

Catherine Portsmouth's letter

to her family in England, about her experiences during the first 6 months of the Second Anglo-Boer War

Background

Catherine Portsmouth (1846–1933), born Matthews, was the widow of Job Portsmouth (1845–1895), who was born in Basingstoke, Hampshire, while Catherine's birthplace was nearby Rotherwick. Portsmouth arrived in Natal in 1874. He established a store and forwarding agency at Good Hope, one mile south of what came to be *Wyford*, and also a stable for post-cart horses. Later he purchased 103 acres of the farm *Wagtenbeetjes Kop*. This was named *Wyford*, after the farm *Wyeferd*, near the village of Sherborne St John, north of Basingstoke, where Catherine had lived.

Catherine landed in Durban in December 1878 and the two were married in January 1879 after an eleven-year courtship. At first they lived in two wood-and-iron rooms behind the store and stable, with an outdoor kitchen. In 1882 the substantial store and residence were completed.

Four children were born to the couple, viz. William (1881–1958), Elizabeth (1883–1887), Henry (born 1885) and Catherine Dorothy (the 'Kittywee' of the letter, who was born in 1888).

Astride the road from Ladysmith to the Free State, as it was, the Underberg/Good Hope/*Wyford* area almost constituted a village. (This Underberg should not be confused with the present village of that name in the Southern Drakensberg.) Post-carts passed each way daily, and for eight months of the year numerous wagons lumbered through, averaging 3 000 a month. Besides the Portsmouths' store and post-cart stage, there was the Good Hope Hotel, a boarding-house, two blacksmith shops, a police station (with a staff of 10 to 15), a customs house and a sheep-dipping officer. All this changed with the opening of the railway line to the Free State border in 1891. The boarding-house and the smithies closed, the police station was moved half-way up the pass, while the customs house was relocated at the village of Van Reenen, seven miles away.

When the Second Anglo-Boer War broke out, the Portsmouth household consisted of Catherine and her ten-year-old daughter, Richard Kermode (Dick) Sansbury (1869–1958), the store manager, his two sisters Essie and Lilian, a guest, Jack Fraser, and Mr Smith who worked in the store. The Portsmouth sons, William and Henry, were in Durban, William working, and Henry at school.

Once the siege of Ladysmith was lifted Mrs Portsmouth went to Durban to see her sons.

All the Portsmouths returned to *Wyford* in June 1900. Their existence in a 'no man's land' between the Boers and the British ended in August, when the latter occupied the village of Van Reenen. Despite Mrs Portsmouth's efforts to remain on her property, the family was evacuated in July 1901, orders having been given for the removal of all residing within twenty miles of the border.

A few months later, in October, further troubles afflicted the family. Henry Portsmouth, Dick Sansbury and two others were arrested for high treason, accused of having provided the Boer forces with supplies. Fortunately they were acquitted in April 1902, there being no evidence to support the charge.

In June 1902 the family returned to *Wyford*, where, in Henry's words, they had to 'start afresh from rock-bottom to build it up as a prosperous farm and store and to re-establish the home'. The British had been using the property as a remount depot and veterinary hospital.

Both Job and Catherine Portsmouth are buried at *Wyford*.

Much of the above Portsmouth information is taken from a record written after 1960 by Henry Portsmouth, before the farm passed out of the family.

The copy of the letter used for publication is a typewritten précis of Mrs Portsmouth's diary. The latter was written in an exercise book, and was in existence up to the beginning of the Second World War, when it was lent to friends and never returned. There are anomalies in the spelling of Dutch names. Mrs Portsmouth could have been responsible for some, e.g. Pretorias for Pretorius and Coetze for Coetzee, but van Roya/van Royer instead of van Rooyen, and Bylor for Byloo, vander Lure/van der Leeman for van der Leeuw, and Rinsloo instead of Prinsloo might have occurred in the original transcription.

The editor would like to thank Mr Alan Povall of Hillcrest, Natal, for lending the copy of the letter and Henry Portsmouth's notes, and to Mr and Mrs Hubert Elffers of St Albans, Hertfordshire, for giving permission for publication. Mrs Shirley Elffers is the daughter of Henry Portsmouth.

Mrs Portsmouth's grammar and punctuation have been left unchanged.

Underberg, Natal
South Africa.
Nov. 19th, 1899.

To my beloved friends in the old country, who will be interested to read the experiences of the little party in the Underberg home, during the terrible war between the Dutch and English, and of our share in all that was so painful, from October 11th till March 23rd 1900.

