

## The Memories and Mythologies of South Africa's Great War

*Mourning Becomes...Post/memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War.* By Liz Stanley. Wits University Press, Johannesburg; 2008, 328 pp. ISBN 978-1-86814-475-4. R220.00.

For those who start them, wars are almost always an illusion, in the sense that the conflict with which they end up is rarely the contest which they had imagined at the beginning. In forcing war upon South Africa's Boer Republics in 1899, Britain's War Office envisaged a short little colonial war, easy on the purse and light on casualties. Instead, in its bid to crush settler republicanism and thereby complete the imperial conquest of southern Africa, London got rather more than it had bargained for. The British found themselves lumbered with a draining, costly and controversial military campaign which did them little credit. Likewise, the Boers, too, discovered that they had bitten off more than they could chew. Running down to the wire, they had to wage a desperate and tormented 'people's war' for existence.

Once it had become apparent that victory on the battlefield would not do the job, the issue for Britain was how this war was to be won. Its answer to Boer guerrilla resistance was a form of modern total war. This involved laying waste to the enemy countryside, interning rural civilians in camps, and exploiting the instruments of modern industrial war—telephones, telegraph, trains, barbed wire, searchlights and observation balloons—to control the field of conflict and to box in enemy forces so that they could be run down and picked off. Unsurprisingly, the ruthlessness with which the Boer states were brought to heel finally in 1902 left no shortage of post-war wounds to be licked. Of these, the most searing and enduring have been Britain's wretched concentration camps, in which close to 30 000 Boer

women, children and men perished in appalling living conditions. The traumatic legacy of these camps, for decades part of the gastric juice of Afrikaner nationalism, is the subject of this book, first published by Manchester University Press in 2006 and now available locally in an attractive paperback edition. *Mourning Becomes* inhabits the continuously expanding historical field of war memory and war commemoration, exploring here the long-term trajectory of the climate of remembrance engendered by the painful history of South Africa's camps. As this book shows, that climate is a dense and tangled site of remembrance, littered with religion, nationalism, public and private mourning and bereavement, memorials and monuments.

In her exploration of this terrain, Stanley has read both widely and well, making good use of the recent literature on the conflict stimulated by its recent centenary commemoration. While her sources are primarily English, she draws on Afrikaans works and has trawled through a wealth of archival material. Fancy theorists like Derrida and Bakhtin put in the obligatory appearance. Chapter structure and topics, a mix of case studies and more expansive reflections, are interestingly-conceived and the volume has a satisfying chronological span. It starts with the celebrated pro-Boer humanitarian reformer, Emily Hobhouse, and ends with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its contemporary lens on the horrors of the national past and the infinitely complicated business of historical truth, transcendence and healing.

In other respects, Liz Stanley's purpose

is no less wide-ranging. Alongside the staple camp fare of epidemics, rations, medical provision and mortality rates, this book weaves in analysis of topics that have often either been ignored or which have received insufficient attention. These include the fate of the thousands of displaced black people tipped into the camp network, the touchy position of backsliding republican burghers who stuck it out with their camp families, and the stony treatment of illegitimate or mixed-race children. These white camp realities, the author stresses, 'have vanished into nationalist mythologising for far too long' (p. 163). In this illuminating manner, *Mourning Becomes* alerts us to a central assumption, that to confront historical memory is to deal not only with what is remembered but with what has been forgotten and why.

No one who reads this intriguing study will be left in the dark about the totality of the concentration camp saga, and the complex—if not convoluted—kinds of remembrance it has bequeathed for absorption into what the author describes as a racialised nationalist framework. There is fascinating assessment of the pivotal influence of women's testimonies in shaping the history of incarceration, of the use of the imagery of child starvation to turn camp experience into that of a charnel house, and of the bereavement rituals of camp cemeteries and their gardens of remembrance. Put another way, the argument advanced here is that for the deeper history of camp memory and the memory of camp history, one needs to take into account far more than the symbolism of the National Women's Monument in Bloemfontein, the usual standby in most historical writing. Moreover, in its humane understanding of the weight of this particular burden of the South African past, *Mourning Becomes* treats it all not through sentiment but through admirably-measured scholarship.

Written in the opaque—at times, perplexingly so—style of post-modernist prose, some readers (including this reviewer) will find it hard going following the more laborious arguments. The same goes for the author's insertion of herself as a meandering presence in the text, so that we learn such riveting detail as the need for 'coat, mittens and scarf' in a Pretoria and Bloemfontein winter in July 2004. As a whole, *Mourning Becomes* is undoubtedly impressive; in parts, it is also faintly irritating.

**Bill Nasson**

Department of History,  
Stellenbosch University,  
Private Bag X1,  
Matieland 7602.

E-mail: [bnasson@sun.ac.za](mailto:bnasson@sun.ac.za)



Replica coffin of concentration camp victim being carried to war monument, October 1972.