

*Amongst the Boers in peace and war*

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I Schroder-Nielsen (Edited by Lone Rudner & Bill Nasson)

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The commemoration of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) between the Boer Republics and the British Empire predictably triggered renewed interest into the period. The rekindled interest in the war stimulated a large body of new research which covered a wide range of aspects and topics. The realistic expectation was that this upsurge of new publications on the Anglo-Boer War would eventually lose its momentum after the conclusion of the celebrations in 2002. However, surprisingly the opposite happened, with the rekindled interest in the war maintaining its momentum with new publications on the Anglo-Boer War appearing on book shelves in book shops almost every month.

One such more recent addition to the vast collection of books on the Anglo-Boer War is the 2013 publication, *Amongst the Boers in Peace and War* by Ingvald Schroder-Nielsen. Schroder-Nielsen was a Norwegian who came to South Africa in August 1898 and kept a diary of his experiences during the war which remained unpublished for decades. The reason is that his diary was initially confiscated by the British, after he was captured, but it was later recovered and published in 1925 in Norwegian. This made his account of the war inaccessible to a wider audience. However, fortunately the manuscript was translated into English by Jalmer and Ione Rudner and finally edited by Rudner in co-operation with Bill Nasson which led to the publication in 2013.

Schroder-Nielsen's account of the war is based on a personal and individual level and provides a fresh insight into the war. The account is structurally divided into three interrelated parts, with the first two parts I and II (pp. 7- 60) describing his experiences as a Norwegian citizen in a foreign country. Part III (pp. 61 – 168) provides a tragic, but humorous account of how he, as

a result of circumstances, was 'dragged' into the war and onto the Boer side. The account contains very vivid descriptions of the guerrilla phase and the war under Generals De la Rey and Kemp. Part III (pp. 170-200) covers the period from when he was taken captive and covers his experiences in various prison camps in South Africa and how he was threatened with execution by the British forces. After an eventful period as prisoner of his British captors he ended up in a prisoner-of-war camp on the Bermuda Island in the Atlantic Ocean, where he has sat out the end of the war. All three sections of the book provide intriguing reading, not only on the prelude to the Anglo-Boer War and the war itself, but the insight provided of the human and social aspects of the tragic conflict.

Part 1 of the diary describes how Schroder-Nielsen obtained employment in 1898 as a telegrapher and as an assistant land-surveyor in the western part of the old Transvaal Republic. His work brought him into direct contact with the rural farmers, the Boers in the old Transvaal Republic which ideally placed him in a position to provide an objective perspective of the political and socio-economic existence of the rural farmers.

The real value of the book is located in the interesting and fresh insight that Schroder-Nielsen provided of how he as a foreigner perceived the Boers in their rural setting, during the months leading up to the War. His account of the everyday lives of the Boers and their extended families provides for very interesting and entertaining reading. He sketches from p. 48 - p. 52 a humorous account of how the ordinary Boer families greeted each in a writing style that is reminiscent of Herman Charles Bosman's accounts of rural life in the old Republics. Equally entertaining is his account of the way in which religious services were conducted, especially his description of the singing of the Boer family as a series of cries and howls. However, it should be stated that the description of the Boers is never done in a fashion which demean or belittle their lifestyle. The description is done with empathy and humour and paints a vivid picture of the social life of the Boers before the Anglo-Boer War.

Schroder-Nielsen was initially very critical of the way the Boers understood and interpreted the position of the Transvaal Republic after the London Convention of 1881, and their general lack understanding of international affairs. However, he soon realised that although the Boers may not be academically astute, because they never read anything other than the Bible, he quickly changed his view. He was especially impressed by the way the Boer Republics stood up against British imperialism over the years.

There are many moving personal accounts of the war included in the book such as when his close friend Piet Schuil was executed after trumped-up charges were laid against him by his British captors. The moving scene of Schuil's execution is done in graphic detail on p. 73 and describes how he was reading his Bible when he was shot and pieces of the Bible flew high in the air. Equally moving is his depiction of the old burghers' in the Bermuda camp (p. 200) reaction when the prisoners were informed that the peace treaty has been signed.

In seeking a parallel with the Schroder-Nielsen account of the Anglo-Boer War, the classic work of Denys Reitz, *Commando*, immediately comes to mind. The elegant description of the period before the War, the first few months before he joined the Commando's, the period of the War and his life in the prisoner-of-war camps is done with such clarity and graphic skill that it captivates the reader throughout the work.

Schroder-Nielsen's account is not well-known in the historiography, because the biography was published in English for the first time in 2013. However, this certainly does not distract from the work which makes a major contribution to the personalisation of the war. As indicated on the flip side of the book, his account describes the hardships during the War with humour and empathy. In my opinion the decision of the editors to follow Nielsen's style and choice of words as closely as possible brought freshness and a Norwegian flavour of the period into the account, which distinguishes this work from any other in the same genre. In my opinion this is a must-read book for any historian or amateur historian and high school history teacher. Accounts, such as *Amongst the Boers in Peace and War* bring the tragic events of the Anglo-Boer War to life for the reader and the learner.