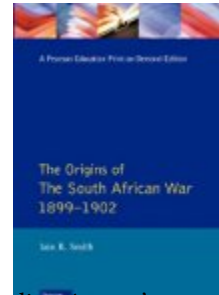


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Iain R. Smith. *The Origins of the South African War, 1899-1902*. Harlow: Longman, 1996. xix + 455 pp. \$73.60 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-49520-3; \$143.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-27777-9.

Reviewed by Kobus du Pisani (Potchefstroom University (South Africa))
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Only three years before the centenary of the South African War a new book on the origins of this war, written by an historian at Warwick University, Iain Smith, was published earlier this year. It was received with mixed reactions by South African historians and journalists and has attracted much attention. In Afrikaans circles it was welcomed as an unbiased work of high academic integrity. At van Wyk hailed it as an excellent and stimulating book [1], and Leopold Scholtz noted that it was well-researched and well-written.[2] Among English-speaking historians it was praised by liberal-minded reviewers, but sharply criticized by radically inclined scholars. Greg Cuthbertson described Smith's book as a "prodigious work" and an "audacious examination" of the historiography of the South African War.[3] Ian Phimister emphasized its interpretative limitations and "pedestrian" writing, and questioned the claim that extensive original research had been done. He concluded that Smith arrived at similar answers to those of earlier studies by asking similar questions.[4]

Smith calls the South African War "the largest and most taxing such war fought by Britain during the century of her imperial pre-eminence, and the greatest of the wars which accompanied the scramble for Africa" (p. 1). Being such a pivotal event, which laid the foundations for twentieth-century patterns in South Africa, the South African War must rate as one of the best-documented events in this country's bitterly contested history. In the ninety-seven years since the outbreak of the war, official British [5] and Afrikaner [6] versions of its history and many topical monographs have been published, analysing the causes of the war, its development, and its results from various angles.

During and shortly after the war the first generation

of histories of the war appeared, including Amery's monumental series [7], an official German version [8], and popular histories by Doyle, Cassell, Cunliffe, Creswicke, Wilson, Davitt, Cook, De Wet, Penning, Vallentin, and Van Everdingen.[9] For many years there was a scarcity in publications on the war, and only a few books such as those of Reitz and Fuller [10] were marketed.

From the 1950s a second generation of monographs dealing with the South African War emerged. English titles included the books of Gibbs, Holt, Kruger, Marais, Selby, Barbary, Marin, Belfield, Judd, Spies, Farwell, Pak-enham, Warwick, and Cammack.[11] Afrikaans monographs dealing with the war were published by Scholtz, Gronum, and Pretorius.[12] Since much time had elapsed since the war, there was a greater availability of primary sources available to the mostly professional academics studying the topic. Using scientific methods of history writing, their works were usually more objective and analytical than earlier studies, even if they reflected the divisions in South African historiography between the Afrikaans nationalist, liberal, and radical viewpoints.

Books dealing specifically with the origins of the South African War include those by Hobson, Lovell, Reitz, Scholtz, Spies, Duminy, and Porter.[13] Jeeves and Bransky contributed unpublished works on the subject.[14] Significant chapters or articles on the South African War and its origins in books and journals were produced by Kruger, De Kock, Atmore and Marks, Etherington, Gallagher and Robinson, Garson, Marks, Marks and Trapido, Porter, Smith, and Thompson.[15]

Some researchers such as Warwick [16] and Nasson [17] have recently started moving away from the perception of the war as exclusively a white man's affair and have started investigating participation by black and

coloured people and the impact of the war on their communities. Because of the shift in focus the term Anglo-Boer War has now been dropped by most academics in favour of the term South African War.

What then is the purpose of publishing another book on the topic, especially when it contributes little by way of new evidence or interpretations? The answer is that Smith's book is a commissioned assignment, being part of a series on the origins of wars. It must be conceded that Smith executed his assignment in a thorough manner. He has written a readable, unbiased account of the origins of the South African War, based on solid research.

