

Still Forgotten

Peter Ryan

Craig Wilcox

AUSTRALIA'S BOER WAR:
THE WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA 1899–1902
OUP, \$69.95hb, 559pp, 0 19 551637 0

EVER SINCE FEDERATION, Australians have heard of the Boer War, as they have heard of the Wars of the Roses. As to deep understanding, they have as much about the one war as about the other. As a 'Matric' student in 1939, I had for my Commercial Practice teacher a Boer War veteran — lean, tall, bow-legged — every schoolboy's image of our horsemen who had taught the Empire's enemies such a lesson in South Africa. Beguiled by eager juvenile diversionists, he would treat us to ten minutes of soldier anecdotes, straight from his saddle forty years earlier.

In 1979, forty years later yet again, a certain Director of Melbourne University Press felt confident accepting for publication a manuscript entitled *The Forgotten War: Australian Involvement in the South African Conflict of 1899–1902*. The author, Laurence Field, was right to say 'forgotten'. On this scholarly path, Craig Wilcox now acknowledges Field as a pioneer, where his few companions included Gavin Souter, most percipient of our scholar-journalists.

All the 'white dominions' (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) sent forces (mostly mounted) to support Britain in its prolonged and costly war against 'a few Dutch farmers'. Yet, in each dominion, there was unease about what was happening. Many people were appalled at Kitchener's methods: burning out and looting Boer farms, leaving women and children roofless on the veld, or herded into pestilential 'concentration camps'. They were uncertain, too, about the war's basic moral provenance: was it a display of imperial fidelity, with 'daughter' dominions racing to the aid of the 'mother' country? Or was it disguised imperial piracy, as the fabulous goldfields of the Rand drew greedy British capitalists and 'the Jews'? (Raw anti-Semitism was loud, especially among workers and the left.)

Henry Lawson believed that the root of the conflict was 'cronk', but because our soldiers were already over there fighting, we must not stab them in the back. Lawson's moral dilemma was as widely shared then as it would be today.

Craig Wilcox's weighty book depicts every angle of the Boer War: the wider international setting, as the German Kaiser geared up for World War I; the shrewd US Admiral Alfred Mahan's swift recognition that the feat of transferring large military forces between continents would change the shape of future warfare; the interplay of colonial and imperial politics; the fighting men themselves (not all angels or good soldiers) who first sailed and then rode to battle; and the intimate realities of war on the veld. Wilcox's research has

been enormous and his citation of sources meticulous. The authority of his scholarship seems likely to endure for many years. From a text so ample, a review can select but a few points to mention. For example, it had not till now occurred to me (though it should have) that the generally accommodating imperial attitude towards Australian Federation, and to the drafts of our constitution of 1901, might have owed something to the British need for our troops in South Africa. Today it seems strange that, in the early years of the Boer War, no Australians, as such, took part. Our contingents were raised and maintained by six separate colonies, none more jealous of its provincial autonomy than Tasmania.

A few statistics enable comparisons with other conflicts. About 20,000 Australian men and eighty Australian nurses campaigned in South Africa. A clash in which Australians suffered, say, six men killed was a serious engagement. Overall, we had about 600 fatal male casualties, and one female. Only thirteen years later, we lost 8500 dead at Gallipoli alone; small wonder that the Boer War became so soon and remained so long 'forgotten'. But I can't forget that our forces in South Africa had 500,000 horses 'on strength', and that two-thirds of them were 'expended'; does that leave you, too, with a lump in the throat?

The besetting problem for the writer who would chronicle a campaign is to give readers full measure of the breathless episodic detail from the front, and at the same time maintain their comprehension of the war's broader progress. Wilcox's resolute efforts here do not achieve quite the mastery and grace of Les Carlyon in his recent *Gallipoli*. But much of Wilcox's descriptive writing is splendid, as when he takes the reader into the actual facts of war: the mounted column on the

track, the cumbrous burden of its equipment, the cold nights for soldiers under one thin blanket. Of the senior officers there is little in the way of colourful pen-portraiture, merely short word-sketches. Unless you are a compulsive reader of appendices, you would not know that Corporal Harold Elliott, who won the Distinguished Conduct Medal at Doornskloof, became the revered 'Pompey' Elliott of World War I; or that Major Chauvell became Sir Harry, one of the greatest mounted leaders of modern times. On the other hand, we do hear of the thrusting and ubiquitous war correspondent Banjo Paterson, disillusion growing upon him as the war dragged on.

Two cheers were the charitable most I could raise for the Australian War Memorial and Oxford University Press, whose joint imprint saddles them with the responsibility for editing, design and production of this important book. It is a pain in the eye to read — typeface too small and lines too long, printed not in black but washed-out grey, and upon an evil, shiny, too-white paper, which glares back at the reader. Though the illustrations are plentiful, someone has boomed by duplicating some of the pictures — once in colour, then in black-and-white; captions are unimaginative and unhelpful. The index, at first glance encouragingly long, lets you down repeatedly in actual use.

As for so much else, we are grateful to the author for his astringent wrapping up of the myth of Harry 'Breaker' Morant, whose murky story seems nowadays to be a summary of Australians' knowledge of their country's part in the Boer War; and even that is drawn from the notoriously unveracious medium of cinema. Wilcox remarks of Bruce Beresford's film that the Australians are 'usefully identified for us by slouch hats that none had worn in real life'.