

‘Maritzburg during the Siege of Natal’

*as reflected in The Natal Witness
from October 1899 to March 1900*

In the months before the Anglo-Boer war broke out, ‘Maritzburg — as its citizens perpetually and defiantly referred to it — exhibited all the confidence and complacency of the closing years of Victoria’s reign. Only six weeks before the commencement of hostilities, the Arthur Rousley Opera Company brought to the boards of Scott’s Theatre (in a somewhat anglicised advertisement) *‘Faust, Montana, Daughter of the Regiment, Bohemian Girl, Lily of Killarney, Cavalleria Rusticana, Pagliacci, Lucy of Lammermoor, Tannhäuser and Il Trovatore* — all to be done in English, and all to be squeezed into the brief sub-tropical season (‘Why is Natal left in the cold for the other eight or nine months of the year?’ asked an irritated correspondent.)

The war was so long a-coming, and the bellicose predictions since Milner’s ‘Bloemfontein Conference’ so frequent and so profuse, that one can detect, in the last days before the actual declaration of hostilities, a touch of *déjà vu*. *The Natal Witness* — the venerable daily by which, for this article, we shall represent Maritzburg’s own ‘man in street’ — had an interesting theory for the slow coming of the inevitable conflict. President Kruger has ‘shown his usual astuteness’, it said, in ‘protracting the negotiations.’ The forthcoming ‘raid on Natal will possibly be attempted as soon as a couple of days’ rain have allowed the grass to grow sufficiently to feed the Boer ponies. . . .’ Little did anyone guess that the conflict would reach levels of mobilisation not seen since the American Civil War. ‘It is possible’ says the unsuspecting editorial, ‘that raiding parties from the Transvaal may inflict some damage.’ Meanwhile, in the lull before the storm, there was time for even more mock battles by the Maritzburg Rifle Association, and for even more goods trucks to be converted in the Durban railway yards — ‘each truck can hold sixty men.’

While Mausers and Creuzot field-pieces were being unpacked in Pretoria, the monthly meeting of the Botanic Society grappled with the problem of the fragility of the public in thunderstorms. Mr Topham, store-keeper of Church Street, suggested that the difficulty might be met by keeping a supply of umbrellas to be hired at a penny apiece. Dr Sutherland: ‘You might add the proviso: On condition that they are

bought at my shop' (*laughter*). The monthly meeting of the Natal Museum thanked donors for specimens. Mr A.B. Sparrow: one vervet monkey. Mr W.E. Marsh: one native opium pipe. And (rather touchingly) Master T.W. James: one moth. . . . These were the days when it seemed quite in the order of things that the game between the Maritzburg Cricket Club and Zingari should be attended by the band of the Manchester Regiment. The only people who seemed to anticipate a war of some scale were the boys of the Model School, the editorial staff of whose journal — it cost only a penny, said an enthusiastic 'puff' in the *Witness* — was increased by one 'war correspondent' and one 'artist in black and white'. Meanwhile Peter Davis and Son — the commercial enterprise that not only published *The Natal Witness* but imported organs and phonographs, produced maps and Zulu Grammars, sold sheet music and bicycle accessories — advertised a whole range of French novellas, bespeaking a considerable readership in that language.

Firmly convinced that any war that came along would come to a swift conclusion, the 'sturdy fight' mentioned by the local press was that of Mr W. Street Wilson, architect of Maritzburg's new Town Hall, trying his hardest to get the clock and bells in position by the end of 1899. The clock was to be shipped from England on 1 November, and he reports that his men will 'have their work cut out. . . to ring in the new year, Jan 1 1900.'