My letter expressed some of the fears which filled our hearts, but I purposely refrained from stating that there was a possibility of our being in danger here, being so near to the Free State border. In all the up country districts every home (with few exceptions) was left; the inmates going down nearer the coast. I was advised to do so, for weeks this was a matter of special prayer to be guided rightly and I believe and still believe, I was led to stay here, and as my story is told, I think my dear friends will think so too.

My last letters to the dear ones at Rose Hill and to Hursted were written on the 11th and 12th of October — just as the Boers were massed at Van Reenen. We sent a Kafir boy, at some risk, through to Ladysmith with letters. He brought back a few, and we were told that all letters for the upper districts were to be held at the GPO, Maritzburg (what a pile must be there for us). Cousin Mary's of Sept. 22nd I received on Oct. 19th. The two letters from my boys which I looked for did not come, neither did Lillie get any from Mr Chapman¹.

On the 12th and 13th of Oct. the Boers could be seen at the very top of the mountains round the Berg and with a field glass we could see them facing their big guns.

Saturday 14th, a day, the close of which will ever stand out as the most terrible of all to us. In the morning Mrs W Scott² came over begging us to find some way for her to get into Ladysmith, she was in a great state of fear and excitement. Dick and I talked it over and decided to let her have the waggon, and start that afternoon, it was a risk we knew. All was bustle and confusion, and in the midst of it all, a gentleman drove into the yard with a lady nurse; the lady nurse had been attending a case in Harrismith, and was wanting to get through to Natal (Durban really) before hostilities commenced. The gentleman had been kind enough to offer to get her down as far as Underberg. She went on in the waggon with Mrs Scott. The gentleman was Mr Meiring³, the head of the Free State Customs, he was well known to the Sansburys in Harrismith, and to Mr Fraser. In Bloemfontien they met as friends. After the waggon had started Mr Meiring said to me, 'Mrs Portsmouth my horses have come all the way from Harrismith and are pretty well knocked up, will you hire me a pair to go up the Berg?' I said at once, 'Is it safe?' and he replied with great dignity, 'perfectly safe. I will see your horses safely returned with whoever takes mine up.' Then I appealed to Dick, who also said, 'It is alright (*sic*) with Mr Meiring.' Mr Fraser offered to take the horses up. My two horses were put into the spider, and then it was found that Mr Meiring's were not riding horses and so could not be ridden up the Berg. At last Dick took them in hand and drove them up before him. Mr Fraser was with him. I was in the kitchen preparing food for some refugees who had come through from Harrismith. Some time after Mr Fraser returned saying, 'Dick insisted on going himself as the horses were such a trouble.'

Seven o'clock and no Dick, eight o'clock and then we began to fear. Another hour told us plainly something was wrong. Oh! what a night that was and the next day (Sunday) it was terrible. We slept that night from pure exhaustion of body and spirit, then the awakening Monday morning [October 16th] to the agony of it all, to what it meant to poor Dick and ourselves. I think in my heart I said, 'God has forsaken me.' I thank him the darkness did not last long. The morning hours passed away, about twelve o'clock we saw on one of the distant hills a commando of Boers moving along, and an hour and a half later they passed our home. We saw them coming, and thought it best to shew ourselves. Mr Fraser and Mr Smith⁴ went on to the verandah in front of the store, Essie, Lillie and I, with Kittywee clinging to me, stood by the open dining room window. The Boers, a rough low looking lot of men, all armed, about 50 in number, halted outside the gates. We waited scarcely wondering, hardly feeling. Then Mr Fraser walked boldly down to them, asked if they wished to come in, they said no, and began to move on at once. When they had all passed and we knew we were safe for that time, the reaction from the strain came. Poor Kittywee burst into tears, and the girls and I were very shaky. Mr Byloo⁵ came back from his dinner, just as the last were passing, and he hurried to enquire for 'Mr Sansbury,' one answered, 'Oh yes, we have him a prisoner, and he is being sent to Harrismith.' The poor Kaffirs all ran into the bushes near to hide, and stayed till the Boers were at a safe distance. A little later a message came from our neighbours the Pretoriuses⁶ to tell me the Field Cornet was coming to see me. In a few minutes he was here. I went into the dining room to him, he rose and said, 'Mrs Portsmouth I believe, I am Field Cornet van Rooyen and I have called to tell you that you will be perfectly safe here, so long as you stay quietly in your home and

remain perfectly neutral. You will not be interfered with, our men will receive orders not to touch you or destroy your property or anything belonging to you.' Then we enquired about Dick, and I told him exactly how he had come to be up the Berg, he listened, and said he was sorry for us, but we might rest assured that he was quite safe. We pleaded for his release, this he gave no hope of till the war was over, but that would not be long he said. He was very angry with Mr Meiring and said he had no authority to take an Englishman into the Laager⁷, and he too had been arrested. He gave me permission to write to Dick an open letter, and he took it and promised it should be delivered, which it was, but Dick was not allowed to write to us. They tried to suspect him of being a spy. Well, we were thankful for so much mercy vouchsafed to us that day, some of the burden was lifted from our hearts, and to me there was a sweet thought that my staying here had saved this dear home from being ruined. Perhaps my boys will value it all the more when they understand at what a cost it was saved. How good for us that we can only see a step before us.

