-398). In using a "political" interpretation and trying to underplay the role of gold in the runup to the war Smith's argumentation is not always convincing.

An interesting contribution, and indeed one of the central theses of the book, is the view that the Jameson Raid of 1895 should not be inextricably linked to the outbreak of war four years later. Smith points out that Rhodes was a "burnt-out case" by 1898 and was definitely not behind the resort to war in 1899 (pp. 395-396).

While refuting the theories of other historians on the causes of the war, Smith does not really produce any coherent theory of his own. In his interpretation the real *casus belli* of the British government remains evasive and vague. Smith argues that the British political leaders had not decided prior to the war to annex the Transvaal as a crown colony, but had been willing to allow a measure of self-government. He concludes that "the evidence is strong that some sort of a self-governing Transvaal would have been acceptable to the British ... *providing* that it was under a 'friendly' government which could be relied upon to cooperate in the larger British imperial project for a federation or union of South Africa ... in which British supremacy and British interests would prevail" (p. 422). Does this make the British imperialist endeavours more morally defensible? From an Afrikaner perspective would the outcome not be exactly the same as the eventual annexation of the Boer Republics as crown colonies?

The major failure of the book is that it is one-sided. The British motives and actions are traced in detail through careful scrutiny of primary and secondary source material. Smith's analysis of the thinking of imperialists such as Milner, Chamberlain and Beit is impressive. Using new material from the archives of mining houses and banks he gives a more balanced account of the role of the Randlords and the Uitlanders than most earlier writers.

However, as far as the Republican side is concerned Smith's re-

search is limited to secondary sources and source publications. Apart from the reference to the Smuts and Leyds Papers in the bibliography, Smith seems to have done very little research in the archives of the Boer republics with their wealth of information. He does not even mention the Free State Archives Depot or the War Museum of the Boer Republics (both in Bloemfontein) in the bibliography. Neither do South African Dutch-language newspapers feature. Smith mentions that recent research has challenged the facile view of Kruger's government as that of a reactionary old autocrat assisted by a corrupt oligarchy (p. 401), but his book hardly contributes to a better understanding of Boer motives and actions in the pre-war phase. Whereas he manages, through his thorough study of documents relating to the British position, to reveal the nuances of opinion in the ranks of the British government and capitalists, he fails to indicate such nuances within the Boer ranks.

Despite its shortcomings Smith's book is undeniably a sound contribution to the historiography of the South African War, which will be extensively used by future researchers and students. It has been described as a pacesetting work with regard to the South African War. The causes of no war can ever be fully explained and therefore this book will not be the last on the topic. The final truth has not been found and the debate on the origins of the South African War will continue. With the centenary of the war approaching this debate will probably intensify over the next few years.