The entrenched racial complacency of the colonials was to get its severest lesson from the Boers themselves. A typical portrait of Kruger published in September says 'He has a low, sullen cunning, a certain nimbleness of intellect, an acute sense of the sordid motive in another. . . the avarice of a peasant, the courageous fear of a beast at bay. . . .' In vain did higher-minded correspondents try to ameliorate the pre-war tone: ' . . . this attitude of brag, of jeering, this tone of "You wait and you'll see what you'll get" is unmanly. . . .' The colonists had little doubt that, as the paper says on 2 October, the 'forces at present in the Colony are sufficient to hold the frontier posts in Natal, and sufficient to beat back any serious (attempt) of the Boer to advance in force. . . .' Complacency is bolstered by a stream of tell-tale stories. An English doctor in the lowveld recommends a bath to an elderly female patient. 'Alamachte [*sic*] man' screamed the old vrouw, who had been ordered a hot mustard foot bath, 'do you want to kill me! I haven't washed my feet for the last 30 years. . . .' Harry Escombe is reported somewhat satirically when, addressing a gathering in Newcastle, he 'gives the Boers credit for being human beings' — not much consolation, says the reporter, to the unfortunate inhabitants. There is no desire to hear anything good from 'over the hill'; one country correspondent declares there is 'not the least doubt the Boers will shoot all the wounded who fall into their hands. . . .'

The colonial complacency was perhaps even more unrealistic than that of the home country. The leader for 19 October is amazed that 'many in England' hold that the conflict 'will be a protracted one, and that the Boers will fight for every inch of their country. . . . Those who entertain that belief do not know the Boer character. . . .' On this theme, the uitlanders from Johannesburg who began to throng the city made for good copy, each train-load having further news of the iniquity of the Boers:

Johannesburg people who journeyed into this Colony during the latter days of last week met with many unpleasant experiences which reflect the gravest discredit upon the Boers. . . (They tell of) particularly unpleasant particulars of the callous and brutal conduct of Dutchmen and Dutchwomen too.

So what was this callous and brutal conduct?

At one station the only refreshments the trainload of passengers were able to obtain was a mixture of tea and coffee, and when a complaint was naturally made, they were told it was 'good enough for English people. . . .'

Within weeks this pampered crew of 'refugees' had become less and less welcome. 'The general public are warned' says one correspondent 'that a number of members of the loafing fraternity are in town asking for help and for lodgings on the plea that they come from Johannesburg. . . .' The better-heeled of them, however, did provide something of an economic boost, especially when they set about assembling their own 'troop', the Imperial Light Horse. One beneficiary of this 'war boom' was T. Dickinson, photographer, who kept business at 294 Berg Street, who advertised shrewdly that 'Volunteers in Uniform' would be photographed at 'Reduced Prices.' By 20 October a whole brigade of amateur photographers was at it, blissfully unaware of the dire pictures that the 'Kodak' would soon be recording within the confines of Natal. The 'energetic snap-shottist has been very busy lately in the City', says one report, and the Imperial Light Horse 'have come in for as much attention as a "star" in the music hall world. . . .' The writer hopes wistfully that 'the Boer guns will not be levelled at them with such deadly effect as have been the kodaks of enterprising amateur photographers. . . .' In fact, with the departure of the Imperial Light Horse for the front, an economic question arises: 'What will the riksha boys do now? The gallant troopers were a continual source of income.'

The Natal 'liberalism' that irritated the uitlanders would make us smile today. It resided in such attempts as that of P. Davis, bookseller, to persuade the public to read *The Captain of the Insects* by W. Werner. 'The manners and customs of the unsophisticated native are but imperfectly known. The whole book breathes the atmosphere of the country and is obviously the result of long and actual experience of life on the veld and in the kraal. . . .' Davis and Son put out *Zulu simplified* by Revd F. Meyr, which 'helps the student of Zulu to obtain a comprehensive idea of the general formation and peculiarities of the language. . . .' Maritzburg's 'refugees', it seems, came from a different environment. A letter signed 'Uitlander' complains that, when he and two ladies sat on a seat near the Supreme Court, 'three Kafirs came out of the buildings close by and crowded on to our seat':

If I had been in Johannesburg I should have known what to do, but being under the British flag once more and seeing the Kafirs were evidently in Government employ, I meekly moved away with the ladies, and left the black men in possession, much to their apparent

amusement. . . I am afraid this Kafir question is going to be a very sore point in Johannesburg when the English take it over. . .