[November] 23rd. Before I go on with the history of the days succeeding those of which I have written, I must tell of the great joy which came to us yesterday, 22nd. Dick came back to us safe and well, his return was a direct answer to prayer. Oh what a day it was to us, I shall be able to write quite differently now, because my heart is brimming over with thankfulness.

Our friends the Bloys⁸ left their home on — of Oct.⁹, they are just on the border, it seemed wiser to do so, more so, because Mr Bloy is a very strong politician, and was well known and intensely hated by his Dutch neighbours. How sad they were over leaving their home and all the work of years, not knowing how or when they might return. It was well for them they left that day. Mrs Bloy and her daughters went by train Monday morning. Mr Bloy drove down the next morning to his farm at Colenso. Now the Boers have reached Colenso, and we wonder and long to know if these friends are safe.

After Mr van Rooyen had told us we were quite safe here, he talked of Mr Bloy. They had been to his house that morning¹⁰, broken it open, looted all they could, found his diary or letter book in which he said there was enough to condemn him. He was a rebel, a traitor, and he would shoot him if he saw him and told his men to do the same; he would not trouble to bring him to trial. Strange unreasonable talk, seeing Mr Bloy was not under Dutch rule, but under British. Then he went on to say: that Natal was their country, indeed the whole of South Africa was, the English had no business with it. He said, 'We have taken Mafeking (not true), we are taking Dundee today (not true), then we shall take Ladysmith and very soon be in Durban, and plant our flag 12 miles on the other side of Durban.' This greatly amused us, this was the man from whom we thought we were accepting a kindness, we had to sit and listen. Afterwards we heard that orders had been given to the men not touch any property where the owner had remained. These men were carrying the Free State flag, and this part of Natal is now spoken of as the Free State. No one in the neighbourhood of Underberg has been interfered with, our friends are all safe, their property also. It may seem like boasting, but indeed it is not, I am humbled while uplifted to think how God has let my influence work for good, my deciding to stay here decided our few neighbours to do the same. I have more at stake than anyone

else here, if I could risk my life by staying, they could too, so they reasoned, and the result has been that not one home has been touched, not a head of cattle taken.

....

Tuesday [October] 17th. The very air seemed full of unrest and excitement, numbers of Boers going to Ladysmith came in during the day. We were feeling so keenly about Dick that I think rumours failed to touch us, as they otherwise would have done; I had to keep quiet and calm, for Kitty's sake, she was ill for a few days with fear and excitement and the trouble about Dick. I was most anxious about her. I thank God that she has recovered and has been well and braver ever since. That night I could not get to sleep for long, it must have been about three o'clock when I did so, and was awakened five o'clock by a slight noise of doors opening and shutting. At once I guessed the Boers were passing down, and that Lillie and Mr Fraser were about. I would not move for fear of rousing Kittywee. In a little while Lillie stole quietly into my room to tell me that it was so. Mr Fraser was first to hear the noise and was up quickly and tapped at Lillie's window as before arranged, she went on to the verandah and they watched them for two and a half hours. They were not going in army order, in twos and threes, and at times quite an interval, then came a great many guns and waggons. Afterwards we were told the first passed about one o'clock and the last at half-past five o'clock. It was a little starlight, the figures could just be seen.

....

The talk was that Ladysmith was to be attacked in a few days, and they were certain of succeeding, that is six weeks ago, and Ladysmith is still occupied by the English.

The next days, [October] 18th/19th/20th were full of excitement, the ambulance waggons and staff passed down; outspanned not far away, the men came in to buy and we were very busy in the store, rain was falling and they all seemed very miserable. The ambulance staff largely consisted of Englishmen, who had volunteered for this work, rather than be commandeered to fight. Reports were brought in of a few skirmishes — of course we could only hear the Dutch side, and they invariably report one killed on their side and two/three wounded. So this week passed on: our hearts were heavy for Dick, the girls and I drew very closely together in this trouble and sorrow, and we were wonderfully strengthened; precious words of comfort were brought home to our hearts. On Saturday 21st a company of 80 armed Boers passed down, followed by six waggons, containing food and ammunition, nearly all came to the store and bought. I had no other thought then, but that they would demand what they wanted, and go off with it, but they paid for everything and were quite civil.

