

# THE PRESS AND THE PUBLIC DURING THE BOER WAR 1899-1902

Dr Jacqueline Beaumont Hughes considers some aspects of the role  
of the Press during the Boer War

The conflict between Great Britain and the Republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State which slipped into war in October 1899 was to become the most significant since the Crimean war. It was to last for almost three years. It was more costly in money, manpower and loss of life than any British military venture hitherto. In many respects it was the first modern war, involving civilians on an unprecedented scale, and raising questions about refugees and their treatment which have become all too familiar. It was also the first war fought by a British Army to receive saturation coverage from the Press. The Press at the turn of the century was the only important medium for the nation-wide dissemination of news and the public expression of views. By 1899 it had reached its apogee in terms of quantity, quality and diversity of newspapers available to the reading public. In the pages of different newspapers may be discovered what opinion-formers thought were the issues and events which the public wished to know about, and the responses of members of the public to what they read. Editors of newspapers had to be alive both to the expectations of their readers and, in some cases, of their proprietor if they were to continue to sell to their market, or, indeed, retain their jobs. But the sample of issues and opinions is neither limited nor one-sided if one has the stamina to read a sufficiently large cross-section of newspapers. Presentation, information and opinions differ in detail and emphasis from one paper to another, but over the spectrum of newspapers, catering for different audiences with different views and interests, a picture emerges of how the war was presented to the British public and how the public responded.

## The Construction of a Late-Victorian Newspaper

The assumptions underlying the structure of a newspaper had certain consequences. A distinction was made between fact and opinion. Facts comprised hard news; opinion was the interpretation of and editorial comment on the news. The two were considered to be quite separate units. The facts were presented on the news page in the form of reports from a paper's own correspondents, if it had them, followed by reports from the various News Agencies and it was a matter of honour for a reputable newspaper that its

correspondents' reports were not altered. Most newspapers relied heavily on the Agencies and some, particularly the evening papers, almost exclusively, although if they had a sister morning newspaper they might borrow its special reports. Some papers provided a brief summary of the main points of the news, but readers were in general assumed to be sufficiently well educated to be able to follow news, often repetitive, sometimes contradictory, presented in this fragmented way. When the Transvaal crisis became acute and in the early stages of the war the reader faced the additional difficulties of unfamiliar terminology and place names. Many newspapers had to educate their readers not only about the past history and present problems of South Africa, but also about the meaning of Dutch words and phrases and the topography of the country. As the war progressed some papers provided summaries of events which might otherwise have been difficult to follow. Those of the *Morning Post*, written by Henry Spenser Wilkinson, a distinguished military critic who was later Professor of Military History at Oxford, were particularly well thought of.

But there was more to the treatment of facts than their presentation and comprehensibility. All newspapers referred at one time or another to 'the facts', meaning the news they published, as if they constituted a fixed body of objective truths. But this was not the case. Facts had to be selected and prioritised. Reports from a paper's own correspondents were frequently highly opinionated. News of events sent to *The Times* was written by the Editor of the *Cape Argus*. *The Daily News* received its reports from the Editor of the *Cape Times*, while the *Daily Chronicle* was supplied with news by the Editor of the *South African News*. The *Argus* and the *Cape Times* were both Imperialist, sympathetic to the aims of the High Commissioner, Alfred Milner, and the Colonial Office and hostile towards the Transvaal. The Editor of the *Cape Times* prior to the outbreak of war, Edmund Garret, generally thought to be in the pocket of Cecil Rhodes and implicated in the Jameson raid, was close to Milner and supported his policies. The Editor of the *South African News*, Albert Cartwright, in contrast, was close to the Bond party at the Cape and sympathetic to the point of view of the leaders of the two Boer Republics. Inevitably the reports coming from these three sources often presented quite different

