My 2021 Xmas Military History Newsletter

This is my 2021 Xmas military history newsletter. There is not very much in the way of travel and field visits to battlefields; society meetings have been mainly by Zoom. With the gradual easing, of the restrictions in our activities due to the pandemic our Durban military history society has started meeting again in a church hall on Saturday afternoons. This suits me very well, as on the Thursday evening meetings, as they were, the trip of 100 kms to get back home to Howick on the N3, dodging the heavy truck traffic and speeding lunatics at close to midnight, was something I did not look forward to! Now my homeward way is not unpleasant and the traffic is quite light. Local Durban people were becoming more and more wary of venturing out at night too. Johannesburg society is still not having face-to-face meetings, only a monthly Zoom. The Eastern Cape people in Gqeberha are doing a splendid job with their Zoom meetings – two per month and not all formal talks and presentations. Some evenings contributions are expected from the audience which is really what Zoom is all about. I have no news of Cape Town but I imagine they are having interesting face-to-face meetings as of yore. (I don't still have to explain where Gqeberha is, do I?)

Zoom talks have been difficult for me. I cannot hear well but a set of headphones has done wonders. However, now we have load shedding which really messes up the schedule. Solution is to get into the archive where the talks are recorded and listen at your convenience. Travels have been mostly to the local convenience stores but also to the Spion Kop area and around my home town of Howick! My reading has been of lots of history and military history, and not only those concerning the local contests of the Zulus and the Boers with the British. My interests have varied widely in this field, and the wars of the twentieth century seem now to be a principal focus. There is such a mass of excellent reading about these two wars which should have been named the 'Great War' and the 'Greater War' in my opinion. I seem to be gradually easing my way forward but I have not yet reached the Korean War, Vietnam or the Falklands War.

As always, this is military history, such that I think you will find at least something entertaining. That's about my lot – if you think this won't interest you, read no further and press 'Delete'.

I made my own Zoom contribution In July with a talk to the Gqeberha society which concerned the writing of the two early histories of the Anglo Boer War: the official *History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902* as produced by the War Office and *The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902* issued in six volumes by subscription by *The Times* newspaper. Very soon after the conclusion of hostilities there had been a glut of war-related memoirs and personal accounts which were dismissed by critics as 'having no pretension to be included in the historian's library.' Both the official history and the *Times History* were immediately recognised as works of lasting significance. Indeed, until 1979 few serious works had appeared: De Wet's *Three Years' War*, Deneys Reitz's *Commando*, printed and continually reprinted, Ian Hamilton's *Anti-Commando* and populist works like Edgar Holt's *Boer War* and Rayne Kruger's *Goodbye Dolly Gray: The Story of the Boer War.* Many works from that period in Afrikaans are populist in style except for G.D. Scholtz's book from 1960 *Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*, beautifully written, but only a brief survey, intended, he said, to stimulate further study.

The Times version appeared first and ultimately became six volumes with a seventh index volume. It was recognised as 'an historical work of great national importance' and that it 'fills a place in our literature from which no rival can dislodge it'. This was certainly fulsome praise but it does reflect the quality of the work and also *The Times's* position as a national institution. The extent of *The Times's* influence was fully recognised by Sir Frederick Maurice. He was embroiled in a dispute with the Treasury over staff and funding for his official history. He told the War Office that the consequences of denying him the resources that Amery enjoyed would be that the *Times History* would become the 'one authoritative history in England'. By 1901 the public's fascination for the war was such that there was a clamour from publishers to obtain the rights. The official account of the Crimean War had been merely a compilation of artillery and engineering records. From 1873 the Intelligence Department had taken over responsibility for the production of such accounts. Their reports now gave a much broader overview of the small wars in which Britain was engaged. Publishers Hurst & Blackett, who secured the rights, predicted sales of 10,000 and the issue of an official history was expected to arouse great excitement.

Leo Amery first made his acquaintance with Winston Churchill at Harrow School when he was propelled into the water by a foot skilfully planted into the small of his back. He discovered that the perpetrator of this outrage on his dignity as a sixth former was a red-haired freckled urchin whom he had never seen before. Churchill was caught and made to accompany Amery into the water to learn respect for age and authority. Amery had been *The Times* correspondent in Berlin when in August 1899 he was ordered to sail to South Africa to report on the peaceful political settlement which was believed to be in sight. In Cape Town he met with Milner who was convinced that Kruger meant war and with Rhodes who was equally convinced that Kruger would climb down. He made his way to Bloemfontein but Steyn was not there and so he met Abraham Fischer. Amery considered that Fischer was busy concocting the arrogant Boer ultimatum to the British government, although he professed in earnest and impassioned terms his agony at the thought of an impending and wholly unnecessary conflict. In Pretoria he met with Francis Reitz (a delightful old man) who took him to see Kruger. Nothing had prepared him for anything quite so massive or so ugly but he felt he was in the presence of a real man of unflinching purpose. Before the ultimatum was delivered, about which, according to Amery, he had advance notice, he took himself off to visit the Boer army assembling at Zandspruit. With an introduction from Reitz to Commandant General Piet Joubert, Amery was duly authorised as British war correspondent to the Boer army. He spent a week with the Boers but was then packed off under escort back to Pretoria. Hostilities had begun but he still managed to get onto the last train to Cape Town.

There he found himself appointed chief correspondent of *The Times* and got together an organisation of twenty correspondents all over South Africa. After further adventures, being present in Estcourt at the time of the capture of Winston Churchill, at Paardeberg for the surrender to Lord Roberts of General Piet Cronjé, he returned to his base in the Mount Nelson Hotel to a pitiful wail from Editor Moberly Bell on the scale of his expenditure. In his efforts to restore the shrunken revenues of *The Times*, Bell had launched out into a series of lavishly-illustrated side-lines, one being *The Times Atlas*, another an edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In reply, after a reasoned defence of his expenditure, Amery jocularly suggested a History of the War in South Africa in sixty volumes. Bell replied with a cable which said: 'Idea of war history excellent, please send introductory chapter and arrange with correspondents in the field for military chapters.' In between his ordinary work Amery wrote most of the first volume, the story of the origins of the war over the century preceding the Boer ultimatum. By August 1900 with the advance of Lord Roberts to Komatipoort, the war seemed to be practically over and Amery disbanded his staff and left for home.

