
The Shifting Memory of the Boer War in Newfoundland

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With the numerous examples of commemoration of past conflicts found across Newfoundland, it is surprising to find that most Newfoundlanders are unaware of their people's participation in the Boer War (1899-1902). Despite the fact that the memory of the conflict has not survived to the modern day, it was alive and well in the period of the living memory of the war, from the early 1900s until the late 1960s. During this time, the memory of the Boer War was expressed in three principle ways: the war as a means of transforming the Boer people into equal British subjects, as a time when both the British Empire and the men who lived under it grew and gained experience and knowledge, and as the catalyst for the reinvigoration of society through youth movements such as the Arm Lads Brigade of Durrell, Newfoundland.

Newfoundland's Response at the Outbreak of War

Despite Governor McCallum's lobbying of the government, Newfoundland decided against raising its own force of men to fight in the Boer War due to financial troubles, and instead opted to fundraise for the war effort.¹ This fundraising was not solely a government endeavour, the wider public was very enthusiastic at the prospect of aiding the cause of the Empire's war. Groups such as the Masonic Temple, the Sons of England, the Star of the Sea, and the Church of England Temperance Society were very active in contributing to the government's fundraising mechanism, the Newfoundland Patriotic Fund.² Private businesses also contributed to the Fund, with both skating rinks and theatres charging extra money that was directly donated to it.³ In total, the people and government of Newfoundland were able to donate \$35,000 to the war effort, a sizeable figure for what Governor McCallum called a colony of "poor fishermen and their families."⁴ This generous donation was a testament to the colony's willingness to assist the Empire in the conflict.

Another clear indicator of the colony's enthusiasm for the Boer War was in the response to the capture of Pretoria, a strategically important Boer stronghold. Pretoria was not the victory that truly ended the war, but it was seen by most people in the Empire as the last stand of the Boer forces. Upon the announcement of the capture of Pretoria on May 31, 1900, Newfoundlanders across the island began massive celebrations for what they viewed as the war's end.⁵ In St. John's, businesses closed early, cannons were fired, and thousands took part in a parade to the Governor's home to hear him give a speech.⁶ In Carbonear, businesses closed at noon and a parade was held with seven hundred people in attendance.⁷ Newfoundlanders were

¹ Melissa J. Watton, "Newfoundland's Response to the Boer War" honours dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1995), 9-12.

² Ibid., 18.

³ Ibid., 19-21.

⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ Ibid., 35-36.

⁷ Ibid., 36.

clearly interested in the War in South Africa and were more than willing to contribute to it and celebrate its end with their Imperial brethren in Britain and Canada. This willingness to contribute to the struggle of the Empire no doubt influenced the creation of the patriotic memory of the Boer War in Newfoundland that arose after the end of the conflict.

The Shifting Memory of the Boers

The Boer War, like any other conflict, brought with it feelings of hatred for the enemy. Many articles can be found in Newfoundland newspapers which decry the Boers as people with “Christ on their lips, [and] the devil [in] their hearts,” who are willing to keep African slaves and use them as human shields in battle.⁸ Other portrayals paint the Boer people as little more than animals, living in hovels and sleeping on muddy floors, with livestock roaming freely in what little room they had.⁹ Despite this dismal portrayal of Boers at the beginning of the Boer War, opinion shifted by the outbreak of the First World War. By this era, Boers were not seen as primitive and evil foes, but as enemies of circumstance in 1899 who had since transformed into loyal allies. By the First World War, both sides were depicted as good Christians who harboured no ill will towards one another, and were even so similar that they buried their dead together.¹⁰

Even the Newfoundland author Jack Randell, who made his hatred of Boers very clear in his memoir *I'm Alone*, was able to see the humanity in his opponents by the time he wrote about them in the 1930s. While in the field shortly after the death of his commander Arthur “Gatling Gun” Howard at the hands of a Boer ambush, two Boers fell into the trap laid by Randell and his men.¹¹ After fatally wounding one, Randell spared the life of the other and took him prisoner, despite the direct orders of his commanding officer.¹² Randell explains that he came to feel sympathy for the man he fatally wounded and did not wish to kill the other “in cold blood” as a result.¹³ Randell risked his life to save the Boer that he captured, having nearly been shot by his superior officer for insubordination when he returned with his captive.¹⁴

