

‘Never again my boy, never again’: Australian Soldiers’ Reactions to the South African War 1899-1902

Effie Karageorgos
Flinders University

The second South African War of 1899-1902 sparked widespread controversy in Australia, which in accounts of the war is usually represented by the jingoistic fervour by both civilians and volunteer soldiers on the departure of contingents for the front line. Reports of dissident opinion on the war were kept to a relative minimum in both the government and public domain in the years of the war, due mainly to the issue of ‘loyalty’ in society of the time, which prevented many from speaking out against the British Empire. Since its conclusion, and even from the late 1960s when various ‘revisionist’ accounts emerged, Australian literature on the war followed this ‘triumphalist’ approach. And, although recent studies do acknowledge elements of opposition, they have still been aligned more towards the triumphalist approach than any other. Such accounts deem the war one that enjoyed almost complete support by both the Australian public and the soldiers fighting in South Africa, during the entirety of the war. Soldiers’ accounts of the war, however, contain more subtlety than has been attributed to them, thus revealing their position on the war not to be as clear-cut as has been claimed. This study revisits established perceptions on ‘public opinion’ and soldier dissidence during the war, and shows, by the examination of first-hand soldiers’ narratives and their relation to more recent theories on soldiering, the vital facets of soldier opinion neglected by these accounts.

Many works on the South African War have masked the negative debate that occurred in Australia at the time, chiefly caused by the comparative lack of evidence encompassing lower as well as upper public opinion, as well as the ‘loyalty’ issue. From the years during the Vietnam War, when opinion on war in general shifted, many found the impetus and opportunity to speak out publicly against war. This caused a revival of the debate on the South African War, prompting a revision of traditional accounts of public opinion during the war. However, these more recent debates concentrate on middle and upper class reactions, in particular people with the

power to influence decisions about the war. This can be directly attributed to the ready availability of information coming from these sectors of society, as opposed to those in less influential circles. Thus, generalisations are too often made which attribute the whole of Australian opinion on the war to the views shared by these groups. Typically, the historian Barbara Penny, who from the late 1960s re-examined public opinion during the South African War, using such evidence as proof, concludes that most Australians at all levels of society supported the war.¹ Chris Connolly revisited the subject in the late 1970s, acknowledging that support for the war was dependent on social class, noting that the opinions of the working classes were not necessarily congruent with that of the middle classes, or even of their peers in the labour movement. But although Connolly maintains that it is impossible to generalise about public opinion on the war because all the written evidence we have available to us comes from the upper sectors of society, he also goes on to say that if the common working man was an opponent of the war, it was because he saw it as 'none of his business'.² This is a reasonable statement to make, as this was one of the platforms used by those who openly opposed the war. For example, the reason why many, such as members of the predominantly middle-class based Anti-War League, objected to Australia going to South Africa in the first place was because they said that the issue in question was not any of our concern, or rather, not significant or valid enough to be our concern. But Connolly's statement is almost impossible to prove conclusively, particularly given the sources he used in the construction of his article, namely parliamentary debates, articles in newspapers and journals of the time, as well as published personal reminiscences of the war mainly written by middle- and upper-class soldiers, often officers, material which lacks sufficient representation from those in the lower sector of society.

Documented opinions of those in the lower classes in Australia at the time of the war appear almost exclusively in various labour publications of the time. There, men from the lower classes did broadcast their opinion. However, given the nature of the press, the inclusion of these opinions was determined by their consistency with the views of those who ran the publications themselves, both editors and owners, who were always men of the middle to upper classes. Rosemary Thompson studied press opinion, including labour publications such as the *Barrier Miner*, in Australia during the South African war. She wrote:

It is sufficient to assume that on most imperial issues the papers chosen reflected the opinion of those sections of the Australian public whose political awareness gave them a concern for Australia's position in the Empire and the world beyond it.³

The term 'political awareness' is generally not immediately associated with those in the 'lower levels' of society. Hence, such sources are unlikely to represent true lower-class opinion. Historians must therefore pay attention to the only Australians from this sector of society whose attitudes to the war can be found: the mass of soldiers actually fighting in South Africa - the common troops. A study of enlistment rolls from the war reveal that most of the men who volunteered for service in this war came from the lower middle classes or below. Young clerks, for example, were a significant addition to the Australian contingents, and most of these considered themselves above the working classes, given their white collar status. This standing was not always reflected in their salaries, so many of these men chose to leave Australia as an escape from dull employment with few financial rewards.

In the past, evidence of Australian public opinion available to us, that from the upper classes, has been used to reflect attitudes of common soldiers towards the war, as can be seen in *Australia's Boer War* (2002), the well-researched history on the Australian contribution to the war effort written by Craig Wilcox, as well as the earlier work by RL Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War* (1976).⁴ The assumption that Australian public opinion directly reveals soldier opinion is, in a way, unavoidable given the limited predominantly middle and upper class based evidence of public opinion in Australia we have available to us. However, it is impossible to make adequate conclusions on the position of common soldiers concerning the war based on this information, as most soldiers came from the lower sectors of society, with their own distinctive values and beliefs.