The first volume appeared at the end of 1900 which Amery believed still stands, he wrote in 1940, as a substantially true story of the long South African controversy. Amery arrived home with a profound conviction that the British Army required a revolutionary reform in its organisation and training if it was to see Britain through the great international struggle that seemed to be impending. *The Times History*, he believed, should provide an absolutely frank and critical examination of the organisation, leadership and actual fighting in the first real war that Britain had fought for half a century. This critical attitude could only be justified if his facts were irrefutably accurate. It meant however that the work took nine years to complete with Amery writing the whole of the first two volumes as well as the sixth and mapping out and closely editing the rest. Sampson Low, the publishers, were wanting the military volumes to follow in swift succession at intervals of six weeks, clearly impossible due to Amery's insistence on accuracy. From Bell's point of view this was very tiresome but Amery pointed out the high praise that he got in reviews and letters. On one occasion he sent Bell a recent letter from a senior officer couched in terms of the warmest praise and adding that his wife read it to him by his sick bed daily. Moberly Bell's only rejoinder was to send back that day's obituary column from *The Times* recording the death of Colonel So-and-so 'after long sufferings heroically endured.'

In order to attain the necessary veracity the manuscript went through an elaborate process of drafting, reviewing and editing. A number of *The Times's* correspondents were charged with preparing draft chapters. Outside experts were also invited to contribute although Baden-Powell's draft was rejected on the grounds that his chapter would be undiluted Baden-Powell. Amery retained tight editorial control. He worked with a mass of official and unofficial material before sending it out to various experts and protagonists for comment. Suggestions for revisions were collated but Amery assumed sole responsibility for the final manuscript. Perceval Landon, *The Times* war correspondent between September 1899 and April 1900 was piqued to find that his account of the battle of Magersfontein had been substantially reworked. He complained that he had not expected such 'Ameryisation of the words and phrases used by me'. Erskine Childers was appointed to act as editor for the three volumes dealing with Roberts's operations after the fall of Kimberley, the guerrilla war under Kitchener and various technical aspects. In agreement on the military aspects, Amery and Childers violently clashed over the interpretation of Milner's post war work of reconstruction, perhaps to be expected as Amery had 'a great personal affection as well as admiration' for Milner.

Amery had been one of the few British correspondents who had had any sympathy for the Boers, admiring their 'force and passion'. However, *The Times History* inevitably reflected Amery's

imperialist views. One critic regarded it is ‘a great lesson in imperialism, its ideals and its duties’. Eminent historian and Liberal politician H.A.L. Fisher took issue with Amery’s general outlook and was certain that ‘this was history with a mission’. It was, Amery claimed, the innumerable eye-witness accounts that he received in preparation for the writing of Volumes II and III that convinced him ‘that the story of the war could be made the best instrument for preaching Army reform’. Certainly the ‘unflinching frankness’ had its effect on Lord Roberts. Amery recalled how Roberts, after reading the account of the Battle of Colenso, felt compelled to write to Ian Hamilton to tell him that ‘It is enough to make a dead man turn in his grave, and the worst of it is that every word of it is true’. Roberts provided considerable assistance with the preparation of Volume III. Kitchener too was approving of Amery’s approach and objectives. Review after review pointed to the work as object lessons in past military failings and blueprints for future army reform. The reviewer in *The Graphic* was insistent that ‘the wholesome and disagreeable truths’ which the volumes contained would leave no one in ‘any doubt as to whether the army is what it ought to be’.

There were dissenting voices, Sir Redvers Buller was particularly aggrieved by Amery’s damning indictment of his command during the opening stages of the war. Buller campaigned both publicly through the press and through a protracted correspondence with the War Office for a full publication of the relevant dispatches. Concerned that Buller intended to pursue the matter through the courts, the War Office in June 1902 decided to place all the contested material in the hands of Parliament and the dispute fizzled out. Indeed the whole issue was never considered a threat to the historical integrity of *The Times History.* In fact the publisher asserted, on being informed that Buller might sue for libel, that ‘a court case would be a splendid advertisement’. There was an allegation in one popular daily that criticisms of the Army’s performance in South Africa were unpatriotic. The *Daily Mirror* expressed outrage at what it perceived to be ‘an amazing attack’ in Volume III on ‘the physical and moral endurance’ of British soldiers on Spion Kop. It was, fulminated the paper’s reviewer, ‘a clear sign of the declining standards of *The Times* generally’. Amery was later to concede that he had been subjected to superficial criticism. ‘Reviewers were laudatory but very few of them showed any real appreciation of the extent of the new light thrown on the actual operations as a whole. Most of them indeed were more concerned with such highlights as my criticism of Buller’s conduct at Colenso’.

By contrast the officially produced *History of the War in South Africa* contained little that would cause great controversy. It took quite as long to produce as *The Times History* and was equally influential. The decision to produce an official account of the conflict was made in autumn 1900 and Roberts’s director of intelligence, Colonel G.F.R. Henderson, was appointed to undertake the task. He wanted a more popular approach than a book whose narrow appeal would be only to military and government experts. His thoughts were that this would mean a book that would yield a substantial financial reward to the government. This persuaded the Secretary of State for War, St John Broderick to waive the War Office’s right to arrange publication. In June 1901 a contract was signed with commercial publishers Hurst & Blackett for a seven volume history. The terms of the contract stipulated that the work would not only contain commentaries on the ‘strategy, tactics and organisation of the war’ but that, by ensuring that the political history of the war was treated fully, ‘every effort would be made to make it picturesque and popular’.

On the death of Henderson in March 1903, Major General Sir John Frederick Maurice, the author of the official history of the 1883 Egyptian campaign was brought out of retirement to assume responsibility for the project. Henderson had already written about the political background to the war. Maurice regarded Henderson’s completed work as ‘certainly not in the ordinary form of military history’ but he did not wish the history to revert to the more traditional ‘blue book’ approach. ‘A dry

statistical record of the war will no doubt be useful for future reference,' he informed Lord Roberts shortly after his appointment, 'but it will be read by hardly anyone, and is certainly not the form of history which the public everywhere has been led to expect'. Maurice eschewed some of the more 'partisan expressions' of Henderson's account. However, this was not meant to challenge the original terms of the contract with Hurst and Blackett. This stipulated that the work should appeal to the general public and should include a full examination of the preparations for, and the political context of, the war.

During Henderson's tenure, the government had little interest beyond seeing that the account should be completed on time and on budget. Maurice required a budget of £10,000 and a staff of 21 officers if the project was to be completed in the three years that Henderson had originally agreed. Negotiations were protracted as both Broderick and the Treasury were uncertain that any study of the conflict in South Africa warranted such an extravagant deployment of resources as those demanded by Maurice. The Treasury wanted to maintain the original budget allocated to Henderson. Broderick intimated to Maurice that he was unlikely to get the support that he wanted 'because, although a great war for us, it is hardly a Franco-Prussian War in its lessons'. The budget was reduced to £6,000 but Broderick still wanted to bring out 'the volumes as rapidly as possible before interest has gone back'. However, the death of Henderson and the subsequent dispute over Maurice's terms and conditions of employment caused Broderick in September 1903 to order a detailed review of the completed chapters to be undertaken. An anonymous War Office reader was doubtful of the suitability of Henderson's work for a government publication. He noted that the third chapter, covering the diplomacy in the immediate lead up to the war 'bristles with controversial matter'. He concluded by suggesting that it would be more fitting if an official history were 'to begin with the declaration of war and end with the declaration of peace'.