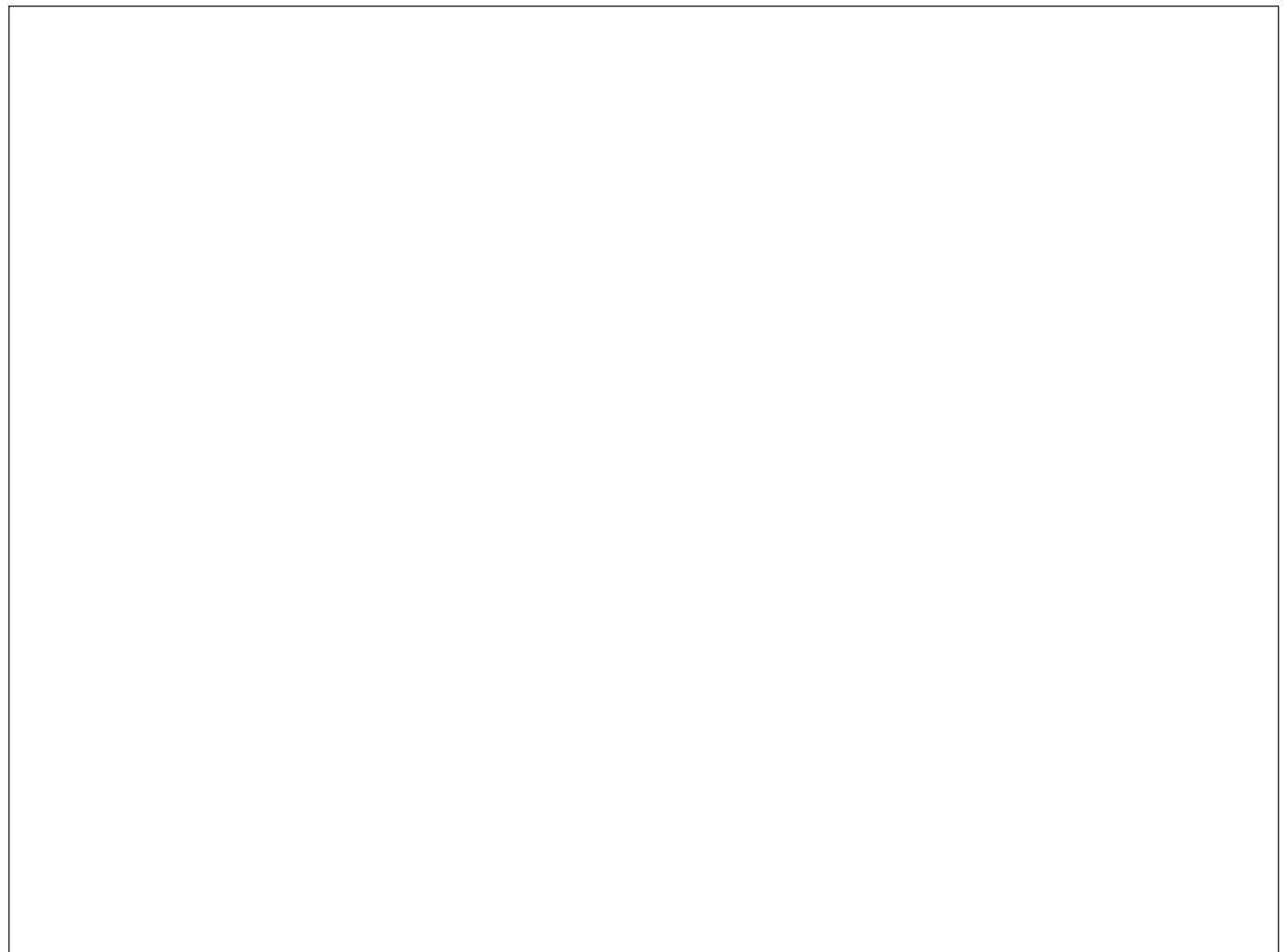
information, or gave a different slant to events. Thus the 'facts' of the news page contained, even if obliquely, an expression of opinion. Often this was deliberate. The correspondent knew what his London paper expected of him and he had been chosen with that in mind. Reports from the News Agencies could be equally nuanced. Reuter's correspondent in Pretoria was editor of a newspaper close to and controlled by President Kruger; in Kimberley the News Agency's correspondent was the editor of the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* which was controlled by De Beers. Even if an Agency correspondent was even handed, and many were, or tried to be, the parts of reports which did not sit well in a paper's news columns might end up on the floor of the Night Editor's room on the grounds of lack of space or the existence of a report from 'Our Own Correspondent' covering the same events.

