

THE ANGLO-BOER WAR CENTENNIAL: A CRITICAL EVALUATION¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

The centenary of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) started in October 1999 (although the run-up started about the middle of 1998) and lasted until the middle of June 2002. During that period there were more than a hundred centennial events all over South Africa; and approximately 200 new books on the war were published, as well as more than 100 scientific journal articles and thousands of newspaper articles, plus several new Afrikaans novels and short stories that are set in the Anglo-Boer War.

Commemorations of historical events are often relatively insignificant events, but in some instances they can have far-reaching consequences for a society, for example, by creating or enhancing feelings of nationalism. But, commemorations can also divide a society if some groups are excluded or if there are aggressive discussions about the interpretations of the past. Throughout history political leaders have often used the past in selective ways to justify, criticise or understand the present. Another function of commemorations is that they can be a source of learning about and creating interest in the past.⁴

It is crucial to have knowledge of the historical context in which a commemoration takes place, since the context influences the event as well as its implications to a large extent. By studying a commemoration, one can also learn much about the

¹ This article is an expanded version of a paper read by the authors at a seminar on the Anglo-Boer War, Bloemfontein, 25 May 2002. Please note that the authors attended several of the events that are mentioned in the text and, consequently, they often write from first-hand experience - which explains why documentary proof is sometimes not supplied in the footnotes.

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⁴ See, for example, B Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1991), *passim*; B Kapferer, *Legends of people, myths of state: violence, intolerance and political culture in Sri Lanka and Australia* (Washington and London, 1988), pp. 6-7; E Hobsbawm and T Ranger (eds), *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), *passim*; D Kertzer, *Ritual, politics and power* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 6-7, 67 *et seq.*

society in question. Thus, by evaluating the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War, one can gain insight into the state of the nation at a particular point in its development.

The Anglo-Boer War centennial took place in the context of the "new" South Africa, some ten years after the release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of the anti-apartheid movements. The centenary began more than five years after the change in government and was the first major heritage event to take place after the political changes of 1994. The present government is in the process of trying to restructure the heritage sector and to reinterpret South Africa's history. For instance, the existence of many monuments and town/street names stemming from the colonial and the apartheid era is being questioned.

The Anglo-Boer War centennial took place in a South Africa with a more open society than in the past, where different cultural groups are more likely to listen to one another. However, especially since the election of 1999, the general discourse has become more racialised. Pessimism regarding the future is also widespread, especially, but not only, among white South Africans. On the other hand, there is also a renewed interest in the Afrikaans language and culture, which, for example, finds its expression in the revival of alternative Afrikaans music, the rediscovery of old music and literature, and in the more and ever bigger art festivals.

It is in this context that the multi-faceted centenary of the Anglo-Boer War took place. It included many different commemorative events and many organisations and individuals were involved. In this article the main role-players and their goals with regard to the centennial are discussed, and a brief review and evaluation of the various types of commemorative events are given. Only the commemorative events that took place in South Africa will be discussed and not those in other parts of the world. It is hoped that the article will shed light on the state of the South African nation at the end of the 20th / beginning of the 21st century.

2. THE ROLE-PLAYERS

The centenary was organised mainly by volunteers and included several role-players at various levels. The majority of the non-governmental events were co-ordinated by a national committee which was formed in 1994 and called the Central Steering Committee for the Commemoration of the Anglo-Boer War. Its chairman was the Director of the War Museum of the Boer Republics, Colonel Frik Jacobs. Each of the nine regions in South Africa had one representative on the committee. In turn, every region had its own committee which was free to draw up its own programme. The regional committees were partly made up of the chairmen of local committees, i.e. committees based in various towns and communities.

There were also role-players who organised a range of activities outside the structure of the national, regional and local committees. Most of the right wing organisations that were involved worked on this level, the most vocal and active one being the Volkskomitee vir die Herdenking van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog. Many academics also played a role in that they delivered lectures, organised conferences and expressed their opinions in the media.

The national government, too, was an important role-player. In 1996 the question of whether to get involved in the commemoration or not was discussed at an ANC meeting. Devising a policy was controversial and initial responses were to a large extent negative.⁵ But as from November 1998 the commemoration was adopted as a legacy project driven by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST).⁶ Besides the government, provincial and local councils were also involved in differing degrees.

Governmental involvement in a commemoration such as this one will usually lead to certain controversies, which can be positive in many cases, as this may result in more people taking note of the event. The involvement of the South African government in the centenary was not without controversy and this was relatively well covered in the media.

3. THE GOALS

All the role-players did not have the same goals with the Anglo-Boer War centennial, but if one looks at the structure of the national, regional and local committees, by which most of the events were organised, the goals were relatively similar and can be divided into nine categories.⁷ Firstly, there was the goal to commemorate the war and to honour and remember those who died on all sides. Secondly, the aim was to increase interest in and knowledge about the war and its consequences among the general public and to make people aware of the importance of history. Thirdly, the organisers wanted to maintain the momentum of the centennial for the period equivalent to the duration of the war; i.e. from October 1999 to May 2002. Fourthly, the objective was to promote a positive image of South Africa and all its provinces. Connected to this was the fifth goal, namely to promote tourism, from overseas as well as within South Africa. An increased

⁵ G Dominy, "Is there anything to celebrate? Paradoxes of policy: an examination of the state's approach to commemorating South Africa's most ambiguous struggle", paper read at the UNISA Library Conference on the Anglo-Boer War, Pretoria, 3-5 August 1998.

⁶ Anna-Karin Evaldsson Private Document Collection (Göteborg): speech by Dr B Ngubane, Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Bloemfontein, 8 October 1999.