By turning to the attitudes of Australian common soldiers to the war in South Africa, we can gain an insight into the outlooks of those of the lower classes in civilian society who have not yet been fully represented in examinations on the war. But more importantly, we can attempt to discover the position these soldiers took towards war

in general, by using concepts of soldiering developed during the twentieth century as a theoretical base. The decision to deal with evidence gained from ordinary soldiers – the testimonies of the rank and file - has been made to ensure the focus will be on those who would have been less likely to articulate preconceived notions of their role in the war zone. Tobey Herzog, in his work on soldiers during the Vietnam War, clarifies this decision by maintaining that it is those who have had little experience of war or sense of their role within it, and who perhaps have an unrealistic image of war in their minds as a result, that experience the largest impact on their behaviours and attitudes when placed in the war zone.⁵ This theory is implicit in the testimony of Jack Abbott, a corporal with the First Australian Horse during the South African War:

Unless one had seen it all before, and had previous knowledge of lovely landscapes that spat bullets from apparently nowhere in particular, one would hardly have expected that in an hour or two would bring on [sic] within touch of sudden death.⁶

Abbott's words also identify a singular feature of the South African War: the use of guerrilla warfare, for which all British soldiers were unprepared, as training before the war concentrated on more traditional strategic modes of fighting.

So, this will lead to a re-interpretation of the attitudes of Australian soldiers in the South African War, as representatives of lower-class civilians, forming part of a larger study on the relationship between these testimonies and public opinion on the home front.

The psychology of common soldiers in combat was first examined in great depth during the First World War. Before this, little in-depth theorising about the views of soldiers in war existed. The increased attention after the First World War was a direct result of the widespread official recognition of traumatic neuroses as a consequence of military duty, given the high incidence of this kind of injury in the war. Peter Leese, in *Shell Shock*, attributes increased focus on this condition in civilians before the war on the newly emerging 'industrial technology' and 'urban modernity' of the late nineteenth century and argues that this extended into wartime as a result of the increased technology used in the First World War.⁷ The effects of this became

increasingly evident when soldiers entered the post-war civilian setting, causing many professionals to focus on it in an attempt to understand its causes and characteristics. Furthermore, Leese associates the limited need for formal cavalry in the South African War with the increased mechanisation of war, a consequence of industrial developments of the time which, increasing rapidly came to an initial climax in the First World War.⁸ Thus studies emerging from this war can, to an extent, be related to soldiers fighting in the South African War, as, using Leese's rationale, the climate at the turn of the century can be directly associated with conditions at the beginning of the First World War.

The scope of such writings increased during the twentieth century, after the technologically advanced Second World War, and particularly the highly controversial Vietnam War. It was after the latter war that accounts broadened to include not only psychological disturbances, but also the impressions and behaviour of all soldiers in war, endeavouring to understand why some are affected so deeply by war, while others are spared the mental anguish. This was an issue that psychologists and psychotherapists were unable to come to terms with after the First World War. This can be seen in the ambiguous report compiled in the early 1920s by the War Office Committee of Inquiry into Shellshock, which was full of contradictions regarding cowardice, and it was not until 1930 that execution was outlawed for 'cowardice', a concept they could not define conclusively even at that time. Just as the First World War had eventually brought an altered view of soldiers within war, so the Vietnam War created a more developed interpretation, particularly of those who were either unwilling to fight, or exhibited signs of psychological scarring as a result of combat. The relatively high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a recent psychological discovery linked to soldiers in both combat and non-combat positions in Vietnam produced an increase in research not only by psychologists, but by sociologists and historians too. In addition, the attitudes of society had changed to permit sympathy for the position of both wounded and reluctant soldiers, increasing protests against the war, thus producing more interest in the perceptions of soldiers in war. This meant a marked increase in Australian studies into combat stress.

Despite the considerable time gap, as well as the given differences in the prevailing values of Australian society between the South African War and the Vietnam War, the

circumstances surrounding each make a comparison of the two beneficial, keeping in mind that it is difficult to find conclusive similarities between any two conflicts. Both were, to an extent, 'colonial' conflicts, in which Australians fought on behalf of larger world powers (the British Empire during the South African War, and the United States during Vietnam) against a somewhat undeveloped and militarily inferior foe (the Dutch Boers and the predominantly North Vietnamese communists). In both cases, Australians initially took a relatively minor, almost token, role but went on to prove themselves better adapted to the opponents' preferred guerrilla mode of combat, causing demand for Australian soldiers to increase. Their adaptability to this form of combat has often been attributed to the rural backgrounds of many who volunteered or were conscripted. Also significant in both is the position of public opponents, an aspect of the Vietnam War which often characterises public accounts of the war, but which was largely concealed from the population during the South African War.