### **The Effects of War on News Coverage**

During the war there were other elements which affected the news. The British Press complained about censorship throughout the war. Initially the problems arose primarily from the lack of a properly organised and trained censorship service in the Army. There were no ground rules, the censor

was often a busy junior officer with a host of other tasks in his view of greater importance than censorship. Some were unacceptably casual in their attitude to the job, acting without any consistency; others put the image of the Army above all else and altered the wording of telegrams. In one instance a correspondent complained that the words 'reconnaissance' or 'successful reconnaissance' were substituted for 'failure' and 'partial failure' in his account of a battle. Even after these failings had been improved telegrams could still be held up for days because the censor had to wait for more senior confirmation that the news could be released, though delays were also due to the telegraph lines being loaded with official business, or, in the case of news from besieged towns, because of the difficulty of getting a runner through to the nearest telegraph point. The result was that initial news of events was often so sketchy that it was not clear what had happened and it sometimes took weeks before a coherent account arrived or could be pieced together.

But newspapers accepted, although sometimes reluctantly, that censorship was necessary, for there were instances throughout the war of complaints about correspondents making up stories and writing of battles at which they had not been present. Bennett Burleigh of *The Daily Telegraph*



Illustrated newspapers were particularly enjoyed by the troops. *The Sphere* and *The Field* are both shown in this picture. It was based on a sketch made at the front by R M Paxton and worked up at home for publication in *The Sphere* of June 13 1900 by one of the newspaper's artists at home. Illustrated London News Picture Library

faced accusations even before the outbreak of war of inventing alarmist stories of the Boers invading northern Natal and subsequently annoyed the officers at Ladysmith by inaccurately writing up one of the early skirmishes before the siege began at which he had not been present. The most celebrated and controversial incident was the account of the murder of Boers by British soldiers at Vlakfontein, written by Edgar Wallace for the *Daily Mail*. Wallace was not present at Vlakfontein himself and his informants were rank and file soldiers. Officers who had been present denied that Boers had been shot and their account was preferred by Lord Kitchener on the grounds that a common soldier's word could not be trusted. Both Kitchener and the Government were clearly anxious to play down such a story, for at that time, June 1901, Kitchener's strategy was to fight hard while trying to make terms with the Boers, and the Government was facing revelations of the conditions in the concentration camps. The Opposition in Parliament was in full cry and British atrocities against Boers were the hottest of news. Kitchener considered that the *Daily Mail*, in publishing such a story, had probably prolonged the war by some weeks, as the outcry at home had given fresh heart to the Boers. But such incidents were comparatively rare. Most correspondents were very conscious of the need for verification of sources and both Burleigh and Wallace were criticised as much by their fellow professionals as they were by the military and civil authorities.

After Lord Kitchener took control of events in November 1900 censorship was tightened to a degree where some correspondents reduced their telegrams to a minimum knowing that they would be blue-pencilled almost out of existence. The news columns, even of a paper like *The Times* which prided itself on its full news coverage, shrank at times to a few paragraphs. This was not entirely, as is often said, because newspapers thought that the public was bored by the war. For a few weeks in the summer and autumn of 1900 it is true that the Press focused its attention first on China and then on the General Election at home, withdrawing most of its correspondents from South Africa. But by mid-December the *Daily Mail* was urgently telegraphing one of its correspondents, Reid, complaining of his inadequate coverage and demanding full accounts of all future engagements to satisfy the public demand. There were, after all, more soldiers in South Africa by then than had ever served in any campaign and many of them were volunteers from all walks of civilian life, some fighting in the ranks, some serving in the hospitals. Journalists became bored with the war as the subject matter available for leaders and special articles became thinner and the issues were worked and overworked until there was nothing new to say. But there were thousands of families who wanted to know what was happening in South Africa, thousands of soldiers fighting who wanted to know the same thing and how their families and people at home were reacting. The best present a soldier at the front could receive, along with tobacco, chocolate and woolly vests, was a copy of an illustrated paper or of his local paper with, perhaps an account of an engagement in which he, or a relative, had taken part or a description of the local festivities after the relief of Mafeking.

As the news from South Africa shrank to terse statements from Lord Kitchener and the occasional paragraph from correspondents, letters from soldiers became more important as subjects of news. The Press published their letters throughout the war, initially as supplements to news sent by correspondents and as sources of opinion on some of the issues being discussed at home, but after the Boers resorted to guerilla war, a letter from an officer might be the main source of information about an action. Events were too widely dispersed for any newspaper to be able to provide full coverage. Many of these letters were written by professional soldiers, but not all were and some of the Volunteers were quite outspoken in their criticisms of the conduct of the British Army and sympathetic towards the Boers. Lionel Curtis, a Volunteer in the C I V Cyclist Corps, later a member of Milner's kindergarten, wrote an anonymous article for *The Times* on events in Prieska during the first rebellion in the northern Cape in which he was emphatically uncomplimentary about the behaviour of British troops, comparing the Boers to them most favourably. In such articles and letters the distinction between fact and opinion became blurred. Like the despatches, as distinct from telegrams, of special and war correspondents technically they were not 'news' appearing on the news page, but the description and explanation of events.

