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School of Humanities  
University of New England  
Armidale NSW 2351  
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# **Also Under the Southern Cross: Federation Australia and South Africa – The Boer War and Other Interactions**

**The 2011 Russel Ward Annual Lecture  
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**Jim Davidson  
University of Melbourne**

Russel Ward, amongst various attainments, gave us in *The Australian Legend* one of Australia's handful of great history books. Ward's book was a seminal exploration of the Australian identity. And while linear, progressing from convicts to miners and soldiers (our two varieties of digger), the book was also implicitly lateral; its purpose was largely to differentiate Australians from other English speakers. *The Australian Legend* was decidedly not a work of tub-thumping nationalism. 'It has become ... clear to everyone' – Ward remarked in an aside, distinctly from the Menzies era – 'that Australian patriotism does not usually or necessarily involve weakening of attachment to Britain, but rather the reverse'.<sup>1</sup>

It is that wider context I want to consider. Too often Australia's role in the Empire is considered simply as the relationship with England: the ease with which we recall the Anzacs, and then overlook New Zealand's participation at Gallipoli, is the clearest marker of that. But it has also led us to overlook basic affinities, not only with New Zealand but with Canada and, to a lesser degree, South Africa. Subsequently, Australian pre-occupation with the link with Britain alone has tended to obscure the links that existed with other parts of the Empire, even those quite close to home. Since independence, Papua-New Guinea has generally dropped from the national consciousness: focus shifts to it in times of crisis, and then immediately moves away. Yet there was once a sense of 'the Islands', extending to Fiji, as a onetime theatre of operations for Australian adventurers – including Errol Flynn and E. G. Theodore. That awareness of a sphere of influence is now almost completely lost.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1958, p. 52.

Here I would like to examine a second sphere of Australian interest and influence, South Africa, one that has also become occluded. Part of this was a consequence of apartheid, and the commendable fight against its ruthless racial discrimination by the imposition of sanctions and other measures. During that period, Australia chose to cultivate its links with Canada, Pierre Trudeau being seen as a kind of John the Baptist for Gough Whitlam. But those links did not clinch and grow. For better or for worse, ever since the First Fleet put in at Cape Town on the way to Sydney, our links with South Africa have been more immediate, more diverse and — in the sweep of history — more sustained. This was particularly so at the time of Federation, and it is those links, and their resonance here, that I wish to explore.

There is an artefact that captures the moment — so much so that it gave me the idea for this lecture (Figure 1). In the Parkes Museum at Tenterfield, there is on display part of a dinner set produced just after Federation. The centrepiece is the jug, not exactly the Portland Vase, which contains four main elements. One of these, as might be expected given the location, is a representation of Henry Parkes — already dead some five years at the time of Federation, which the jug purports to celebrate. The Governor-General, and the Duke and Duchess of York — who came to Australia for the opening of the first federal parliament in Melbourne — are on the jug too. But the centrepiece is an image of Queen Victoria (ageing distinctly gracefully) with a British officer, helmeted, and an Australian, plumes flamboyantly projecting from his slouched hat, standing on each side. Surprisingly, they do not stand to attention, but are leaning against the medallion: at ease in the Empire. Below is a scroll, quoting the British colonial secretary and imperialist, Joseph Chamberlain: 'May the union between the colonies and the Motherland now cemented by their blood be for ever maintained'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful for the assistance here of Robin Riley of the Parkes Museum and the Tenterfield School of Arts.



Figure 1: The 'Tenterfield Jug': celebrating Federation, but firmly placing it in an imperial context. Photo by Jim Davidson.



What the Tenterfield Jug shows, very clearly, is that a federated Australia emerged within the Empire, ratified by participation in the Boer War. It is often forgotten, given the cliché perpetuated in schools that 'Australia became a nation in 1901', how slow our nation was to emerge, indeed in so clouded a fashion that no particular year can be singled out as marking our independence. The Governor-General not only stood in for the sovereign, but, until the appointment of a separate British High Commissioner in 1931, wrote weekly despatches back to Whitehall, telling the British what 'his' government was up to. Even Australian coinage and stamps were slow to appear, dating from 1910 and 1913 respectively; and many people took a long time to enlarge their civic consciousness from their state to the nation. Barry Humphries, of course, still prefers to call himself a Victorian — as well he might. But, until well into the twentieth century, while the federal government remained weak, he was not alone. It is my argument that the Boer War is crucial in understanding Australia's sense of itself at the time of Federation, even if it did not much advance it. Secondly, Australia acted as a sub-imperialism in South Africa, not only in the Boer War but in other ways as well, particularly with the stream of adventurers who sought their fortunes in mining. Because of this broad front of involvement, Australian consciousness of South Africa was also high, and I shall say a few words about how the war appeared in our literature.

