



Inleiding/Introduction

Beelde van 'n oorlog – trauma en identiteit

Images of a war – trauma and identity

Hierdie spesiale nommer van *Literator* word gepubliseer as deel van die honderdjarige herdenking van die Anglo-Boereoorlog. Die doel van hierdie nommer was veral om die rol van beelde en voorstellings van die oorlog te verken. Vrae waarin ons veral belanggestel het, was hoe sulke beelde gevorm en gebruik is, hoe hulle met mekaar vergelyk, wat hulle rol in die politiek of die vorming van identiteit is, en watter beelde van die oorlog in die buiteland gebruik is. Dit is natuurlik deel van die besinning oor die oorlog en sy betekenis vir vandag.

Soos hieronder in meer besonderhede verduidelik word, blyk uit hierdie verkenning van die beelde veral vier belangrike temas. Eerstens bestaan daar 'n besondere verband tussen herinnering, trauma en identiteit. Verder is die dominante beelde van die boerekryger en die lydende vrou in die kampe met verloop van tyd gedemitologiseer. Dit hang nou saam met die wyse waarop die trauma van die lydende vroue verwerk is – as volksmoeders wat gaandeweg vir die nasionale projek onnodig geword het. Geslagrolkweessies is dus ook baie prominent in die beeldvorming van die oorlog. Uit die verskillende perspektiewe op die oorlog blyk ook duidelik dat die oorlog 'n teks is en dat geskiedskrywing as her-verbeelding van die oorlog ook heelwat fiksionele elemente bevat.

Why commemorate the war?

Commemorating the war means trying to reimagine and understand the events. In reimagining these events remembering the suffering of people during the war cannot be avoided. Though the past significance of the war might be impossible for us to understand completely, we have to try and understand its present-day meaning. As Johan Snyman explains in his article, there is a politics of memory, in that strategies of dealing with the past and past suffering influence what we regard as desirable in the present-day organisation of human society.

The politics of memory leads one also to the question: what does it mean to publish this special issue? What are the reasons behind the commemoration and what are its functions in the present-day world? Is it important to remember a historical event like the war because it had an enormous influence on South Africa as a whole? Or is this commemoration just another media hype, just an exercise in the tourist packaging and marketing of South Africa and its battlefields?

If the commemoration is to be more than an empty commodification of the war we have to analyse carefully the desire to remember and the ends it serves. In other words, we must look carefully at the politics of memory.

The commemoration has at least two important social functions today. Firstly, it is part of nation building. Highlighting a shared suffering and fostering pride in a common history can unite South Africa, split and divided by its recent history. In this way it can help to construct a common future.

Secondly, perhaps more fundamentally, the commemoration can play an important part in fostering discussion about new identities for South Africans. The war might serve as a kind of prophylactic to prevent similar conflict and suffering in future if, through remembering the war, we could learn to recognise and respect the dignity of the other. But as Snyman also points out, restricting suffering to one category of people instead of appealing to a universal humanity, can lead to further conflict and suffering. This is one lesson to be learnt from our recent apartheid past. But again, identity formation is not a simple matter, since it is a dialectical process whereby the other and the foreign, those aspects of the self that are strange to the self, are incorporated. Only by incorporating what is disturbing and un-self-ish – in the war and in apartheid history – will growth and renewal seem possible.

The politics of memory is also, as the different articles show, a politics of gender, a politics of naming, a politics of image building and identity formation, a politics of discourse and a politics of writing history itself.

Memory, trauma and identity

The relationship between memory, trauma and identity is a strong theme in several of the articles. Interesting comparative perspectives emerge in the way in which memory was used in the past and is used today to deal with individual and group trauma and to support the construction of identities. Johan Snyman analyses the politics of memory in the case of the experience of Boer women in the British concentration camps, comparing different strategies of remembering and different functions of memory. He shows *inter alia* how the women in the camps resorted to different strategies to deal with their traumatic experience of suffering and loss. Both Snyman and Heilna du Plooy, in her review article of

the recently published *Boereoorlogstories*, link the war experiences at the beginning of the century with the contemporary situation in post-apartheid South Africa. The evidence of apartheid atrocities put before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been disturbing, even traumatic, for many Afrikaners. Du Plooy states that this disturbing present is so complex and so near that it can only be approached indirectly through stories.