⁷ The goals are not discussed in order of importance.

number of tourists would contribute to the realisation of the sixth goal, which was to boost employment and economic growth. The seventh aim was to ensure that historic sites were preserved and upgraded. The eighth objective of the centennial was to promote reconciliation and nation building.⁸ The ninth goal that could be identified was to increase scientific knowledge about the war.

The government got involved in the centennial with more or less similar goals. It also saw the centenary as being part of the broader project of reinterpreting the history of the country.⁹ It might also be possible that it got involved partly because it wanted to show that it was now in control and therefore had to leave a mark on the event. It also wanted to use the centennial to enhance the process of nation building. In contrast, the right wing sector in Afrikaner ranks mainly wanted to enhance Afrikaner nationalism and stimulate an interest in the history of the Afrikaners (amongst the Afrikaner community).

4. A REVIEW OF THE COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS

There were three national events that launched the commemoration, beginning with the opening of a new exhibition at the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein on Friday evening 8 October 1999. In the new exhibition an attempt was made to present a balanced and inclusive image of the war. The event was attended by, for example, a number of members of the national government and of provincial and local councils, as well as by academics and representatives of cultural organisations.¹⁰

The official launch of the commemoration was staged in and outside Brandfort on 9 October 1999, exactly one hundred years after the Boers had handed their ultimatum to the British government. The function consisted of wreath-laying ceremonies at the graves of Boer and Commonwealth victims, as well as at the recently found and upgraded graves of black people. President Thabo Mbeki, the Duke of Kent, as well as members of the national government, parliament and provincial and local councils attended. President Mbeki and the Duke of Kent, among others, delivered speeches, which contained messages of peace, reconciliation and nation building. A monument was unveiled, which serves as a reminder of the role and suffering of black people in the war. An estimated 3 000 to 4 000 people attended, most of them black.¹¹ At the beginning of the year 2000 there was a debate in the newspapers

⁸ Interview with Mr K Gillings, Durban, 18 October 1999.

⁹ B Mabandla, "Respect for all involved in SA War", *Sowetan*, 8 October 1999, p. 11.

¹⁰ Interview with Col F Jacobs, Bloemfontein, 10 November 1999; interview with Comdt B van Coller, Bloemfontein, 10 November 1999.

¹¹ Interview with Col F Jacobs, Bloemfontein, 10 November 1999; "Anglo-Boer War in new light", *The Star*, 8 October 1999, p. 5; "Afrikaners mark historic occasion apart", *The Star*, 11 October

about whether the graves next to the new monument were in fact those of black concentration camp victims or whether they were farm-workers' graves. Evidence indicates that the actual black cemetery is a short distance away. In some articles the Brandfort event was therefore presented as a fiasco, while others stressed that the monument was symbolic of all blacks who had died and suffered in the war.¹²

The third launch event took place in Mafikeng and was attended by Deputy President Jacob Zuma. More than 500 people were present at the function, which aimed to highlight the role of the Barolong people during the siege of Mafikeng.¹³ After these three events the government played a relatively low-key role, except for an event at Spioenkop on 13 November 1999 (which was attended by the Duke of Edinburgh), and a conference organised by the DACST in Durban in August 2000.

Since November 1999 most of the events were, to a great extent, localised and they focused on specific events and not on the entire war. The concentration camps, as well as other general aspects, such as the participation of black people, were emphasised mainly at the start of the commemoration. The focus thereafter moved to specific incidents, predominantly battles. There were fewer events during the commemoration of the guerrilla phase than during the centenary of the semi-conventional war phases.

The commemorative events can be divided into a number of different categories. The most common type centred on unveiling new or rededicating old monuments. These events usually included speeches, prayers and a solemn wreath-laying ceremony. One example is the Anglo-Boer War Memorial in Durban (on Francis Farewell Square in the city centre) which was rededicated on Sunday 17 October 1999. Later that same day there was a rededication of the British military cemetery in Wyatt Road, Durban. The events were attended by a relatively small, predominantly white, crowd, that braved the bad weather. There were also similar ceremonies at concentration camp sites. For example, at the Merebank Concentration Camp, south of Durban, the history of the camp was told, poetry read and school children sang songs on 17 October 1999. Wreaths were laid by various Afrikaans and English cultural organisations in honour of those who had died in the camp.

1999, p. 2; Anna-Karin Evaldsson Private Document Collection (Göteborg): **Launch of the commemoration of the centenary of the Anglo-Boer South African War (programme).**

¹² See, for example, "Besluit oor begraafplaas geregtig", *Die Volksblad*, 9 February 2000, p. 2; "Monument se ligging is beslis verkeerd", *Beeld*, 2 February 2000, p. 5; "Boer War events turn into farce", *Mail & Guardian*, 23-30 March 2000, p. 30.

¹³ Anna-Karin Evaldsson Private Document Collection (Göteborg): **Launch of the commemoration of the centenary of the Anglo-Boer South African War (programme); "Recognise struggle of Boers, blacks – Zuma", *The Star*, 11 October 1999, p. 2.**

At Ladysmith in KwaZulu-Natal the Freedom Monument was unveiled on 24 October 1999. It is a new monument and was dedicated to the Anglo-Boer War and the subsequent freedom struggles in South Africa, such as the anti-apartheid struggle and the struggle for women's rights. The main commemoration of the war in Ladysmith was called the Freedom Festival, but the focus was almost solely on the Anglo-Boer War. The monument is situated in a township at the foot of Umbulwane Mountain where fighting took place during the siege of the town. The base of the monument is triangular and symbolises diverse cultures which are united by a circle inside the triangle. Approximately 7 000 people attended the event, almost all of them black.¹⁴ Speeches were delivered by, for example, the Mayor of Ladysmith, Cllr SD Vilakazi, and Ms Stella Sigcau, Minister of Public Works. Choirs and dance groups took part and different groups laid wreaths. In contrast to the solemn events in Durban, mentioned above, this function in Ladysmith was characterised by a joyful atmosphere.