The strength of the War Office's objection to Henderson's work can be gauged by the lengths that they went to in order to have publication suppressed. Maurice and Henderson's executors were all contacted to make sure they did not possess copies of the manuscript. A request by the publishers Hurst and Blackett to produce an edition of the first three chapters with all reference to the official history removed was denied. Despite these precautions, Henderson's chapter on the state of the British army in 1899 survives as Chapter XIV in *The Science of War*, a posthumous collection of his essays. Alerted to the controversial nature of Henderson's work by Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne, the cabinet informed the War Office that a 'dry narrative of the actual events would be preferable to a political history'. Hugh Arnold-Foster, who had succeeded Broderick as Secretary of State for War, naturally acceded to the cabinet's recommendation and instructed Maurice to start afresh, producing 'strictly an official account of the war' on lines as close as possible to the German *Official History of the War of 1870*. Maurice agreed to tone down 'all accounts of party acclivities' and to reduce the political content to a bare minimum. Nevertheless his revised manuscript proved to be no more acceptable to the authorities than Henderson's original. One passage, submitted for review in October 1904 caused particular concern: "The war, which these volumes record, was in nothing more remarkable than in this, that it was a contest most unwillingly waged by a great peace-loving empire against small states which, at the time when the war began, had come under the domination of an autocracy based on an oligarchy. For many years the purpose of the oligarch and his agents had been to organise the whole people for war. That preparation had only one object, the expulsion of British authority and the substitution for it of the autocracy as supreme throughout South Africa."

General Sir Neville Lyttelton, newly-appointed Chief of the Imperial General Staff, informed Maurice that 'stating officially that the Boers fought and died, not for their Republic but for the personal

autocracy of Mr Kruger was highly likely to give offence to our new fellow subjects in South Africa'. He was particularly moved by his desire that 'nothing which can he avoided, should be done to impede the reconciliation of races in South Africa'. Hugh Arnold-Foster and Lord Lansdowne were equally perturbed by Maurice's effort. Despite support from Joseph Chamberlain for whom the authorities were 'so fearful of offending our enemies that they are unable to defend ourselves', Maurice was left with no option but to remove all the offending sections and restrict himself solely to an examination of military operations. His only consolation was the inclusion of a partial disclaimer in the preface to Volume 1. He explained that the absence of any political commentary was the result of the government's belief that it 'would be undesirable to discuss any question that had been at issue between them and the rulers of the two republics'.

When Volume 1 was eventually published in June 1906, the press reception was favourable but not enthusiastic and an anonymous British officer was doubtful that the work would be a commercial success. Maurice's impartial narrative, he said, 'was worthy but lacking in popular appeal. The British public was unlikely to study a book like the *Official History* which fails to offer the attraction of the impalement of unsuccessful generals. To the impartial historical student it presents evidence that may be accepted as above suspicion'. Sales of the book were disappointing and only 4,500 sets were sold. Much more interesting than its actual content was its controversial genesis. In March 1906 *The Spectato*r said 'it is rumoured that the preliminary chapters, as prepared by Colonel Henderson, showed the ungarbled truth to be so unpalatable that the late government absolutely forbade its publication and went so far as to have the entire manuscript burned'. The War Office officially denied that this was the case but speculation about government interference continued in the press. *The Times Literary Supplement* in July 1906 indicated that the history had failed to live up to expectations. It was, they said, supposed to have been a work conceived in great style, one which was not only to illustrate the great principles of the art of war but also to bring out the place of that campaign in the political history of the British Empire'. Obstacles that had prevented these lofty ambitions being achieved were 'the action of the War Office authorities'. Maurice whereupon felt obliged to open Volume 2 with a rebuttal that 'the only subject that any officer asked for change was to any phrase that might affect our relations with our Boer fellow subjects'.

Maurice persevered with the task of producing an account that was as comprehensive and objective as the constraints of his War Office remit would allow. Pressure of work and the on-going disputes with the Treasury over spiralling costs undermined his health and he was compelled to retire in 1908. The project was completed by the historical section of the Committee of Imperial Defence. The third volume was issued in 1908 with no author being credited. Volume 4 was published in 1910 with Captain Grant of the CID as the acknowledged author. Clearly, the official history failed to live up to Maurice's expectations and 'was a colourless statement of facts rather than one which might form and guide the opinions of soldiers'. *The Times* said in Maurice's obituary in 1912 that 'had he been given a free hand then these volumes of *The History of the War in South Africa* would, without the smallest doubt, have been among some of the most interesting ever written'.

In Volume II of *The Times History* Amery opened the account of military operations in South Africa with a sweeping indictment of the British army. As an institution, he argued, it flattered to deceive: 'The numbers on its roll were large, the uniforms of the members through all ranks of the military hierarchy most distinctive, their traditional ceremonies, known as parades, inspections, guards, elaborate and pleasing to the eye, the regulations to which they submitted, infinitely complex. As a fighting machine it was largely a sham'. Although Maurice disagreed fundamentally with this viewpoint, he was realistic enough to realise that his scrupulously detailed and objective analysis of the problems facing the British army in South Africa would do little to mitigate the criticism. 'It was'

he admitted in Volume 2 of the official history, 'much more popular to ignore all this and throw the whole blame on our "ignorant generals" and "stupid soldiers"'. Amery's stirring narrative trumped the 'colourless statement of facts' in the official history. By opening up contentious debates, the *Times History's* polemics pandered to the public's appetite for scandal. In turn, the protracted and problematic genesis of the official history raised rumours about a War Office cover-up which served to reinforce Amery's critical interpretation of the conflict. It is this version of the war, of a poorly-prepared and ill-led army outwitted by a resourceful enemy which set the tone for subsequent histories and continued to colour the popular memory of the war for the rest of the century.