But first, the Boer War, or the South African War, as it is also known.<sup>3</sup> I shall pass over its causes, except to say that it was ostensibly about the extreme reluctance of the Transvaal government to extend full citizenship rights, and the vote, to the English-speaking miners, the Uitlanders. The Boers (as the Afrikaners were then called) feared — with some justice — that they would lose control of their state. Apart from the machinations of leading capitalists, even progressives such as George Bernard Shaw argued that the goldmines of the Rand should not be in the hands of a group of frontier farmers, and that, for want of a world government, the

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<sup>3</sup> I have drawn extensively here from L. M. Field, *The Forgotten War: Australian Involvement in the South African Conflict of 1899-1902*, Melbourne, 1979, and C. Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, Melbourne, 2002.

British Empire should take control of them. So war broke out, between the two Boer republics (the Transvaal and the Orange Free State) and the British Empire.

There were three phases in the war. The first, from October 1899 to the end of that year, revealed the incompetence and poor leadership of the British army. The Boers speedily advanced and scored a number of victories: the three rapid ones in December 1899 soon led the English to refer to them collectively as 'Black Week'. At the same time, the Boers laid siege to Ladysmith, Mafeking and Kimberley – only the last a town of any real importance. The younger Boer generals were urging further advance instead, but they were overruled. Inevitably the tide turned. The year 1900, to September, marks the second phase of the war, with Lord Roberts now in charge, making a sweeping advance first to Bloemfontein and then on to Pretoria. The republics were annexed by the British; the war seemed over. But in its third phase the war would go on for at least as long as it had been waged already. The Boers proved to be expert guerrilla fighters, making darting raids, refusing to take a stand and instead breaking off the fighting when it suited them, returning to fight another day. Guerrilla war was also fought in the Cape; the Boers had hopes of rousing the majority of the white population to participate, since they were also Afrikaners.

Kitchener, now in charge, came to realise that he would have to fight a new kind of war. Ruthless tactics were adopted by the British: blockhouses and barbed wire were strung along the railway lines, farmhouses burnt, and Boer women and children rounded up and – in an effort to concentrate the population, away from their menfolk still at large – placed in what were termed concentration camps. Unfortunately disease and malnutrition gave that term a familiar resonance: over 20,000 Boer women and children died in the camps. The Boers were worn down, although still capable of surprises. In May 1902 the war ended in the Peace of Vereeniging.

In Australia, the first real interest in the war was shown in military circles; some soldiers from New South Wales (NSW) had already gone to England for further training when the fighting began. Meanwhile the British, aware of the propaganda value of

having wider Empire support for their war against the Boers, set about inducing the colonial governments to send volunteers — that is to say, existing members of the militia who were prepared to go to South Africa. NSW and Victoria were resistant, at first. But then Queensland, in those days more marginal, seized the opportunity to set the pace, and offered to send a contingent. The bigger colonies found it expedient to follow. In the case of South Australia, the Legislative Council approved the sending of a contingent by only one vote. But the war was becoming popular, and the reverses of Black Week made it more so — helping the mother country in a spot of bother. When the first contingents departed, cheering crowds lined the streets, just as the relief of Mafeking was wildly celebrated here as throughout the Empire.

Australia's growing enthusiasm becomes more comprehensible when the spirit of the time is considered. Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, in 1897, had literally seen the Empire on parade in London. Pride in it was never greater. The following year the United States went to war against Spain, and picked up, amongst other places, the Philippines and Hawaii, responding to Kipling's exhortation to 'Take up the White Man's Burden'. Republican America had become imperialist; there was talk now not only of the English race, but even of a pan-Teutonicism, which included Germany. Cecil Rhodes' last will, drawn up at this time, provided for German Rhodes scholars to go to Oxford — as they did till 1914 — as well as colonials and Americans. Thus Australian federation was seen by many as essentially a sub-set in the Empire; the tug was constantly towards the imperial, and outwards from that. 'Among the Australians', Keith Hancock would write, 'pride of race counted for more than love of country'. And involvement in the imperial project — what Donald Horne once called being 'mates in the Empire' — meant sharing in world dominance. There was, reflected New South Welshman J. H. M. Abbott in occupied Pretoria, 'the vague realisation that we, the English, and the Canadians, and the Australians, were a race that overran the globe and that its inheritance was ours'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W. K. Hancock, *Australia*, Brisbane, 1964, p. 49; J. H. M. Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, London, 1902, p. 213.