The depiction of Boers during the First World War went further than an understanding of their humanity, and Boers were constantly portrayed as highly loyal to the British Empire. According to many during the First World War, the origin of this transformation into true British colonials was the granting of democracy and autonomy to South Africa in the years after the Boer War. For one author in the *St. John's Daily Star*, Lord Kitchener’s “wise decision was to bring the Boers into the British Empire on self-respecting terms, and he succeeded” through his push for a moderate peace deal with the Boer forces after the war.¹⁵ In a 1917 speech reprinted in the *Daily Star*, General Smuts, a Boer General, referred to the allowance of South African democracy after the Boer War as “one of the wisest political settlements ever made in the history of the British Empire.”¹⁶

⁸ Alice Hyneman Southern, “Those Simple and Pious Boers,” *Evening Telegram* (St. John’s, NL), Oct. 26, 1899.

⁹ N.a., “The Boer at Home,” *Evening Telegram* (St. John’s, NL), Oct. 12, 1899.

¹⁰ I.C. Morris, “A Thought for the Times: The War – Chapter XIII” *Evening Telegram* (St. John’s, NL), Sept. 29, 1914.

¹¹ Jack Randell, *I'm Alone* (New York: Jonathan Cape, 1930), 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64-65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁵ N.a., “British Empire is a Power That Stands For High Ideals: Article III” *St. John's Daily Star* (St. John’s, NL), May 23, 1916.

¹⁶ R. U. Right, “Just Round the Corner” *St. John's Daily Star* (St. John’s, NL), May 3, 1917.

This political settlement led to the Boers being portrayed as some of the most loyal subjects of the British Empire. One article in the *Telegram* details the story of David Derklerk, a Boer man who fought against the British in the Boer War.¹⁷ When World War I began, the German authorities of German South-West Africa ordered Derklerk's two brothers who resided there to join the fight against the British. When the men refused, the Germans executed them.¹⁸ In response to the murders, Derklerk took it upon himself to join the British Army, desiring to go to the Western Front and fight for the Empire to avenge his brothers.¹⁹ In an article in the *Daily Star*, the mourning of Lord Kitchener in Pretoria offers another example of the newfound loyalty of the Boer people after the war. In the article it is stressed that the Boer people transformed from enemies of Kitchener during the Boer War, to loyal soldiers under his command in the First World War, to mourners of Kitchener's death who were "no longer Boer, but British to the core."²⁰ From the Boer War to World War I, the perception of Boers in Newfoundland quickly shifted from Boers as evil animals to that of Boers as loyal British subjects who had simply become enemies of circumstance in the War in South Africa.

The Boer War as a Source of Experience

The Boer War was often depicted in Newfoundland media as a source of knowledge and experience for the men of the colony, the commanders of the army, and the Empire as a whole. This knowledge was seen as essential to the men of Newfoundland in the First World War. The experience of the Boer War was placed amongst other conflicts in which Newfoundlanders took part, including the Peninsular War and rise of Newfoundlander Sir Henry Pynn from a simple clerk to a commander in the British Forces, the American Civil War, the Ten Year's War in Cuba, the Boer War, and the First World War.²¹ Newfoundlanders were, thanks to this hundred years of military experience, more than capable of rising to the occasion of the First World War, the defense of the Empire and the freedom which these people felt that it upheld.²²

When authors and journalists discussed Newfoundlanders who had enlisted in both the First World War and the Boer War, their service in South Africa was consistently emphasized. One example of this can be found in the story of George Adams. Adams was a native Newfoundlander who fought in the Boer War, and was profiled in an article in the *St. John's Daily Star*.²³ The article briefly outlines the experience of Adams in the War in South Africa where he fought against the forces of General Botha, a commander in the Boer army, and goes on to attribute his skill on the battlefield of World War I to his fighting alongside old enemies from the South African War.²⁴ Emphasis on past service in the Boer War was common for any First World War soldier profiled in newspapers across Newfoundland. The importance placed on the actions of these men during the Boer War demonstrates the perceived role of the conflict as training for Newfoundlanders in the First World War.