Comparisons with the Vietnam War are useful especially when considering the impact of war on soldiers, a subject that inspired a vast amount of research after Vietnam, but had reached only a very preliminary stage during and after the South African War. Although this article focuses on soldiers fighting the one war, its conclusions will contribute to a broader comparison of soldiers' impressions during both wars. The work uses theories that chiefly arose from issues within the Vietnam War in an attempt to determine whether it is possible to create general theories of soldiering, or whether each war is unique, not only as an experience, but also in its impact.

The use of soldiers' testimonies as evidence of attitudes towards war creates difficulties relating to reliability. These can be overcome to a large extent, preventing them from becoming a hindrance to effective analysis. Soldiers' accounts of the South African War can be found in diaries and letters written at the front, as well as in published narratives, mostly written by soldiers who have returned from war. Diaries written by soldiers tend to give information, rather than express opinions or emotions, making their reading dry and of little help to the historian. Moreover, letters written to family and close friends from a war environment generally downplay war's negative aspects, in order to protect those at home from unnecessary worry. Also of importance in the minds of soldiers writing home is the awareness of censorship. Letter writers are conscious of the fact that shipments of letters could be intercepted and read by

Boer forces eager to gain information on the enemy. Censorship must also be taken into account when reading soldiers' letters published in Australian newspapers during the war. Many were chosen for their optimism, or lack of controversial content, or severely edited by newspaper editors with specific ends in mind. It must also be noted, moreover, that soldiers often requested in letters home that their letters not be published, or expressed annoyance upon discovering that they had been published. For example, RJ Byers, of the First Victorian Contingent, wrote in complaint to his sister, May, that he did not want his letters to be made public:

You say that some of my letters have been published, well I wish you would not allow any more to be published, as I have a decided objection to it. In fact, if I thought you were going to publish any letters of mine, I would not have written them.⁹

Stan Jones, a mounted soldier of the First Australian Contingent, expressed the same wish in a letter to his family.¹⁰ The knowledge that letters were to be made public would certainly produce self-censorship, or at least limit the candid expression of emotions in personal correspondence. This thereby affected the degree of reliability of these letters. Moreover, Charles Sabine reveals in a letter to his family: 'It is amusing to read the letters in the papers some fellows sent to the other side. Many of them are written by fellows who havn't [sic] seen a bit of the fun'.¹¹ Thus, the desire to present an exciting tale from a relatively mundane experience to those back home could also influence the accuracy of such reports.

Published personal narratives by soldiers can also be problematic, as most are written retrospectively. Issues of memory recollection and recording arise here, known factors in personal reminiscences. Historians writing on memory and personal reminiscences place importance on the role of collective or national memory in influencing a person's individual memory. For instance, Peter Burke argues that, aside from an individual's memory of a public event, there are social groups surrounding these people who establish what is of vital importance in public memory, and in this way directly influence individual memory by social depictions of the past.¹² This factor is especially valid in the case of a war that provokes enormous public interest. The in-depth study of personal reminiscences will form a part of the more extensive study,

and their use necessitates the examination of the historiography of personal narratives, but both lie outside the scope of this article. Thus, the evidence of soldier's personal attitudes used in this article will be limited predominantly to what was written directly from the South African front.

Official consideration of the effects of the South African war on the Australian population is predominantly positive, evoking images of streets lined with civilians cheering their loyal volunteers off to battle, or the public celebration of victories such as the relief of Mafeking and Ladysmith. In many analyses of the war, the seemingly endless queues of men wanting to volunteer for military service is used as evidence of the steadfast support of the war by Australians. Even complex investigations specifically dealing with the soldiers, despite mentioning both the pro- and anti-war perspectives displayed by common soldiers fighting in the war, have also presented a positive account. Penny refers to the fervour of all in Australia, including women and children, to fight in South Africa, claiming that this 'romantic' attitude was not even crushed by knowledge of casualties.¹³ As part of an argument claiming the overall support of the South African War by Australians, this follows the positive slant found in many public accounts of the war. Many insist on using the initial fervour exhibited by volunteers to characterise the general opinion of soldiers during the entire war. Wilcox, for example, acknowledges the existence of soldier, as well as civilian, discontent with the war. However, the overall picture is a more rosy one than not, seen by his insistence that 'quiet support all round' still existed despite increasing discontent with the war.¹⁴ Even more recent works that attempt a revision of the history of the South African war in Australia, such as the research of Barbara Penny, follow this trend. Penny admits the existence of opposition, then goes on to state: 'Australia's participation in the Boer War had been a consolidating rather than shattering experience',¹⁵ based on the reaction of Australians to reaffirmed ties with Britain as a result of fighting for them in South Africa. Such conclusions highlight the need for an in-depth analysis of more recent theories concerned with soldiers, examined in conjunction with autobiographical accounts of soldiers fighting in the war.