Towards the end of the centennial a statue of Danie Theron was moved from Kimberley to Fort Schanskop in Pretoria where it was re-unveiled on 6 March 2002. Former state president Nelson Mandela delivered a speech and stated that he was proud to pay homage to a brave Boer fighter and that he had been deeply influenced by the lives of Afrikaner freedom fighters. Mandela's presence at the ceremony was criticised by a few right wing organisations.¹⁵

On the afternoon of Friday 31 May 2002 there was a wreath-laying ceremony at the Irene Concentration Camp just south of Pretoria. It was organised by the Centurion Komitee vir die Herdenking van die Anglo-Boereoorlog (Centurion Committee for the Commemoration of the Anglo-Boer War) and was attended by about 200 (almost exclusively Afrikaans-speaking) white people (half of them school children). The next day saw the "official" conclusion of the centennial when the DACST hosted a very formal function at the Anglo-Boer War Memorial in Saxonwold, Johannesburg, adjacent to the South African Military History Museum. About 500 people braved the cold weather to attend the function - more than half of them invited guests, and about 150 uniformed personnel (including the Highland Brigade of the Scottish Division from the United Kingdom, a small Australian Army contingent, and the South African Army's National Ceremonial Guard and Band). This event honoured "the memory of all the men, women and children of all races and all nations who lost their lives in the Anglo-Boer / South African War of 1899-1902".¹⁶ Amongst the VIP guests were Dr Ben Ngubane (Minister of Arts,

¹⁴ The function coincided with one of South Africa's matches in the Rugby World Cup.

¹⁵ "Mandela praises Boer War hero", *The Star*, 7 March 2002, p. 7.

¹⁶ André Wessels Private Document Collection (Bloemfontein), ABO100(file): programme of commemorative event, Johannesburg, 1 June 2002.

Culture, Science and Technology, and the main speaker), King Goodwill Zwelithini of the Zulus, and Gen. Constand Viljoen (ex C-in-C, SA Defence Force, ex right wing political party leader, and a speaker at the function). Approximately 50 wreaths were laid at the rededicated war memorial (now honouring all the war dead), among others by several ambassadors or their representatives, cultural and other organisations, military units, and town councillors.

The second category of commemorative events was the commemoration of battles. Many battles and skirmishes, both well-known and less well-known ones, were commemorated with wreath-laying ceremonies, which were usually organised to coincide exactly with the centenary of the actual event. These included battles such as Talana (20 October 1899), Elandslaagte (21 October 1899), Magersfontein (11 December 1899), Colenso (15 December 1899), Spioenkop (24 January 1900), Paardeberg (17-27 February 1900) and Sannaspos (31 March 1900). There were several events at Spioenkop on 13 November 1999, for example, when the Duke of Edinburgh and Deputy President Jacob Zuma delivered speeches and laid wreaths at both the British and the Boer memorials.¹⁷ Later, on 24 January 2000 (i.e. exactly 100 years after the battle), there were, once again, wreath-laying events at Spioenkop - which formed part of a series of commemorative events in the Bergville-Winterton area.

The majority of battle commemorations included some form of re-enactment. The re-enactment of the battle of Talana on 23 October 1999 (i.e. three days after the hundredth anniversary of the battle) will be described briefly. Before the re-enactment the Mayor of Dundee, Cllr A Mfeka, spoke and prayers were said in English, Afrikaans, Zulu and Hindi. Seventeen wreaths were laid on behalf of all groups involved in the war. The re-enactment included British soldiers, black scouts, Indian stretcher-bearers, and Boer burghers accompanied by black "agterryers". It took place on a part of the original battlefield and the "actors" wore the same type of clothing as during the war. The spectators were mainly white, but there were also, relatively speaking, many black and Indian people present. Later, on 6 and 20 November 1999, there were two repeat re-enactments at Talana. Visitor numbers ranged from 6 000 to 10 000 for each of the re-enactments.¹⁸

Another example of a re-enactment is the commemoration of the battle of Magersfontein on 11 December 1999. This included, for example, a night march to the site in which approximately 500 people took part, re-enactments of different aspects of the battle, tours of the battlefield, and activities for children. On the afternoon of 31 March 2000 the hundredth anniversary of the battle at Sannaspos near Bloem-

¹⁷ SABC3, News, 20h00; 13 November 1999.

¹⁸ Interview with Mr K Gillings, Bloemfontein, 5 October 2000.

fontein was commemorated, inter alia by re-enacting the events of 1900. The function was attended by members of the Q Battery Royal Horse Artillery, one of the units that had fought bravely on 31 March 1900.

Other events, apart from battles, were also re-enacted, such as Winston Churchill's speech in Durban after he had escaped from captivity. On 19 October 1999 Churchill's speech was read in the foyer of the Durban City Hall by his granddaughter, Lady Celia Sandys.¹⁹ About 300 people attended the function, which also included the singing of traditional English and Afrikaans songs. Another example is the re-enactment of the experiences of the townspeople during the siege of Ladysmith. The siege was re-enacted at several occasions (the first one being on 25 October 1999) on top of Platrand (Ceasar's Camp/Wagon Hill) by a large number of actors and with the aid of light and sound effects. On 28 March 1900 the British war correspondents, who accompanied Lord Roberts' army, hosted a dinner in honour of the British Commander-in-Chief in the Railway Bureau in Bloemfontein. Exactly 100 years later this dinner (with the same menu served in the same room) was repeated ("re-enacted"), with various local inhabitants representing those people who had attended in 1900. To coincide with the exact time of the end of the war at 23h05 on 31 May 1902, about 30 invited guests attended a function in the dining room of Melrose House in Pretoria (where the terms of surrender were signed) exactly a hundred years later to listen to a "re-enactment" by Prof. Fransjohan Pretorius (Department of History and Cultural History, University of Pretoria) of the dramatic last act of the war.