### **The Tone of News**

Although the reliability of the accounts of events provided by war correspondents in South Africa was from the start dependent to some extent on censorship, which was beyond their control, there is no doubt that both correspondents in South Africa and their papers at home were concerned to temper the facts so as not to offend the susceptibilities of readers. Sketches from artists and even photographs, often reworked by other artists at home, which appeared in the *Illustrated London News*, *Punch*, *The Sphere* and other illustrated papers were frequently a source of amusement to the soldiers at the front, who looked at the elegant uniforms and glossy, well-fed, prancing horses depicted and compared them with their shabby, ragged clothes and the exhausted, often emaciated, horses. The reading public at home had little idea of the conditions under which the Army was fighting from the photographs and pictures in the Press, which in general suggested cleanliness, order and discipline. The pictures were reinforced by the tone of reports from war correspondents. Many accounts of battles early in the campaign read like chivalric romance. Not only were the men and equipment splendid to look at, but they also acted with unparalleled heroism and true British grit, their officers leading from the front, the men marching head on to face an invisible foe. This was not always true, but when the correspondent of the *Morning Post* suggested that the Highlanders, confused and taken by surprise at the battle of Magersfontein, had run away, Queen Victoria's secretary sent a letter of sharp reproof. The Queen considered that the details given undermined the honour of the Highlanders and reflected badly on British prestige abroad, at a time when the European Press was overwhelmingly hostile

towards British actions in South Africa. Oliver Borthwick, son of the proprietor, Lord Glenesk, had to send a letter of humble apology.

As the war progressed this romanticised picture was modified, although the attack was concentrated on senior officers. There was general agreement among correspondents that the rank and file were magnificent but badly led. The correspondents became increasingly critical of the way in which matters had been conducted in the early months of the war. Senior generals, including Buller, were openly attacked by military correspondents at home. Leo Amery, the chief correspondent of *The Times* in South Africa until the summer of 1900, stirred up a hornet's nest by writing an article about our 'stupid' officers. The columns of *The Times* buzzed for some time with letters attacking and supporting him. He was supported and opposed by other correspondents in their newspapers too, a notable opponent being Winston Churchill of the *Morning Post*, who continued his attacks on the critics during a lecture tour at home and in the United States in the summer of 1900. It is, however, noticeable that criticisms did not extend to Lord Roberts in the same way. Roberts, like Baden-Powell, was raised to hero status by the Press in general. As one correspondent, writing to Lord Milner after the relief of Pretoria put it: 'Every kitten, rabbit, calf, lamb and baby in England is called Bobs or BP.' Roberts's reputation probably survived intact due to his adroit handling of the Press. Criticisms continued but they bounced off him personally. Most newspapers had supported Government policy. Most of them therefore concentrated on attacking the system, demanding reform of the War Office. Many modified their attacks because from the moment war news started to come through there were attacks on Government handling of the war which came from the few 'pro-Boer' newspapers who were supporting the Parliamentary Opposition.

### Public Opinion and the Press

Public responses to the war news were recorded chiefly as letters to the Editor and as reports of public meetings and speeches. Often they had a cross heading labelling them as public opinion. The extent to which an individual newspaper covered such items depended on the space available. The emphasis was usually determined by the paper's stance during the war. In gauging public response one has to be aware of editorial bias. Inevitably an anti-war, Radical paper like the *Morning Leader* published copious extracts from letters written by concerned, high minded Non-conformist Ministers who supported and embellished its arguments, and gave full coverage to meetings of anti-war groups, just as the Liberal Imperialist *Daily Telegraph* recorded primarily the opinions of those who supported its views. It would be a useful corrective if one were able to read the contents of an editor's waste paper basket. Individuals in politics and public life at the time were concerned about the implications of this bias and some, for instance and notably James Bryce, made it their business, where they were able, to test what they read in their newspapers

against the views both of the man in the street and the specialist at home and abroad. We also still have some of the letters and other information received by Editors which were never published and which sometimes present a rather different picture from the one which they felt their readers wished to see or which the paper's 'line' demanded that they see. We also have *The Times*. Editorially *The Times* was throughout the war a supporter of Government policy. But it was also almost alone among newspapers at that time in seeing itself as a historical record and it therefore published letters and other information reflecting all shades of opinion, even if some were editorially ignored or sneered at. Consequently *The Times* was seen by its readers as an important sounding board; letters often talk of its influence in bringing to public attention the particular point at issue. Individuals or interested groups with a point to make were eager to be published in *The Times*. Friends and adversaries alike had to take you seriously if *The Times* found room for your letter.