Studies on soldiers in war have recently re-emphasised the enjoyment men experience through the various rituals of war, despite the many hardships faced. One of the main

advocates of this idea is Joanna Bourke, who, in her extensive work *An Intimate History of Killing*, contends that men feel a basic drive to gain power, which is fulfilled through the killing during war. Therefore despite some complaints by soldiers of the unpleasantness of killing, it is gratifying an innate urge in them, ultimately giving them satisfaction.¹⁶ Similarly, Elmar Dinter, when examining soldier behaviour in war, suggests that laws against killing may repress an instinct of men to kill, since some men do clearly enjoy the act of killing.¹⁷ It is not difficult to see instances of this theory being supported by evidence from the South African front. In his book on the Australian ranks, Abbott notes that it is 'a big sport, a gamble with fate – and, as such, while the human composition remains human, it will never cease to exercise a certain fascination and attractiveness to man'.¹⁸ The attractions of war have been an essential element in numerous works on the characteristics of war for centuries. Research on the topic has suggested that this applies to both those that are yet to reach the war zone, as well as those who have already seen much of battle. An in-depth look into the topic, however, frequently finds that this feeling of excitement does not often endure.

Recent literature has identified two major characteristics as causing men pleasure in war, namely, the initial elation of war or fulfilment of previously instilled idealised expectation of war. Both mark men's outlook before actual war service begins. Researchers on the topic have concluded that there are many influences on the sources of the expectations of men on their way to war. Graham Dawson, in *Soldier Heroes*, his work on the British soldier and their connection to the concept of Empire, stresses the role of literary narratives that emphasised the importance of Empire before the First World War in giving young men splendid views of war.¹⁹ Wallace's work on the South African war corresponds with this theory, as he claims that it was the adventurous concept of the defence of Empire, tied to soldiers' connection with their Mother Country, England, which prompted them for service in South Africa.²⁰ Evidence of this can be seen in the words of one Victorian volunteer, who stated: 'Then, I s'pose, it's the right thing to do to stand up for y're own country, for, of course, England's our country's as well as Australia'.²¹ Testimony like this ties in well with the attitude of most Australians at the time towards England; for many, the initial decision to join the British army in going to war in South Africa was not to be questioned, as the perceived position of Australia at the time was merely a distant

subordinate to their mother country. Such opinions make it clear that men often enter war with images of a romanticised past in mind, which instils a spirit of adventure into them, thus making their war experience initially pleasurable.

Many researchers on the topic believe, however, that these expectations of war are based on a cultural myth, implicit in any society that goes to war. Herzog claims that older generations which have gone to war create a legend of war based on their own battle experiences which, in turn, fuels the sense of adventure experienced by those newly going to war.²² Similarly, Lloyd B. Lewis agrees that the ideas upon which young men go to war arise from a common belief system, which is a product of their culture.²³ Such positive influences on a young soldier may provide him with an idealised picture more easily shattered upon exposure to the harsh battle environment, rather than increasing his enjoyment of war, possibly making his war experience more severe.

Moreover, soldiers volunteer for army service for a variety of reasons, not all directly concerned with idealism and idealised views relating to the war in question. Studies on the South African War, as well as war in general, have focussed on a number of these reasons to prove that pleasure can be derived even where these are absent. This is highlighted by Alistair Thomson when discussing Australian soldiers in the First World War, who says that the adventurous mood that gripped them when approaching the battlefield and during actual combat was enhanced by the fact that many of these men had gone to war to leave unfulfilling, dreary lives.²⁴ This claim is particularly applicable to the South African War, as can be seen by the economic crisis, drought and consequent unemployment in Australia preceding the rush to enlist, which Wilcox attributes to opportunism among young men discontented with their civilian lives.²⁵ This is not only common to men leaving Australia, as seen in the letters of Hamline Glasson, a member of the famous Bushveldt Carbineers. Upon his decision to enlist, he was working for the Natal government railways, at which time he wrote in a letter to his mother: 'the fact is I didn't like joining', then clarified his decision to join by saying, 'I can't stand it any longer', referring to his position of employment. After his active service was over, he returned to work in South Africa, working for the Durban Corporation, soon after which he was prompted to enlist again for much the same reason as before, as well as the offer of twelve shillings a day working in intelligence

at the front.²⁶ The desire to leave uninteresting lives is one reason of many which has been quoted by a number who volunteered to fight in the South African war, thus illustrating the point that there are other influences which affect a soldier's apparent eagerness for battle, which in many accounts of war are too quickly attributed to a yearning for combat.

