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The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War. A Social History

(Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2013, xx, 391 pp., illustrations, tables, notes, index. ISBN: 978-1-4314-0542-8)

Elizabeth van Heyningen

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HC Bosman's Oom Schalk Lourens describes finding his farm after the peace. He knew it by "the hole under the koppie where I quarried slate-stones for the threshing-floor... everything else was gone". He went on "my wife came out of the concentration camp and we went together to look at our old farm. My wife had gone into the concentration camp with our two children, but she came out alone. And when I saw her again and noticed the way she had changed, I knew that I, who had been through all the fighting, had not seen the Boer War".¹ There were, of course, two Boer Wars after December 1899. The first lasted until the fall of Bloemfontein and Pretoria and Lord Roberts's triumphant return to England in December 1900. The second lasted from the early months of 1901 to the peace of Vereeniging in May 1902. This was the guerrilla war carried on by the commandos, whose dependents were taken,

¹ HC Bosman, *The Rooinek* (Mafeking Road, Johannesburg, CNA, 1949), pp. 150-151.

by force or consent, from their farms and “bywoner” (squatter) homes in the war zone into hastily established, chaotic refugee camps, where some 28 000 or more white women and children, men too, died, with 15 000 or more Africans. This was the war Schalk Lourens, despite fighting at Sanna’s Post and Dewetsdorp, did not see.

It is a feat of Elizabeth van Heyningen to have illuminated for us the camps where Schalk Lourens’ children died, with sympathy and without rancour, with criticism of the administration, civilian and, worse, military, and the inmates, but also understanding of the degree of blame due to social history and the practice of medicine. She reveals also the attempt to create to “create a British world”, the male-dominated social order, class structures of landowning Boers and “bywoners”, and the influence of British pro-Boer lobbying, pacifism and the social welfare concerns shared with the loyalists.

Van Heyningen’s vision of the camps is far-removed from the understandably bitter polemics of many studies in Afrikaans or a few biased rejoinders in English. Her prose is a model of clarity and eloquence. Despite the degree of technical detail – of administration, logistics, finance, diet, disease and death, and her discussion of relations between Boers and British and their differing lifestyles, she is always eminently readable. This reader’s copy of the book is disfigured with pencil-marked extracts: apt summaries and quotations, even characteristic apophthegms.

Early on we learn that, before Kitchener’s “scorched earth” destruction had begun, “Boer leaders had in fact taken their first difficult decision in the policies that would lead to the camps: to leave their families to fend for themselves”. Such statements are supported by evidence. General Louis Botha is quoted: “we must not think of our wives and children any more but must fight for our independence” (p. 48). He was not to know what the terrible outcome would be.

Near the end is another of her judgements: “The British were well aware that this dreary isolation was bad for morale... in their eyes education, sport and celebration also had the virtues of introducing the camp people to British values and cultural institutions, to prepare them for the British world they would inhabit after the war” (p. 216). “Celebrations”? At the turn of 1901-1902 there were Christmas and New Year and in June 1902 the coronation of King Edward VII (despite its postponement until August due to his emergency appendectomy). An old lady in the Irene camp was reported to have said: “I

have served President Kruger a long time and got nothing, and now the new king, as soon as he is our king thinks of the old people and gives us a dinner, he is the king for me” (p. 268).

With the commendable balance she shows throughout, she quotes the Bloemfontein camp superintendent who “was surprised to find the people keeping themselves aloof as they did”. He supposed “one can hardly expect the people to become loyal and enthusiastic members of the empire all at once”. The author’s judgment is acceptable: “however hard the officials worked at creating a British world in the camps, the Boers clung to their identity”. It took General Hertzog’s De Wildt speech of 1912 to articulate the rejection of imperialism except where of benefit to South Africa and to assert “the importance of nationalism to the Dutch-speaking people” and express the hope that perhaps one day he would preach nationalism also to the English-speakers.²²