Colonel G.F.R. Henderson's work that was intended to become a chapter in Volume 1 of the official history was not destroyed as decreed by the War Office. It can be read in its entirety as the last chapter, headed *The British Army*, in the collection of essays and articles published in April 1905 entitled *The Science of War.* This book contains a memoir by Field Marshal Lord Roberts describing Henderson's career and how he came to appoint him to his staff in South Africa. While at the Staff College in Camberley as Professor, Henderson wrote *Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War*, still one of the best reference works on the American Confederate General, and published in 1898. It took 8 years to write. His objective was for his readers to understand the supreme importance of a knowledge of strategy. Roberts had given considerable thought to the probability of an outbreak of hostilities in a theatre 6,000 miles from Britain and the difficulties that would ensue. While still thinking over the problem he read *Stonewall Jackson.* He was much struck with the extraordinary effect which strategy had upon the campaign in Virginia, Jackson's swift and unexpected movements. Bearing this in mind, he determined the strategy that he would adopt if and when he was appointed to command in South Africa. This was to change the axis of the British advance from Natal to an unexpected eastward thrust into the Orange Free State and thence to the Transvaal. Henderson was appointed Director of Intelligence in Pretoria in January 1900 but his health failed and he was soon back in England. In August 1900 he was appointed to take charge of the writing of an official history but died before he could do much more than write the introduction to the first volume.

Henderson's introduction is worth careful reading and certainly the War Office did just that. Although he praises the excellence of the British soldier and his officers, one virtue being that not a man among them was either a conscript or commandeered. They were in South Africa because they were eager to fight the Queen's enemies. Many of the officers were highly qualified – practically every important campaign had produced at least one great leader and many good ones. However, he highlights the lack of support received from the legislators, the Secretary of State for War and the War Office itself. In 1895 it was decreed by the legislators that the Commander-in Chief's principal duty was the provision and maintenance of plans of offence and defence, while the Adjutant-General was to be responsible for the training of the troops. However it was manifestly impossible for this to be done by just two people but additional staff would have involved conflict with the Treasury. The good intentions of Parliament were thus nullified by the Secretary of State. The Staff College was the only school of strategy, and Henderson said that, since war had become a science, officers with a sound knowledge of strategy will greatly improve the odds in their favour.

Previous to 1870, trained strategists were few. With the advent of Moltke (the Elder) to power in Berlin there were created numbers of trained strategists and accomplished subordinates. Man for man in 1866 and 1870 the generals and staff officers of Austria and France were inferior in every respect, except courage, to those of Germany. They were continually worsted and outwitted, utterly incapable of dealing with the science of the *Kriegsakademie*. The Staff College was extended and improved but was still too small to supply the needs of the Army, only graduating 32 officers per

year. In 1899 it was brought home to the government that the Empire was vulnerable, elsewhere than on the shores of the Channel or the frontiers of Hindustan. The great navy was not an infallible safeguard. For this salutary lesson they had to thank an enemy whose power and resolution they had consistently despised. England owes much to Paul Kruger wrote Henderson. Then follows a long discussion on tactics and the fallacy of the French tactic of *L'audace, l'audace et toujours l'audace* (Boldness, boldness and even more boldness) in the light of modern weaponry. Henderson therefore stresses the importance of envelopment rather than frontal assault. The Militia and Volunteers were excellent material but were woefully poorly trained in peacetime. As well, the practice of drafting the pick of the men into the ranks of the regulars was prejudicial to their efficiency. Concerning the Colonials, the Canadians get high praise but the Australians and New Zealanders, as civilians were so used to acting each man for himself that the claims of discipline were at first irksome. They were fine horsemen, were used to the rifle and could shift for themselves. The numerous contingents furnished by South African loyalists were worthy opponents of the commandos. The mass of regulars, militia, volunteers and colonial irregulars took time to become an effective army. This great mass of soldiery was to all intents and purposes organised at the same low level as the Boers. It had not advanced beyond the battalion, equivalent to the commando. There were no strategists at the War Office charged with laying down the functions of the army in the event of war or charged with ensuring and organising the army in readiness for war, however unexpected. Again, Henderson's commentary, written in beautiful Victorian English, is worth reading and very much foreshadows the drastic overhaul and reform of the British Army between the wars. By 1914 the British army was hardly recognisable from the army of 1899.

(I acknowledge the use of Peter Donaldson's *Remembering the South African War* in the writing of some of this.)

It took seventy years for another comprehensive study and narrative of the Boer War to appear, Thomas Pakenham's *The Boer War*. No one had made the attempt for seventy years. The book is based largely on manuscript and oral sources. As he says, *The Times History* and the *Official History* have dominated Boer War studies and remain indispensable to the military historian with their vast mass of original material. He worked from the War Office's confidential files, the sources that Amery's and Maurice's volumes were based upon. He was also able to dig up the private papers of most of the British generals and politicians. He stumbled on the lost archives of Sir Redvers Buller which had remained hidden under the billiard table at Downes, his estate in Devon. The private papers of Lord Lansdowne and trunk-loads of documents from Lord Roberts were uncovered. A *Secret Diary* running to a million words was found in the National Army Museum. When he began writing in 1970 he was able to interview and record the memories of 52 men who had fought in the war, the youngest of whom was 86 years old. That they were all privates is clear from the interviews as none had a favourable view of the tactics and logistics, particularly the army rations. He also used a number of accounts in Afrikaans, Professor Johan Barnard's *Botha op die Natalse Front* and J.H. Breytenbach's *Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*.

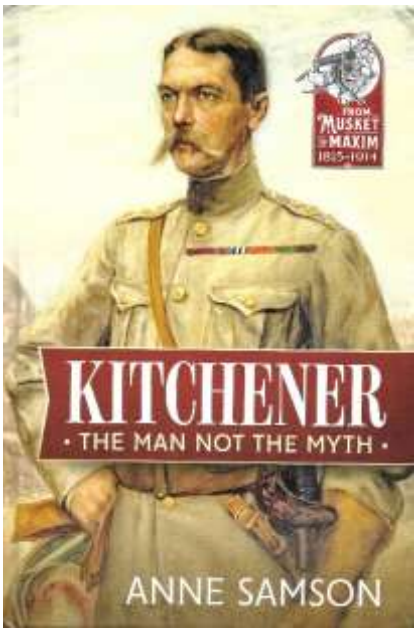
The book reads more like a novel and is certainly controversial in its content. He claims to have tried to justify Buller's military actions in Natal. He gives Buller credit for successfully hammering out the new tactics needed when a nineteenth-century army had to fight a twentieth-century war. He gives little credit to any other British actions or personalities but, making a start on a decade-long programme to study the Anglo Boer War, then Pakenham's book is as good a place to start as anything else. Thomas Pakenham is the 8th Earl Longford but chooses not to use his title nor take his seat in the House of Lords in Westminster which may explain his pro-Boer stance. His home is Tullynally Castle, County Westmeath, Ireland. You can see on the cover of Pakenham the quote from