It is true, however, that some soldiers do volunteer for war because of a genuine desire to fight. This is illustrated by some accounts of men during the South African war, such as Trooper P.H. Wickerson of the New South Wales Lancers, speaking of his fellow soldiers: 'We are all eager for action, the whole line being impatient...It's wonderful how eager the men are to fight'.²⁷ Similarly, Stan Jones, of the First South Australian contingent, writes to his family: 'Although we rough it and get into some very dangerous places at times, I am not a bit sorry that I came on the War trip, it is a wonderful experience'.²⁸

However, it can be seen that the letters and diaries of soldiers fighting in the South African war more often display a disappointment with men encountered when they actually reached the battlefield. Paul Fussell illustrates this well in his study of men in the First World War, where he concentrates on the 'irony' of war, which he argues is greater in magnitude, the more naïve or idealistic a man's impressions of war are before reaching the battlefield.²⁹ As mentioned, this study concentrates on the men who are the most innocent before reaching the war front, those with little to no experience of war. Such disillusionment can often be seen in examples of those fighting in the South African War. Trooper Fred Stocks, of Bethune's Mounted Infantry, writes to his parents: 'I expect you will wonder how I like soldering [sic] well to tell you the truth. Never again my boy, never again; no one that has not been in it knows what it is'.³⁰ Similarly, Harry Victor Roberts, of the Scottish Horse F Squadron, in a letter to a friend, 'Chas', writes, clearly expressing his antipathy towards the war: 'Col. Craigh left us at Machododorp and has gone back to Victoria to raise another 250 men I suppose he will not have much trouble but my advice to you is DON'T COME'.³¹ Even Abbott asserts, in a chapter in *Tommy Cornstalk* directly dealing with the attitudes towards the war: 'Why couldn't England have 'bucked up' and fought her old war herself? We're not getting anything out of it. We're losing time, and money, and place'.³² He then ends that chapter with the claim:

'And, strange as it may seem, this is the actual view of nearly every soldier in the army'.³³ Such testimony can often be found in the personal papers of many of the soldiers in the war, even of those who were quick to fervently declare their dedication to the British cause in South Africa, thus demonstrating that the initial enthusiasm displayed by many men volunteering to go to war seldom lasted.

The aversion felt by some of the common troops towards the war they were fighting prompted many of them, in letters to family and friends, to openly declare their desire to return to Australia. An example of this can be found in almost every letter written by Trooper Jack Cock, of Bethune's Mounted Infantry, to his family, in which he repeatedly mentions his desire to come home: 'I won't be sorry when the war comes to a close, and we are homeward bound. We did not think it would last so long'.³⁴ Writing from Modder Spruit, Hamline Glasson similarly wrote: 'All the soldiers are fairly tired of the war, & longing to get back home again'.³⁵ That this was a common occurrence can be seen by a telegram sent to the South Australian Chief Secretary's Office from the New South Wales Premier, William Lyne. In it he states:

Have recd private telegram from South Africa that discontent exists amongst Australian troops being kept there over twelve months and suggesting that Imperial Govt should give definite assurance to the men as to their early return.³⁶

Thus, the problem was sufficiently widespread to prompt official action, as shown by the reply of the same day from the South Australian Premier, Frederick Holder, which states that all men who wished could leave the front after twelve months of service.

Despite the frequency with which men publicly, or privately, expressed their desire to return home, many of these men remained in the war zone even beyond their length of service. Often, these were men who had clearly stated their desire to return home. Alexander McQueen expresses his conflict of interest when he wrote to his family and friends: 'I will be glad when the war is over, but would not like to go before'.³⁷ Expressions such as these are too often, in studies of the war, attributed to a continued desire to fight, or dedication to the British cause in South Africa. However, a closer look into personal testimonies of soldiers in this position reveals that there were other

motivations that caused them to stay. The issue of 'loyalty' in Australia at the time was a dominant one. Numerous letters were sent to governments reporting cases of 'disloyalty' during the war, showing the disdain with which many civilians treated any anti-war behaviour. Dr Davies, of South Australia, wrote to the Governor, Lord Tennyson, on the topic of disloyal citizens and claimed that they were 'at present menacing the Empire far greater [sic] than people generally realise'.³⁸ Given the importance with which this was considered on the home front, the pressure on soldiers, who were, in effect, Australia's loyal representatives in South Africa, would have been immense. Many in political circles who had been voicing justifications for the sending of Australian contingents to South Africa, used the 'our country right or wrong' rationale, claiming that whether the British cause was worthy or not did not matter, as Australia was part of the British Empire and had to accede to their request for aid. This stance was opposed fervently by the Anti-War League and even some parliamentarians. One of these was the outspoken Henry Bournes Higgins who declared before Australia's entrance into the South African War: 'we have no right to enter into any war...unless we do enter into the justice of it'.³⁹ Such opinion, however, did not seem to be the prevalent one among Australian political decision makers. With this spirit of involvement prevalent, logically men fighting on the front would have found the prospect of being branded 'disloyal' by deserting extremely disagreeable.

