Conclusion

Published by

Donaldson, Peter.
Remembering the South African War: Britain and the Memory of the Anglo-Boer War, from 1899 to the Present.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/72704.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72704
Conclusion

By the end of the nineteenth century, Britain was a nation fascinated by the military world. Although, for some of the working class, this fascination may have been darkened by a lingering sense of apprehension, for the vast majority of the population the army served as a symbol for national and imperial pride. In part, the roots of this burgeoning popularity can be found in the Victorian cult of personality. Already well established by the time of Gordon’s death in Khartoum in 1885, the focus on the individual hero reached new heights during the South African War as the new mass daily newspapers seized on it to market the conflict and increase sales.¹ Yet, coeval with this development was a growing interest in, and idealisation of, the ordinary soldier. The popular image of Tommy Atkins, propagated through a variety of media, was of a stoic and increasingly abstemious imperial warrior sacrificing himself in the cause of a Christian mission.² Steve Attridge has argued that such imagery became even more pressing during the early stages of the South African War when public confidence in the armed forces took a knock as news of the reverses at Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso filtered through.³ Representations of the ordinary soldier, which came to rival in popularity those of the officer, provided a romanticised vision of army life in which the enlisted man was idealised as the embodiment of Anglo-Saxon virtues. However, for this to work, the war itself had to be sanitised and reshaped into a traditional heroic narrative in which the subjugation of the Boers was a moral as well as military victory. This, of course, became increasingly difficult to do as the war entered into the drawn-out guerrilla stage.

These themes and challenges were reflected and crystallised in the war memorial movement that followed the cessation of hostilities in South Africa. While the individual hero was still central to much of the commemorative activity, especially where a community felt slighted by the perceived maltreatment of a local celebrity, there was a growing shift towards the memorialisation of the ordinary soldier.\(^4\) This democratisation of memory was indicative of not only Edwardian civil society’s greater acceptance and understanding of the military world, but also its idealisation of the qualities that underpinned army service. By holding up the ordinary soldier as the paragon of British manhood, civilian communities were able to address their fears about national efficiency and racial degeneracy. The war was seen as redemptive. Thus, monuments honouring the service of their peers would, it was felt, help to jolt the public schoolboy out of his indolence and remind the industrial worker of the importance of patriotism. This vision of war as a moment of salvation very much reflected the Edwardian mindset and was to feature prominently in the rituals of remembrance following the First World War.\(^5\)

Memorial iconography and dedication ceremonies also served as celebrations of an aspirational set of national character traits. Figurative monuments depicting heroic charges or self-sacrificing last-stands were frequently complemented at unveiling ceremonies by speeches focusing on abstract virtues and concepts. More than anything else, this was a reflection of the civic, regimental or institutional pride that underpinned much of the commemorative activity in this period. Those being honoured were put forward as the ideal representatives of their parent communities. This was especially, but not exclusively, true for those who had volunteered for active service. The war records of these citizen-soldiers were regarded as personifying and defining the values that the wider community held dear. Occasionally, such was the contentious nature of the conflict’s origins, officiating dignitaries felt it necessary to divorce the qualities that the fallen were thought to enshrine from the specifics of the war. This was the case in Rochdale and Llanelli where opposition to the war had been markedly pronounced.\(^6\) However, for the vast majority of communities, no such doubts were allowed to creep in and the struggle against the Boers was portrayed as a necessary step in the nation’s great imperial mission. The didacticism of South African war memorialisation was augmented by the relatively peripheral role the bereaved played in the remembrance process. Although grief was in evidence, particularly at the intimate level of family commemoration, it was rarely the predominant or overriding emotion. As a result, dedication ceremonies were celebrations of collective values and achievements, frequently carnivalesque in nature.

---

\(^4\) See monuments to Buller and Wauchope, pp. 114–20 above.


\(^6\) See pp. 24–25 and p. 43 above.
mood, in which the needs of the bereaved were not allowed to cloud the tone of self-congratulation. This was to change in the 1920s when the substantially higher death rate and more emotionally charged atmosphere of the Great War were to see a much greater emphasis placed on mourning in the construction of memory sites.⁷

The two dominant, contemporary written histories of the war, *The Times History of the War in South Africa* and Maurice’s official history, buttressed the triumphal typography of the memorial movement. Leo Amery, though more inclined than those charged with overseeing the memorialisation process to highlight shortcomings in the conduct and management of military operations against the Boers, nonetheless presented readers of *The Times History* with an equally sanitised version of events. His certainty about the sanctity of Britain’s imperial mission and his admiration for the fighting spirit of the Boer Republics reinforced the vision of a necessary and heroic struggle fought along gentlemanly lines. Further mirroring the monumental commemoration of the fighting, the work also served a didactic function. By presenting the image of a hide-bound military establishment unable to cope with the demands of modern warfare, a forceful case was made for army reform. This representation of the conflict, dominated by the twin themes of chivalry and incompetence was, albeit inadvertently, bolstered by Frederick Maurice’s official history. Firstly, the War Office’s insistence that Maurice had to excise all material that might give offence to the Boers helped to confirm the notion of a gentleman’s war by validating the public’s perception of an honourable struggle waged against a noble adversary. Secondly, allegations in the press about censorship pointed to an establishment cover-up and thus appeared to corroborate Amery’s claims about administrative mismanagement and military ineptitude.