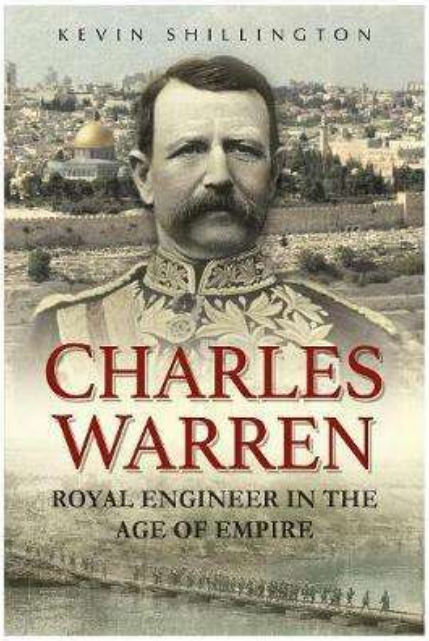
A.J.P. Taylor: ‘This is a wonderful book: brilliantly written ... the reader turns each page with increasing fascination and admiration.' High praise from one of Britain’s more distinguished but contentious historians. Pakenham liked to add literary flourishes to the data he has gleaned from his sources, describing events more like a novelist than a historian. At times it is very hard to know how much he stretches the truth to be entertaining. For example, it is just credible that he was able to reconstruct the "burning topic" of gossip at a Christmas party at Lionel Phillips’s Hohenheim mansion in 1898, but does he really know every idle comment that Joseph Chamberlain's secretary made at the office on a random day in November? His rendition of the meeting of Major-General John French and Cecil Rhodes on the relief of Kimberley is clearly wrong. For him to say later in the book that the war brought forth excellent Boer generals but he can think of no good British generals is not objective. The book displays a certain degree of balance but certainly reflects contemporary British pro-Boer political views. To some extent, Pakenham’s book kindled interest in the Anglo Boer War which was waning. One critic said that, had it not been published in 1979 when apartheid seemed to be entrenched, a few years later with boycotts and sanctions it might not have made quite such an impact.

No comprehensive history besides these two multi-volume versions had been written until the appointment of J.H. Breytenbach as State Historian in 1959. He was tasked with writing a version from the Afrikaner nationalist viewpoint in Afrikaans. His office was in the Union Buildings and he had official access to the archives. The history department of the University of Pretoria also gave academic support. The first volume appeared only in 1969, printed by the Government Printer and sold for a purely nominal price. J.H. Breytenbach died in 1994 before the sixth volume had appeared. The draft was completed by some of his colleagues and finally appeared in 1996. The six volumes cover only the first ten months of the war, with volume VI ending with the Battle of Bergendal. It does not always describe the battles with a military strategic perspective. The role played by black people, on both sides, is not described in a properly balanced manner. The author seemed unable to rise above the information that he had amassed to give any kind of strategic commentary. Nevertheless, the Breytenbach volumes remain a useful and basic reference source for researchers.

Bill Nasson wrote *The Boer War* in 1999 while at the University of Cape Town and the much expanded version, *The War for South Africa,* as Professor of History at Stellenbosch University a decade later. Both books give a South African’s version of events, almost totally ignoring the details of the military campaigns. The causes of the war and the attitudes and policies of the Boer and British protagonists are documented from an author who has no axe to grind for either side. The two are most valuable additions to Anglo Boer War literature. Perhaps the first version was written to a deadline so as not to miss the centenary in 1999. The second book is considerably more detailed as regards the war’s origins and outcomes although permission of the publisher of the first was given for the use of certain of that material in the second. The second volume is effectively a total replacement for the first. It is not the last word on the Anglo Boer War – that will never be written!

My talk aimed at explaining how the two major histories came to be written. I did not speak about the many books on the Boer war that have been written in Afrikaans. Breytenbach, took 25 years to write his multi-volume history which covered only the first ten months of the war. Since the centenary there has been a steady release of many interesting and instructive accounts. The subject of what became concentration camps long after the war ended has become so emotive that it tends to obscure many an attempt at rational discussion of the war. Professor Elizabeth van Heyningen’s *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War A Social History* certainly brings a measure of objectivity to the subject. It deserves to be widely read and has been well received in general. The last word it is not but like the war itself, that will never be written.

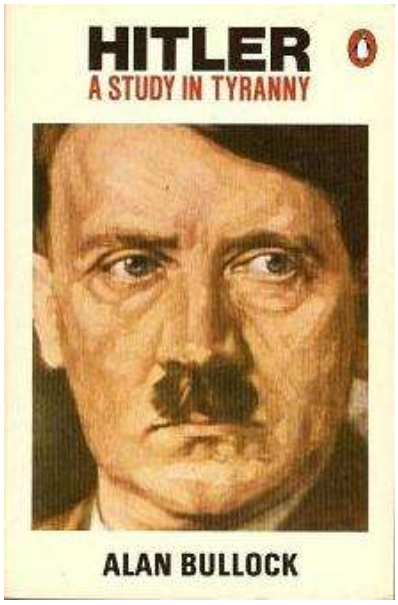


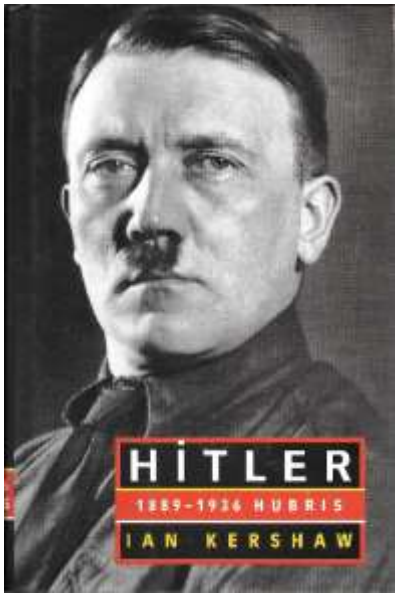


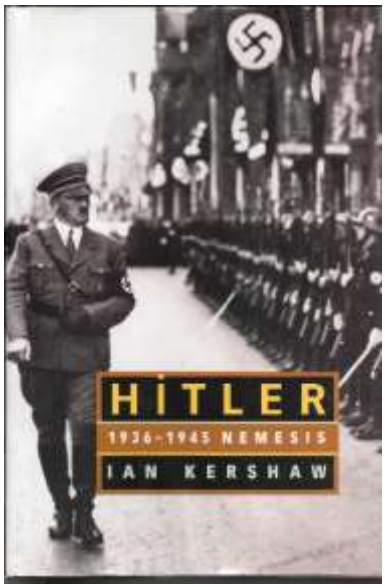
Two controversial figures on the British side in the Anglo Boer War were General Lord Herbert Kitchener and Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Warren. In last year's newsletter I explained the view on Kitchener according to a number of modern historians, that he was not the monster he is regarded in South Africa. Anne Samson's book *Kitchener The Man not the Myth* was a new source that I quoted and it bears repeating that this book is well worth a look. Warren's reputation in South Africa suffered from his being in command of the force around Spion Kop in January 1900. The story of this debacle can be read in great detail in numerous books (you could start with the accounts in the two official histories that I have described above!) or you can listen to some of the accounts that you will hear from tour guides on the hilltop. The battle there was the last one of a seven-day series of fierce battles but often that is not taken into account. In previous newsletters I have written several pieces about the campaign around this famous hill. In any case, just over a month later, the Boers were in full retreat back to the Transvaal and General Buller and his men, including Warren, were in Ladysmith, their immediate objective. Warren had been in command of Buller's artillery in the last assault on the Tugela Heights, a key factor in that success. That this might have redeemed to some extent his tattered reputation is seldom mentioned. There is a new book on Warren just published entitled *Charles Warren Royal Engineer in the Age of Empire* by Kevin Shillington, an English teacher and educationist. It's 486 pages long so it is no pot-boiler. I have not yet received my copy but two friends have told me good things about it. I hope I will have it in my hands before Xmas. I am sure it's a worthy account as it certainly meets my criterion that a book with less than 400 pages is unlikely to have anything worth reading! By the way, Kevin Shillington is also the author of another book *History of Africa* which is an authoritative account of the history of the continent. I believe this to be a worthwhile acquisition which will find its way into my library in due time.