....

Thursday 24th. The thought of Dick in prison was much in our hearts, and the thought of an appeal to the General had been in my thoughts some days: at last I spoke of it and the others thought we might try, though the hope of success was small. I wrote out an appeal that morning, explaining how Dick was taken to their Laager, and pleaded that in justice he might be released. My letter was approved of by all, and I had not finished it ten minutes when an opportunity of sending it offered, it did seem providential. We waited five days then came a reply in Dutch, how excited we were, while it was being translated. It was to say: The General could not grant my request as to releasing Mr Sansbury, but he assured me of his safety, also that he had given orders for my horses to be sent back. We were sadly disappointed, and it was a fresh trial to our faith. In a day or two our spirits revived, and the girls and I clung to God's promises of help and deliverance, so the days passed. We were very busy in our store. Boers were continually up and down and came in to buy.

Sunday [October] 29th was a quiet day. In the afternoon some of our neighbours came and 'the war' was the one topic of conversation. A report came that Mr Bloy and one son were shot, but as it was said they were shot in the fight at Elandslaagte, we would not believe it. They would not be in the fight, not anywhere near it, we have neither heard it confirmed or contradicted since. The Boers would like it to be true! How little we ever thought our beautiful little colony of Natal would be the scene of such horrors as are now being enacted in it. The homes made with such toil, costing many years of hard work, almost ruined, not much besides the walls standing, doors and windows broken and the wood used for firewood, furniture smashed to pieces, organs, pianos, many expensive instruments deliberately chopped to pieces, beds and mattresses cut open, and strewn round the houses. In several instances the people had got up from a meal, the things being left on the table, all their wearing apparel left, this was torn to pieces and scattered about.

....

On Nov. 2nd my horses were returned to me, also my keys. Dick had the keys of the safe in his pocket and we had not been able to get at the books or cash box. Both horses and keys were sent by a responsible man, and I was asked to sign a paper saying I had received them. I did feel very thankful and, somehow, the horses coming back increased our faith that in good time Dick would be restored to us.

The fight at Dundee had taken place by now. Reports came to us very often just then, and from them we could gather that the Dutch were not so successful as they expected to be, but they boasted much of the number killed on the English side, and the few on their own. From a Free State paper we heard that our soldiers did well. It was talked of by a few leaning towards the English as a victory, but we knew that they retired to Ladysmith. Whether this was necessary, or part of the plan we knew not. We grieved to learn that General Pen (*sic*) Symons¹¹ was killed in this fight. Now every day the Boers coming into the store would remark that they were going to take Ladysmith tomorrow, later on they said, 'next week.'

Nov. 3rd. We could hear the big guns quite distinctly. In the afternoon a number of Boers came down from the Laager, also more waggons, and outspanned just

above us, to the left. Cousin Harry Smith will know the spot I refer to. They came and as usual were going to take Ladysmith. We are told what would be laughable tales, if it did not touch what is so real and terrible. One day it would be that the soldiers could not possibly hold out much longer, they were starving, and that they were tired of it all, then that they were trying to make terms with Joubert for peace, anything to get out of Ladysmith. I wonder, did they really think we believed all this?

9th. I am sitting at our evening meal when footsteps were heard round the verandah, and a gentleman looked in at the open window asking, 'Is Mrs Portsmouth here?' It was Dr Wilson¹² of Harrismith. 'We are an ambulance party, may we put our waggonettes inside your yard for the night?' It was quite pleasant to hear an English voice. He had two others with him. We invited them to dine with us, this they gladly accepted. They had been having a very rough time, and enjoyed the comforts of a spread table once more. The Boers were suspicious of Dr Wilson and would not have him to attend to them, so he had orders to return to Harrismith, and his helpers with him. One of these was a young fellow from Parker, Wood & Co.¹³, Harrismith. In conversation I found they were allowed business communication with their Vrede firm, so I asked him if he could manage to let my sister know we were safe here, and he willingly undertook to do so. It was not safe for him to take a letter from me to forward, he might be searched, and such a letter would lead to suspicion. I do hope the message reached Lizzie, but of course there has been no means of hearing from her, though I have since heard. We had been hoping very much that Dick would be allowed some liberty, but from these friends we found he was not. This was an increased sorrow to us, our faith has indeed been tried.