Demythologising the image of the heroic Boer and the suffering woman

Heroic male warriors. Suffering women in the concentration camps. From an Afrikaner perspective these remain the enduring images of the Anglo-Boer War, the most extensive colonial war to be fought on African soil, and a war that heralded the 20th century dispensation in South Africa. Various contributions in this volume revisit these images of the war, placing them in a different perspective in a “new” South Africa.

Snyman explains how Afrikaner men transformed the women who had died in the camps from victims into heroines who had sacrificed their lives for a nationalistic ideal. This was done to restore the dignity of the women *post factum*, but primarily to restore the men’s own self-image. The National Women’s Monument in Bloemfontein stands as a concrete reminder of this strategy of memory. Kobus du Pisani indicates how the image of the heroic Boer warrior, just like that of the suffering woman, was exploited by Afrikaner nationalist leaders and adapted in different phases of the Afrikaner nationalist project to suit socio-political needs, particularly to promote the evasive ideal of Afrikaner unity.

The Boer warrior image has been and is still being reconceptualised by Afrikaners who are reconstructing their identities in a period of transformation. This happened in Afrikaans literature as well, a case in point being Etienne Leroux’s novel *Magersfontein o Magersfontein*. Luc Renders demonstrates how the warrior image is debunked in two recent novels, *Op soek na generaal Mannetjies Mentz* by Christoffel Coetzee and *Verliesfontein* by Karel Schoeman. Renders argues that contemporary Afrikaans authors demonstrate their total rejection of the ideology of previous generations by debunking traditional conceptions of the Anglo Boer War, thereby forcing Afrikaners to look into their own heart of darkness. In *Verliesfontein* the Boers are ghostlike presences who are not allowed their perspective on the events and who eventually emerge as callous and unthinking racists. In *Mannetjies Mentz* the focus falls on the resourcefulness and quiet heroism of women and black people instead of on the heroic Boer warrior. The General, who is Everyman as his name indicates (it can be translated as “male human”, or even “immature male of the human species”), is described as being driven by the ideal of an absolutely new society. In the

service of this ideal pain and fear and the most inhumane atrocities are a necessity. The noble Boer warrior is transformed into an abomination. The book resonates powerfully against the background of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: reading the book is a miming of the process of incorporating into our identity, accepting as part of ourselves, the atrocities committed in the name of an ideal by people like Eugene de Kock. In its confessional structure, too, the question about the significance of the life and death of loved ones comes across powerfully. In opposition to the traditional interpretation of the war as a heroic freedom struggle against British domination the war assumes the aspect of an essentially unheroic civil war between Afrikaners, in which unrestrained violence and naked racism prevailed.

With the doubts created regarding accepted truths about the war by contemporary novels such as these Hein Viljoen revisits the text of “Oom Gert vertel”. He demonstrates how a poem celebrated for its nationalism reveals in its silences and resonances a different view of the pureblooded Boer. It is not the Boer warrior who is celebrated; rather, the poem draws a moving portrait of the conflicting loyalties of an Afrikaans-speaking sympathiser with the Boer cause in the Cape Colony. To make matters worse, his pain and suffering might have been overshadowed by the dominant images of the Boer warrior and the suffering women and children after the war. The poem is also a very eloquent exercise in rewriting history – in saying much by omitting a lot; in fact, saying very little about what might be regarded as the main events, but speaking powerfully about the human cost of war.

Memory and gender politics

Gender relations form another important focus of several contributions. Snyman shows how Emily Hobhouse universalised the local image of the suffering Boer women into a symbol of the universal struggle of voiceless women. She broke through ethnic barriers to express universal moral demands. In her view the Women’s Monument took on a sublime aspect. Elsie Cloete’s article is an analysis of how women’s identities are constructed by men, especially by nationalist discourse. For this purpose she analyses three brochures of the National Women’s Monument, erected to commemorate the white women and children who died in the concentration camps and in the war in general. She argues that the war was an unsettled period when women had more freedom, but that after the war the position of women was gradually redefined and circumscribed by male nationalist discourse.