A major difference between Van Heyningen and even her worthiest predecessor, Burrige Spies (*Methods of Barbarism*, Cape Town, 1973) and, on the black camps, so neglected even by Emily Hobhouse, Peter Warwick’s outstanding *Black People in the South African War, 1899-1902* (Cambridge, 1982), is her study (and that of Professor Iain Smith, on the Transvaal camps) of the camp registers. Their database - <http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/mss/bacd/index.php> - is still far from complete. She has been through the “mass of papers of the Military Government Pretoria files”, Orange River Colony camp reports, Chamberlain-Milner correspondence, many private collections, even invaluable letters of the Ladies Committee which visited the camps officially, late in 1901.

Between them Van Heyningen and Smith unearthed material which, as expressed by Van Heyningen, bring to life the role of the politicians, British army leaders (Kitchener the most culpable), civil administrators, doctors, nurses, teachers – and, in far the greatest measure, the 136 000 or more men, women and children in their wretched suffering in the white and black camps, where disease ended so many young lives. The densely packed material, always readable, will prove of endless value in the study of the political and social consequences of war as it affected non-combatants. These were mainly white and subject African women and children.

²² DW Kruger, *South African policies and parties, 1910-60* (Cape Town, 1960), pp. 65-67.

We are shown Emily Hobhouse, in a brilliant portrait, not as anti-imperialist and pro-Boer but as a “passionate pacifist” (p. 118) who brought to light “the plight of the camp families”, which might never have happened without her heroic contribution. Van Heyningen explains that a Wellcome Trust grant accounted for the fact that “a social history of medicine is at the heart of this book” (p. xi). Yet the story she tells rises above medical science and social history. Two examples reveal the horror of war as Emily Hobhouse reviled it. Hobhouse quotes one Aletta du Toit: when the soldiers burnt Mrs G’s farm “she went almost frantic, fell down on her knees before the officer, and took hold of his hands, and cried: ‘Oh, look at your soldiers carrying out my beautiful furniture. See what they are doing’”. For they had made a big fire and were heaping on to it her pillows and feather beds... tables, chairs, clocks etc. “‘What are they doing?’ she cried out, ‘what are you doing with my things?’” (pp. 104-05).

Elizabeth Neethling told of “a child in Volksrust camp recovering from measles” (as so few did). “Oh, so pale, so thin, so emaciated! In its trembling little hand it holds an empty jam tin containing a little black, bitter coffee, in the other a bit of half-baked bread... the only meal until next day...”. Neethling was a “post-war romanticizer” and Hobhouse sought to appeal to middle-class supporters but their accounts ring sadly true. Van Heyningen herself continues: “Most terrifying of all was the disease that ate away the faces of their children. It was hardly surprising that some Boers believed that the British were murdering them with ground glass or blue vitriol in the sugar and hooks in the meat” (p. 123).

Elizabeth van Heyningen has done more than rid us forever of the ground glass and hooks. She has shown, in all essential detail, the “refugee” or “burger camps” as many contemporaries called them, to have been the unavoidable result of the second, guerrilla phase of the war. They were not “concentration camps” as the world later knew them, but miserable places of vital relief, for whites and, far worse, for blacks, where disease added so many thousands to the death toll of the war itself, and which, with the miseries of camp life, created a bitterness that this book should help to alleviate.

Kopwond: Vergete slagoffers van die Bosoerlog

(Kaapstad: Tafelberg Uitgewers, 2011, 208pp. ISBN: 9780624052876)

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In die tydperk van 1966-1989 het die Suid-Afrikaanse Verdedigingsmag (SAVM) 'n oorlog gevoer om die grense van die destydse Suid-Wes Afrika (tans Namibië) teen aanvalle vanuit Angola te beveilig. Jong Suid-Afrikaanse dienspligtiges was na die grens gebied gestuur om nasionale diensplig te voltooi wat tot twee jaar kon strek. Duisende soldate het hul lewens op die grens verloor, maar hul terugkerende kamerade het die grens verlaat met sielkundige letsels wat behandel moes word. Die SAVM het wel professionele sielkundiges in die weermag gehad wat die getraumatiseerde soldate moes behandel, maar die bevindings van die SAVM sielkundiges het tot dusver min aandag van militêre historici gekry.