The third kind of centennial activity included concerts, dance performances, plays, festivals and sports meetings. On 19 October 1999, for example, there was a song and dance event in the Durban City Hall where traditional English, Afrikaans, Indian and Zulu songs and dances were presented. The Deputy Metro Mayor of Durban, Cllr Mveli Mavundla, delivered a speech, mostly concerning nation building. The City Hall was filled almost to capacity with the majority of people being white, but with a relatively large attendance of black and Indian people. Another concert took place in Ladysmith on 23 October 1999 and was attended by approximately 2 000 people, of whom about 40% were Indian and black. Members of the Zulu Royal Family also attended the event. Ladysmith Black Mambazo, the Drakensberg Boys' Choir and the South African Navy Band performed a variety of African and European songs.

¹⁹ The re-enactment and function were moved from the original site, just outside the General Post Office (in 1900 the City Hall), to the present City Hall because of bad weather.

At the end of October 1999 a Gandhi festival took place in Ladysmith, as well as a traditional Boer festival, a cultural festival (where mainly black groups performed), a choir evening with traditional English and Afrikaans songs, and a siege ball. An example of a sports meeting is the road race that was held in Bloemfontein in remembrance of the 10 kilometres people had to walk from the Bloemfontein concentration camp to the cemetery.

A number of plays were performed during the centenary of which some were only performed in one town, while others travelled widely, for example, the acclaimed one-woman play **Dear Mrs Steyn** (starring Wilna Snyman) that was performed at several venues. It deals with the concentration camps and is based on the correspondence between Emily Hobhouse and Rachel Isabella (Tibbie) Steyn, wife of the Free State's last president. Another play, which was performed in Ladysmith on several occasions (the first one being on 24 October 1999), is **The Parrot Woman**, which concerns the interpersonal relationships between Boer and Briton in the concentration camps.

For financial and political reasons the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) only played a minor role during the centennial, unlike the years before 1990 when the then South African Defence Force was prominent at most cultural and other important events. However, the military were involved in the centenary to some extent. Military units, predominantly volunteers, were present at several events, for example at the re-dedication functions in Durban on 17 October 1999, to which reference has already been made. In Ladysmith there was a big military parade on 23 October 1999 (including 5 SAI, the Imperial Light Horse Regiment, the Natal Carbineers, the SA Navy and British regiments), which was attended by, for example, the Minister of Home Affairs, Mangosuthu Buthelezi. At this function the Freedom of the Town was bestowed upon the SA Navy.

The upgrading of historical sites connected to the Anglo-Boer War, as well as of the infrastructure necessary to reach the sites, can be regarded as a fourth kind of centennial activity. The DACST, for instance, was involved in the search for and upgrading of black graves and concentration camps. Numerous other sites were also restored, or at least cleaned for the purpose of the centennial.

On the academic side of the commemoration there were many activities, which can be regarded as a fifth category. Three big academic conferences on the Anglo-Boer War were held in South Africa. The first important one, called "Rethinking the South African War", was organised by the Library of the University of South Afri-

ca (UNISA) in Pretoria from 3 to 5 August 1998, as a prelude to the centenary.²⁰ The second, and largest one, with the theme "The Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902): a reappraisal", was hosted by the University of the Free State's Department of History in Bloemfontein from 12 to 15 October 1999. Ninety speakers from 15 countries read papers and the conference was well attended.²¹ From 29 to 31 August 2001 the DACST hosted a conference in Durban on the role of black people in the war. Unlike the other two above-mentioned conferences, this conference received almost no publicity in the media.²² Other conferences, etc. that dealt with the history of the Anglo-Boer War, included a symposium entitled "Afrikanerperspektiewe op die Anglo-Boereoorlog" (Afrikaner perspectives on the Anglo-Boer War), hosted by the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge (Federation of Afrikaans cultural societies) in collaboration with the War Museum of the Boer Republics (at the War Museum) on 29 and 30 May 1998,²³ a day seminar hosted by the University of the Free State's Department of History and the War Museum of the Boer Republics (at the War Museum) on 25 May 2002,²⁴ and a conference organised under the umbrella of the FAK in Bloemfontein (31 May to 2 June 2002) with as its theme "Die toekoms: ons uitdaging" (The future: our challenge).

The commemoration spurred research about the war, as well as the publication of such research. As mentioned previously, many new books and articles were published on the history of the war and many bookshops had special displays with books on the war. It is also important to note that many novels and short stories set against the backdrop of the war were published, especially in Afrikaans. From 27 to 29 May 2002 the Children's Literature Research Unit (CLRU), Department of Information Science, UNISA, hosted a very successful conference in Pretoria that dealt with Afrikaans fiction and the war.

A sixth commemorative category that can be identified, albeit that it consists of only one event, is the debate in the National Assembly (Parliament) on 16 November 1999 regarding the Anglo-Boer War and the lessons that can be learnt from it. During the discussion the history of the war was told from different perspectives. Marthinus van Schalkwyk (leader of the New National Party) told the history of the

²⁰ Several of the papers read at the conference were published in the *South African Historical Journal* 41, 1999.

²¹ Several of the papers read at the conference were published in a special edition of the *Journal for Contemporary History* 25(2), December 2000.

²² This conference was characterised by many papers that were of a very low academic standard. By August 2002, i.e. two years after the conference, there is still no sign of the book that was to have been published, and which would have contained (at least some of) the papers read at the conference.

²³ The papers were published in *Afrikanerperspektiewe op die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (Johannesburg, 1999).