If black people had political clout at all it was in their forming, once hostilities had broken out, a constant judgmental witness. As one correspondent puts it: 'In our conduct we are being intently watched by the Natives and the Dutch sympathisers in our midst. . . the least display of fright or cowardice will be marked down against us. . .' One person who forgot this imperial 'burden' was Mrs Graves, of Zwaartkop, who was fined £3 for discharging a revolver at two young natives 'under the impression that the Kafirs were laughing at her. . .' It might be considered weak, today, that the magistrate let her off with 'if anyone had been killed she might have been tried for her life' but it is obvious that the two young men in question did feel they could bring a white woman before a magistrate.

On 7 October a correspondent notices that the British Indians in Mafeking are applying for arms to assist with the defence. He compares them with Natal's 'agitators of the Gandhi type' who are 'ready enough to complain. . . .' Would he have read the letter from M.K. Gandhi of 28 October, which says that, while 'we do not know how to handle arms,' it may be that 'there are other duties no less important to be performed in the battlefield. . . we would consider it a privilege to be able to perform them'? The official response is given in an editorial footnote: 'the Government is deeply impressed with the offer of Her Majesty's loyal Indian subjects in Durban. . . .'

Those who would like to feel that 'the feminine' was an ameliorating influence in the midst of all these male patriotics would not be much assisted by Maritzburg's best renderer of Kiplingesque pastiche, Kate Bishop. She seems to have felt the need for the 43rd Regiment to avenge Majuba more than did the regiment itself. A poem published on 3 October longs for the clash of arms:

It was only just a murmur, but a murmur low and deep,
Like a lion's angry growling when you rouse it from its sleep;
But it's reached the golden Indies and the wild Canadian shore,
Bound to speak again in cannon, as the lion's bound to roar. . .

There is no attempt to disguise the source of inspiration:

Now there ain't a Rudyard Kipling in the fighting Forty-third;
But it just expressed our feelings and our very souls is stirred. . .

This before the Kipling-Sullivan 'Absent Minded Beggar', where Kipling's cockneyisms made the imperial middle class feel that they embodied the virtues of Tommy Atkins, so long as they would 'pay, pay, pay. . .'

That same 3 October was the day of a 'hearty send-off' at Maritzburg station of the Natal Carbineers; a send-off that

was continued all up the line. . . Hardly a house was passed but its inmates turned out to give them a cheer. Near Rosetta, several young ladies raised a good deal of enthusiasm by turning out with Union Jacks.

The first engagements in Natal, where the earliest contingent of British troops was widely supported by colonial volunteers and where, at Elandsplaagte and Talana Hill, the Boer advance was well anticipated, saw the complacency of Empire well served: 'the dash and courage of the British infantry . . . was equal to anything it has ever shown in its long and brilliant history.' But already there was a qualification in the general euphoria; the Boers seemed to be more tenacious than anyone expected. Thus on 25 October: 'As to the pluck of the Boers there can be no doubt. Again and again they returned to the attack, after our artillery fire had scattered or killed groups of them. . . .' (One might say this was the first 'honourable' reference to republican personnel for literally years.) Then comes the realisation that at the battle of Tinta Inyoni (Rietfontein in more modern texts) the losses on the Imperial side are beyond expectation for what is supposed to be the mere rebuttal of an invasion. How innocent the *Witness's* exclamation of horror seems now as it notes that 'the cost of the dilatory conduct of the Imperial Government. . . is the appalling total of 584 killed and wounded. . . .'

Comes a subtle change of mind. It was not long before the Maritzburg public was learning the double-speak of war reporting, and the associated art of reading between the lines. As early as 27 October the patriotic editor of the *Witness* — E.G.Thomson, the first South African-born editor in the country¹ — realised that the official pronouncements posted outside the *Witness* offices were not squaring with the strategic facts:

Even with the words Another British Victory in large type staring them in the face people were not disposed to regard the position with cheerfulness. The so-called victories, it was argued, were far too dearly purchased to cause any rejoicing. . .