Kopwond, vergete slagoffers van die Bosoerlog deur Feinstein kan gesien word as deel van 'n reeks publikasies wat handel oor die grensoorlog, wat in die laaste tien jaar aansienlik toegeneem het. Sy werk is uniek in die opsig dat dit handel oor die eerstehandse ervaringe van 'n mediese offisier wat as sielkundige in die SAVM gedien het. Met die eerste oogopslag van die titel word die indruk geskep dat die boek net handel oor die emosionele aftakeling van SAVM soldate wat in die grensgebied operasioneel was. Inteendeel: *Kopwond...* begin sinvol by Feinstein as konteks... amper soos 'n gewone herinneringskrif (*memoir*) met 'n hoofstuk oor die kinderjare van die skrywer. Feinstein het in 'n sorgvrye huishouding groot geword met al die nodige stimulasies om hom aan te spoor om nuwe hoogtes in akademiese studies en in sy musiek te behaal. Hierdie gedeelte van die boek is in 'n apologetiese toon geskryf. Dit wil ook die indruk skep dat die skrywer 'n swaar skuldgevoel beleef jeens Apartheid en dat hy dus die eerste gedeelte van sy herinneringskrif gebruik om van hierdie skuldgevoel ontslae te raak.

Feinstein se werk is merendeels geskryf vir Jan Publiek as vir 'n akademiese lesersgroep. Laasgenoemde mag selfs neerkyk op die taalgebruik en die afwesigheid van verwysings na die gevalle wat hy waargeneem het. Alhoewel dit dalk bekend is dat soldate se gewone taalgebruik nie altyd voorbeeldig is nie, is dit sins insiens onnodig om herhalend in die teks te wees ten opsigte van kragwoorde. Die argument dat vloek deel is van die uitdrukking van 'n soldaat se ervaring, en help bou aan 'n lewensgetroue indruk oor die by tye se hardheid van lewe in die weermag, se geloofwaardigheid kan verflou wanneer dit steurend herhalend word. Dieselfde geld vir die triviale in-diepte beskrywings oor die reuke en omstandighede waarin die skrywer moes vertoef. Vir sommige lesers mag juis dit meer begrip van die omstandighede gee.

Reeds ten aanvang van die boek kry die leser 'n goeie idee van kamplewe. Die klimaat in militêre kampe was opvallend nie gemaklik nie. Oorlogsomstandighede was ook nog nooit vir 'n ieder en elke soldaat maanskyn en rose nie. Dalk mag sommige lesers ook die skrywer se gekla oor lewe in die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag betwis. Elk het 'n mening, maar moet daar gewaak word teen eensydigheid. Vooroordeel kan steurend raak. In die lig egter daarvan dat die publikasie vir 'n gehoor veel wyer is as die akademie, is dit seker 'n aanvaarbare benadering tot die neerpen van persoonlike herinneringe wat uiteindelik binne 'n veel omvattender wetenskaplike diskoers bevestig of betwis mag word.

Vir konteks is Feinstein as professionele sielkundige se loopbaan in die SAVM geskets: Eers was hy gestasioneer by No. 1 Militêre Hospitaal in Pretoria. Daar het hy begin om met pasiënte te werk wat deur senuwee instortings gegaan het. Sy beskrywings oor die trauma wat soldate beleef het, is besonder interessant en die leser word meegevoer deur die intensiteit en belewenis van sommige oorlogssituasies.

