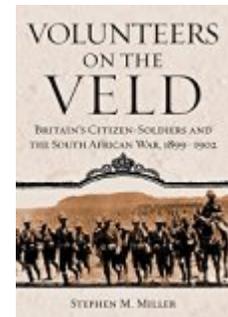




Stephen M. Miller. *Volunteers on the Veld: Britain's Citizen-Soldiers and the South African War, 1899-1902.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xii + 236 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-3864-0.



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Much has been published on the South African or Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, from descriptions of individual battles to general histories and the odd memoir, with most focusing on the period of conventional or set-piece battles. This short book breaks with the tradition by exploring the role of British volunteer or irregular troops, in particular the militia, yeomanry, and volunteers in the war. By implication, this moves the focus of the war to the period of guerrilla fighting and for someone brought up on both the British and South African myths of the war, this provides a refreshing and alternative insight.

The book starts with a description of the little-known Battle of Tweebosch of 1902 in which Lord Methuen was defeated and where the volunteer forces failed to prove themselves. After setting out reasons for the battle's obscurity, one of which is that irregular troops were used, Miller turns to the purpose of this book, namely, that charting the recruitment and use of these volunteers to provides an insight into the changing British imperial attitude during the Victorian era. As he notes,

"While the Regular Army has received great attention, Britain's 'citizen' army, the Yeomanry, Volunteers, and Militia, have been almost completely overlooked" (p. 7). The use of these volunteers during the South African War, particularly after Black Week in December 1899, is significant for two reasons. Firstly, in 1900, Britain was the only imperial power not to have conscription. This was influenced by the "Blue Water School," which maintained that the navy was sufficient to protect Britain and the empire, yet the war of 1899-1902 was to show otherwise. Secondly, an enquiry into the performance of the more than one hundred thousand volunteers in the war resulted in a radical change to the military structure in 1907, seeing the transformation of the volunteer forces into the Expeditionary or Territorial Force and later the Territorial Army.

The first three chapters explore the origin of the irregular troops, the context in which they are sent to South Africa, and the issues surrounding their recruitment. Miller introduces many interesting aspects, such as the background to each of

the three forces; namely that the militia were recruited before 1850 as a counterbalance to the regular army and a possible dictatorship, whilst the yeomanry or mounted volunteers were recruited to suppress "riotous or tumultuous" Britons, and the volunteer movement enabled the middle class to participate politically and as a means of preventing conscription (p. 25).

Although from the middle of the Victorian era the reputation of the military was declining, from the 1870s the attitude towards the irregulars was improving. Miller tries to explain this by describing how education, religion, and business all started to promote the benefits of empire and the military. Boys' brigades grew in popularity with the migration of people to the towns and cities to find employment and the increase in leisure time. In addition, the volunteer forces required little funding from the central treasury, which appealed to the politicians who were preparing the country for potential conflicts on the continent and elsewhere. Miller points out that although the civilian War Office seemed to control military decisions, the country's heroes in the late Victorian era were all soldiers, such as Field Marshall Garnet Wolseley, General Charles Gordon, Major General Henry Havelock, and Lord Roberts of Kandahar. Songs, literature, and newspapers all extolled the virtues of the military and martial values, a point further taken on board by the church and missionaries. Although raising some valid points, Miller does not dwell much on the reasons underlying the change in attitude, which is a pity.

Miller goes onto explain the differences between the Boer and British troops, showing how evenly matched the two forces were and what weaknesses would play a role. The reluctance in Britain to prepare the military for action in southern Africa initially gave the Boers the upper hand, leading to what became known in Britain as "Black Week." The series of defeats during Black Week takes on greater significance when the reasons for British confidence in victory are set out,

such as access to more sophisticated weapons and the presence of the engineering corps and specialist medical teams which the Boers did not have. Miller provides a breakdown of the number of troops available to each side, noting that Britain had approximately three times the number of troops to draw on than the Boers, despite the quality of some of the British troops, i.e., the volunteers and militia, not being up to standard, particularly in the area of leadership. Despite this shortcoming, many saw value in using volunteer troops and encouraged their recruitment. Unfortunately, the process of how this happened is a little vague as Miller sidetracks to home defense issues prior to 1899 and the unsuitability of the volunteer forces in their existing state for this purpose.

A complex set of regulations appears to have dictated where and when irregulars could be used and with the events leading up to the war, these came to the fore. Miller provides a broad overview of why the War Office sanctioned the recruitment of the army irregulars and relative detail on the social composition of the different groups. He suggests that the War Office was not completely happy with the composition of the volunteers based on the areas they came from, but why this was perceived to be an issue is not fully explored. The main reasons why men volunteered centered on class and patriotism, although the revisionist economic explanation which arose during the 1960s also receives coverage. In setting out his arguments around recruitment, Miller has paid close attention to available statistics to prove his point and to highlight differences between regions and the three irregular forces.