Sometimes, though rarely, it is possible to trace the symbiotic relationship between the Editor and his public on a particular issue by comparing the letter columns with editorials in *The Times* and with the private correspondence of those concerned. Inevitably these instances involve leading political figures and relate to high politics. One such instance occurred in September 1899. Throughout the late summer *The Times* had been educating its public on the intricacies of the situation in the Transvaal, supporting the position of Joseph Chamberlain and the Colonial Office. When Chamberlain turned to the question of suzerainty as a reason for interference in the affairs of the Transvaal, *Times* editorials strongly supported his argument that the preamble to the 1881 Convention with the Transvaal, which used the word suzerainty, remained implicit in the Convention of 1884, where the word was not used. Sir William Harcourt and John Morley, alarmed at the bellicose tone of *Times* leaders and considering that they reflected the intentions of the Colonial Office, took action in their own different ways to try to defuse the situation in the hope of averting war. After some weeks of careful research Sir William, on September 20, in a speech delivered to his constituents in New Tredegar but clearly tailored for the very much wider audience that would read the virtually verbatim transcript sent to all major national papers by the Press Association, provided a detailed analysis of the legal position underpinning the suzerainty claims. His speech appeared the following day in the national Press, including *The Times* and was subsequently supported by two long letters from John Westlake, the Cambridge Professor of International Law, also in *The Times*. *The Times* allowed the discussion to run and in the face of a combination of distinguished legal opinions, it dropped the argument it had used, much to Harcourt's satisfaction.

### Concerns Expressed by the Public

The war evoked a latent patriotism which was expressed in many ways in the pages of newspapers. It showed itself

**Paardeberg was the first important victory. The capture of Cronjé and the relief of Kimberley and Ladysmith followed in quick succession, encouraging hopes that the end of the war was in sight. This drawing was printed in *The Illustrated London News* of March 3, 1900.**

Illustrated London News Picture Library

at its most strident in the accounts of public meetings, particularly those protesting against the war, where bands of men broke up the proceedings, sometimes just drowning out speakers by shouting patriotic slogans and singing songs, sometimes with violence as well. Such events occurred throughout the war. Cronwright Schreiner had to cancel his lecture programme; Emily Hobhouse had meetings cancelled for her by anxious proprietors. All but the most determined were deterred from holding anti-war meetings, all the more so after news of the defeats in December 1899 shocked even the most jingoistic into a more sober frame of mind and worried those who had opposed the war lest dissent was interpreted as treachery. It showed itself too in the reports of public reaction to victory. There was a gradual build-up from the response to the relief of Kimberley and the battle of Paardeberg at the end of February 1900 to the eruption at the news of the relief of Mafeking in May and the subsequent occupation of Pretoria in June. All newspapers covered these events in detail; some read lessons from scenes which were described as unprecedented. They were seen by some as representing national cohesion in support of the ideals of Empire, and as a manifestation of the true spirit of the man in the street. It showed itself in the flood of money which came into the various war funds set up by

newspapers all over the country and in a general expression of the need to put service to one's country above personal pleasures. Not since the Crimean war had so much money been collected. Provincial newspapers tended to pass on their funds to the Lord Mayor's Fund, but some of the nationals had their own. *The Daily Telegraph* administered its own fund which lasted until the end of 1900. The Lord Mayor's Fund was the largest of all. It was strongly supported by the City and wealthy individuals, but it also attracted small sums and collections made in churches, Sunday schools, offices and hospital wards. It showed itself too in the many reports of gifts for the troops of books, newspapers, tobacco, warm clothing and other luxuries. The Queen led the way with her present of chocolate for Christmas 1899. The newspapers reported public generosity and contributed to it themselves, a useful form of self-advertisement in the circulation battle.