This phase of bitterly-learned scepticism culminates in the editorial for 1 November, where the triumphant General White is severely taken to task:

On Monday afternoon, there was once more exhibited on a board in Church Street the announcement that we had won another glorious victory. With such announcements the Maritzburg public has become only too familiar . . . Only by the widest stretch of the imagination could the battle at Ladysmith on Monday be represented as a victory. . .

The moral shock was great to a people who had simply not anticipated the mobility of flying columns and the strategic scale on which the war with the Republics was going to be fought.

The shock is well symbolised in the fate of Major General Penn Symons. On 24 October he is written up as the latest 'star' to arrive in Natal: 'a trim, light, well-built, active figure, above the middle height; a face bright but hard-bitten; eyes keen and piercing; dark hair and moustaches still untouched with grey' and with a 'quick decisive speech, a brisk, direct air. . . .' Three days later the poor man's death is duly noted, together with the last battle-order of that 'quick, decisive speech': 'Tell General Yule my accident is but slight, and that I shall be out again tomorrow. . . .' (Like all Victorians, *Witness* readers loved 'death-bed' sequences. There was the

case, in the bombardment of Ladysmith, of the sudden death of Dr Stark, naturalist, who was felled by shrapnel in the public street, and whose last words were said to have been 'Look after my cat. . . .' But, suggests a relative on 19 January, it is 'highly probable that Dr Stark died before he could complete his sentence', and that the last words of the stricken naturalist were actually 'Look after my catalogue. . .')

Meanwhile the demoralising losses, and the blatant failure of the British to take the advice of colonials, led to some tensions in the patriotic alliance. 'Of what use', asks one letter,

is our much vaunted, much belauded British officer, with his interminable 'exams', 'coaches', luxurious mess, polo, sport of every kind, and an income. . . quite sufficient to keep two families. . . what 'exams' have the Boers and their leaders ever passed?

The greater reality of war was causing everyone to revise their mental attitudes. This is evident in a letter from the front: 'As a volunteer who was present at the fighting of Elandslaagte. . . I appeal to the kindly-disposed of whatever nationality to ameliorate the lot of the enemy's wounded that fall into our hands.' The writer notes the 'generous conduct of our soldiers towards the enemy's wounded', and also the way 'the wounded of both sides chatted like comrades during the dreary watches of the night, till the ambulances came up. . . .'

By 6 November and the investment of Ladysmith the *Witness's* colonial-born editor has little option but to do an honourable re-think:

It is true that previous to and just after the outbreak of hostilities we spoke slightly of our opponents, and talked somewhat foolishly of how they would be smashed up. Well, we were mistaken. We underrated our enemies. . . . The long lists of British casualties . . . demonstrate that in the Boer Great Britain has found a foe worthy of her steel.

And his sub-editor 'Q', in charge of 'Topics of the Town' — up with the worst of them in stirring pre-war feeling — admits that the Boers' 'doffing of hats in the streets of Pretoria as a mark of respect for. . . captured officers' has entirely revised his preconceptions: 'I wondered whether an English crowd would have behaved as generously. . . .' A letter of 9 December from four Boer POWs in Maritzburg gaol must have gone a long way to altering the received image: the men give thanks 'for the kind and most humane way we have been treated, especially to Mrs Mackenzie, Drs Ward and Lund. . . .'

Gradually the legendary names of the Natal warfare — Elandslaagte, Talana, Ladysmith — become part of the general vocabulary, sometimes presuming a *kudos*, suggests 'Q', that the facts did not warrant. He reminds us of a satire by an American poet: 'I was with Grant, the old man said. . . .' The same spurious fame is being claimed by those who let it be known that 'I was in Dundee. . . .'

When in a shop the other day a bevy of damsels, who were taking an hour to purchase what the 'mere male' would have bought in five minutes, repeated the word Dundee some sixty times in ten minutes. . .

Gradually the growing realism began to sort out fact from propaganda. To this day text-books on the Anglo-Boer War offer a photographic record of Buller's departure from England and disembarkation at Cape Town so complete that it comes as something of a relief to discover that the colonial public were not necessarily convinced by the blaze of publicity. On 26 October a *Witness* leader claims that many a 'loyal' newspaper has discounted the official line:

The 'impending departure' of General Sir Redvers Buller has proved a plaything. . . The public were positively sick of the intelligence and begged that. . . different newspapers would establish a censorship of their own accord and 'black out' Buller on every occasion that the name occurred. . .