Feinstein se professionele lewensreis het hom ook in 'n stadium tot in die hartjie van Suidwes Afrika (Namibië) gebring. Saam met ander mediese offisiere was hy getaak om die weermagdele by die Oshakati-basis by te staan. Oënskynlik was daar somtyds struwelinge onder die mediese personeel, en het dit nie altyd maklik gegaan nie. Oor sy belewenisse daar, is hy besonder blatant. Veral 'n sekere "Pete" is vir hom 'n steen des aanstoots. Die druk en spanning van oorlogsomstandighede buite Suid-Afrikaanse grense en weg van die bekende, kan waarskynlik nie uitgesluit word nie. Tog was die geestelik afwykende pasiënte in Oshakati-basis minder, en die gevaar van verveeldheid groter. Gevolglik is selfs gewone pasiënte buite die Oshakati-basis en gesinslede

van weermagbestuur behandel. In hierdie deel dwaal Feinstein besonder weg van die gewone soldaat, maar is hierdie belewenisse in sy lewensreis van belang om 'n begrip te kry van die groter geestelike impak wat oorlog ook op gesinne na aan die berede soldaat kan beleef.

Ná byna 'n jaar te Oshakati is Feinstein verplaas na die buite-pos, Tshandi. Dit is hier waar Feinstein 'n vuurdoop beleef om in aktiewe omstandighede van skermutselings homself te moet kan verdedig. Sy persoonlike vuurdoop word oorskadu deur ander prikkelende insidente soos die senuwee-skade van sy offisier, en belewenis van sy kaptein. Die kaptein byvoorbeeld is, geteister deur nagmerries, moet gehelp word, en die offisier moet ondersteun word om uit die sielkundige kloue van 'n vreesbevangenhede te kom. Ook moet die houding van Feinstein se mede-soldate by Tshandi genoem word. Dit blyk uit sy beskrywing dat die soldate by hierdie buite-pos meer bombasties en vreesloos wou voorkom in vergelyking met die soldate wat nie in 'n gevaarsone patrolliediens moes doen nie. Feinstein verwys na hierdie bombastiese en ekstreme houding van die soldate as die sogenaamde "Weermag se Mantra", 'n veralgemening wat dalk nie in alle situasies geregverdig kan word nie. Ook sou geargumenteer kon word dat die skrywer probeer oordra dat soldate soms tydens 'n oorlog hul vrees en spanning wou oorwin deur voor te gee dat hulle oor 'n onbreekbare manlikheid beskik wat in stand gehou is in groepsverband.

Ná Feinstein se kort verblyf by Tshandi word hy teruggestuur na Suid-Afrika waar hy gedurende 1990-1994 diens verrig in van die swart woonbuurte van die eertydse Transvaal provinsie (byname Sedibeng), en waar hy ook die trauma van geweld en moorddadige aksies beleef het.

Kopwond... sluit af waar Feinstein, meer as twintig jaar later, deur die nuwe Republiek Namibië reis, met die doel om ou bekende plekke te besoek en herinneringe daaroor te koester. Dit blyk dat Feinstein ook wil argumenteer dat die oorlog sinneloos was maar dat die nuwe magshebbers in Namibië ook nie die plaaslike bevolkings enigsins gehelp het nie. In vele opsigte is Feinstein se slotindrukke oor sy lewensreis 'n eie interne gesprek (dalk worsteling) met wat goed en as minder sinvol beleef is gedurende sy jare as werknemer van die SAVM, en sy belewenis daarvan dekades weg.

Feinstein se werk is 'n besliste bydrae, en dalk 'n eerste, in die traumatiese belewenisse van gewone mense wat as soldate diens gedoen het, vanuit die pen van die sielkundige as dokter self. Senuwee-ineenstortings en die sielkundige aftakeling van oorlog op die Suid-Afrikaanse soldaat in die grensoorlog is

prominent. Hierdie terrein van studie is betreklik jonk, en daarom word die bydrae van Feinstein verwelkom. Sommige lesers mag dalk teleurgesteld wees oor Feinstein soms meer op homself fokus ten opsigte van sy eie traumatiese ervarings, in plaas daarvan om 'n balans te vind tussen sy eie stryd en dié van sy pasiënte. Ook die ware traumatiese impak van oorlog in die psige van die soldaat is in *Kopwond...* ongelukkig verdoof. Dalk is hierdie leemtes die aansporing vir verdere studies oor die wesenlike geestelike skade wat oorlog aan mense in Suid-Afrika in die verlede aangerig het.