10th. For the first time a Dutchman who was in the store expressed a doubt as to their being able to take Ladysmith. Also at this time we heard good reports of the work our troops were doing. During these days a great many troops of horses, cattle and goats and sheep passed, these the Boers had looted, and they continue to do this, finding Ladysmith more difficult than they expected. Some of the men were ordered to go down towards Colenso, the numbers has (*sic*) varied from 2 000 up to 5 000, they have gone even beyond Colenso. Before this the capture of the Gloucester Regiment was reported, and this was all too true. We cannot hear full particulars, but we know there must have been some gross blunder for a whole regiment to be captured, the Boers were greatly elated at this. After much thought I decided, with the approval of all in the home, to try a second appeal to the General on Dick's behalf. I wrote it out, and to make it more sure of the General reading it himself, got Mr van der Leeuw to translate it into Dutch. I copied it, we decided it was best the appeal should go direct from me, not through any medium. We waited an opportunity of sending it, not one occurred for a few days, then a more respectable Dutchman than many was in the stores, and Mr Fraser gave him the letter to hand over to the General then in charge at Van Reenen, with a request that he would forward it to General Prinsloo¹⁴.

On Friday the 17th [November] the Boers moved from Van Reenen to near Ladysmith, I should rather say the Laager, there were not many men left up there, about 60 went down and 95 waggons. They all outspanned in the same place I have before mentioned. What a lot it looked, and all was hurry and excitement, we did a

lot of business that day, mostly in clothes, for we had already sold out of much in the grocery way. Dick had kept the stock up to about its usual amount, we had not felt it wise to go in for anything extra, for no one knew if it would be taken from us or not. We could have done double the business, had we had the goods, but I do not regret this. I feel sure our reasons then were right though now we have scarcely anything left to sell. We sent word to our neighbours that they must get a supply of necessities at once if they wished to — for if the goods were in the store, we should not dare to refuse to sell to the Boers when they came in to buy. So for a while yet, we in this neighbourhood have necessaries, but I will now finish this day. Mr Byloo, Fraser and Smith were kept busy as possible the whole day, the young Boers walked round the verandah into the garden [and] helped themselves to fruit. Fortunately it was nearly all green just then, we had just cleared a tree of the most beautiful plums. They were all carrying guns, but they were quite civil, expressed some surprise that we had not gone away, and wondered what kind of people we were not to have done so.

....

On this Saturday the 18th 65 more waggons came down, they went on beyond the Pretorius' to outspan. Sunday 19th was a quiet day, Mr Fraser, Lillie and Katie went for a walk in the morning. Essie and Mr Smith were up in the garden amongst the pines, and I was in the house alone, when an armed Boer, as I thought, came round the verandah, I confessed to a little fear, being all alone. I went to the door and spoke to him and he answered in English. He said he did not want anything, only he was so surprised to find the house occupied, that he called to see who lived here. He said all the houses lower down are empty, and the Boers have destroyed everything, what could not be taken away they have broken to pieces, it is sad to see, he added. Then he told me he was an Englishman, had lived in Heilbron 14 years and so was commandeered. He had leave of absence for 14 days and was going home — fighting against his own countrymen — I listened to his conversation but said very little, it would have been unwise, though I believe his sympathies were with the English. He stayed and rested quite a long time, I got him some tea and the others all came back before he left.

Monday passed as usual, we were told that Lizzie's husband was commandeered, and was with the Vrede commando near Ladysmith. I felt troubled, yet hoped it was not correct.

....

22nd. A red letter day indeed. Just after dinner, about two o'clock, Mr Fraser came to me saying, 'there is a man from Vrede who knows Mr Povall in the store, will you not come and speak to him?' I went and found two there, a Dutchman, an old gentleman whom I had met at Lizzie's, and an Englishman. They had both seen Herbert and Lizzie a few days previously, and they were all well. Herbert had not been sent to the front, how thankful I was. These gentlemen were only going to the front to have a look, and offered on their return to take a letter for me to my sister.

They returned in ten days' time and I sent a few lines by them. I think they would take it safely.

A little later I was resting in my room when I heard Mr Fraser open the passage door very quickly, knock loudly at the girls' door and call, 'come quickly here is someone coming you will like to see.' I heard Lillie's voice at once, 'Dick, Dick.' You may be sure we were all together pretty quickly, Dick was off his horse and in the house before Essie and I had time to run out and meet him. Oh what a meeting it was! I must leave you to picture our delight and the thankfulness. How much there was to tell as soon as Dick's escort, three armed Boers, had gone. We gathered in the dining room to hear and to tell. Dick did not know at all why he had been released, a telegram from the General to the Landdrost came on Sunday to say, 'Sansbury was to be released, and a safe escort given him to Underberg.' It was too late to leave Harrismith that day, the train had gone (the Dutch are running the train they took on October the 11th from the Natal Government, as far down as they can), so he went to see the friends who had been so good to him all those five weeks, and left on Wednesday for home, when he arrived about three o'clock. He was looking so well, we had not dared to hope this. Three lady friends, after much trouble and perseverance, obtained permission to send him in food three times a day, and they just fed him up, also they got in many little comforts which helped him wonderfully. When we told about the appeal sent to General Prinsloo, Dick was sure it was that that had been the means of his release, we are all very thankful.