Letters home to loved ones, however, often display a resignation towards remaining on the battlefield till the war ended out of a sense of duty. Christopher Butler wrote of fighting the Boers before reaching the battlefield: 'I promise you, old chap, I will not disgrace my relations'.⁴⁰ Similarly, Alan Wellington, when writing to his friend Philip Teer, spoke of burning the Boer farms and homes, a practice that became standard in the closing years of the war. In describing having to carry a Boer woman from her home onto a wagon, he says: 'It was hard for me to have to do it but Phil it was my duty I had to do it'.⁴¹

Some remained in South Africa because they simply had no pressing business in Australia, as many had volunteered in the first place for this reason. This can, again, be seen by the example of Hamline Glasson, who fought in the Bushveldt Carbineers, then remained in South Africa when his service was over, later joining another contingent.⁴² Glasson was one among many who requested that their service end in

South Africa, so they could remain there and find employment. Clearly, to conclude that all of soldiers' eagerness for the war emerged from a genuine desire for fighting is misleading; it is evident that other motives and considerations governed many men's minds.

Still, it can be seen that some men did desert, despite the shame involved, or at least hoped to escape the front through means that appeared more honourable, such as through wounding. It is very rare to find accounts of such actions or aspirations in examinations of the South African war, which is not to say it did not occur. The attitudes to warfare, and particularly to this war, which extolled the virtues of Empire, generally ensured, however, that the mention of these was minimal. It was from the First World War, during which in-depth research into soldier psychology took place on a much larger scale, that examples of such deeds were made truly public. This is attributable, however, to the fact that desertion was viewed as a serious and a shameful offence, as it was, as previously mentioned, not until April 1930 that execution ceased to be used as punishment for such an act. Bill Gammage, when studying soldiers of the First World War, speaks of the desire of soldiers for a 'blighty', a wound that granted them an honourable escape from the battlefield⁴³. Christian Appy, when dealing with the Vietnam War, calls these 'million dollar wounds', being wounds that ensured men were no part of the action for the rest of their tour, but not serious enough to be a severe threat on future quality of life.⁴⁴ This demonstrates the value with which some soldiers viewed the opportunity to avoid action in the combat zone.

However, even in research done on the Boer War in the past forty years, very little attention has been paid to these issues. This does not mean, though, that they did not occur. Martin Maddern, one of the Imperial Queensland Bushmen, mentions several instances of desertion in his diary. On their way to South Africa, their ship was frequently searched for stowaways, which uncovered the presence of deserters onboard.⁴⁵ Also, Watson Steel, of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles, mentions in his diary the use of wounds to escape combat: 'One fellow has "bluffed" the doctor he has rheumatism, an ailment difficult to diagnose. When the electric light goes out at 8:30 he usually dances a hornpipe in front of the stove before turning in'.⁴⁶

Thus, in looking at many of the personal narratives of these men, the image that is found of the Australian soldier is very different from the traditional, and persistent recent accounts of the enthusiastic young men marching off to battle accompanied by the fervent support of the Australian people. It seems the initial excitement at going to war was not an emotion that lasted, especially after exposure to the harsh and unpredictable battle environment of the South African War.

Frequently, in accounts of Australians in the South African War, mention is made of their reckless behaviour. These men had a reputation of misbehaviour, with many accounts of British soldiers, as well as Australian civilians, shocked at their manner of addressing officers, as well as at instances of general disobedience. Such can be seen in a letter written by the Women's Temperance Union to the Premier of South Australia, in which they insist that the 'sale and supply of intoxicants' be prevented on ships to South Africa, as it was 'quite an open secret, that in camp and on this voyage, some of the men have found these drinks a source of injury'.⁴⁷ Similarly, Major Joseph Dallimore reported in his diary on ship to South Africa, when speaking of misbehaviour among Australian troops: 'drunkenness and insubordination is the general crime'.⁴⁸ It seems that many who were unwilling to escape the battlefield, through a sense of duty or pride, found expression for their grievances through disobedience.