The fact was that, as the *Witness* spelt it out, 'General Buller. . . landed with the mortification of hearing. . . that no inconsiderable portion of the British forces in Natal are on the march to Pretoria, but as prisoners of war, and not, as we hoped, as conquerors. . . .'

The ponderousness of the 'home' reaction brings with it a growing realisation that it is not beyond the bounds of imagination that the capital city of the Colony will itself come under siege. It is no great consolation to see Fort Napier being strengthened:

Great energy is being displayed in fortifying Fort Napier, but [people] naturally ask: 'What is to become of us?' It would not be against the fort that [the Boers] would expend their shells, but at the prominent buildings in the town. . . .

The fragility of Maritzburg was rendered more obvious by the view from the top of the new city hall, which was now nearing completion. A winched lift took dignitaries and reporters to the top of the tower, where they 'positively appeared to "look down" on Signal Hill and the fortification in the vicinity.' What a plum this would be for the stealthy invaders!

The Union Jack, a little tattered and torn, perhaps, but none the worse for it, was hoisted on the apex of the tower of the rapidly-growing Town Hall. . . . Fortunately 'Brother Boer' has not yet gained possession of the heights surrounding the city, otherwise the hoisting of the grand old flag may have been treated as a challenge and have brought a shell from a 12-pounder. . .

The strengthening of the garrison boosted no-one's confidence. The colonial government seems to have had no policy, no strategy to allay public fears. 'Q' particularly took the Prime Minister, Colonel Hime, to task:

Overheard in the Park last Saturday:

'I say, Colonel, I hear that they are fixing up guns on. . . '

'Yes, yes', said the head of the Government; 'done any fishing, lately?'

'Well no, not lately, but those guns. . . . '

'Since you left we have introduced trout. . . '

It is worth mentioning that one brave letter to the correspondence columns of the *Witness*, signed 'Senex', *did* recommend the surrender of the city if the Boer advance got this far. This on 6 November:

All that is left to us is a few men, many of whom are armed only with weapons effective up to 1 000 yards, against the 3 000 yards of the Boer mausers. . . . To attempt resistance under these conditions would be to invite a butchery only as cruel as it is purposeless. We have only two choices, to surrender the City with a bombardment, or without it. . . .

One reply suggested that Senex be tarred and feathered, but, at this distance in time, his letter seems a model of good sense. The *Witness*, while not formally agreeing with Senex's analysis, nevertheless did spell out the consequences of that ultimate fate: the fall of Maritzburg. That fall, says a leader of 23 November,

would be more catastrophic than the fall of Kimberley. It is the capital of Natal, and if the Boers were to get possession of it, they would be placed in the position of ability to dictate terms of settlement to the Imperial Government. . . .

Was this grand self-estimate a sort of parochial megalomania? Whatever it was, the constant whisper these days was how close the Boers had got to Maritzburg. In vain did the press try to allay the panic: 'The *Kokstad Advertiser* has been requested to advise farmers that there is absolutely no danger in sending wagons with wool to Maritzburg' — this following a report that Boers 'have been seen near Richmond'. The jitteriness of the public was not helped, points out 'Q', by the municipality's horse-drawn rolling machine: 'the noise this cumbersome contrivance makes is remarkable, and goodness knows how many nervous people have mistaken its rumbling for the Boer artillery. . . .'

A great talking point was a Government Advertisement of 23 November:

The Government view with the deepest concern the desertion of their houses by inhabitants of certain of the Country Districts of the Colony through apprehension of ill-treatment by the invading forces. As far as the Government has been able to ascertain, the houses of those who have remained at their homes have not been interfered with, nor have the occupiers been subjected to personal ill-treatment. . . .