¹⁷ N.a., "A Boer in Scots Guards: Patriot Whose Two Loyal Brothers Were Murdered by Germans" *Evening Telegram* (St. John's, NL), May 21, 1915.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ N.a., "As We See It: Significant" *St. John's Daily Star* (St. John's, NL), Jun. 8, 1916.

²¹ N.a., "Four Brothers with the Colours" *Evening Telegram* (St. John's, NL), Sept. 29, 1914.

²² Ibid.

²³ N.a., "Assisted Botha to defeat Huns: Soldier from St. John's Fought Against Great Boer General 15 years Ago," *St. John's Daily Star* (St. John's, NL), Apr. 12, 1916.

²⁴ Ibid.

The Boer War also functioned as a source of experience and reputation for the officer class of the First World War. One example of this can be seen in an article on Lieutenant-General Birdwood, the commander of the Australians and New Zealanders at Gallipoli. Birdwood's experience in the Boer War is depicted as vital to his reputation as a great general, one article explaining that "his high courage and magnificent fighting spirit [during the Boer War] were mentioned no fewer than five times in dispatches".²⁵

This imagining of the Boer War as a builder of reputations can also be found in various articles about General Bryan Mahon. Upon his appointment to the command of the British forces in Serbia during the First World War, Mahon was described as a man who loved to fight, and who was eager to join up in the war in South Africa as soon as he had heard of its commencement.²⁶ In addition to this, many articles mention both his claim to fame due to his command of the force that ended the siege of Mafeking, a British army stronghold besieged for seven months during the Boer War, and his nickname of "Mafeking Mahon", which he gained as a result of his victory there.²⁷ These profiles of British officers who gained fame and knowledge during conflict, such as Birdwood and Mahon, served as examples to the people of Newfoundland and demonstrated how men could be transformed by warfare into great heroes both on and off the battlefield.

Finally, the British Empire itself gained experience and knowledge during the Boer War in both the increase in the skill of its men, and the increased ability of the Empire to deal with deadly wartime diseases. In articles written during the First World War, lessons learned during the Boer War are referenced as solutions to the First World War's problems. One example of this can be found in an article written in *The Telegram* in 1917, wherein the author expresses his frustrations with the lack of progress of the war, blaming it on the absence of application of the lessons from the Boer War.²⁸ The article claims that if the Allied forces would remember the manner in which the South African War was won, through the mobility of troops and not through fortification of trenches, the Great War would have already ended.²⁹

Similar lessons were learned by the British Empire in terms of disease. According to writers during World War I, the Boer War provided a lesson on the importance of vaccinations.³⁰ Many authors stressed the high casualty rates from disease in the Boer War, with one *Daily Star* journalist explaining that ten percent of men who died in the conflict died from typhoid, and Great War soldier Lieutenant Owen William Steele writing in a letter home that "In the Boer War seventeen died from disease [for every one who died] from bullets."³¹ Both suggested that increased vaccination rates since the Boer War was the main reason why rates of death from disease had decreased tremendously.³²

²⁵ N.a., "The Soul of Anzac," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's, NL), Oct. 25, 1915.

²⁶ N.a., "He Relieved Mafeking," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's, NL), Dec. 17, 1915.

²⁷ N.a., "He Relieved Mafeking," Dec. 17, 1915.; N.a., "Boer War hero in the Balkans," *St. John's Daily Star* (St. John's, NL), Oct. 29, 1915.; N.a., "Nicknames of Our Fighting Men" *St. John's Daily Star* (St. John's, NL), Aug. 12, 1916.