In chapter 1 Smith discusses the roots of the Anglo-Boer conflict before and during the nineteenth century. Chapter 2 deals with the consequences of the discovery of gold in the Transvaal. In chapters 3 and 4 the Jameson Raid and its aftermath are revisited. Chapters 5 to 9 focus on the build-up of tension between the British and Transvaal governments after the appointment of Sir Alfred Milner as British High Commissioner to South Africa. This tension centered around the Uitlander question: the refusal of President Kruger's government to accede to demands by the British government to grant full democratic rights to the mainly British immigrant population on the goldfields of the Witwatersrand. These chapters do not put new theories forward, but new evidence from the Bank of England archives is used to reinforce the critique of anti-imperialist Marxist writing. The final events leading to the outbreak of war are dealt with in chapter 10.

As the narrative unfolds it becomes clear how the British government and particularly Milner deliberately provoked conflict with the Transvaal. Smith nonetheless writes: "Milner may have helped to stir the pot, but he did not supply the ingredients" (p. 415). The war was in his view brought about by governments, not individuals. Smith supports the view that no war is inevitable. He emphasises that the South African War was long in the making (p. 390), the "culmination of Britain's increasing involvement in South Africa during the previous 30 years" (p. 405). However, he seems to contradict himself when he concludes that Britain did not necessarily seek war.

Smith's old-fashioned approach, maintaining a strong narrative line, is a fresh breeze. He shies away from the people's history and class analysis approaches. Instead he focuses on politics, and particularly on the high-level diplomacy between the British and Transvaal governments. In the preface (pp. xi-xii) he clearly states

his purpose of looking at the war through the "official mind," the records of government officials and decision-makers. In the conclusion he once again justifies his approach by stating: "Wars occur because of the breakdown of relations between governments. That is why I followed the traditional path, in this book, of devoting much attention to the relations, and the eventual breakdown of relations, between the British and Transvaal governments between 1895 and 1899" (p. 390).

The concluding chapter, the most important in the book, is analytical and interpretative in nature. In it Smith takes issue with some historians and the myths created by them regarding the origins of the war. He rejects the theory, put forward by the British imperialists who wished to justify the war, that the Afrikaners intended to extend their dominion over the entire South Africa (pp. 391-93). He challenges the Hobson thesis that the war was in essence a capitalist war to promote the economic interests of the mine magnates and their cohorts. He argues that the role of the mining houses in the build-up to the war has been exaggerated by Marxist historians and that the mine magnates were in fact dis-united. Smith rejects the notion that the war was essentially fought by the British to gain possession of the gold of the Rand mines or to protect their trading interests in southern Africa (pp. 408-12). He refutes the perception that the Germans posed a real threat to British economic and strategic interests in the subcontinent (pp. 406-7). However, he seems to miss the point that the British government exploited this perception, however false it may have been, in their rationalisation of the war.

Although Smith does not completely reject economic explanations for the war (p. 405), he sides with J.S. Marais's [18] approach of placing British supremacy rather than economic interests centre-stage (pp. 396-98). In using a "political" interpretation and trying to underplay the role of gold in the runup to the war, Smith's argumentation is not always convincing.

While refuting the theories of other historians on the causes of the war, Smith does not really produce any coherent theory of his own. In his interpretation, the real *casus belli* of the British government remains evasive and vague. Smith argues that the British political leaders had not decided prior to the war to annex the Transvaal as a crown colony, but had been willing to allow a measure of self-government. He concludes that "the evidence is strong that some sort of a self-governing Transvaal would have been acceptable to the British ... *providing* that it was under a 'friendly' government which could

be relied upon to cooperate in the larger British imperial project for a federation or union of South Africa ... in which British supremacy and British interests would prevail" (p. 422). Does this make the British imperialist endeavours more morally defensible? From an Afrikaner perspective would the outcome not be exactly the same as the eventual annexation of the Boer Republics as crown colonies?

The major failure of the book is that it is one-sided. The British motives and actions are traced in detail through careful scrutiny of primary and secondary source material. Smith's analysis of the thinking of imperialists such as Milner, Chamberlain, and Beit is impressive. Using new material from the archives of mining houses and banks he gives a more balanced account of the role of the Randlords and the Uitlanders than most earlier writers.