²⁴ Most of the papers were published in another special edition of the *Journal for Contemporary History* 27(2), May 2002.

war mainly from an Afrikaner perspective, but he also linked the war to the present situation. He stated that one can learn from the war that reconciliation is difficult, and he pointed to the importance of trying to avoid humiliating other groups, for example, by the non-recognition of language rights, as this plants the seed for future problems. He likened the present-day Afrikaners to those at the turn of the previous century and considered the biggest similarity to be in the mindset since, once again, many Afrikaners feel excluded and disillusioned.²⁵

Many other politicians who delivered speeches that day also linked the war to the present situation, for example, by saying that both the war and the anti-apartheid struggle were freedom struggles, and by stressing that war does not solve any problems. Besides this, a great variety of aspects of the Anglo-Boer War were discussed, such as the role of Emily Hobhouse, as well as of other women and black and Indian people; the issue of not doing to others what was done to yourself, and the similarities and differences between the peace negotiations and settlement of 1902 and the multi-party political negotiations and settlement in South Africa, 1990 to 1994. The need to know the past in order to understand the present was also stressed. Minister Ngubane pointed to the fact that the centenary was not about celebrating the war, as some black politicians seemed to think, but about commemorating the painful experience of the war.²⁶

The speakers emphasised different matters. Most of the ANC affiliated politicians focused on issues such as the exclusion of black people from history, and saw the war as a struggle about who would rule over the black people. Mr Motsoko Pheko, the deputy president of the PAC, stated that black people should not commemorate the war since it had been a war between colonial forces to dispossess black people, and he stated that black people had been forcibly conscripted to fight for their own genocide.²⁷

A very important aspect of the centennial was the role of the media. The event was covered extensively in the media, especially in the newspapers. Numerous articles were written in connection with the centenary, either about the war or about commemorative activities. The media reports were most frequent at the start of the commemoration, but articles appeared on a continuous basis in many newspapers during the course of the centennial. *Die Volksblad*, for instance, published something on the war or on the commemoration on a daily basis for the duration of the commemoration. There were also a number of television documentaries. The one

²⁵ Republic of South Africa, *Debates of the National Assembly (Hansard): First session – second parliament*, 16 to 18 November 1999, cols 1914-19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, cols 1914-75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

that attracted most attention was "Scorched Earth" (first shown on M-Net on 31 July 2001) and its Afrikaans equivalent (although somewhat more anti-British) "Verskroeiende Aarde" (first shown on kykNET on 2 August 2001). The documentary was accompanied by two books.²⁸

Prior to the commemoration some people were concerned that it might be hijacked by the right wing. This concern, however, proved unfounded as groups orientated towards the far right scarcely figured in the centenary. The majority of the right wing groups were organised under the Volkskomitee vir die Herdenking van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog. One of the bigger events organised by them commemorated the concentration camps and took place in Bloemfontein on 5 and 6 October 2001, especially at the Women's Memorial. One right wing interpretation of the war was to view it as an unfinished Afrikaner struggle for freedom. Many right wingers also seem to see themselves as the present-day bittereinders, and the Afrikaners who support the political transition and who have accepted the "new" South Africa, as joiners.

One can conclude that the various kinds of activities during the Anglo-Boer War centennial were organised with a variety of goals in mind. Now, in retrospect, it is possible to evaluate to what extent the goals were achieved, keeping in mind that a more complete evaluation might not be possible until some years have passed, since one cannot know how the consequences will develop in the future. Some effects might not be visible yet, while others might decrease in importance or disappear completely. The extent to which the commemoration lived up to expectations, will now be discussed.

5. AN EVALUATION OF THE COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS

Even if all the role-players did not have the same goals with the commemoration, the most common ones can be divided into nine categories, as have been discussed in Section 3, *supra*. The first goal was to commemorate, honour and remember those who had died and suffered in the war. This aspect was central to practically all the commemorative events and the centenary had considerable success in achieving this goal. The victims were commemorated extensively in a comprehensive, balanced and inclusive manner. The losses on all sides were acknowledged, and the actions of well-known "heroes" as well as the suffering of the white and black civilians were commemorated. A group that did not figure much in the commemoration was the hands-uppers and, even less so, the joiners. The role of Indians was only included in a few events, mainly in KwaZulu-Natal. The civilians

²⁸ See F Pretorius (ed.), *Verskroeiende aarde* (Cape Town, 2001) and F Pretorius (ed.), *Scorched earth* (Cape Town, 2001).

who did not end up in the concentration camps, but who either stayed on the farms or moved around in the veld also did not feature strongly in the centennial.

The second aim of the centennial was to increase interest in and knowledge about the war and to make people aware of the importance of history. It is difficult to evaluate the success of this goal. The centenary was a relatively low-key event and the interest on the part of the public was not really that great. However, it seems as if the public interest in the war grew slightly stronger as a result of the centenary. Visitor figures to museums, for example, point to an increased interest. At the Talana Museum, for instance, the monthly average is normally around 6 000 visitors, but during the first months of the centennial it jumped to 29 000 people per month.²⁹ The War Museum of the Boer Republics normally has around 20 000 visitors a year, but for the period April 1999 to March 2000 there were about 28 000 visitors, and for the period April 2000 to March 2001 about 38 000 visitors.³⁰

It is interesting that there is still considerable interest in a war which occurred one hundred years ago. In spite of the fact that the commemoration did not attract wide public interest, the events did nevertheless generate considerable attention. The fact that centennial events took place somewhere, almost on a weekly basis, over a period of two and a half years, is indicative of considerable interest on the part of at least a portion of the South African population, in most instances in the white Afrikaans-speaking community. The extensive media coverage, once again mainly in the Afrikaans press, is also indicative of public interest. The newspapers would not have published so extensively if there was no interest. Because of the extensive media coverage the majority of South Africans have probably taken note of the commemoration, at least among those South Africans who have access to newspapers and news on radio and television.