Figure 2: Johannesburg, 1897. An Australian float is prominent in a pro-British, implicitly anti-Boer demonstration.

Australian involvement in the Boer War was multi-layered, and, as Craig Wilcox has shown, probably amounted to over 20,000 soldiers rather than the official 16,378. In addition to the various colonial Bushmen, the initial contingents drawn from militia, there were the later civil volunteers, styled Imperial Bushmen. Soldiers in this second group were equipped and paid for by the imperial government; many of those who volunteered for them were attracted — in an Australia still sluggish after the depression of the 1890s — not only by the prospect of adventure, but also by the handsome rates of pay: four or five times those of English soldiers. The British, initially more concerned to have Australian participation for its propaganda value, wanted infantry, at first, but before long they learned the value of the colonial mounted trooper. British cavalry may have been more professional, with their lances and swords, but the Australians, as Erskine Childers put it, 'seemed by intuition to grasp the possibilities of a union of the rifle with the horse.' Australians already in South Africa volunteered; in addition

to joining regiments there, they formed an Imperial Light Horse, open to all comers. Others decided to go to South Africa under their own steam; they went as 'indulgence' passengers on special fares, on the understanding they would enlist on arrival. But despite considered attempts to recruit bushmen – agents were told to go out to the end of the railway lines, to make sure they got the genuine article – well under half of the Victorian volunteers, despite the styling of their contingent as Imperial Bushmen, could truly claim to be so. As the war went on, the urban working class component increased.<sup>5</sup>

Even some of those most opposed to the war were careful to frame that opposition within a context of endorsement of the Empire. As well they might: even the Australian Natives' Association had come to stress imperial loyalty. The first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, took the line that not enough was known to discuss the rights and wrongs of the war, so it was a case of 'the Empire, right or wrong'.<sup>6</sup> Earlier, a ritual 'Three cheers for the Queen!' had concluded colonial debates on the war. People did put the contrary case, but even in 1902, when the War had been widely condemned in Britain for its 'methods of barbarism', there were only five federal MPs who were prepared to take a stand against it. Others, such as W. A. Holman in NSW, had been roughed up and intimidated. Even German clubs were attacked, in Broken Hill and Bendigo, as nests of pro-Boer sentiment. Opposition did come, from the *Bulletin*, from pockets of the Labour movement, from Professor G. A. Wood of the University of Sydney (who nearly lost his chair in consequence), and elements of the Catholic Church. But it swam against the tide, until, with the lack of set-piece battles, the stories of farm-burning and distressed Boer women, plus some embarrassment about the rambunctiousness of Australian troops, active interest in and support for the war ebbed away.

In a sense Australia acted as a sub-imperialism during the war. Some South Africans were horrified by Australian participation. The

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<sup>5</sup> W. M. Chamberlain, 'The Characteristics of Australia's Boer War Volunteers', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 78, 1982, pp. 48-52.

<sup>6</sup> Barton, quoted G. Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo*, Sydney, 1976, p. 64.

feminist and novelist Olive Schreiner told Banjo Paterson, who spent nine months in South Africa as a war correspondent, that she couldn't understand why Australians were there. The English had no choice, had to go where they were told; but Australians had volunteered, and, as another South African public figure remarked, 'it's not their quarrel'. Kipling thought England 'fawned on the younger nations for the men who could shoot and ride', and Milner was indulgent to those colonials who wished to go home at the end of twelve months, rather than stay for the duration. In fact the first contingents returned just in time for the Federation celebrations. This was felt to be perfect synchronisation. For whereas with Gallipoli Australia was participating on the world stage, in the Boer War we were playing to the Brits. As Paterson had written:

*And in the front the Lancers rode that New South Wales  
had sent:*

*With easy stride across the plain their lean, long Walers  
went.*

*Unknown, untried, those squadrons were, but proudly out  
they drew*

*Beside the English regiments that fought at Waterloo.*

'Bright-eyed out of the battle', noted Kipling, approvingly; 'Daughter no more but Sister'. Joseph Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for the Colonies most keen to strengthen the bonds of Empire, even held out the prospect of Australia being consulted with regard to the postwar settlement in South Africa. More immediately, and importantly, in 1900 he conceded that the High Court, rather than his preferred (British) Privy Council, should be empowered to deal with Australian constitutional disagreements and challenges. This concession was made the day before Mafeking was relieved. It was a receipt for military aid; or perhaps, given that the future founder of the Boy Scouts was still cooped up in the besieged town, a proficiency badge.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> E. R. Drooglever (ed.), *From the Front: A.B. (Banjo) Paterson's Despatches from the Boer War*, Sydney, 2000, pp. 126-7; South African public figure and Kipling quotes, Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, pp. 71, 186, 299.