Well into the Victorian Age, wars were won or lost after one huge decisive battle, Waterloo is a good example. The entire war was won or lost on the very last battle. By the twentieth century this was no longer the case and wars became ghastly attrition. The Somme is an example – was there a winner? But on sea the battles of Trafalgar, Jutland and Midway did result in definite outcomes. Trafalgar on 21 October 1805 saw the British Royal Navy's supremacy firmly established; Jutland on 31 May and 1 June 1906 seemed to have been indecisive at the time but the German High Seas Fleet did not again venture out of its base at Wilhelmshaven; Midway was a stroke of luck in a certain respect but decisive in that henceforth naval battles were fought with fleets of dive bombers with

their carriers at huge distances from one another. With some trepidation I managed to squeeze all this into an hour and it apparently went down well with the Ambers audience (the Ambers is the name of the large retirement complex where we live). My friend Roy Bowman has done a number of talks to the military history society on the naval aspects of the Second World War, mostly the Pacific War which is where most of it happened. He covered the various clashes in a lot more detail than I did in the limited time that I had available. This is really a very specialised field and absolutely fascinating.







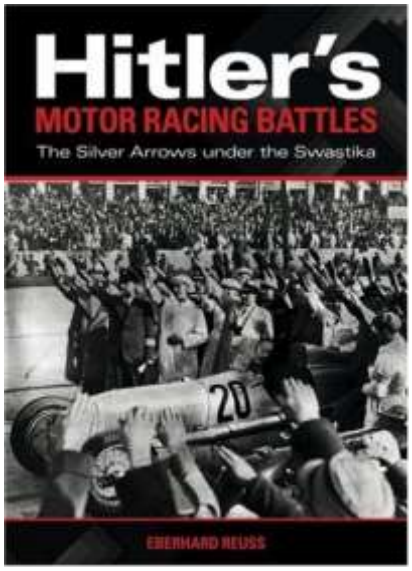
One of my major projects this year has been to do a pair of talks on Adolf Hitler. A few years ago I bought a small collection of Hitler books on auction. The main attraction was the two-volume set of Ian Kershaw's biography *Hitler Hubris 1889-1936* and *Hitler Nemesis 1936-1945*. I certainly do not claim to be in any respect an expert on Hitler. The start of a study of the period could be, like my own beginning of serious attention to the subject, William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. This not a biography of Hitler but covers much of the politics of the period. Another classic is Chester Wilmot's *The Struggle for Europe*, but again this is not a biography of Hitler. In the bookshop of the Imperial War Museum in London I bought a copy of Richard J, Evans's *The Coming of the Third Reich* which I read while on a visit to Malta. Later I completed the trilogy with *The Third Reich in Power* and *The Third Reich at War*.

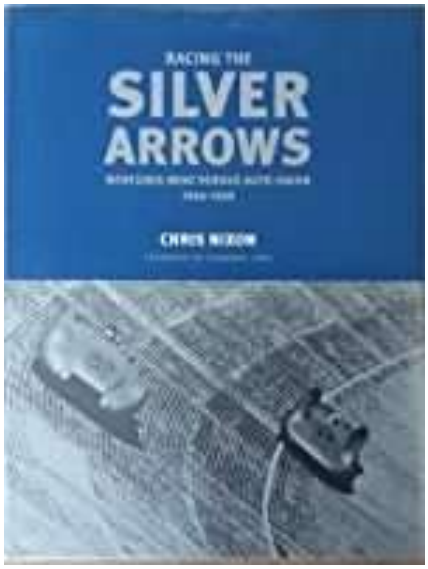
There are many more biographies of Hitler and they keep coming – lately there is the newest version in two volumes by Volker Ulrich, available in an English translation and highly thought of in Germany and England. The two volumes appeared in 2015 and 2020 in English editions. Joachim Fest's *Hitler* published in 1974 was the first biography in German and there is also a translation in English. This is very much a classic too but there is also his *Plotting Hitler's Death* which covers the numerous attempts to kill him over many years that culminated in the bomb plot of 20 July 1944. These were all pre-dated by Alan Bullocks' remarkable 1952 biography compiled mainly from documents that became available as a result of the Nuremburg War Crimes court. Ian Kershaw determined on writing his Hitler biography after a German colleague advised him 'rather not', as thus far only Bullock and Fest had tackled the job. There are more but the ones I have mentioned are the ones to go with.

Any study of Hitler should begin with trying to read his own book, *Mein Kampf (My Struggle)* written while he was in jail in Bavaria in 1924. He had been arrested and put on trial after his part in the so-called Beerhall putsch in November 1923. This was a real hare-brained attempt to take over the national government of Germany. He was sentenced to five years imprisonment, of which he served a little more than nine months. Reading his badly-written, rambling concoction of weird ideas is very difficult. It sold very slowly at first but numbers increased when he became Chancellor and by 1945 millions had been sold, making him wealthy in his own right. In fact it is two books, the first written in Landsburg prison and the second a few years later titled *The National Socialistic Workers' Party*. Banned in many countries until 1969 when an English edition of the combined books was published (my copy was included in the auction lot), it is really only useful for academic study. The remarkable thing is that Hitler never deviated from the path he had laid down in this book right from the outset. When he told his assembled generals in 1937 that he was determined to go to war to capture more land to feed the growing German population, they were shocked and surprised. Not one of them had read *Mein Kampf* obviously. Political parties were banned and the largest trade union organisation in the world was destroyed in little more than a day.