²⁸ N.a., "An Outlook on the War," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's, NL), Oct. 11, 1917.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ N.a., "What War Will do for Peace," *Evening Telegram* (St. John's, NL), Jun. 18, 1915.

³¹ N.a., "Doctor Grenfell on Experiences in the Trenches," *St. John's Daily Star* (St. John's, NL), Jun. 6, 1916.; Owen William Steele, *Lieutenant Owen William Steele of the Newfoundland Regiment: Diary and Letters* ed. David R. Facey-Crowther (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 21.

³² N.a., "Doctor Grenfell on Experiences in the Trenches," *St. John's Daily Star*, Jun. 6, 1916.; Steele, *Lieutenant Owen William Steele of the Newfoundland Regiment*, 21.

The Legacy of the Boer War in Newfoundland: The Arm Lads Brigade

Despite the lack of monuments or official commemoration of the Boer War in Newfoundland, the legacy of the conflict continued in other ways. One continuation of this legacy was the Arm Lads Brigade of Durrell (ALB), a youth group based on military ideals that was steeped in the legacy of the Boer War since its inception.

The earliest example of a youth group which, like the ALB, focused on military practice and drill is the Boys' Brigade, founded by William Smith in Glasgow in 1883.³³ Smith's group focused on ideals of Christian manliness, including "reverence, discipline, and self-respect" and taught military drill and bible study to reinforce these ideals.³⁴ Smith saw the practice of drill and other military exercise as a key tool in the religious and moral improvement of boys who took part in it.³⁵

Both Smith's Boys' Brigade and other later Brigades were bolstered in popularity by the Boer War, specifically the mythology of the Mafeking Cadet Corps. The Mafeking Cadet Corps was an organisation comprised of young boys given uniforms and trained in "busy work," such as carrying messages and doing lookout duty, so as to assist in the defence of Mafeking.³⁶ War correspondents present in Mafeking during the 217 day siege of the town detailed the events of the siege in a constant stream of telegrams to London, which quickly became the center of public attention.³⁷ The Mafeking Cadet Corps was officially cited in the military records as part of the force defending the town and this designation, along with the media coverage provided to the siege, created the Mafeking Cadet Corps' mythic status.³⁸

Smith's ideas concerning the use of military drill and discipline with young men, combined with the mythology of the Mafeking Cadet Corps, led to the extreme popularity of his movement across Britain, with 55,000 boys enrolled in his organisation by 1904.³⁹ This popularity led to many similar groups arising, such as the (Anglican) Church Lads' Brigade, the Jewish Lads' Brigade, the Catholic Boys' Brigade, the Boys' Life Brigade, and Lord Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts.⁴⁰

This trend in the creation of Boys' Brigades appeared in Durrell, Newfoundland in 1908, in the form of the Arm Lads' Brigade.⁴¹ The ALB was founded by a Boer War veteran from the island of Jersey who arrived in Durrell on business in 1908.⁴² When this man, who is referred to in Durrell as "the mystery man" as his name has been long forgotten, arrived in Durrell, he founded an organisation much like the Boys' Brigades of his native England: the Arm Lads' Brigade.⁴³

³³ Robert H. MacDonald, *Sons of the Empire: The Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement, 1890-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 12.

³⁴ MacDonald, *Sons of the Empire*, 12.; Michael Rosenthal, *The Character Factory: Baden-Powell and the Origins of the Boy Scout Movement* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 231.

³⁵ Rosenthal, *The Character Factory*, 232.

³⁶ MacDonald, *Sons of the Empire*, 91.; Rosenthal, *The Character Factory*, 53.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 91, 93.

³⁸ Rosenthal, *The Character Factory*, 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁰ MacDonald, *Sons of the Empire*, 12-13.; Rosenthal, *The Character Factory*, 53.