There was not much interest on the part of black people, even though the message that the war was not a white man's war seemed to have filtered through to some extent. The War Museum of the Boer Republics has, for instance, had a considerable increase in black visitors.³¹ Another example is the fact that interest in the Freedom Festival in Ladysmith was relatively extensive among black, as well as Indian people.

²⁹ Interview with Mr K Gillings, Bloemfontein, 5 October 2000.

³⁰ Interview with Col F Jacobs, Bloemfontein, 9 October 2000; information supplied by Col F Jacobs, 13 August 2002.

³¹ Interview with Col F Jacobs, Bloemfontein, 9 October 2000.

There are many reasons why the centennial did not generate widespread popular support. History, as a subject, has had to cope with low levels of interest in South Africa lately. A lack of knowledge and a lack of interest reinforce one another. And then there are those people who did not want to be involved in the commemoration of a war which had previously been firmly connected to Afrikaner nationalism. But the limited interest on the part of black people should be seen in the right context: it changed from basically no interest at all before the commemoration to at least a limited interest in or some knowledge of the conflict by June 2002.

A third goal was to maintain the momentum of the centennial, i.e. to keep the commemoration going throughout the period of two and a half years. During the first year of the centenary it seemed as if this goal would be achieved successfully. However, when the centennial moved into the period of the guerrilla phase, notably fewer events were staged. The main reason is that it was more difficult to commemorate guerrilla actions than those of the period of semi-conventional warfare. The remembrance of the end of the war was in some ways more important than the commemoration of many other events during the war, since it is important to focus on how peace was achieved after such a bloody conflict and since the end of the war had far-reaching implications for the future of South Africa. As pointed out in the previous section, quite a number of diverse centennial events were clustered in the last week of May and first week of June 2002. During the centenary there was, however, relatively little emphasis on the consequences of the war.³² This is a matter that should receive attention in the months and years following the official centennial, because it is impossible to understand the political, economic and social history of 20th century South Africa, without knowledge of the Anglo-Boer War and its consequences.

The fourth goal was to promote South Africa, and this was closely connected to the fifth one, viz. to boost tourism. From October 1999 to January 2000 the number of tourists who visited KwaZulu-Natal increased by 46 000 compared to the same period the previous year.³³ A large number of international tourists visited war sites, but it is difficult to estimate how many of them would have visited South Africa regardless of the centenary. It is important not to forget the local tourists and if one looks at visitor figures to museums, for example, it is relatively clear that the number of local tourists to many museums have also increased. Unfortunately, there are still too few black South Africans who tour their own country and visit places of historical interest.

³² According to Saunders there is a lack of comprehensive assessments of the consequences of the Anglo-Boer War for South Africa. C Saunders, "Historiographical reflections on the significance of the South African War", *Kleio* 33, 2001, p. 4.

³³ Interview with Mr K Gillings, Bloemfontein, 5 October 2000.

KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape achieved the most success in promoting their region before and during the centenary. One factor that influenced this is probably that there are a large number of Anglo-Boer War related sites in these two provinces. Another factor is the availability of published guides. See in this regard, for example, the excellent guides published with regard to the battlefields in Natal,³⁴ Steve Lunderstedt's book on the events in and near Kimberley,³⁵ as well as several guides researched and published through the efforts of the Friends of the War Museum in Bloemfontein,³⁶ and others.³⁷

The successful achievement of the fifth goal went hand-in-hand with achieving the sixth aim, viz. to create employment and economic growth, as between six to eight tourists who visit South Africa create one new job. An attempt was also made to employ local unemployed people to upgrade war sites. Some local people were also trained as tour guides, while others became self-taught tour guides. One example is Vusi Dayile from Ladysmith who, prior to the centenary, was unemployed but who, during the commemoration, took tourists to the Umbulwane Mountain, a site connected to the siege of Ladysmith. He also showed the tourists the nearby township and they ate traditional food at a local café. There are, however, not many examples like this one, and the limited employment that was created during the centenary was probably of a temporary nature.

³⁴ See, for example, G Torlage and S Watt, *A guide to the Anglo-Boer War sites of KwaZulu-Natal* (Randburg, 1999); P MacFadden, *The battle of Talana: 20 October 1899* (Randburg, 1999); P. MacFadden, *The battle of Elandslaagte: 21 October 1899* (Randburg, 1999); S Watt, *The siege of Ladysmith: 2 November 1899- 28 February 1900* (Randburg, 1999); SB Bourquin and G Torlage, *The battle of Colenso: 15 December 1899* (Randburg, 1999); G Torlage, *The battle of Spioenkop: 23-24 January 1900* (Randburg, 1999); S Watt, *The battle of Vaalkrans: 5-7 February 1900* (Randburg, 1999); K Gillings, *The battle of Thukela Heights: 12-28 February 1900* (Randburg, 1999); L Childs, *Ladysmith: Colenso/Spion Kop/Hlangwe/Tugela* (London, 1998).

³⁵ S Lunderstedt (ed.), *Summer of 1899: the siege of Kimberley, 14 October 1899 to 15 February 1900* (Pretoria, 1999).