Hitler took control of absolutely everything in Germany. He became Chancellor completely legally. But then he took over the office and the duties of the President when Field Marshall Hindenburg died. That made him supreme commander of the army. Then the command of the armed forces (the Wehrmacht) and then the army (the Reichswehr) devolved upon him when he got rid of the generals. Thus there was no one in authority above him as well as fewer levels of command. When he provoked the western powers into war he took complete charge and controlled even the minute details of the generals' strategy and tactics. If they failed to obey the orders of the First World War corporal, or if they did obey but, as a consequence of obeying ridiculous orders, the operation was a disaster, they found themselves given their marching orders. His racial and anti-semitic ideas are clearly laid out in *Mein Kampf*. SS Head Heinrich Himmler and Reinhardt Heydrich hardly needed detailed instructions to institute what became the Holocaust they just had to follow what they believed was what Hitler would have wanted.

By far the majority of the military operations of the Second World War took place in the east against the hordes of the Red Army. When things started going wrong as early as the end of 1941, Hitler's micro-management of every aspect rapidly made things worse. In 1944 on the key eastern front a new Soviet advance in the south was making rapid advances. The tensions with his generals were palpable. A defensive strategy was foreign to Hitler's nature. What was needed was greater skill and tactical flexibility than the Commander-in-Chief himself could muster. Field Marshall Erich von Manstein came to Hitler's headquarters at Rastenburg in East Prussia in January 1944. He reported on the rapidly deteriorating situation of Army Group South. Hitler would not budge on his view that Manstein would simply have to hold out until reinforcements became available. Alone with Hitler after the conference, Manstein stated that enemy superiority alone was not responsible for the army's plight. This was 'also due to the way in which we are led'. Hitler's cold demeanour reached freezing point as Manstein persevered and proposed that he himself should be appointed overall Commander-in-Chief on the eastern front with full independence of action within overall strategic objectives, in the way that Rundstedt in the west and Kesselring in Italy enjoyed similar authority. This would have meant the surrender by Hitler of his powers of command in the eastern theatre. He was having none of it. 'Even I cannot get the field marshals to obey me!' he retorted. Manstein replied that his orders were never disobeyed. Hitler closed the discussion but Manstein had had the last word. My two illustrated talks were each an hour long and gave only a flavour of this complex topic. I hope some people took the hint about reading some of the books. Be warned though, when I got to the end of Ian Kershaw's *Hitler* I felt like I had awakened from a bad dream!





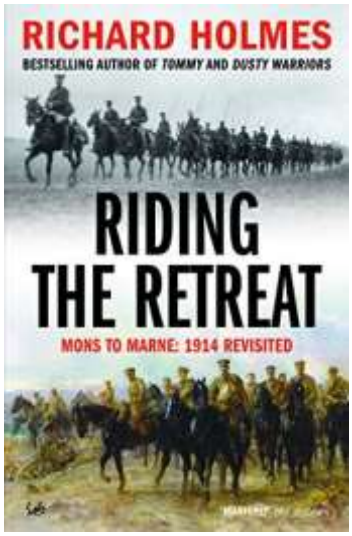
Also in the auction lot was *Hitler's Motor Racing Battles The Silver Arrows under the Swastika* by Eberhard Reuss. If you are not a motor racing enthusiast as I have been since childhood, you may not be aware of the dominance of German cars in Grand Prix racing (as it was before it became Formula 1 a few years ago). Hitler wanted to modernise Germany with the latest technology, besides building the strongest army in the world. Soon after becoming Chancellor in 1933 he instituted the building of the autobahn system. The railway authorities thought this was a bad idea, of course. Hitler wanted everyone to have cars and supported Doctor Ferdinand Porsche's idea of a People's Car, in German, *Volkswagen*. The civilian version did not get off the ground before war came in 1939 but a number of military variants were in use by the Wehrmacht by then. Hitler also subsidised Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union (nowadays Audi) for the building of Grand Prix racing cars so as to dominate the world. The Italian Alfa Romeo and French Bugatti were the leaders in the 1920's and early 30's but the two German makes became absolutely dominant from 1935 onwards This book by a motor racing broadcaster and journalist is the first one that I know of on this topic to be written as proper researched history – the author was a historian until he changed course. It describes all the races and racers but puts it all into context of the support that they received from the German dictator.

Hitler's regime depended very much on propaganda that was its lifeblood – the myth of the infallible leader. Sport, and motor sport in particular, was the ideal medium. Hitler made huge capital out of the Olympics and planned to have the games moved to a permanent home in Berlin. Nazi involvement in grand prix motor racing was also overt throughout the 1930's. Most races were attended by a senior Nazi, Adolf Hühnlein, who reported directly to Hitler. The Nazi presence pervaded motor sport as it did the rest of Germany. Race grids were heavy with soldiers wearing swastikas, strong uniformed presence on victory podiums, and stiff arm salutes at the Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union factories when winning cars returned. Hühnlein was a dedicated Hitler supporter, was in prison with Hitler after the Beerhall pitch and was in charge of driver training for the army. When the Nazis came to power all members of motor clubs were require to join the National Socialist Motor Corps (NSKK). All racing drivers were required to become members.

The drivers became cult figures, just as much as they do today. Rudolph Caracciola was the big star, a naturalised German of Italian ancestry who lived most of his life in Lugano, Switzerland. He was a consistent winner with Mercedes Benz. The Auto Union star driver was Bernd Rosemeyer and he dominated the 1936 season. He was killed a year later in a speed record attempt on a German

autobahn. He was married to pioneer pilot Ellie Beinhorn, a star in her own right who flew solo around the world in 1931. She died only in 2007 at the age of 100.

A number of the 1930's Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union grand prix cars still survive, most in museums but a few that are in running order and occasionally appear at race meetings, though never used in competition. Auto Union's headquarters and factory was in Zwickau in east Germany and the contents of the racing department ended up in Russia after the war. It was many years before the cars that still existed re-appeared in the west. Another book in my collection is Chris Nixon's *Racing the Silver Arrows* which says very little about the political aspects of the support of the Nazi party for the sport. The cars themselves were very interesting technically and very different in concept from the Italian and French designs that attempted to compete against them. There were one or two attempts to race the cars after the war but the Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union factories were not then able to offer the necessary support.



Richard Holmes has written literally dozens of books. Three that are prescribed reading for information about the men of the British army are *Redcoat The British Soldier in the Age of Horse and Musket*, *Sahib The British Soldier in India* and *Tommy The British Soldier on the Western Front*. He has written numbers of guide books on war walks of the two world wars and Marlborough, Wellington and French.