....

Dec. 20th. I have not written anything of late, there is not much to write, unless I put down the tales the Boers bring of their success, but these have not been much of late, they have pretty well given up the idea of taking Ladysmith, but on Sunday the 17th we had a terrible report. Of course we only hear the Dutch version, and knowing how they exaggerate, how little truth there ever is in the number they give, we try to hope it is not so bad.

On Friday the Boers entrapped the troops at Colenso, they say the English had been firing with their cannon for three days and the Boers did not reply, so the troops thought they had gone from the hill, and prepared to pass through the drift. But the Boers had been working nights and had dug trenches and were in hiding, so were already (*sic*) to fire upon the troops. They report that over 2 000 of our men were killed, 150 prisoners with ammunition. They never tell of the killed and wounded on their own side, though the man who told this story did say there were 60 Dutch killed and a great number wounded. We have felt so sad and yet we hope the number killed is incorrect, we never doubt the ultimate result, but Oh! it does seem as though it would be a long time yet, and the loss of life is terrible, and the desolate homes and hearts.

Only four days to Xmas Day, is there any hope of the usual happy meeting with our dear ones (note the numbers killed were greatly exaggerated, we are told not more than 168). We must be patient and wait till all is over to hear the truth.

Jan. 14th 1900. You see dear friends it is some time since I have added to my journal. I had not the heart to write through Xmas time and New Year. There was

no happy meeting and my dear boys are still far away, and I can get no news of them, but I hope they had news of us about that time, and they would be cheered. Through a friend we got a letter sent to Mrs Loze at Delagoa Bay and she sent it to all our dear ones in Durban and Maritzburg telling them we were safe. We received a post card from her on New Year's day, also a letter from Lizzie. It seemed a good omen for the New Year, they were the first letters for three months.

The Boers attacked Ladysmith in the early morning of Saturday 6th [but] were repelled with heavy losses, many whom we knew personally were killed, we hear too, that the British troops are making preparations to cross the Tugela, it scarcely seems worth writing these things. You will hear in England all about it, and we, so much nearer, are shut off from all reliable information, but we have so many mercies left to us, our comfortable home and the daily routine of duties keeping us busy and occupied, and each trying to help one another, the burden of care and anxiety is lightened for each one. We are all separated from some dear ones and have sympathy one for another.

....

Jan. 28th [1900]. The weeks pass, still we are shut off from the means of communication, I think of you all often and often. You will be troubled at the long weeks of silence, and we too are troubled and find the long waiting a heavy strain upon us, at times I have felt discouraged and anxious, our provisions are getting low, we have fruit and vegetables in abundance, and for a while yet we have flour, sugar, tea and other small necessaries. Paraffin, candles and matches we have to use with care, our neighbours are not quite so well off. The Macfarlanes begged for a little sugar as they were quite out; Mrs van der Leeuw for a little tea, Mrs Pretorius for candles, which I had to refuse, and just as I sat down to my writing a kaffir, an old kitchen boy of mine, came begging for a little paraffin, he has a sick child, and had to sit up at night with him. I gave it, how could I refuse, when I had it, but we may be without ourselves ere long. Yet with all this, let me not forget God's mercies which are so many, and great. Our daily needs have been supplied with all the quiet and comfort this dear home can give. Most of us are brave and hopeful, and deliverance is surely not far off.

On the 17th our troops came across the Tugela and we hear of heavy fighting and heavy losses on both sides, for a week the cannons were going the whole day from early morning till dark, they are fighting in two places, and from both we can hear the guns. We have so hoped they would get through to Ladysmith this past week but fear it is not so, for two days no news has reached us, the cannons are quiet, they may be fighting the small guns, if so of course, that means they are close together.

....

March 2nd. You see how long it is since I have written anything in my journal. I had no heart to do so, and then to hear no news of my boys took much of my courage away. I was afraid too, that I might write in a way that would pain you as you read. And now what we have been waiting for so long has come. Yesterday

morning very early the glad news of the release of Ladysmith was brought to us. Oh! with what thankful hearts we received it. I am going to look up my diary, and go on from where I left off.