Even those newspapers which opposed the war, and continued to do so in principle throughout the conflict, had to bow to the enormous public interest in and enthusiasm for the war. *The Morning Leader*, the only 'pro-Boer' paper in London which remained consistently so throughout the war, often reiterated its views in Leaders and took a somewhat debunking tone in many of its



special articles too. It commented ironically on the 'patriotism' of retired army officers who were intending to make a profit from kitting out troops of mercenary rough riders. It watched the departure of Sir Redvers Buller on October 14 among the crowds on the quayside at Southampton and noted a certain disappointment at his civilian clothing. "No man,' as one eminent critic observed, 'ever looked heroic in a hard felt hat,'" remarked the Special correspondent. It had great fun with the stampeding mules at Nicholson's Nek just before the start of the siege of Ladysmith which it compared to Liberal Imperialists and it ridiculed the war efforts of many worthy ladies by writing of Mrs. Postlethwaite's problems with the multi-coloured and misshapen tam-o-shanters she was being sent. But it also recognised the enormous interest in war news. At the beginning of November 1899, the paper offered a cheap news telegram service to its readers, which was immediately taken up throughout the country. The scheme was aimed at and appealed in particular to small shopkeepers who could post up the latest news for their customers. Within two days the office was flooded with applications 'from Lincoln's Inn and from Penmaenmawr.' Many shopkeepers in small towns and villages in remote areas subscribed on behalf of their customers, who might not see a newspaper for days. Clerks in offices, soldiers in barracks, men working in the wilds on engineering schemes clubbed together to subscribe.

When newspapers reflected upon the lessons of the war, as they did at various points when it looked as if war would soon be over, usually they discussed the lessons to be learned by the Army for the future. Public reactions moved into areas which went well beyond the technicalities of how best to manage and use cavalry or artillery in modern warfare and what reforms were needed at the War Office. The war raised questions of national efficiency and national prestige which encouraged scientists, industrialists, City merchants, headmasters, imperially-minded political pressure groups, bishops and clergy, doctors, philanthropists and charity workers to write to newspapers. Beside the jingoistic expressions of patriotism, the shouting and the slogans, of public meetings there is in these letters a sense of unease and of concern. If in war time the Army could not provide the right guns for the right places, or sufficient doctors and nurses, what did this say about our expertise in management, in technical competence and innovation, and about our capacity to educate the young to face the challenges of the twentieth century? Beside the complacent statements of British superiority in any given field, and there were many, there were others questioning accepted practice, suggesting improvements, looking to examples on the Continent and in the United States. The war also raised questions of public mourning and ritual. In the past the Army had been primarily responsible for honouring its dead and raising memorials. It still was; most cathedrals have at least one regimental plaque for the Boer war. But in this war there were so many civilians who had lost their lives in battle and through sickness. How should grief for those who had died be memorialised and help be given to their families? There are numerous accounts of meetings held by the members of old boys' associations,

town and city councils and other groups intending to place memorials in local churches and school chapels and market squares and to support the efforts of the Guild of Loyal Women in South Africa so that graves would be marked and tended. After the defeats in December 1899 there was a debate about whether or not there should be a national day of humiliation and prayer in which all shades of religious and non-religious opinion were vigorously expressed. The need to help severely wounded soldiers and the families of those who had been killed, gave rise to sharp arguments as to the methods to be adopted which merged into current debates over the granting and management of old age and other pensions and touched on many prejudices about the treatment of the feckless or drunken poor. There were concerns about the effect of the conduct of the war on foreign opinion, not just on that of the foreign Press, much of which was hostile, but that of Governments. There was discussion about the future role of the Empire in matters of defence. The events of war both fostered national pride, and forced self examination.

What these different concerns tell us about public reactions to the war has long been a matter for a debate which is still unresolved and probably always will be. There are no statistics; the opinion poll did not exist and evidence is partial and anecdotal. We cannot say with any pretence of accuracy that so many percentage of any given social or political group were pro-Boer, Imperialist, anti-war or any other label one cares to find. But through an examination of the Press one can discern what issues and information were considered to be important by editors and their readers and try to answer the question, why they should have been so.

### Further Reading

Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (1979 edition for the full text, 1993 edition abridged and illustrated). Winston S Churchill, *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* and *Ian Hamilton's March* both have been reprinted quite recently by Leo Cooper. Stephen Koss, *The Anatomy of an anti-war movement: the pro-Boers* (London/Chicago, 1973). Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty; from the Crimea to Vietnam: the war correspondent as hero, propagandist and myth maker* (London, 1978).

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