To tell the inhabitants of Newcastle that avoiding Boer occupation had been 'desertion of their houses' was more than most colonists could stomach. The local

editor waxed eloquent: 'If Ministers are so indifferent to the facts of the hour, why does not Mr Bale (in charge of local militia) set an example by retiring to his villa at Hilton Road, (where), should he feel apprehensive of loneliness, he might take with him the company of the guard of which he has assumed command. . . .'

It was the relative of a farmer's wife who, a week later — when the Boers had in fact spent many hours in houses near Estcourt and Mooi River — humbly suggested that the Government might be right. The letter is titled 'Give the devil his due', and is — a hundred years later — delightful for its innocent equation of the Boers with English rural labourers — persons, in other words, who can recognise an English Lady when they see one!

None of the women folk (near Estcourt) experienced any indecency, no more than we should from an ordinary English labourer. All honour to women like this who stayed with their husbands on their farms during Boer occupation and did not help to produce the needless panic and congestion rushing into Maritzburg and Durban. . . .

Back in the city, however, siege mentality meant that anyone with a non-English name was under suspicion. 'Topics of the Town' reports that 'Dutch sympathisers meet daily at the residence of one of their number to discuss "church matters"' and asks, 'are they being watched?' Feelings were running high: at a concert in the YMCA Hall, one Mr Henry Miller recited Clement Scott's *Midnight Charge*. A 'lady of Dutch sympathies in the audience' apparently misinterpreted the piece and 'met Mr Miller outside and threatened to bring several male friends to chastise him. . . .' A teacher of Dutch at the Loop Street Government School, M.K. van Dam, was 'charged with treasonable practices for allegedly trying to convey information to Her Majesty's enemies. . . .' Three 'Mooi River Dutchmen' were arrested for being on Railway property without passes. Only after they had been shunted from court to court was it conceded that they were 'trying to sell forage to Imperial authorities.'

The hunger for news led to a sort of promotion in social rank of anyone who could come forward with a newsworthy titbit. Natal blacks became prestigious newsmongers: 'The imaginative native is seized upon as a fruitful medium for the manufacture of "copy"' What more authoritative way might one start a report than with 'We learn from a Dutch voice. . . .' 'Q' notices how 'the simple incident of a Dutch family ordering a few yards of crepe is interpreted by the soothsayers as indicating "heavy Boer losses"'. . . .

16 November was the last time that the *Witness* was permitted to take upon itself the analysis of a military exploit. The incident was that of the Armoured Train, and the colonial paper refused to dress it up in glowing terms. The 'débâcle', said the paper, would have been perfectly avoidable if colonial spying — in this case 'the imaginative native' — had been attended to:

Native information had been received that the Boers were in strong force, and the armoured train was sent out with a complement of officers and men who would have been totally inadequate. . . .to

cope with the enemy. The conduct of the campaign is sickening. . . .

How ingenuous was the paper being not to realise that, sooner or later, this would invite retaliation? The Declaration of Martial Law was advertised in the edition of 20 November, but only by 29 November did the size of the thing — and the key role the *Witness* had played in inviting the strictures — become effectively apparent. The paper was aghast:

How utterly misconceived the censorship [has been] in its attacks on this paper. What the war correspondent wants to feel is that he is in complete touch with the great British nation for which he is writing. He is engaged in writing History — the historian of the future will look to the comparison which he will make of what each writer has told him. . . .

Alas, 'the historian of the future' will find that, from this date on, the *Witness* presents an inhibited view. The criticism of General White was the straw that broke the camel's back — Mr Bennet Bewley, correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, who came 'very close to the view we had formed of General White's strategy' brought about the same interdict upon that venerable journal. The *Witness* quoted enthusiastically the *Telegraph's* loud squeal: censorship is 'an offence against reason and the modern way of conducting campaigns,' but it could not defer the fall of the axe.

The axe is evident in the edition for 30 November. In many ways this should be one of the most famous editions of our local paper: it was certainly exhibited overseas at the time when the debate on censorship reached full fury. It is perhaps the only *Witness* ever to have had one whole column spattered with blacked-out copy. The article was called 'Military Press Censorship' and the censor's pencil has cancelled some 20 lines of print.