³⁶ Three guides have been published by the Friends of the War Museum, namely AV Oosthuizen (compiler), *A guide to the battlefields, graves and monuments of the Anglo-Boer War in the North Eastern Cape: hundredth anniversary 1899-1999* (Bloemfontein, 1998); AV Oosthuizen (compiler), *Anglo-Boereoorlog gids vir die Suid-Vrystaat: honderdjarige herdenking 1899-1999/Anglo-Boer War guide for the Southern Free State: hundredth anniversary 1899-1999* (Bloemfontein, 2000); DA van der Bank, *1899-1902: slagvelde, gedenktekens en grafte van die Anglo-Boereoorlog in Bloemfontein en omgewing / Battlefields, monuments and graves of the Anglo-Boer War in Bloemfontein and vicinity* (Bloemfontein, 2001). Two other publications were produced by people who are members of the Friends of the War Museum, namely PJ Greyling, *Pretoria en die Anglo-Boereoorlog: 'n gids tot geboue, terreine, grafte en monumente / Pretoria and the Anglo-Boer War: a guide of buildings, terrains, graves and monuments* (Pretoria, 2000); G and E van der Westhuizen, *Gids tot die Anglo-Boereoorlog in die Oos-Transvaal: 1899-1902, 100 jaar / Guide to the Anglo-Boer War in the Eastern Transvaal: 1899-1902, 100 years* (Roodepoort, 2000).

³⁷ See, for example, T Westby-Nunn (compiler), *A tourist guide to the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Simon's Town, 2000); A Baker, *The battles and battlefields of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (Milton Keynes, 1999).

The seventh goal was to upgrade and maintain Anglo-Boer War sites as well as the accompanying infrastructure. This goal was pursued relatively successfully, since numerous sites were upgraded, including, for instance, cemeteries, memorials and battle sites. One example is Spioenkop, which was upgraded extensively prior to the centenary. There is, however, a significant problem regarding vandalism of war sites. Metal items are often stolen. There is also a myth circulating claiming that treasures are hidden under graves and monuments. Due to vandalism there is a need to constantly check and renovate sites in order to maintain them, but there is a lack of money to maintain sites and the political will to maintain them has also decreased after the centenary. Some sites also seem to have been restored mainly in order to look good for a specific event; thereafter the maintenance decreased considerably. One example is the Elandslaagte battlefield that was in good order in October 1999 when the battle was commemorated, but since then the site has been left to deteriorate. The shocking state (June 2002) of the Kroonstad Concentration Camp site is another example. While some sites are left to deteriorate now that the centennial is over, the improvement to the infrastructure and the improved accessibility in other areas will hopefully last much longer, as has so far been the case with regard to, for example, the road-signs and roads that lead to Railway Hill and Hart's Hill between Colenso and Ladysmith (and which form part of the Thukela Heights battlefields).³⁸

The eighth goal was to promote reconciliation and nation building in South Africa. One can conclude that the centenary did not work against reconciliation and nation building, but on the other hand it will probably not have a great impact regarding promoting them either. The commemoration was characterised by a sense of goodwill and promoted good relationships and understanding between different population groups. Where black and white people co-operated in the organisation of centennial events, they co-operated well. One example is Ladysmith where the committee was made up of approximately 70% black people, 25% Afrikaans and 5% English-speakers.³⁹ Thus, in cases such as these, the centenary created opportunities for people to meet one another. Another example was the re-enactment of the battle at Talana, where local black people came to ask whether they could participate, and were allowed to do so. These examples are, however, relatively few.

³⁸ See, once again, the battlefield guides referred to in footnote 34, which go hand in hand with the restoration and enhanced accessibility of battlefields in KwaZulu-Natal.

³⁹ Interview with Mr T Holtzhausen, Ladysmith, 28 October 1999.

The history of the war and its commemoration can play an important role in the lives of white Afrikaans-speaking persons. The centenary can in a certain sense be seen as a kind of truth and reconciliation commission for Afrikaans-speakers where, on this occasion, they were the underdogs, the ones who suffered, and who emerged as the moral winners, in stark contrast to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings of the 1990s, where to a large extent the Afrikaners were presented as the guilty ones. It is indeed possible to refer to the war as a heroic period in the history of the Afrikaners, who were the victims of foreign imperialism, sharing the plight of millions of other Africans who, in the course of especially the nineteenth century, also became victims of the European colonial powers. On 9 October 1999 at Brandfort President Thabo Mbeki stated: "We pay homage to the courageous Boer men and women who stood with Paul Kruger [...] We pay homage to them because they had the courage to take on Goliath in defence of their freedom. We pay homage to them because, in struggle, they asserted the right of all colonised people to independence. We pay homage to them for their skill as warriors and their resilience in the face of overwhelming odds. We pay homage to them because the fortitude they showed has become part of the heritage of all South Africans, whatever their race or colour."⁴⁰

During the centenary many interpretations of the Anglo-Boer War were presented, something that might contribute towards a better understanding of the complexity of South Africa's history, and of the influence that the war had on shaping the course of events in 20th century South Africa. Knowledge about the war, and especially about the concentration camps is, for example, important to be able to understand why apartheid came about. At Mafikeng Deputy President Jacob Zuma said: "In all its complexity and multitude of narratives, the South African War can teach us a lot about ourselves and give a greater understanding of the history of our country over the last century. It can help us to understand the place that we have reached today and to know that the history of the South African War belongs to all of us."⁴¹

In the course of the centennial the war was presented as part of the mutual past of all South Africans. Shared moments in history do not make a nation, but might be a stepping stone towards building one. A mutual past might contribute to the creation of feelings of unity in diversity – a matter which was touched upon on several occasions during the centenary. One example is a quote from President Mbeki's speech at Brandfort: "As a country and a people, we have embarked on a long and

⁴⁰ Speech by President Thabo Mbeki, 9 October 1999, <<http://www.anc.org.za/anc/newsbrief/1999/news1011>>, consulted December 1999.