AB Xuma: Autobiography and selected works

(Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2012, 402 pp., bibl., index. ISBN: 978-0-9814264-3-3)

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It can well be said that Dr AB Xuma, president of the African National Congress (ANC) from 1940 to 1949, is a very unfortunate figure in terms of historiography. On the one hand, much like the people he represented as a leader, his life was not documented in a fitting manner. Poor record-keeping of black South Africans was standard practice in South Africa at the time – and one that Dr Xuma, as a medical doctor, often deplored as an obstacle to proper health care.

However, there is another and probably greater reason why this interesting historical role-player has not yet been fittingly celebrated in South Africa. For just as young leaders and the old guard are at odds in the new South Africa, so it was when Dr Xuma was at the height of his powers. And it was the ANC's most famous struggle icon of all times, Nelson Mandela, who dealt the most damaging blow to how Dr AB Xuma would be remembered in our history books. To the young Madiba, Dr Xuma represented a conservative class, paternalistic in views, reluctant to act, and in a word – outdated.

It is fitting that there are now fresh insights and perspectives on the life of Dr AB Xuma. Whereas these texts have almost been lost forever they are now available for us to study at leisure. This publication is long overdue, and access to the words of Xuma himself informs a re-appraisal not only of his life and work but also of the ANC at that time.

Autobiography is, in itself, a controversial matter. Is it possible to reflect upon oneself objectively? The autobiography in this work is, however, very brief, and covers only forty one pages. "I do not intend", Xuma notes in the first paragraph, "to boast about or praise myself" (p. 7) – a commitment to which he stuck firmly. Yet from the outset one is confronted with a certain charm in his words. For example: "I believe my life has been a mixture of successes and failures as the lives of most mortals are. I hope to bring out both" (p. 7).

In his selection, Peter Limb includes a number of Dr Xuma's letters. Interpreting letters can be challenging, but fortunately for the reader, the letters are divided into sections, each of which Limb introduces with a background and other contextual information.

The bulk of the source material however, is grouped in section three under the heading "Essays, speeches and miscellaneous prose". It is here that the reader is confronted with the most unsettling and grim passages of prose in this volume, as they reveal the realities that Africans faced well before the onset of apartheid. Dr Xuma's writings touch on varied subjects, ranging from property rights, health and medicine, to crime and education. The writings on crime could be valuable in explaining how Union legislation had the effect of turning the youth to crime, perhaps setting in train a vicious pattern for years to come.

Xuma also concerned himself with the controversial issue of alcohol legislation. Alcohol consumption, like many aspects of African life at the time, was strictly controlled by the authorities. Legislation often resulted in over-consumption because individuals were not allowed to remove alcohol from specified drinking areas that held exclusive liquor-selling rights.

Of particular interest is a brief biography of the enigmatic Charlotte Maxeke. A sad aspect of our historical legacy is the neglect of the role of women. That he captures something of the life of Maxeke is fascinating, especially considering the image of Dr Xuma as a paternalistic leader. One cannot help

asking: was he perhaps not just a man of his times? And can we judge him fairly given our 21st century norms? Despite the brevity of this biography of Maxeke, it is insightful and stresses the significant role of education in the upliftment of people.

Dr AB Xuma played an influential role in the history of South Africa. He was instrumental, notes Limb, in rebuilding the “organisational structures of Congress... his hard work ironically placed it [the ANC] on the road to militant resistance, even if he did not take this road himself.” (p. xix). Against this background, “AB Xuma: Autobiography and selected works” is a significant contribution. It succeeds in providing the reader with a nuanced picture of Dr AB Xuma, and reconfigures the way in which he has been viewed in the past.