Jan. 28th. After the week of heavy fighting we heard our troops had retired, and with this we had to be content, all was quiet, no guns going and we did not know what to think, yet did not lose our faith in our brave soldiers, but oh, it was a time of waiting.

On the 17th [February] we heard the good news that the troops had released Kimberley, we rejoiced then. For a few days we had various reports of the troops at Colenso, that they were advancing, that the Boers had been driven out of some of their good positions, then we heard that they (our troops) intended being in Ladysmith on the 28th, we waited in hope and fear. Then early Wednesday morning the 1st March, the news was brought to us that Ladysmith was relieved, some of the troops had got in the previous afternoon. Can you imagine how we felt, the intense relief, the deep thankfulness, the joy. Oh! it was a glad time.

You will have read much of it all, long ere this, it must have been a terrible time for our poor soldiers, and for the Boers. They had to fly and at once orders were given for the Free State laagers to move back to Van Reenen, they got away in a great hurry believing the soldiers were following them. We have had no news of the ambulance men, many of whom are English. They said those in command had kept the defeat of the Transvaal Boers quiet, that many of the Free State Boers did not know of it — did not know why the orders were given for the retreat, and it was even circulated amongst them that it was for 'change of air', as there were so many fever patients.

Some men on horseback reached here by six o'clock, having ridden all night, such an exciting day we had, many off-saddled near by, and then a little later waggons came along, and through the whole day this went on. Waggons, carts, traps, cattle and horsemen, some passing on up the Berg, some outspanning for a while, a great many came to the store and were quiet and civil, seemed to be rather rejoicing in going back; than depressed because defeated. Many of the Dutch farmers of Natal, I should say the few who were left, also trekked out yesterday, afraid of the soldiers, Mr and Mrs Pretorius also went out. We were sorry they did, it is not at all likely they would have been interfered with, but they believe everything bad of the English soldiers; and so were frightened. Today has been a repetition of yesterday, only that the waggons had finished passing earlier than the previous day. We do not know at all what is coming now; if the Boers intend making a stand on the Berg or not, if troops are coming up here, or not. We hope and pray there will be no fighting near us and that we will be able safely to get into Ladysmith in a day or two to post letters and send telegrams, and hear of at least some of our dear ones, so we are all busy writing.

....

17th. Last Sunday evening we had an exciting and anxious time for a while. Two of the Macfarlanes came in to tell us they had notice from the military to leave, as they would be in range of the firing from both sides. Mr Macfarlane and his son

went to Ladysmith on the Friday, and George was sent home to tell the others and get their goods packed. A waggon was to be sent for them the next night. We were very troubled and expected a notice that we too must move. We had quite a sad hour, and came such a relief, it was like a message from God. Mr Fraser was also in Ladysmith to get out letters, saw Mr Macfarlane in the street who told him that he had been advised to move. Mr Fraser went at once to the authorities and inquired if it was really necessary, told them how we were situated, and of our two invalids¹⁵ who could not be moved without great danger. They asked many questions as to why I did not leave as others had done. Mr Fraser told them we had made the place ourselves, that I loved it, and knew that the only chance of saving it from being ruined by the Boers was to stay in it, and the Boers had respected our trust in them, and had not molested us in any way. Then Lord Dundonald¹⁶ ordered a special permit to be written out, giving us permission to stay in our home through the present crisis. It is not stated in the permit, but Mr Fraser was told the risk was our own, but we had nothing to fear unless there was fighting on the Berg and any of the Boer cannon struck the house. So once again we are cast entirely upon God who has done such great things for us in the past. Mr Fraser brought letters from our friends and from my dearest boys, they are well and have had many kind friends, who have given them pleasure, and thought of and cared for them.

Since this is Sunday [March 18th] we have had [a] quiet and uneventful day without any news, this evening we hope the boy¹⁷ will return from Ladysmith with letters.

23rd [March] Durban. You will wonder at the above address. I am here (at last) with my own dearest boys; Kittywee and I arrived last night. It took me a long time to decide that it was the right thing to do, the girls and Dick were quite urgent for me to come away and see my boys. I do trust this has been of God's guidance, they all tried to make it easy for me, and were so sure that there was no cause to fear anything going wrong.

We left my loved home at half-past five in the morning, and reached Ladysmith at half-past eleven. We met British patrol parties twelve miles down the road, and then a large camp about 15 miles. The Ladysmith friends were delighted to see me and Kittywee. The town is very desolate and dirty as yet, dry and barren [but] the buildings are not greatly damaged. We left at ten the next morning, reaching Durban at half-past nine. Willie looks well and so tall, he went up to Harry early this morning and brought him down and he has stayed the whole day with us, he too is well and has grown very much.

