

**Thomas Pakenham**, *The Boer War* (London: Abacus, 2009), ISBN: 9780349104669.

*The Boer War* is an account of the second conflict (1899-1902) between the British Empire and the 'Boer' republics of southern Africa. It is a 659 page one-volume general history, originally published in 1979. This review is of the 2009 Abacus History Greats series reprint.

A.J.P. Taylor referred to this work as 'wonderful...brilliantly written', while *The Independent* has praised it as a 'classic'. It is now one of the definitive works on what was a long, bloody asymmetrical war between a major superpower and a resilient, religiously-motivated agriculturally-based opponent (it has been reprinted twenty times since 1979). The quality of the work, and its contemporary relevancy, encourages a fresh review.

When *The Boer War* was written, there were already two established, substantial Edwardian chronicles of the war: the *Times* (1900-09) and the *Official* (1906-10) histories. Pakenham acknowledges both, but ultimately rejects both their conclusions. In his eyes, the *Times* was too polemical. Its author, Leo Amery, was an advocate for Army Reform, and in Pakenham's eyes wrote his text too much with that in mind. The *Official* meanwhile was too diplomatic; the author alleges that the British Government had made sure there was nothing in that account that could adversely influence the post-war peace process. Pakenham instead looks to provide a critical alternative to both. In contrast to the *Times* and *Official* histories Pakenham tells '[this] story...taking as my raw material the first-hand, and largely unpublished, accounts provided by contemporaries' (p. xv). Other factors encouraged this. Pakenham points to the growing availability of material and scholarship on the Boer role in the conflict (though the majority of the book is told from a generally British perspective). While Pakenham's sources were predominately written (newspapers, letters, official papers), he also took oral testimony from 'fifty-two men who had actually fought in the war, the youngest of whom was eighty-six when I

tracked him down' (p. xvi), so presumably time too was partly of the essence.

Crucially this is a history with an ideological air rather than a pseudo-historical tract. The British Governor-General, for instance, is shown to be willing 'to sacrifice the nigger absolutely' (pp. 119-120) to achieve Anglo-Saxon hegemony in Southern Africa. Pakenham is clear though that many on each side were determined to keep it a 'white-man's war' (pp. 7, 120-2, 405-9), and addresses some possible reasons why (pp. 389, 429-430). His arguments are supported by rounded, well-balanced accounts of some of the major points of the war. While, for example, the role of local mining agents in stirring conflict is shown (see pp. 48-56 especially); we are shown why the Uitlanders (non-Boers resident in the republics) had an existing underlying hostility to the Afrikaners (Native Boers, see pp. 50-2). As for his own methodology, Pakenham emphasises four 'threads' running through his narrative. For the most part, these reflect what one can imagine is the 'progressive' ideology of the author – the role of capitalist agents in motivating decision-making, and attempt to detail the fate of the native, and Boer civilian, populations. The fourth is purely military; an attempt to redeem the reputation of Sir Redvers Buller, who initially commanded British troops in the region.

Whilst a balanced account, it is driven by a clear, coherent narrative. Pakenham's chapters are grouped into four sections: on the development of the War (Milner's War), the initial British reverses (Buller's Reverse), the British victory in the conventional war (Robert's Advance) and the descent into annihilating guerilla conflict and eventual peace (Kitchener's Peace). The flow between each chapter and section is helped by his recurring cast and while the linkage between elements of his threads can be somewhat ropery (between the role of the mining companies and the importance of the mines to the British after pp. 258-9 for instance), ultimately those 'themes' allow the reader to both see how the major elements driving the war developed. One is left with a sense that while the book may be divided into chapters and sections, there is a continuous – if

complicated – series of events being chronicled.

Pakenham is sometimes somewhat over-imaginative. The idea that Governor-General Alfred Milner's dedication to his work was part of a greater attempt to 'do penance of the sins of his father' smacks of imaginative projection (see p. 13). There are moments too when the narrative becomes questionable. We are told, for instance, that 'stories were later circulated about Buller's addiction to champagne.' Little evidence is given to refute these accounts, while a negative comparison is quickly made with Lord Roberts, who made 'a fool of himself with a court of dukes' sons' (p. 210). Some too have questioned the extent to which he can justifiably accuse Alfred Milner of being in league with local mining interests. Ultimately though, reading the *Boer War* puts you in mind of Pakenham's depiction of Redvers Buller. It is not a perfect account, and there are some, but not many, points where one questions the decision-making involved. It is not though, despite the *Newsweek* quote on the back of the book, 'a grand-scale history with heroes and villains', but a strong, well-rounded history that does all it can be reasonably asked to do well. This is a deeply impressive and well-balanced work, with Pakenham's exhaustive use of primary sources, nuanced and balanced approach and comprehensive narrative leaving us with one of the better, if not the best, one-volume histories of the South African War available.

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