The articles by Truter and Van der Merwe & Grobler, interestingly enough, both describe the strong role some women played during the war, showing up the “manly” image of women in unsettled times. In her article on the wartime experiences of Mrs Tibbie Steyn, Elbie Truter relates how this sheltered and dependent woman was tried by suffering and adversity and became a symbol of

resistance and of the indomitable spirit of the Boer republics. Through humiliation and suffering she discovered her own inner strength so that she was able to stand up against the British and to nurse her husband back to health in Europe after illness lamed and nearly blinded him during the last months of the war. Through her shining example of strength and endurance she earned herself a lasting place in the heart of the Afrikaner people. Her story is one of being tested until only the pure mettle of intrinsic quality remained. This is part, the author implies, of the human meaning of the war, a war in which the human interest, in General J.C. Smuts's words, far outweighed the military interest. Mrs Steyn demonstrated that the human soul endures; that the human spirit can overcome adversity. As Cloete indicates, Mrs Steyn became a role model of the nation – one of the prototypes of the mother of the nation. That she was buried with her husband within the enclosure of the National Women's Monument is proof of this. But in this her individuality was overshadowed by her husband and by the requirements of the national project.

Rita van der Merwe and Jackie Grobler take the diary of Johanna van Warmelo, famous author of *The Petticoat Commando*, as their point of departure and argue that the diary provides a unique personal history and personal perspective on the war that is extremely valuable for understanding the cultural history of that time. The diary also relates her personal small history and personal adventures within the bigger history of the war. Van der Merwe & Grobler give a factual account of the work of these courageous women in aid of the commandos in the field. Johanna van Warmelo could not remain satisfied within the constraints on women in Victorian times. Her work as a spy during the war and the history of her spying activities novelised in *The Petticoat Commando* contributed to the formation of an Afrikaner national consciousness. In other words, Johanna van Warmelo typifies the strong and self-confident female warrior who shows the same pluck and resourcefulness as the men in the field and who can serve as a role model for women in a period of unsettlement.

What happens when a period of unsettlement ends, Cloete argues, can be gauged from the brochures written by men on the National Women's Monument. According to her, three stages in the nationalist making of Afrikaner women can be distinguished. In the first stage women are regarded as mothers of the nation who have to nurture the infant nation. In the second stage the nation has grown strong enough to be weaned from these mothers, so that the monument can become a symbol of nationalist success. In the third stage, reached in the thirties, the women are practically laid to rest: they are no longer necessary to the nationalist project and should stay in their place. What is fascinating about Cloete's analysis, is that she postulates that the position of women might become similarly ghettoised in the African nationalist project now that success has been attained. Male nationalist discourse might in their case also lead them to accept that gender issues should be subordinate to the nationalist imperative.

This boils down to a criticism of nationalism as the “normative mode of the political”, suggesting that alternate arrangements should be sought.

Different perspectives

Tracing the way wars are usually named (for the primary participants, the issues they are about, their duration, the battle terrain), Elize van Eeden shows how strongly political a seemingly simple issue like the name of the war is. Analysing the politics of naming shows that the various names given to the war carry emotional and ideological connotations, since the perception and memory of an event can be controlled by the way it is named. From a scientific perspective the most inclusive and neutral name might be preferable, but in opting for the “South African War”, Van Eeden is striving for the ideal of inclusivity. Here lies a paradox. The desire is to be inclusive by recognising that white and black share a history of suffering during the war. This is part of the South African nation building project. The “South African War” is, however, a name that primarily makes sense as part of a series of geographical names of wars given from a 19th century British perspective: the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, the Afghan War, the Transvaal War and the South African War. In a South African perspective this name is not distinctive and makes little sense: weren’t all wars in South Africa South African wars?

As a war against colonisation, one of the principal issues of the war was precisely the point that the British Empire, no matter how powerful, had no moral right to force its will on the people of the former Boer republics. What is at issue is the right of the Boers to be recognised as other, as part of universal humanity and entitled to be treated like any other human community. Calling it the South African War, people may argue, misrecognises this universal humanity and could thus be regarded as an imperialist act.