A sub-imperialism, by definition, has some awareness of its own, separate interests. While Australia's sense of itself was weak, the Boer War helped to clarify the prerogatives that had to be exercised and insisted upon if nationhood was to be meaningful. A proposal to send some Boer prisoners to Tasmania was knocked back – not by Tasmania, but by the federal government, probably for its resonance of the convict system. Then the Marquis of Tullibardine found that, while he was able to recruit one unit from the Scottish community in Victoria, he encountered some resistance to the idea, with even more when he sought a second one to replace them. The federal government, annoyed by Milner and Baden-Powell's keenness to recruit for the South African Constabulary, blocked the move. Australia was not, in the words of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'to be a happy hunting-ground for the recruiting sergeant'.<sup>8</sup> People should be free to volunteer, but as Australians in Australian regiments. Meanwhile there was concern that the Australian government was not being notified as fully as it should be. No official notification of the worst Australian disaster of the war, the loss of eighteen lives in a skirmish at Wilmansrust, reached the new government. Concern was also expressed about the British court-martialing of three Australian soldiers – not Morant, Handcock and Witton – but another three, for mutiny, again without notifying Melbourne. The root cause there was a particularly unpopular British officer. Australian soldiers generally did not mix much socially with the Tommies, the British privates; their officers may as well have come from another planet. The longer the war continued the more it seems to have strengthened a resolve that in future wars Australians would fight in their own regiments, and under their own generals.<sup>9</sup>

Given the importance of the war, why its eclipse? Many of the characteristics celebrated in the Anzacs were already recognised and promoted in connection with the Boer War: the scepticism towards military rules and procedures, the distaste for discipline – 'curiously lax', a British officer observed<sup>10</sup> – the ability to live off the land, the tenacity in fighting. But this was insufficient to fix the War in the

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<sup>8</sup> SMH quoted in Field, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Drooglever, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, p 199.



public consciousness. L. M. Field called his study *The Forgotten War*, and a generation ago that was no exaggeration. First to be considered is the death toll: just over 500, with embarrassingly slightly more dying from disease or accidents than being killed in action. The total of 518 would be overtaken by those killed at Gallipoli in just a week or two. The scale of the Great War, and Australia's participation in it, dwarfed the involvement in South Africa. But there were also other reasons. The Australians' attachment to imperial regiments, albeit as brigades, blurred their identity, despite special shoulder straps or hat badges. In fact, state loyalties still counted most; the term 'Australian' was still more generic than national. The first Commonwealth contingents did not set sail till the war was nearly over, while Kitchener's attempt to form an Australian regiment, prompted by Federation, was distinctly unpopular.

Moreover, there was also the fact that, while there was a notable defence at Elands River, Australian victories were generally on so small a scale that they did not cry out for celebration; it is unlikely that some action will be resurrected, as Long Tan and Fromelles have been. Generally the Australians fought as auxiliaries to the British; indeed a great number of them were diverted to Rhodesia (the present Zimbabwe), and engaged in preventative police action rather than being involved directly in the war. And as the war degenerated into a series of actions against guerrillas, people at home lost interest. For the last half of the war, there was no Australian newspaper correspondent in South Africa. South Africa Day, celebrating veterans on the anniversary of the most notable British victory, the battle of Paardeberg, was observed only once. There was no Australian official history of participation in the war, while a 'national' war memorial in Melbourne was quietly forgotten.

But there were myriad local memorials, up to a couple of hundred of them: the exact number would be difficult to compute, as some have disappeared. What is striking about them is the general absence of reference to the infant nation Australia: usually the references are to Queen and Empire, and in a number of cases only the War is mentioned; no polity at all. Volunteering is something country boys do, and so the 'people of the district' would feel moved

to mark their patriotism and to remember those who had not returned. The places of death recorded on the memorial arch at Tenterfield, 'Bloemfontein' and 'Pretoria', were given in quotation marks. These places were reduced to concepts. Australian country towns were a long way from South Africa.

Urban or larger country town contexts were different. In South Melbourne a monument yokes the fiftieth anniversary of the municipality to the despatch of the 'several Victorian contingents who fought the battles of Queen and Empire in South Africa' (Figure 3). No mention of their return. It was as though the country felt itself to be on a roll, of Empire, and race — all the more important in Australia since purity of race, plus valour, might be seen to eradicate the convict stain.