I cannot write of our meeting, but our hearts are full of thankfulness to God who has given us the great joy of being together again. I have at times some fear for our dear home at Underberg, but I do know something of the quiet rest God can give, after such months of daily experience of his power to sustain and protect through such dangers. Now dear ones all, this long story must close. With warm true love to each dear one.

Ever yours lovingly and affectionately.

Katie Portsmouth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dictionary of South African biography*: Vol. 1 Marthinus Prinsloo; Vol. 4 Douglas M B H Cochrane, William Penn Symons
- Hawkins, Eliza Blanche: *The story of Harrismith, 1849-1920*. (Ladysmith, 1982)
- Holmden's map of Natal and Zululand. (Johannesburg, c.1927)
- Natal Almanac* 1895, 1899 (Pietermaritzburg, 1894, 1898)
- Portsmouth, Henry: Historical notes of *Wyford*, known originally as Underberg. (Typescript, n.d.)
- South African who's who* 1910 p.530
- Spencer, S O'B: *British settlers in Natal, 1824-1857*, volume 2, pp.106-8. (Pietermaritzburg, 1983)
- Steyler, F A: *Die geskiedenis van Harrismith*. (Bloemfontein, 1932)
- Times of Natal* 2 Dec. 1897 (obituary of Mrs Henrietta Stranack)

NOTES

- George Chapman whom Lilian was to marry after the war. In 1913 the widowed Chapman married Catherine Portsmouth.
- Presumably the wife of William Scott, farmer and blacksmith, whose address in the 1899 *Natal Almanac* appears as 'Scotston, Van Reenen'. *Scotston* or *Scottstown* was one of the border farms.
- J H Meiring and J C Rosa were the officials at the customs office in Harrismith while the customs union between Natal and the OFS was in force, 1890-94.
- Smith, a sufferer from tuberculosis, later died at *Wyford*.
- Presumably G. Byloo who appears in the 1899 *Natal Almanac* as a farmer of 'Underberg, Van Reenen'. However, from the text it seems he was working in the Portsmouths' store.
- Presumably Gerhardus Philippus Pretorius, hotel-keeper of Good Hope, whose name appears in both the 1895 and 1899 *Almanacs*. There was also a G P Pretorius '(A's son)' who is listed as a farmer of *Maritz Drift*, a farm adjoining *Wagtenbeetjes Kop*.
- This must have been the Boers' headquarters inside the OFS border.
- Francis Richard Bloy (1836-1906) had a border farm, *The Reproach*. Bloy was a man of irascible temperament. The very names of his farms denote this – besides *The Reproach*, he had *Half-my-right*, so named through resentment that he was not granted as much land as he thought himself entitled. When his wife died in 1905 he attributed her death to the 'cold-blooded cruelty' and 'neglect' of the Natal Government, which only in 1903 compensated them for their losses, and in his opinion, very inadequately. These quotes come from a letter he wrote to the Resident Magistrate when required to fill in her death notice.
- The transcript does not record the day in October. Mrs Bloy left on Monday (9 October) and Bloy the following day.
- This gives the impression that the Bloys' home was destroyed on 16 October. Bloy himself maintained it was 13 October, which coincides with Mrs Portsmouth's entry under the date 22 November, where she records that Sansbury, when arrested by the Boers on 14 October, was at first mistaken for the Bloys' son, whom they had shot at 'a few days before'.
- Major-General Sir William Penn Symons (1843-1899), the commander of the British forces at Dundee.
- Dr Edward Fitzgerald Bannatyne Wilson (born 1859, Limerick, Ireland), who had come to South Africa in 1883. After the war he was Harrismith's district surgeon.
- Parker, Wood & Co. was a Durban mercantile firm with branches in Natal and beyond the Berg.
- The OFS Chief Commandant, Marthinus Prinsloo (1838-1903). He was chosen as such once the commandos of Harrismith, Vrede, Bethlehem, Heilbron, Kroonstad and Winburg (a total of more than 6 000 burghers) had mustered near Harrismith. Presumably this was at the 'Laager' mentioned in the text.
- One was Mr Smith. The other could have been Essie Sansbury. It would seem that she died young.
- Douglas M B H Cochrane, 12th Earl of Dundonald (1852-1935). As commander of the second Cavalry Brigade, he spear-headed the final drive towards Ladysmith.
- i.e. her African servant.

SHELAGH SPENCER