



The South African Military History Society

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

Founded 1966

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Most members arriving at the last meeting could hardly believe their own eyes at the number of cars in the parking lot and still coming in through the Museum gate. Parking was at a premium and boded well for a record turn out at the meeting. Alas! The crowd was for the launching of a new CD by a rock band, but none-the-less we still had an excellent turnout for two very good talks.

The Chairman, Bob Smith, opened the meeting in his usual inimitable style by doing the monthly notices and then introducing our first speaker for the evening. This was the well-known Pretoria tour guide and amateur historian Felicia Fourie, who was to speak on "Four Exceptional Women in the Anglo-Boer War".

Using a top class "Power Point" production, Felicia then treated us to the stories of a most interesting quartet of 19th century women. Avoiding the obvious choices such as, say, Emily Hobhouse, she focused on lesser-known figures who had also played an outstanding role in the Second Anglo-Boer War.

The first was Lady Sarah Wilson. Born Sarah Churchill at Blenheim Palace she was the youngest of the 7th Duke of Marlborough's eleven children, being the sister of Randolph Churchill and Winston Churchill's aunt. She was pretty, intelligent, with a quick tongue and acerbic wit. In her late twenties, she met and married Lieutenant Gordon Wilson of The Royal Horse Guards and accompanied him to South Africa in 1895. She had a knack for making friends, among them Alfred Beit and Cecil Rhodes, and before returning to England a while later, had a very good knowledge of the political situation in South Africa and a definite understanding of the Boer point of view. The couple returned to South Africa in 1899 where Wilson became ADC to Baden-Powell. They accompanied him to Mafeking and there Sarah found herself swept up by the preparations for war and the general air of excitement, which was so different from her leisurely high society life in London. Intending to return to England, she lingered too long and was caught in Mafeking by the outbreak of war. Unable to take an active part in the siege, she started writing of her experiences for the Daily Mail, who promptly enrolled her as a Special War Correspondent. Baden-Powell was concerned for her safety and ordered her to the nearby town of Setlagole, 46 miles South of Mafeking but, fearing being taken as a prisoner of war, she moved again, this time to the African village of Mosita.

While there she started passing on information, culled from rumours among the local population, to the British in Mafeking. This was done through local African runners and proved so successful that she became a link between the besieged forces in Mafeking and the outside world, at one stage even reporting on the Boer forces

occupying Vryburg after a visit there. Her taste for spying thus aroused, she took to it with a vengeance, until a carrier pigeon carrying a message from her to Mafeking was intercepted and she was arrested as a spy. While awaiting her fate, she confronted general Snyman outside Mafeking and somehow convinced him to swap her for a Boer prisoner in a prisoner exchange. This was done. She was exchanged for a Boer horse thief by the name of Petrus Viljoen and found herself back in Mafeking as a heroine. She then excelled herself in the role of "the good genius of the siege". The London society hostess who had never lifted a finger for herself in domestic duties became the big mover and shaker in caring for the wounded, ill and homeless, while at the same time continuing in her role of war correspondent. At the close of the war she was probably the most celebrated woman in England, a country to which she had returned once the siege was lifted.

The second woman of the quartet was Sophia Izedinova, a person about whom very little is actually known. She was one of 22 young Russian nurses who volunteered to accompany a Russian/Dutch ambulance brigade to nurse the Boer forces. Leaving from Saint Petersburg and travelling via Berlin, Naples and Lourenco Marques (now Maputo), the brigade and all its equipment met with a number of hiccups along the way but finally arrived in Pretoria in February 1900. At that stage the Boers were winning the war and the Anglo/Dutch brigade was feted wherever it went. When its equipment caught up with them they were divided in to three ambulance groups and Sophia's was despatched to Bloemfontein. For the next four months she served in field hospitals in several theatres. Starting at Poplar Grove and Brandfort the group was an integral front line force and suffered great hardship from a lack of proper victuals, poor transport arrangements and, in many cases, incompetence on the part of the Boer generals. Gradually victory turned to defeat and her group fell back to Christiana, Winburg, Kroonstad, Elandsfontein outside Germiston and finally Fourteen Streams on the Vaal River. Frequently under fire and suffering hardship shared with the civilian population, they were at one time left behind when general Du Toit retreated without informing the hospital. This led to their evacuation on his instructions and they were sent via Klerksdorp and Johannesburg to Pretoria, which was then in disarray in the face of the advancing British forces. There the group was disbanded and Sophia returned to Russia. At the urging of President Reitz at her farewell, she resolved to bring the Boer cause to the notice of more of her countrymen and in 1903 published a book in Russian entitled *A few Months with the Boers*, which was reprinted in English in 1976 and which was widely read.

The third woman was Millicent Fawcett, a redoubtable lady of quality who devoted her life to the Suffrage movement in England, being active for sixty years in obtaining the right to vote for women. Following Emily Hobhouse's report on the British concentration camps in South Africa, the War Office appointed a Commission of Enquiry under the leadership of Millicent and entitled the Fawcett Commission to investigate and report back on the state of the camps. The Fawcett Commission was the first in England to consist entirely of women and was supposed to be completely impartial, but in fact all five ladies on the Commission believed the war to be a just one, and two, including Millicent, were anti Boer. The Commission spent five months in South Africa and the members proved to be completely fair with their report, substantiating most of Emily Hobhouse's claims. They travelled extensively, questioned both camp staff and inmates and implemented wide-ranging changes. Millicent was as hard as steel and had no time for incompetence. Her criticism was outspoken and the Commission rapidly became a force to be reckoned with by camp commandants. Conditions in the camps improved dramatically, the mortality rate fell, but Millicent Fawcett received little credit for this. She is more widely remembered for her suffragette activities that resulted in women being given the vote in the United Kingdom, while the Fawcett Society is still to this day very active in gender issues.