Images of the war prevalent outside South Africa also receive attention. The distorted image of the Boers and the war in the books of the remarkably successful Dutch author Louwrens Penning is analysed by Jacques van der Elst. Although these novels distorted historic facts and were hardly more than fantasy, they portrayed Afrikaner heroes involved in a “holy” war against the English in a positive idealised light. Blacks were stereotyped and treated condescendingly. By drawing on his readers’ taste for imaginatively embroidered events with exotic people in an exotic yet familiar setting, Penning’s work for many years had a decisive impact on Dutch views of the Afrikaner.

Andries Wessels analyses Irish involvement in the war on both sides. Irish ambiguity concerning the war stemmed from the fact that Irish imperialists defended the cause of Empire, whereas Irish nationalists supported the Boer cause. The dilemma of the majority of Irish combatants was that they fought for

England while sympathising with the Boers. For them the war took on the aspect of a displaced Irish struggle for Irish causes – a struggle waged as much with the pen as with the rifle, as Wessels shows in his analysis of popular verse of that time.

A war in texts: The unavoidable textual nature of the war

In the context of postmodernist discourse the power of the pen is a clearly identifiable thread that runs through most of the contributions. In many ways the Anglo-Boer War is today a war of words, a text. Millions of words have been written about the war. The very name of the war has been hotly contested, as is shown by Elize van Eeden. In Du Plooy's review article the textuality of history is emphasised. She investigates the relationship between the current political situation, postmodernist literary trends and the memory of the war. It is shown how the narrators of short stories engage with the past in different ways, *inter alia* by indicating the fallacies of historiography and by contrasting little narratives with the master narrative of official historical documents.

It is remarkable how many of the contributors, by drawing on personal documents like diaries and letters, are writing small, personal histories. Diaries and letters are forms of discourse that allow the repressed voices of women to be heard. In most cases, ironically, it is the manly heroic women whose voices are heard and then mostly in masculine terms or in terms associated with the male warrior image. Being recognised as authors, in other words, forms part of their strong, manly image: they are allowed to become creators, writers of discourse and of his-story.

One central implication of all the contributions to this special issue is that in literature and history telling stories is equally important. It is just as important to ask who can tell the story and how the story should be told. One of the unresolved tensions in the divergent images of the war is the tension between universal humanity and particular, personal humanity. Aristotle demarcated history from what we today would call literature by emphasising that history deals with the universal and literature with the particular. Personal history, diaries, letters and literature that test the boundaries of fictionality tend to deconstruct the Aristotelian view. Literature is, after all, not merely a reflection of life, but a construction and a modelling of the possibilities in life.

How to write history: fact/fiction

The past is another country, a country that cannot be revisited physically, only mentally. Historians have made it their task to "reconstruct" the past. Earlier generations of professional historians attempted to achieve this by a meticulous investigation and recording of facts. As the scientific discipline of history further developed it became clear that there was an undeniable fictional element in the

mental processes connected with history writing, which was described as an imaginative reliving of the past. Today it is generally accepted that historiography consists of both factual and fictional elements. If facts are the bricks in the house of history, fiction is the mortar that keeps the construction together and gives it shape. Historical reconstruction is now mostly seen in terms of "reimagining" the past. The title of this special issue, "Images of a war", links up with the concept of reimagination by showing how images or metaphors associated with a particular event, in this case the Anglo-Boer War, are constantly being transformed. Studying the images of the war also confronts us with an intellectual challenge to reconfigure the images of the Anglo-Boer War so that they can be fertile for a more humane future in South Africa.

Dankbetuigings

Ten slotte, hartlik dank aan die skrywers vir hulle uitstekende bydraes tot hierdie nommer, wat ook spesiaal is danksy die groot verskeidenheid onderwerpe wat hulle aangeraak het en die deeglike navorsing vir elke bydrae. Jennie Terblanche het 'n spesiale en besondere beeld vir die buiteblad en die bemarkingsbrosjure van hierdie nommer ontwerp. Baie dankie daarvoor. Spesiaal ook dankie aan Mariana Venter, Susan Lourens en Lucia Seleka, die span van die Buro vir Wetenskaplike Tydskrifte, wat hierdie nommer op hulle gebruikelike deeglike en professionele wyse die lig laat sien het.

Hein Viljoen & Kobus du Pisani

Gasredakteurs

Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir CHO