The Boer War can be seen as marking the completion of our colonial phase, and in a number of places, such as Goulburn, the confident Victorian townscape was literally completed by the Boer War memorial. (The axis of Belmore Gardens runs from the bandstand to the fountain to the monument, as laid out before the courthouse.) So much was the war about empire that in at least one case, Brunswick, the almost certainly mercenary motives of the great number of volunteers was lauded by a rare reference to their 'noble deeds'. But it was also about community — within Empire — as demonstrated by an early postcard from Brunswick. The central image of five, the Boer War monument becomes the lynchpin of a community putting its best foot forward.

The war took place on the hinge of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and increasingly would look old-fashioned when compared with what came after, which again accounts for its relegation. It was extraneous to Australia's abiding concerns, and also simply an episode in the lives of those who took part in it. But given the voluntary nature of service in South Africa, it is instructive to see how it became integrated in three quite different life stories.

Captain Staughton, the first, was the most conventional figure; like many officers in the contingents, he came from a landed family in Victoria, and represents the high Anglo-Australian tradition. He

was sent to England for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and five years later was a member of Edward VII's coronation escort. By then he was a member of parliament, succeeding his father; but it was all cut short when, after marrying an English bride, he died from appendicitis. A lamp still stands in his memory in the main street of Melton.<sup>11</sup> In stark contrast there is the anti-imperialist, also Victorian-born, Arthur Lynch (1861-1934), who became an Irish nationalist, went to South Africa at the time of the Boer War, and started a second Irish Brigade to fight on the Boer side. Later, in England, although elected to an Irish seat in the House of Commons, he was regarded as a traitor, and sentenced to hang – but the sentence was commuted, and he was pardoned shortly afterwards.<sup>12</sup>

More prosaically, there's the story of Francis Birtles, an adventurous working-class boy born in Fitzroy. He was one of those young men who, working as a sailor at the time, got himself to South Africa. There he jumped ship to join Australian militia, but ended up in a troop of irregular mounted infantry until the end of the war. Birtles returned briefly to Australia, then went back to join the constabulary in the Transvaal. Becoming seriously ill with fever, on recovery he decided to return to Australia once more. Here he became an indefatigable cyclist, crossing the Nullarbor and later riding his bike right round Australia. By 1912, among other journeys, he had done this twice. Eventually he performed similar feats in the motor car, and was the first person to drive from London to Melbourne. For Birtles the war had been a *Boys' Own* adventure.<sup>13</sup>

Olive Schreiner told Banjo Paterson, correctly, that the war was a disaster for South Africa: it would leave an appalling legacy which would be 'everlasting': it did last a full century. But Australia was not entirely unscathed either. It could be said that the birth of the nation, in a volley of gunfire, created a nexus of Australia's identity being tangled up with war in a way that is with us still. From

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<sup>11</sup> *Argus*, 21 May 1903; D. Moloney *et al*, *Shire of Melton Heritage Study Stage 2*, Melton, 2007, Vol 4., pp. 342-4.

<sup>12</sup> G. Serle, 'Lynch, Arthur Alfred (1861-1934)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 10, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 176-7.

<sup>13</sup> T. G. Birtles, 'Birtles, Francis Edwin (1881-1941)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 7, Melbourne, 1979, pp. 297-8.

Gallipoli to Afghanistan we have willingly sent our troops abroad as junior partners in an alliance, without always bothering to work out our own reasons as to why they should be there. It's as though atavistically we know that nations are usually created in armed struggle; and how clever of us to have contrived to have always fought, with the exception of our then colony of Papua-New Guinea, on someone else's soil.



Figure 3: The Boer War Memorial, South Melbourne, celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the municipality as well as commemorating the eight local dead.

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Apart from the imperial context, more important with the Boer War than any other Australia fought, there was another reason — often overlooked — which accounts for Australian enthusiasm. That was mining. Once the gold rushes began to peter out in the 1870s, Australians began to look to South Africa. Some turned up on the diamond fields. They were a recognisable group on the Lydenburg goldfields in the 1870s. Indeed an Australian, George Harrison, is often credited with being the discoverer of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886, and one of the main streets of Johannesburg was named accordingly.

With the collapse of the land boom in Melbourne five years later, a number of people began to look westwards: there was even a short period when more young men left for South Africa than for the emergent goldfields of Western Australia. It has been estimated that of the nearly 12000 white men working in the Transvaal goldmines in the late 1890s, a thousand were Australian. In Johannesburg they were a recognisable group: there were not only Australian bars, but games of Australian rules football; also, apparently, an Australian brothel. Although happy to call themselves British(ers), these Australians knew that they were not English; they may have also felt more different than they expected from English-speaking South Africans. They were certainly different from the Boer rulers of the Transvaal.