By 5 December the paper's demotion is evident in its gloomy tone, chafing with editorial frustration:

The Press is becoming so restricted as to what it might write, and the subjects which may be touched are becoming every day so more and more limited, that we may have to fall back upon science, geography, or astronomy Before long we may expect to have to fall back upon the Homilies of the Church of England. . . .

As if to demonstrate just how 'local' local news will now have to be, 'Q' gives his own rendering of events:

There was an 'armoured train' disaster in Commercial Road yesterday morning. The Corporation steam-roller came to grief in the trench through which the new barrel drain has been constructed. . . .

For the historian the result is a strange hiatus during the build-up of British forces prior to the battles at Tugela River (and, of course, as to any news of General Buller's

arrival). Maritzburg could not but be aware of the throngs of ox-wagons passing through the town, each with a yellow military arrow painted upon it. But its citizens were not allowed on to the station to see the troop-trains passing through, and the news of the hour had to be carried more by gossip than by print. 'Q' speaks for the offended middle class when he notices how the atmosphere has changed up at the station. Surely 'the military will issue passes to a certain number of ladies and gentlemen who have charge of the distribution of dainties. . . .' But the officials, it seems, were adamant: those who once served the public now bossed it:

There is a bit of a martinet at the railway station, who has his own ideas of martial law. It is not pleasant for responsible and respectable citizens to be told: 'Here, get out of this, we are under martial law now, you know', and then to the men: 'Shove 'em out. . . .'

It was 'too much martial law', says 'Q' grimly, that, at Lexington, 'lost England a new world.'

That blow to bourgeois presumption was accompanied by frequent large-print adverts proclaiming a curfew: 'No person allowed out of their houses between 11pm and 4am without a Pass. All male non-residents must register their names at the Borough Police Station. . . .' There was no question about it: with the investment of Ladysmith, Maritzburg had been shunted off-stage. Natal became overrun with generals and top brass who had minimal concern for what the colonists thought or felt:

Overheard in Church Street a couple of days ago: 'Did any more troops come up last night?' 'No. I only heard of a trainload of mules and generals. . . .'

How much comfort might the citizens derive from Buller's pronouncement (was he in Natal or was he not?) that 'the British flag will fly over Pretoria by Christmas Day'? Later he denied that he ever said it, but at the time it led to another fluctuation of emotions. P. Davis and Son inserted an advertisement that, before long, they would have cause to regret:

Despite a few minor reverses, much is expected before Christmas. . . it may be hoped that before Christmas Day the newsboys in the streets of London will be announcing victory after victory for the British. What could be more fitting than for those across the ocean to receive from South Africa Christmas and New Year cards together with the glorious cable news. . . .

It was an enticement to back the mail-boat against the telegraph.



A HERO'S WELCOME. The civic reception for General Buller, in the Pietermaritzburg Market Square, 17 November 1900. The area bedecked with flags is for the dignitaries, while others mill about and look on. The spire visible at the lower end of the square is that of the old Dutch Reformed Church, which was a landmark from 1861 until its demolition in 1955. (It can also be seen in the famous Thomas Baines painting *Market Square, Pietermaritzburg, 1870*, the original of which is in the National Archives of Zimbabwe.)

(Photograph from the collection of The Natal Society Library.)

One military incident that the curbed paper *could* report upon was the investment of Kettlefontein (to use its own spelling). Kettlefontein (i.e. Ketelfontein), half way up to Hilton, was still the site of a renowned public house, and it was thither that the Home Guard — trying to prove its worth in stirring times — directed a Sunday 'manoeuvre'. 'The day was hot' says the reporter 'and some unkindly-disposed ones insinuate that had the objective been drier, it would never have been reached. They also hint that in the return march the ambulance men had a good many wounded to attend to. . . .'

So where was Buller? Suddenly, on 15 December, comes an oblique reference to the British general, alive and well at Colenso. A Wesleyan clergyman, Revd Wayne Sparks, is quoted as speaking 'in the highest terms of the courtesy with which the General and his staff have shown him the camp.' Only in a much later *Witness*, of 22 January, do we get a retrospective story on the weird silence that surrounded Buller's arrival in Natal. It seems that a Gilbertian discord ruled the day:

The Press received instructions not to mention General Buller's whereabouts. When, however, the censor here learnt that the censor at Frere or Estcourt had passed a mention of General Buller, that restriction was removed. . . . [C]ould anything have been more absurd?