This behaviour is usually attributed to the 'reckless' way of the Australian male, and seen as a product of their upbringing, rather than deriving from a genuine desire to escape the war for politically motivated reasons. Richard Holmes, in his general study of soldiering, attributes many cases of desertion and misbehaviour to dissatisfaction with army life and a desire to return to the comforts of home.⁴⁹ Many personal accounts of soldiers in South Africa express a desire to return home for these reasons, rather than because of an affinity with anti-war protesters in Australia, many of whom were labelled pro-Boers because of their disapproval of the British attack, thus confirming the apolitical nature of their discontent. Nevertheless, a form of political motivation did emerge among soldiers fighting in this war. Many men, despite the atmosphere in Australia and on the war front which looked down upon 'disloyalty', were compelled to mentally stray from positive feelings about their purpose in fighting in South Africa. Open admiration of the Boers for various reasons was

common, especially in the closing days of the war, as can be seen by the blatantly 'disloyal' words of Trooper Hamline Glasson: 'I have seen enough to satisfy me that the Boers are not so bad as they are painted when you taken into consideration some of our actions'.⁵⁰ Such reactions were common in later wars, particularly in the Vietnam War where subversion against the war, and particularly pro-North Vietnamese thought, which generally commenced on the home front, spread to soldiers. In this case, these men were not only discontented with army life, but were also experiencing moral dilemmas at fighting a war against a supposedly weak, undeveloped aggressor. This platform of opposition to the war is directly comparable to that of Australian pro-Boers, but little to no mention of these ideas spreading to soldiers in South Africa has appeared. However, that such expressions are seen in this war demonstrates that political motivation may have been apparent, and 'disloyalty' may have seemed an attractive option to men who were engaged in a war they did not want to continue fighting. This therefore begins to indicate an association between the position on the war of those in the front lines and perhaps those of a similar social status on the home front.

Further evidence that the impressions of the soldiers fighting in South Africa were not as uncomplicated as often alleged is also shown by the emphasis many placed on survival of the war above mere combat participation as the ultimate reward of their involvement. Robert Lifton, a psychologist writing on Vietnam soldiers through his regular attendance of veterans' rap groups after the war, noticed that as a result of the indifference of many soldiers to the tactical aims of the war, their goal in fighting the war was no longer the possibility of 'glory' or a 'defense of national values', but was instead merely surviving it⁵¹. Similarly, Samuel Hynes, in *The Soldiers' Tale*, notices this tendency among soldiers in the Second World War, in which he claims that merely the survival of wounds was seen as a courageous element of combat duty, rather than as an 'interruption of the real war story'.⁵² Such an approach to combat duty can be seen in the testimony of men fighting in South Africa, thus demonstrating a change from the traditional aim of the soldiers of fighting gallantly despite the possibility of injury or death. Samuel Hubbe, in a letter home, states: 'I will do my duty as a brave man and the son of my father but will take no unnecessary risks'.⁵³ Stan Jones also says, in a letter to his mother: 'you do not forget to think each time we have a go-in, how lucky we were that we were not killed or wounded. Then you can't

help but wonder how you will get on the next day or the next time that you have a set to with the Boers'.⁵⁴ Clearly then, the thoughts of these soldiers in battle were not merely on the possibility of fighting bravely, an objective that was often fostered by their military superiors, but on lasting till the battle was over, thus demonstrating a synonymy between soldiers in the South African war and those decades later.

Conclusion

This study gives an indication of the conclusions that can be achieved in studying Australian soldiers in the South African War, given the emergence of many more recent theories regarding the attitudes and behaviour of soldiers in war. It is clear, then, that there is an immense amount of research to be done to reach definite conclusions on both the parallels between Australian soldiers during the South African War and soldiers in other modern wars, as well as the comparability of combat soldiers in the war with both pro- and anti-war civilians of the same class basis. Traditional assumptions about the outlook of a soldier in battle, especially in the time of the South African War, are based on views that are not necessarily valid nowadays. This limits considerably our impressions of soldiers from the past, and calls for a more in-depth look at their lives given theories established in more recent times. Using such theories, accounts of soldiers can be revised to give a new interpretation of the behaviour of the soldiers fighting in the South African war, and indeed, all wars.

Notes

¹ See Penny, Barbara R, 'Australia's Reactions to the Boer War – A Study in Colonial Imperialism', *The Journal of British Studies*, Volume 7, Number 1, November 1967

² Connolly, Chris, 'Clan, Birthplace, Loyalty: Australian Attitudes to the Boer War', *Historical Studies*, Volume 18, Number 71, October 1978, p. 220, 226.

³ Thompson, Rosemary H, Doctoral thesis, *South African and Imperial Affairs 1895-1911: A Study of Australian Press Opinion*, Flinders University of South Australia, 1 September 1969, p. 4

⁴ See Wilcox, Craig, *Australia's Boer War: The War in South Africa 1899-1902*, Oxford University Press: Victoria, 2002, and Wallace RL, *The Australians at the Boer War*, The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service: Canberra, 1976

⁵ Herzog, Tobey C., *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost*, Routledge: London, 1992, p. 4

⁶ Abbott, Jack HM, *Tommy Cornstalk: Being some account of the less notable features of the South African war from the point of view of the Australian Ranks*, Longmans Green and Co: London, 1902, p. 43