If the Boer War to some degree occluded the enunciation of an Australian identity, for these expatriates their South African experience helped to augment it. Most Australian miners were not committed to settling permanently in Johannesburg or South Africa, and so they worked at maintaining a sense of their Australianness. Thus while the colonies sent separate expeditionary forces until very late in the war, an Australian brigade was formed in Johannesburg at the time of the Jameson Raid (in 1895) — only to be promptly ordered by the British, along with the other miners' volunteer forces, to disband. They just had time to pose for a photo, which appeared on one of the first post cards to be made in South Africa. Shortly afterwards, given the defeat of Jameson and his raiders by the Boer

government of the Transvaal, a counter-demonstration was held on the streets of Johannesburg. Queen Victoria was celebrating her Diamond Jubilee. Prominent in the march was a float, bearing an enormous (unofficial) Australian coat of arms (Figure 2). When the Boer War came, the existence of the Australian community in the Transvaal was often given by politicians as an additional reason for taking part.

Some members of the contingents, given the adverse conditions at home, had come to South Africa with the hope of getting land, or at least employment. When discharged, some had immediately joined imperial units of irregulars. Only the government of NSW took positive steps against such a course, by stipulating that its volunteers would be paid out only on return home. There was a fear that many Australians would be lost to this new frontier. Before the war was over, there had been some slippage into police and railway duties. But public service jobs were fewer than in Australia, and while there was some settlement, what was more striking was that Boer farmers were helped in the reconstruction after the War, rather than turfed off their land. So some Australians settled in Rhodesia instead, but fewer than Rhodes had hoped.

'We want you Australians to stay over here and fetch this place along', Kipling had said to Paterson. And, in the attempt to anglicise the Boers, a group of 40 female Australian schoolteachers had volunteered to work with children in the camps. But those men who stayed on often did it tough. There was drought in South Africa, now. The expected post-war boom did not materialise. Ambrose Pratt, who accompanied Andrew Fisher to the celebrations for the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, wrote that South Africa had little to offer many other than 'a miserable existence and a pauper's grave'. The colour bar was intended to reserve the best jobs for whites, and it did; there wasn't a white bricklayer who didn't leave the carrying to a black assistant or two, and then placed the brick and applied the cement in a lordly fashion. What was less known was that the colour bar also worked in reverse: menial jobs were seen as 'Kaffir work'. Even if they were disposed to do them, Australians would usually not be given the chance. So many ended up living on charity and drifting into crime. 'They are industrial

superfluities', said Pratt, the despised 'poor whites'.<sup>14</sup> In 1907 the Australian government began repatriating some of them. Three years later Fisher found himself besieged by a deputation of 500 former Australians, claiming to represent 10,000 more. The adventure was over.

Nonetheless, skilled artisans had been enticed into the mines, so that the number of Australians working there rose from a thousand before the war to at least three times that number in 1904, sustaining an Australian community of some five thousand. With them, to a place where trade unionism was relatively weak – both in organisation and membership – these artisans brought a strong commitment to unionism: a good many (reinforced by British immigrants) became active in the South African labour movement. Two Australian prime ministers, Watson as well as Fisher, visited South Africa and mixed with local labour leaders and addressed trade union gatherings. 'Australia', writes South African historian Jonathan Hyslop, 'provided the inspiration for the ideology of white labourism. British-diaspora Labour admired the welfarism and real prosperity of early twentieth century Australia'.<sup>15</sup>

Australians also brought with them the racial attitudes of 'White Australia' – more geographically excluding than South Africa could ever be. This was to be particularly important after the Boer War, when they were vociferous in their campaign against imported Chinese labour. Australian precedent often functioned as a stiffener for South African attitudes: Thomas Matthews, in 1914, spoke of the white man's right to oust the African 'just as the Australians ousted the Chinamen and the Kanakas'. He was probably unaware that Australia had, in turn, developed the Dictation Test from a procedure used in Natal to restrict Indian immigration. Given common racial and racist assumptions, such practices were seen to be

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<sup>14</sup> A. Pratt, *The Real South Africa*, London, 1913, pp. 7, 257-8.