However, as far as the Republican side is concerned Smith's research is limited to secondary sources and source publications. Apart from the reference to the Smuts and Leyds Papers in the bibliography, Smith seems to have done very little research in the archives of the Boer republics with their wealth of information. He does not even mention the Free State Archive Depot or the War Museum of the Boer Republics (both in Bloemfontein) in the bibliography. Neither do South African Dutch-language newspapers feature. Smith mentions that recent research has challenged the facile view of Kruger's government as that of a reactionary old autocrat assisted by a corrupt oligarchy (p. 401), but his book hardly contributes to a better understanding of Boer motives and actions in the prewar phase. Whereas he manages, through his thorough study of documents relating to the British position, to reveal the nuances of opinion in the ranks of the British government and capitalists, he fails to indicate such nuances within the Boer ranks.

Despite its shortcomings Smith's book is undeniably a sound contribution to the historiography of the South African War, which will be extensively used by future researchers and students. It has been described as a pace-setting work with regard to the South African War. The causes of war can never be fully explained, and therefore this book will not be the last on the topic. The final truth has not been found, and the debate on the origins of the South African War will continue. With the centenary of the war approaching, this debate will probably intensify over the next few years.

Notes

- [1]. *Beeld*, 3.06.96.
- [2]. *Die Burger*, 12.06.96.
- [3]. *Financial Mail*, 5.04.96.
- [4]. *Sunday Times*, 12.05.96.
- [5]. *History of the War in South Africa* (4 vols., 1906-1910).
- [6]. J. H. Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902* (5 vols., 1969-1983).
- [7]. L.S. Amery, ed., *The Times history of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902* (7 vols., 1900-1909).
- [8]. *The war in South Africa* (2 vols., English translation 1904/1906).
- [9]. A. C. Doyle, *The great Boer War* (1900, further editions 1901/1902); *Cassell's history of the Boer War, 1899-1902* (2 vols., 1903); F. H. E. Cunliffe, *The history of the Boer War* (2 vols., 1901/1904); L. Creswicke, *South Africa and the Transvaal War* (8 vols.); H. W. Wilson, *With the flag to Pretoria: a history of the Boer War of 1899-1902* (2 vols., 1900/1902) and *After Pretoria: the guerrilla war* (2 vols., 1902); M. Davitt, *The Boer fight for freedom: from the beginning of hostilities to the Peace of Pretoria* (1902); E. T. Cook, *The rights and wrongs of the Transvaal war* (1902); C. R. De Wet, *De strijd tusschen Boer en Brit* (1902); L. Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika: de strijd tusschen Engeland en de verbonden Boeren-republieken Transvaal en Oranje-Vrijstaat in zijn verloop geschetst* (3 vols., 1899/1901/sa); W. Vallentin, *Der Burenkrieg* (1903); W. Van Everdingen, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* (3 vols., 1902-1915).
- [10]. D. Reitz, *Commando: a Boer journal of the Boer War* ((1929); J. F. C. Fuller, *The last of the gentlemen's wars* (1937).
- [11]. P. Gibbs, *Death of the last republic: the story of the Anglo-Boer War* (1957); E. Holt, *The Boer War* (1958); R. Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray: a history of the Boer War* (1959); J. S. Marais, *The fall of Kruger's republic* (1961); J. Selby, *The Boer War: a study in cowardice and courage* (1969); J. Barbary, *The Boer War* (1969); C. Marin, *The Boer War* (1969); E. Belfield, *The Boer War* (1975); D. Judd, *The Boer War* (1977); S. B. Spies, *Methods of barbarism: Roberts and Kitchener and civilians in the Boer republics, January 1900-May 1902* (1977); B. Farwell, *The great Boer War* (1977); T. Pakenham, *The Boer War* (1979); P. Warwick, ed., *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (1980); D. Cammack, *The Rand at war 1899-1902*

(1990).

[12]. G. D. Scholtz, *Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902* (1960); M. A. Gronum, *Die Engelse Oorlog 1899-1902: die gevegsmetodes waarmee die Boere-republieke verower is* (1972); F. Pretorius, *1899-1902: die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (1985) and *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902* (1991).

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[16]. P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902* (1983).

[17]. B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's war: a black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902* (1991).

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