More importantly for the memory of the war, in both histories the ordinary soldier continued to be represented as the embodiment of national values and virtues. Amery, although critical of the army’s performance, went to great lengths not to disparage the spirit or character of the fighting man. The shortcomings in Britain’s military prowess that the war had revealed, he argued, nothing to do with a lack of moral fibre within the ranks of the army but rather the product of years of complacency from the authorities and civil society in general. Such luminaries as Rudyard Kipling fully appreciated this distinction. The moral to be drawn from the criticisms of Volume II was, he observed, ‘that the nation lost Spion Kop’.⁸ Others, however, were less sure. One veteran of the Natal campaign, convinced that the history was little more than a ‘damnable libel on the British Army’, chose to pursue his grievance through the law courts.⁹

⁷ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, chapter 2.
⁸ ChCA, Leopold Amery papers, AMEL 2/5/4, Kipling to Amery, 4 May 1905.
⁹ Amery, *Political Life*, p. 366
vigour with which the case was defended, and won, attests to the importance that Amery attached to the issue.¹⁰

The representation of war enshrined in the pages of Amery’s and Maurice’s histories and through the iconography of the war memorials dominated the public image for next half century. Not until Kenneth Griffith reintroduced the conflict to the wider public through three BBC television documentaries between 1967 and 1999 was the orthodoxy of a gentlemen’s war seriously challenged. A passionate if somewhat eccentric campaigner against perceived injustice, Griffith moulded the conflict to fit his worldview of an on-going struggle between the privileged and the oppressed. In this new interpretation, it was the ordinary British soldier as well as the Boer commando who was presented as the victim of imperial hubris. Misgivings about the legitimacy of British war aims, which had been largely expunged from the collective memory during the memorialisation process and the writing of the histories, were now given centre stage. In the televised version of the war, the civilising mission of British imperialism was replaced by the egregious materialism of a corrupt plutocracy. The military authorities received equally damning treatment. A succession of elderly veterans, Boer and British, testified on camera not only to the professional incompetence of the British army’s high command but also to their callous disregard for the lives of combatants and non-combatants from both sides. This revised configuration of events mirrored the changing cultural landscape. The rediscovery of the Great War and the growing interest in the human face of battle had established, to borrow once again Ashplant, Dawson and Roper’s phrase, new templates of war remembrance.¹¹ Not only did military operations against the Boers fit neatly into these reworked templates but they also, as Bill Nasson has pointed out, resonated with a liberal anti-war public who could see in them a parallel with America’s conflict in Vietnam.¹² Yet, in one crucial way, the televised war of Griffith’s documentaries remained true to the representation of events constructed through the war memorial movement and histories. Notwithstanding his righteous outrage, Griffith still presented the war as a heroic narrative, with the ordinary soldier centre stage. The personal qualities of what Griffith called ‘these poor bloody footsloggers’ were being held up, as they had been in so many of the remembrance rituals in the immediate post-war years, as worthy of emulation.¹³ Yet, an important shift had occurred. The focus was now on the humanity of the combatants not their national

¹¹ Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, The Politics of War Commemoration, pp. 34–36. See also pp. 00–00 above.
¹³ BBCWAC, T41/535/1, Kenneth Griffith to Robin Scott, 11 September 1972, p. 5.
devotion. For Griffith, the war was a lesson in the resilience of the human spirit, a celebration of a common humanity that crossed national boundaries.

The South African War has both shaped and reflected the remembrance of the Great War. The intense commemorative activity that followed the signing of the Peace of Vereeniging established new approaches and themes in memorialisation. A potent admixture of frontline journalism, stirring militarism and mass volunteerism had not only transfixed civil society during hostilities against the Boers but had also provided the impetus for a diverse range of individuals and communities to engage actively in the post-war construction of memory. This latter phenomenon was to be repeated, though on a much larger scale, after 1918. As Britain entered the second half of the twentieth century, with the popular perception of what constituted a moral war having been redefined by the defeat of Nazism, it was the turn of the South African War to be refashioned in the mould of the Great War. Futility, incompetence and horror, the central tenets of a new historiographical trend from the 1960s onwards, seemed to serve as the perfect shorthand for the last of Victoria’s colonial wars. Yet, what remained unchanged in this reconfiguration of the memory of the war was the idealisation of the frontline soldier. Although serving different purposes according to the divergent agendas of controlling agencies, the memory of the ordinary soldier remained sacrosanct throughout. This thread of continuity points towards a democratisation in war remembrance, the beginnings of which can be traced to the conflict in South Africa. In this respect, as in so many others, the South African War can be identified as an important moment of transition.