<sup>15</sup> B. Kennedy, *A Tale of Two Mining Cities: Johannesburg and Broken Hill, 1885-1925*, Melbourne, 1984, pp. 7, 21; J. Hyslop, 'The British and Australian Leaders of the South African Labour Movement, 1902-1914: A Group Biography', in K. Darian-Smith, P. Grimshaw and S. Macintyre (eds), *Britishness Abroad*, Melbourne, 2007, p. 93.



interchangeable. The advanced settler democracy established in Australia hovered as an aspiration: apart from immigration, even in domestic South African matters it could provide a lead. In Queensland a ban on marriage or cohabitation between whites and Aborigines or half-castes had existed since 1897.<sup>16</sup>

Some time ago Pierre van den Berghe coined the term 'Herrrenvolk democracies': the evolution of the South African version owes more than is generally realised to White Australia and white Australians. Australian ideas of 'white labourism' bolstered traditional South African racial practices, solidifying the colour bar. The South African Labour Party was the first to advocate 'a full-blooded programme of racial segregation'. At union in 1910, the first Labour party senator was Australian-born; a little later, so too was the second.<sup>17</sup>

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If the mining community in Johannesburg showed Australian males at their most assertive, the Boer War at once enabled Australian women to exercise their traditional nurturing role and to advance the feminist cause. Quaker women in Melbourne made clothes for the Boer women and children in the concentration camps. Comforts for soldiers – such as warm clothing, brandy and bandages – were also gathered and sent to nurses in South Africa. There the NSW Hospital in Bloemfontein developed a particularly high reputation.

An important figure of the time was the South African writer Olive Schreiner. Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) was probably the best-known 'colonial' novel in Britain: its proto-feminist heroine moved in a landscape of 'solemn monotony', effectively being described for the first time. Mystical elements in the novel appealed to the then fashionable hankering after unseen spiritual forces.<sup>18</sup> But Schreiner was very much rooted in the real

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<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, *op. cit.*, pp 23, 29.

<sup>17</sup> P. van den Berghe, *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective*, New York, 1967, p. 126; W. K. Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, London, 1940, Vol. 2, Book 2, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> O. Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*, London, 1883.

issues of the day. Her husband was a member of the Cape parliament, while her brother was the colony's premier at the outbreak of war. But Schreiner herself had a double importance. Her feminist writings were well-known – the crusading English editor, W. T. Stead, described hers as 'the defining voice of the "new" woman', and she was also decidedly pro-Boer. The interview she gave Banjo Paterson shows her formidable intellect at work: indeed it penetrated the Australian poet's consciousness deeply, and helped to change his views about the conduct of the war.<sup>19</sup>

Schreiner's articulate opposition to the conflict worked to embolden women in Australia to take a stand against the war. Apart from the general arguments, the fact that women in NSW were on the cusp of exercising the vote for the first time encouraged the articulation of a feminist position. Rose Scott, an activist who also ran what elsewhere would have been called a salon, believed that the masculine impulse to aggression was a refutation of man's claim to rationality; women needed to take a greater control of national affairs. Also important was Ada Holman, wife of the Labor parliamentarian who had spoken out against the war. She was active with Professor G. A. Wood (often standing in for him) in the work of the Anti-War League, founded only a few months before the war ended in 1902. Women generally comprised one-third of the people attending League meetings.<sup>20</sup>

But perhaps the nexus of the Boer War and feminism can be seen most clearly in an early novel of Miles Franklin – she whom Nettie Palmer dubbed 'the Olive Schreiner of Australian Literature'.<sup>21</sup> The novel *Cockatoos*, while written at the time of the War, was not published until 1954. It is set in the country around Goulburn – centred on cockies, small farmers, although members of the squattocracy put in an appearance. Like a lot of Miles Franklin's fiction, it is semi-autobiographical, with the heroine, Ignez, being the

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<sup>19</sup> Drooglever, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-130, 419; Stead quoted in S. McKirdy, 'Lives on the Line: Women of Empire and the Peace Movement during the Second Boer War 1899-1902', BA Hons thesis, Macquarie University, 1998, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> McKirdy, *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 50, 69.

<sup>21</sup> Palmer quoted in J. Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography*, London, 2008, p. 331.

author of a locally-set novel (shades of *My Brilliant Career*); she also, like Miles, has a fine voice that is wrecked by an incompetent voice teacher. The story of talent having to struggle free of rural Australia is underlined at the end of the book by another two or three characters having the same problem of emerging from the chrysalis of the country. To flourish they need to be 'exodists', as Franklin calls them — expatriates. The novel in fact is subtitled *A Tale of Youth and Exodists*.<sup>22</sup>