Then there is *Riding the Retreat: Mons to the Marne 1914 Revisited*. This is his story of a trip with three horses along the route of the retreat taken by the British Expeditionary Force in 1914. The BEF ran into the right flank of the advancing Germans at the Belgian town of Mons in September 1914 and were forced into retreat, overwhelmed by the huge disparity of numbers. They undertook a gallant rear-guard stand at Le Cateau when General Sir Horace Smith Dorrien disobeyed orders from Field Marshall Sir John French. This saved the BEF from destruction and there was a further action at Nery, near Compiègne where Brigadier-General Charles Briggs's 1st Cavalry Brigade was involved. Three VC's were awarded to members of 'L' Battery Royal Horse Artillery when they held back the attack of a German cavalry brigade until reinforcements arrived, drove them away and enabled the brigade to make its way to safety.

Richard Holmes's expedition of course visited both places, among a host of others. The late Richard Holmes was a tour guide of note. He taught military history at Sandhurst for a good many years and presented a number of TV programmes on that subject. He was a part-time soldier with the Territorial Army eventually becoming Colonel of the Princess of Wales Royal Regiment, a unique honour for a civilian. His trip with the horses through Belgium and France was greatly assisted by the

British Army who supplied two vehicles and drivers and Brigadier Evelyn Webb-Carter who was the senior serving officer on the trip. Horse clubs in Belgium and France were enthusiastic supporters, the sort of trip I would love to have gone on. A stop at midday included three glasses of Muscadet, a very dry and distinctive wine from Brittany made from a very hardy grape variety grown in that region because of its resistance to the cold winters. Riding a horse after that might have been problematical, never mind the evening hospitality that the horse clubs laid on thick!

Quite apart from the military history, the information about horses was something that I had never appreciated, I suppose because I have never really been about and around horses like my daughters and granddaughters. Getting them fed, groomed, attending to their hooves (quite a bit of the route had some sections of cobbled *pavé* and some short unavoidable tar road) and settled down for the night took lots of time. The personalities and equine thinking processes are well-explained in this story of the journey. How could the human race have been so cruel and heartless to these noble animals in time of war?

To my mind the initial actions of the Great War are much more interesting than the unremitting stalemate of a few months later that lasted almost to the very end of the war. Visiting that area makes Richard Holmes's book invaluable for the detailed descriptions of the battles and clashes around the towns, villages, woods and forests. My visit to the area in 2018 commenced in London with the boarding of the Brussels Eurostar, and alighting at their stop in Lille. We spent five days and nights there in a nice Ibis hotel, down an alleyway and just off the town square. Mons was our focus, a short train ride away. A taxi for the better part of the day and driver Frederique took us pretty well wherever we wanted to go for €80. But I do wish Richard Holmes's book had been along too!

There is a South African connection to all of this. Smith Dorrien, at 19 years old and a Second Lieutenant in the 95th Rifle Brigade, seconded to the transport section of Lord Chelmsford's Zululand force was a survivor of the battle of Isandlwana. He was one of five Imperial officers who managed an escape from the disaster. In his book *Forty-Eight Years of Service* is the letter he wrote to his father from Helpmekaar a few days later. His father's reaction on receiving this letter can scarcely be imagined!

Smith Dorrien was back in South Africa twenty years later in the next war, by now a Major General. He was certainly one of the more effective of the British officers and played a significant part in the battle of Paardeberg with his brigade of Canadians and Shropshires. In early 1901 he was in command of a column during John French's sweep through the eastern Transvaal. At Lake Chrissie/Chrissiesmeer, then the village of Bothwell, on 6 February his large column and its supplies were an irresistible attraction to Louis Botha. His commandos mounted an attack in the early hours but Smith Dorrien had made a round of the pickets only few minutes earlier. Night attacks are always tricky and this was no different. A few horses stampeded – how many depends on whose account you consult – but the camp was intact and the next morning Duncan Mackenzie and men of the 2nd Imperial Light Horse pursued some of the Boers who were still nearby. All in all an indecisive outcome which could have been a signal success for the Boers but for the watchfulness of the British general. It was already clear then that Smith Dorrien and his superior, John French, did not see eye-to-eye. Smith Dorrien read some orders that French had issued to him and remarked to his staff officer: 'I see we have more to fear from behind than in front!'

By the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, Smith Dorrien was full General and ranked close to the top in the British Army. Which army was miniscule compared to the conscripted hordes of France, Germany and Russia. Divided into two Corps, Smith Dorrien was in command at Aldershot where the First Corps was based. This would take the field under Douglas Haig, consisting of three divisions

with attached artillery. A Second Corps was organised under the command of James Grierson. The two corps, together with a cavalry division under Edmund Allenby, constituted the British Expeditionary Force. Off they went to France as planned, to be positioned on the left flank of the French armies. Lieutenant-General Grierson suffered a heart attack and died on the train on his way to France. General Smith Dorrien was appointed in his place and was now the ranking British general in France, except for Field Marshall John French. I have always wondered, and surely I am not the only one, that the British Cabinet already had their doubts about the appointment of the Field Marshall as Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force. Smith Dorrien had the necessary seniority to replace him if needs be.

It never happened and John French managed to rid himself of this potential rival. Smith-Dorrien returned to England and in 1916 was appointed to command the army in East Africa which was in need of a senior officer. Most of their men were South Africans and Smith Dorrien requested that he go to his command via South Africa so as to meet with Jan Smuts. On board ship he fell ill and was near to death on arrival in Cape Town. He needed a long convalescence and never did make it to East Africa. He said his book was written, particularly the part dealing with the Great War, so as to put forward his side of the story since John French in his book *1914* is generally considered to have not been completely forthcoming.

There is another South African connection. Quite some years ago the former Durban chairman of the military history society, Paul Kilmartin, gave one of his wonderful talks entitled 'The Guns of Nery'. I had never heard of this incident but no less than three V.C.'s were awarded to members of 'L' Battery Royal Horse Artillery. The 1st Cavalry Brigade commander to which the battery was attached was Brigadier-General Charles Briggs. He was in command of the 1st Imperial Light Horse regiment for most of the Anglo Boer War and had commanded great respect and affection from his troops. He had a distinguished career and ended the war with the army in Salonika, Greece.

See the drawing by Fortunino Matania of the Nery guns in action in the yard of a French farm surrounded by spent shell-cases (and dead horses). You can find it on the internet, just ask Mr Google for Fortunino Matania. An Italian who lived in London and died there in 1963, he was noted for his realism and his drawings look almost as if they were copied from photographs. He had a huge range of subjects but with numbers of incidents from the Great War, particularly where horses are concerned. Queen Mary was greatly impressed and bought several of his works.

Finally, food for thought:
"Out of every one hundred men, ten shouldn't even be there, eighty are just targets, nine are the real fighters, and we are lucky to have them, for they make the battle. Ah, but the one, one is a warrior, and he will bring the others back."
Heraclitus (he lived 500 B.C.)

May I wish you all good things for the coming Festive Season and lots more interesting military history activities in the coming year.

Robin Smith
Howick, KZN
South Africa
November 2021