The last of the quartet, Sarah Raal, deserves to have had a film made of her life. Born into a prosperous farm family in the Southern Free State outside Jagersfontein, with the outbreak of war her father and four brothers immediately enlisted leaving Sarah, her mother and two small children alone on the farm. On one occasion, when the latter were shopping in Jagersfontein, her mother was denounced for feeding passing Boers and, together with

her children, placed in a concentration camp. This left Sarah alone on the farm with her farm workers. After seven months of this, her brothers suddenly appeared seeking sanctuary. Word of this got out, but they all got away before their arrest could be carried out. For a few months Sarah moved from farm to farm but inevitably her luck ran out and she was incarcerated at Springfontein. There she had a run-in with the Camp Commandant that resulted in her being placed in a punishment detail from which she escaped to rejoin her brothers.

As the countryside was palpably unsafe for a woman alone, she was allowed to enlist with the commando under command of a Commandant Nieuwoudt. There she took part in a number of guerrilla engagements, coming under both rifle and shell fire several times and displaying considerable bravery during the course of these actions. On more than one occasion she was in actual physical combat with the enemy, narrowly escaping injury, death or capture. She was eventually captured in an ambush and placed in a camp until the end of the war. She later wrote a book entitled *Met Die Boere In Die Veld*, which was published in 1936 and re-published in English in 2000.

Felicia was thanked by Bob Smith for an excellent talk, which was most appropriate for Women's Month, and he then introduced our next speaker, also a well-known tour guide. This was Ken Gillings, a noted author and Natal Battlefields Guide. He has also served as Chairman of the Natal Branch, from which he passed on best wishes. His talk was entitled *The Aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War* and was also professionally illustrated on a Power Point production.

Ken commenced his talk with the Treaty of Vereeniging signed in Melrose House, Pretoria, on 31 May 1902. Using a free and easy style, he then took us slowly forward through time, commencing with the bare facts of the cost in money and lives of the Second Anglo-Boer War. Ironically the job of re-constructing the two devastated Boer republics was given to the man widely deemed responsible for the war in the first place, Alfred, Lord Milner. Milner enlisted a group of what would today be termed "whiz kids" and which became known as "Milner's Kindergarten". They were faced with a huge task. Thousands of prisoners of war had to be repatriated and resettled, a large number of displaced Blacks had also to be resettled, and devastated farms made viable again. There was also an immigration policy to bring in British settlers to be implemented. Given financial backing from the British government, Milner's team set about it's task until 1906, when a change of government in the UK brought self-government to the former Boer republics. This brought the Afrikaner politicians back in to power, a power which was extended in 1910 with the Act of Union to the rest of South Africa.

Ken then led us through the intricacies of the political wheeling and dealing of the Afrikaner political elite until 1994, when the chain was finally broken. He also described the effect the stipulations of the Act of Union had on the Black population, whose resentment of these led to a political awareness and the ultimate founding of the ANC and the 1994 ending of Afrikaner power. Milner also restored and improved the mining industry, an area in which he achieved staggering success. This, coupled with an influx of "poor whites" - Afrikaners displaced from their farms and forced to find a living in the cities - turned South Africa from an agricultural society to an industrial one.

The effect of the war was also felt in the UK, whose forces had suffered a few grievous lessons on the battlefield. These lessons were taken to heart and with the advent of World War I the faults had been corrected. The Army was re-organised, Staff courses introduced, the Territorial Army established, artillery methods updated and tactics revised. Their Medical Corps also learnt from the Boer War and battlefield casualties and disease victims were considerably reduced because of the new outlook. Even far-off New Zealand was affected. It's participation in the war, as a nation, led to a feeling of national identity and the rejection of any participation in the Australian Federation.

After a look at the Rebellion in 1914 and the 1922 Strike, which also had their roots in the war, Ken ended his talk with a brief overview of the subsequent lives of the major figures in the conflict, which also proved fascinating. At the conclusion of this excellent talk there was a brief question period and then Ken was thanked by Marjorie Dean, who also made a point of once again thanking Felicia Fourie.

Bob then closed the meeting with an invitation to meet for tea in the gallery and to visit the book sale. This incidentally was the last of these popular sales and no more will be held in the future.

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FORTHCOMING LECTURES

Johannesburg:

11th September

CR	Robin Gardiner	Special Operations Executives in Burma
ML	John Parkinson	<i>HMS Durban ; WW2 - The East & D-Day</i>

KZN in Durban:

11th September

DDH	Brig Gen Albie Gotze	My experiences in the Ossewa Brandwag
MAIN	Gilbert Torlage	Die Weisse Rose

Cape Town:

11th September - The Last Throw of the Dice - The Battle of Alam el Halfa

Our speaker is Col Lionel Crook who will discuss the Battle of Alam el Halfa in July 1942 and the controversies arising from the planning of the battle. This should be an interesting talk.

SAMHSEC in Port Elizabeth:

8th September:

CR	Piet Hall	War Poetry
MAIN	Jock Harris	Operation Savannah Memories

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