⁴¹ Speech by Deputy President Jacob Zuma, 10 October 1999, <<http://www.anc.org.za/anc/newsbrief/1999/news1011>>, consulted December 1999.

difficult road to national reconciliation. We have taken this road because none of us is without a scar. There is no one among us whom our common past has not hurt, and who has not been harmed by some whose past actions help define our common history."⁴²

The issue of mutual suffering in the concentration camps was emphasised, but it is questionable whether this matter has been widely accepted. It is also a controversial matter since, for example, many blacks supported the British and sometimes gained from this support. It has also been suggested that the ANC was trying to construct a new myth according to which blacks and Afrikaners are seen to have suffered under the racist British Empire.⁴³

It is important that a commemoration of an historic event should be inclusive, balanced and complex in order for it to contribute to reconciliation and nation building. In general the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War was inclusive; that is, it presented an image which included all the groups that were involved in the war. An inclusive event can be unbalanced, but the risk that this might be so is greater in the case of exclusive events. In a balanced view, all role-players are afforded their historically correct "role", i.e. the history of the various role-players is not distorted. Some people were worried that the commemoration would be unbalanced in the sense that the role of black people would be overemphasised, that the pendulum would swing completely to the other side.⁴⁴ In the great majority of commemorative events this was not the case and on the whole the centenary was fairly well-balanced. However, there are still some black academics and students who, when dealing with the Anglo-Boer War, seem to be too emotional regarding the conflict, which can lead to a distortion of facts and an unbalanced interpretation of events, just as was the case with many Afrikaner historians in the past. One example of a relatively unbalanced event was the DACST conference in Durban (August 2000) on the role of black people in the war.

If the past is presented in a too simplified and homogeneous manner, it might function divisively, since different groups and individuals have different experiences and images of the past. While assessing a war it is easy to pit group against group. The risk of antagonising various groups is decreased by presenting a balanced view of the complexities of the war. During the centenary the history of

⁴² Speech by President Thabo Mbeki, 9 October 1999, <<http://www.anc.org.za/anc/newsbrief/1999/news1011>>, consulted December 1999.

⁴³ B Theron, "Remembering the Anglo-Boer War: its place, 100 years later, in our historical consciousness", *Kleio* 33, 2001, p. 136; G Cuthbertson and A Jeeves, "The many-sided struggle for Southern Africa, 1899-1902", *South African Historical Journal* 41, November 1999, pp. 5-7.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Theron, p. 116.

the Anglo-Boer War was presented as more complex than previously, but some aspects were neglected, for example the role played by the hands-uppers and joiners.

Most organisers wanted to keep the centenary out of the political arena. Although there were attempts on the part of both the right wing and the ANC to use the centenary for political purposes it does not seem as if anybody gained much politically out of the events. Relatively few events were organised by groups oriented towards the right and they got little coverage in the media. Apart from the events at Brandfort and Mafikeng, as well as the DACST conference, the role of the government was fairly low-key. One might question its motives for becoming involved in the centenary. Was it due to a genuine interest in commemorating an important historical event, or was it motivated by the possibility of influencing the course of the centennial and gain politically? The quotations above from speeches by Mbeki and Zuma were also contradicted by certain utterances and actions during the course of the commemoration, such as the much quoted "Two nations" speech by Mbeki on 1 September 2000, in which he presented a simplified picture of South Africa as consisting of two nations, one white and wealthy, and one black and poor.⁴⁵

The final goal of the centennial was to increase scientific (academic) knowledge about the war. The centenary stimulated both research and the publication of research findings, and provoked new questions and interpretations of the war,⁴⁶ and one can conclude that it had considerable success in achieving this goal. However, there is still a lot of research to be done, especially with regard to the participation of blacks, coloureds and Asians.

6. CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVE

The fact that the Anglo-Boer War centennial took place in the context of the "new" South Africa without any doubt influenced the events to a great extent. It would most probably have looked different, and would have produced a different image of the past, if it had taken place in the context of the 1930s (when the Great Trek centennial took place) or in the 1980s (when the 150th anniversary of the Great Trek was commemorated).

⁴⁵ See, for example, "Ras se skade, wins", *Beeld*, 6 September 2000, p. 10; "Emotions colour racism debate", *The Star*, 7 September 2000, p. 6.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Saunders, pp. 4, 14-6; Theron, pp. 115-6, 137, 143; A Porter, "The South African War and the historians", *African Affairs* 99, 2000, pp. 633-48.

The centenary was characterised by a large number of diverse events organised by many different organisations and individuals. The success with regard to attaining the goals of the centenary varies. To some extent all the goals were achieved, but at this point in time (at the end of 2002) it is difficult to say whether the results will only be of a temporary nature or not.

The Anglo-Boer War centennial was in many ways a remarkable event, regardless of whether it will have a lasting effect on the South African society or not. Has any other conflict anywhere in the world ever been commemorated in this manner over such a relatively long period? This form of sustained commemoration is indeed very rare. Usually a few major events will be commemorated, but neither such a great variety of events as during this centenary, nor over such a long period of time.

If one considers history on the whole, one of the most important questions one has to endeavour to answer is related to the extent to which cultural groups, as well as nations, are changed by events such as war. The Anglo-Boer War had far-reaching political, economic and social consequences for all the inhabitants of the war zone, as well as implications for inter-group relations; as a matter of fact, one cannot understand the history of 20th century South Africa without an understanding of the Anglo-Boer War.

The way in which most of the debates during and about the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War were conducted, as well as the manner in which most of the articles and other publications on the war have been written since 1998, indicates that today educated and well-informed South Africans think about their history in a more nuanced and mature fashion than before. It also indicates that there is an increased level of mutual respect between various cultural groups in the country. There is indeed no single correct interpretation of the past, and one should adopt a multiperspective approach to history.

The Anglo-Boer War centennial was a well-organised and suitable commemoration of a very sad historic event in the history of South Africa, which had far-reaching implications for the future of the country and its peoples. By commemorating the suffering of thousands of innocent people, many South Africans have hopefully realised more than ever before that such a traumatic war must never again be allowed to take place in this part of the world. In this way the Anglo-Boer War centennial might have contributed, even if only in a small way, towards the future of the country. It definitely has contributed towards ensuring the future of our controversial past.