⁷ Leese, Peter, *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War*, Palgrave MacMillan: Hampshire, 2002, p. 2

⁸ Leese, *Shell Shock*, p. 20

⁹ Byers Robert J, Letter, 21 August 1900, MS9691, State Library of Victoria

'Never Again my Boy' – Effie Karageorgos

- ¹⁰ Jones, Stan, Letter, 6 July 1900, D6427 (L), State Library of South Australia
- ¹¹ Sabine, Charles G, Letter, 25 August 1900, PRG57/10, State Library of South Australia
- ¹² Burke, Peter, *Varieties of Cultural History*, Cornell University Press: New York, 1997, p. 44
- ¹³ Penny, 'Australia's Reactions to the Boer War', p. 118
- ¹⁴ Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, 188
- ¹⁵ Penny, 'Australia's Reactions to the Boer War', p. 127
- ¹⁶ Bourke, Joanna, *An Intimate History of Killing*, Granta Books: London, 1999, p. 14
- ¹⁷ Dinter, Elmar, *Hero or Coward: Pressures Facing the Soldier in Battle*, Frank Cass: Great Britain, 1985, p. 22
- ¹⁸ Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, p. 97
- ¹⁹ Dawson, Graham, *Soldiers Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, Routledge: London, 1994, p. 59
- ²⁰ Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War*, p. 1
- ²¹ Anonymous in Reay W T, *Australians in War: With the Australian Regiment from Melbourne to Bloemfontein*, Massina: Melbourne, 1901, p. 26
- ²² Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories*, p. 4
- ²³ Lewis, Lloyd B, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives*, Greenwood Press: Connecticut, 1985, p. 10
- ²⁴ Thomson, Alistair, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Oxford University Press: Melbourne, 1994, p. 28
- ²⁵ Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, p. 34
- ²⁶ Glasson, Hamline, Letter, 10 April 1901, MLMSS 3858, State Library of New South Wales
- ²⁷ Wickerson PH, in Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War*, p. 79
- ²⁸ Jones, Stan, Letter, 18 May 1900, D6427(L), State Library of South Australia
- ²⁹ Fussell, Paul, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford University Press: New York, 1975, p. 18
- ³⁰ Stocks, Fred W, Letter, 14 June 1901, MS11729, State Library of Victoria
- ³¹ Roberts, Harry Victor, Letter, undated, MS 9882, State Library of Victoria
- ³² Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, p. 65
- ³³ Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk*, p. 74
- ³⁴ Cock, Jack, Letter, 9 July 1900, MS 13385, State Library of Victoria
- ³⁵ Glasson Hamline, Letter, 31 October 1900, MLMSS 3858, State Library of New South Wales
- ³⁶ Lyne William, Telegram to CSO SA, 19 February 1901, GRG 24/6/480/307, State Records of South Australia
- ³⁷ McQueen Alexander, Letter, 17 April 1900, MS 9662, State Library of Victoria
- ³⁸ Davies, HGB, Letter to Tennyson, 22 December 1899, GRG 24/6/471/1230, State Records of South Australia
- ³⁹ Higgins Henry Bournes, *Parliamentary Debates - Victoria, Volume 92*, Melbourne, 1899, p. 1777
- ⁴⁰ Butler Christopher in Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War*, p. 38
- ⁴¹ Wellington Alan, Letter, 7 February 1902, D7334(L), State Library of South Australia
- ⁴² Glasson Hamline, Letters, MLMSS 3858, State Library of New South Wales
- ⁴³ Gammage Bill, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* [1974], Penguin Books: Victoria, 1975, p. 170
- ⁴⁴ Appy, Christian, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, University of Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1993, p. 244
- ⁴⁵ Maddern Martin, Diary, D4860(L), State Library of South Australia
- ⁴⁶ Steel, Watson Augustus, *In the Ranks of the Mounted Rifles (A diary of the campaign from day to day) 1899-1901*, 29 June 1901, MLMSS 2105, State Library of New South Wales
- ⁴⁷ Women's Temperance Union, Letter to CSO, 20 February 1900, GRG 24/6/472/248, State Records of South Australia
- ⁴⁸ Dallimore Joseph, Diary, Book I, 6 May 1900, PA 99/75, State Library of Victoria
- ⁴⁹ Holmes, Richard, *Firing Line* [1985], Penguin: Middlesex, 1987, p. 85
- ⁵⁰ Glasson Hamline, Letter, 14 February 1902, MLMSS 3858, State Library of New South Wales
- ⁵¹ Lifton, Robert Jay, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners*, Wildwood House: London, 1973, p. 41
- ⁵² Hynes, Samuel, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, Penguin: New York, 1997, p. 128
- ⁵³ Hubbe, Samuel, in Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War*, p. 223
- ⁵⁴ Jones Stan, Letter, 27 February 1900, D6427(L), State Library of South Australia