Chapters 4 through 6 focus on the experiences of the troops and make much use of memoirs and other personal accounts. Where little evidence exists, Miller puts it down to the commonness of the work and the proximity of the training bases to family and friends. Life on ship is accorded the same level of detail, with comments about

the sighting of Los Palmas and Tenerife in particular. The time spent on board and in training was seen as important for building an esprit de corps which would be needed on the battlefield. The awareness of the officers in building this esprit, however, is juxtaposed by the accounts of what men were not trained or drilled in, such as putting up tents and hammocks. Special attention is also given to the time when the men realized what they had taken on: the moment of embarkation and the last sighting of UK territory.

Unlike the majority of histories of the South African War, which tend to focus on the action, Miller is quite comfortable, albeit through the experiences of others, sharing the mundane and tedious side of the war. What becomes evident in chapter 5 is the infrequency with which the volunteers encountered the enemy and the drain this had on morale, especially when the men were not aware of the bigger picture. Other highlights include accounts of being under fire for the first time, the subordinate role of the volunteers on the battlefield when set pieces were fought and, again, the inadequacy of their preparation, such as not being able to saddle a horse. Special attention is given to the City of London Imperial Volunteers (CIV) throughout the book which perhaps is of no great surprise considering that much was written about them at the time, too. The jealousies this gave rise to are also addressed in this book.

In dealing with the men's experiences of the war, Miller addresses the transition from traditional warfare to guerrilla war, but rather than from the tactical point of view, he explores the impact this had on the troops as their function changed to one of guarding prisoners and railway lines, killing animals, and burning farms. Again, there are diversions to explore the attitude towards and role of Black South Africans, of which over 30,000 fought on the side of the British, and the death of a French aristocrat, Comte de Villebois-Marueil, who was fighting on the side of the Boers. Dominating the correspondence is the

British hatred of the Boers, negativity towards the war, and the growing restlessness amongst the troops towards those in command.

Chapter 7 sees a return to more traditional historical narrative with less use of memoir and diaries. The chapter is one of contrasts as Miller compares the different responses in the press to the send-off of the troops and the reception accorded their officers compared to that of the men. The chapter also deals with the pressure on the officers to return men home before the Treaty of Vereeniging was signed and the difficulty they faced in launching offensives with depleted forces, an example being that of Lord Methuen's column of thirteen hundred which was compiled of men from fourteen different units. The subsequent assessment of the auxiliaries and the tension faced between meeting the need for bodies on the battlefield versus training culminates in the defeat and capture of Lord Methuen at Tweebosch, with most blame being placed on the Imperial Yeomanry. Miller balances the criticisms with evidence of support for the irregulars, particularly for the yeomanry and again, the CIV. Although some of the auxiliaries did not perform as expected, the overall verdict regarding their contribution to the British victory is positive. Where the men failed, this was not due to their inadequacies but rather to a lack of training and organization.

The final chapter looks at the years following the end of the war and the restructuring of the armed forces through three secretaries of state for war, namely William Broderick, Hugh Arnold-Foster, and Richard Haldane. The changes introduced by Haldane were the most far-reaching, with the introduction of the Expeditionary Force and the change in focus from India to the continent as the last line of defense. Various reports were produced following enquiries of which the most prominent were the Elgin and Norfolk Commissions into the role of the auxiliaries and around the issue of conscription. Although the commissions pointed to weaknesses and concerns

in the performance of the auxiliary troops, it was felt that these inadequacies were more to do with the organization of the troops and the paucity of preparation and thus the outcome was of the utmost praise for the men who rose to the call in Britain's time of need. Interspersed in the chapter is a discussion on the poor health of the volunteers noting that approximately a quarter were rejected for various reasons. Despite giving some space to Sir Frederick Maurice's views on the matter, Miller turns to the overriding theme of the day, namely, why men did not volunteer and the debate on whether conscription should be introduced.

This book is a valuable contribution to a war about which much has been written. In its attempt to reconcile the strategic or political approach with the experiences of the irregular troops, use has been made of personal and government sources, giving it appeal to a wider range of readers than would necessarily have been the case if only one aspect had been addressed. At times, it was a little difficult to follow the author's argument as he introduces asides and alternative explanations; however, this does not distract from the purpose of the book, which was to tell the story of the militia, yeomanry, and volunteers in the South African War of 1899-1902 and highlight the changing attitude towards the military during the late Victorian era. If anything, it serves to further highlight the complex feelings and attitudes towards war and its relationship with society and politics.

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