The Boer War is a strong presence in the book. Three of the book's characters go off to South Africa, one dying there, another remaining since he marries and settles down there, while the third returns. That's Cowpens, as he's nicknamed, a misfitting clodhopper who had to clear out after furtively shooting the horse of a rival in love from under him. The Boer War is presented as an exodus of the wrong kind, a crusade against people 'similar to ourselves'. Hopes of getting land in South Africa, among country Australians cursing the long drought, are present, along with the hope that, failing that, they might get a good government job on return. But the pointlessness of the war is placed along side the struggle of women. Why should Britain seek to liberate its people in the Transvaal when it has not yet liberated its own women? Poignantly, as the young Ignez leaves Redfern station (there was no Central then) she witnesses the suicide on the tram tracks of one said to be a streetwalker. Her uncle alludes to this condition delicately, but describes such people as a 'necessary evil'. Ignez is aghast at this rampant sexism, as we'd call it now, and at the way her uncle seems to regard prostitution as a perfectly acceptable safety-valve which helps maintain respectability. The suicide haunts the impressionable Ignez, obstructing any thought of physical love with men. The 'fallen woman' has been a casualty of battle — fell, in fact — in what is a far more significant and enduring struggle than a far-off war.

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<sup>22</sup> M. Franklin, *Cockatoos: A Story of Youth and Exodists*, Sydney, 1954.

Surprisingly, the Boer War cast a long shadow, if a faint one. Christopher Brennan's *The Burden of Tyre* was a high-flown and abstruse attack on the war; even so, the poem seems to have been regarded as too controversial – or too solipsistic – to publish at the time. It did not appear until 1953.<sup>23</sup> By that time the number of Boer War veterans marching in Anzac Day parades had shrunk to handfuls. Even so, in the same year as Brennan's long poem was published, there were still as many Boer War veterans in the ALP caucus as there were returned soldiers from World War II: as much a comment on the party's slowness to change as on their longevity.<sup>24</sup>

In recent years the Boer War has been prompting reconsideration. In a small way this began with the centenary, but it is more a matter of shifts in perspective. Once the Boer War could be ignored, as Garrie Hutchinson does in his guide book for those making a pilgrimage to Australian battlefields; just a cartoon before the main feature.<sup>25</sup> Indeed Boer War veterans sometimes did not take part in Anzac Day, and could be thought of by the young as having fought in a foreign war. But times change: fresh developments prompt new questions, and people – in particular historians – look for new antecedents. Now, in the time of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Boer War does not look aberrational at all, but rather in the main line of Australian military involvement abroad. Indeed, as a proportion of the total population at the time, those 20,000 Australian troops are roughly comparable with those fighting in Viet Nam. The deaths are about the same.

Country towns tell it true, when (in some of them) you will see later war memorials taking their alignment from the Boer War one. Indeed, in the case of Casino, the later wars are but additions to 'the Mafeking lamp' standing on the town's main junction; the war becomes almost generative of Australia's later military involvements.

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<sup>23</sup> C. Brennan, *The Burden of Tyre*, Sydney, 1953. For discussion, see S. Walker, 'The Boer War: Paterson, Abbott, Brennan, Miles Franklin and Morant', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1985, pp. 213-16; A. Clark, *Christopher Brennan*, Melbourne, 1980, pp. 158-60.

<sup>24</sup> J. Hocking, *Gough Whitlam, A Moment in History*, Melbourne, 2008, p. 140.

<sup>25</sup> G. Hutchinson, *Pilgrimage: A Traveller's Guide to Australia's Battlefields*, Melbourne, 2006.

There is now a campaign under way to build a Boer war memorial in Canberra: the site has already been allocated on Anzac Parade. It should eventuate, given the increasing interest in the war. Recently there have been annual remembrances, while an advertisement recently appeared in the *Australian*, advertising a tour for the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the peace.<sup>26</sup>

The other way the War remains alive — the main one, now — is the case of 'Breaker' Morant. Although Peter Handcock too was executed, it is Morant, the commanding officer of their unit of the Bushveld Carbineers — who haunts the public imagination. Pleas for his case to be re-opened, and for him to be granted a posthumous pardon on the grounds of unfair judicial procedure, have again been made recently. Morant, the well-born Englishman who became an Australian horsebreaker and bush balladeer, is ideally cast as a martyr to the ambivalence inherent in the Australian-British relationship. The Boer War gave us no memorable battle to recall, but it did give us this Ned Kelly-like figure — an incarnation prophesied shortly after his death. But one wonders whether to have Morant pardoned — a questionable procedure — might not reduce the potency of the myth. Better to leave him, I think, riding free and as open as a question mark.

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<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to comments offered by Professor Jim Barber, Vice Chancellor of the University of New England, recollecting schoolboy attitudes in Adelaide towards a Boer War veteran, when this lecture was given on 8 September. On the Boer War 'Anniversary Tour' see <[www.bwm.org.au](http://www.bwm.org.au)>, and advertisement *Australian*, 13-14 August 2011.