⁴¹ Paul Sparkes, "Discipline, Obedience and Sobriety: Quasi-Military Organisation in a Small Outport Gave Youth Pride and Purpose," *The Telegram* (St. John's, NL), Oct. 16, 2013. <http://www.pressreader.com/canada/the-telegram-st-johns/20131016/281741267149644>

⁴² Sparkes, "Discipline, Obedience and Sobriety," *Telegram* Oct. 16, 2013.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

The ALB began by holding drill twice a week in the net loft of nearby Howlett's Island with 44 boys in attendance.⁴⁴ The boys trained with surplus decommissioned rifles from the Boer War that were purchased from England, military-style uniforms, and played instruments on special occasions.⁴⁵ By 1910 there was not enough space in the net loft for the Brigade and a new location for training and events was required. The ALB Drill Hall was constructed in response to this by volunteers cutting wood nearby and hauling it to the hall's current location.⁴⁶

The ALB was part of the social fabric of Durrell and the surrounding areas, holding socials and concerts in the Drill Hall, and parades and picnics elsewhere throughout the history of the organisation.⁴⁷ The organisation also commonly attended special occasions such as Easter Sunday, in full uniform.⁴⁸ The ALB was even inspected by the Lieutenant Governor of Newfoundland upon his official visit to Twillingate in 1950, an honour usually reserved solely for the military.⁴⁹ The ALB went on to reach an enrolment of one hundred twenty boys at one time, and over the course of its existence, thirty-two former ALB members enlisted in World War I and eight enlisted in World War II.⁵⁰

With the fading of the Boer War from living memory, the ALB too began to disappear. Attendance rates dwindled, and the Drill Hall sat empty for several years, until the leadership of the ALB decided to donate the building to the town of Durrell, on the condition that it be used to commemorate the ALB and the men from it who went on to serve in both World Wars.⁵¹ In 1973, a committee was formed and the Durrell Museum was built in the ALB Drill Hall, preserving the collective memory of the ALB, as well as its origins in both the Boer War and the Boy's Brigades that arose from it.⁵²

Conclusion

Despite the lack of direct participation in the Boer War by Newfoundland, the conflict nonetheless influenced the lives of Newfoundlanders and was remembered by them well into the later part of the twentieth century. Since that time, the memory of the Boer War in Newfoundland may have faded from the public eye, but at one point, it was remembered as the conflict that changed the Boer people, changed the men of the British Empire, and changed the small town of Durrell, Newfoundland into better versions of what they once were.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Sparkes, "Discipline, Obedience and Sobriety," *Telegram* Oct. 16, 2013.; Christy Janes, "Durrell Museum Planning July 1 Memorial Service to Honour Arm Lads Brigade," *Pilot* (Lewisporte, NL), Sept. 29, 2017. <http://www.lportepilot.ca/news/local/durrell-museum-planning-july-1-memorial-service-to-honour-arm-lads-brigade-74212/>

⁴⁶ Sparkes, "Discipline, Obedience and Sobriety," *The Telegram* Oct. 16, 2013.; Janes, "Durrell Museum Planning July 1 Memorial Service," *Pilot* Sept. 29, 2017.

⁴⁷ N.a., "Arm Lads' Brigade," *Twillingate Sun* (Twillingate, NL), Apr. 29, 1939.; N.a., "By Telegraph," *Twillingate Sun* (Twillingate, NL), Mar. 14, 1931.; N.a., "Arm Lads Brigade" *Twillingate Sun* (Twillingate, NL), May 4, 1912.

⁴⁸ N.a., "Home News," *Twillingate Sun* (Twillingate, NL), Apr. 23, 1949.; N.a., "Twillingate Notes," *Western Star* (Corner Brook, NL), Apr. 4, 1948.

⁴⁹ N.a., "Programme," *Twillingate Sun* (Twillingate, NL), Aug. 5, 1950; N.a., "Twillingate Holds Sports Day; Lieutenant Governor Pays Visit" *Western Star* (Corner Brook, NL), Aug. 25, 1950.

⁵⁰ Sparkes, "Discipline, Obedience and Sobriety," *Telegram* Oct. 16, 2013.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

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