More than this: General Buller, in his personal deportment, seemed not to have understood the basic tenets of military secrecy:

The fact of his being in Natal could not have been more widely proclaimed than by General Buller himself, who, on the two consecutive Sundays on which he was in Maritzburg, attended church with the Governor, and visited the hospitals. . . .

It should be mentioned that, throughout these months of censorship, the *Witness* dutifully reported the voice from the 'other side of the hill', in the shape of the *Diggers' Times*, the English paper of the Republics. Though it often picks holes in the figures and facts offered by that source, it does admit that putting two stories together is often unexpectedly edifying:

While information and reference to the movements of troops has been strictly banned, and criticism of military men is taboo, it has been possible to kill poor Piet Joubert twice, to relieve Kimberley and Mafeking at one stroke, and to capture 2000 Boers at an engagement at Ladysmith. These little pleasantries are allowed. . . .

'Q' captures nicely the exasperation of the editor at his literary demotion:

Editor to Printer: 'Throw away my War leader, and put in that thing about "'Do worms make love?'"'

In the first weeks of December the paper tries to devise strategies of its own to 'give the wink' to its readership. An editorial entitled 'Whilst Waiting to Cross' obviously refers to Buller, but chats away about distant topics of scientific research until it suddenly interrupts itself (has the censor fallen asleep?) with:

Since we may not touch, except with the greatest caution, upon matters which are of absorbing interest to every man, woman, and intelligent child in the community, other subjects must be found. We are as much in want of relief as Ladysmith, and it is even becoming a matter of common gossip that ours is much the further off of the two. . . .

If the historian goes to the *Witness* on the day that the Battle of Colenso was fought, it will find stories that almost defiantly jeer at the censor: 'The gratings of the barrel drains are at present covered with refuse, and are badly in need of attention. . . .' 'There was to have been an organ recital at St Peter's Cathedral on Sunday evening last, but unfortunately the organ broke down. . . and the recital has had to be postponed until next Sunday.'

But even this mood of grim humour rapidly became obsolete. When 'official reports' did at last come on Buller's attempt to cross the Tugela, they could no longer hide the size of what had actually happened. On 22 December the Maritzburg public woke up to news that quite changed the tenor of the war. After the publication of casualties from the Battle of Colenso one simply knew that one was party to a conflict on a scale not seen since the Crimea or the American Civil War. The names of killed, wounded and missing take up columns and columns: 900 names become a few days later 1 100 names, and even then the list does not stop growing. The sheer size of the reverse led to a chastened honesty from the military, and the Official Report, published each day, no longer tried to conceal the facts. 'The Ermelo Commando delivered such a terrible fire that two batteries of cannon had to be abandoned. . . It was a most crushing defeat, and nine cannons (were taken) across the river. . .'

The nearest a local reporter could get to the scene was at Chieveley station, and that provided a poignant story. The reporter, standing on the platform, saw many wounded being loaded on to a train:

. . . arms were in slings, heads and faces swathed in blue lint bandages. Some of the men hopped along on one foot. It was in this line I noticed a little bugler boy with his arm in a sling. He could not have been more than 14. . . .

The events of late November and December well-nigh banished light-heartedness from the everyday style. The new note was struck by the headmaster of Maritzburg College, R.D. Clark, when he gave a Christmas Day address not to the boys in his school, but to the sick and wounded soldiers who now occupied it. The resonance of the message — with the Latinate syntax of Natal's best classicist — is immediately apparent:

Soldiers of the Queen, for whom you have bled, and for whom so many of your gallant comrades have died in this Christmas land, I little thought when, less than a year ago, I had this hall, graced as it is by a fine portrait of Her Majesty, called the Victoria Hall, that it would be consecrated by your presence today. . . .

'I little thought. . . ' — the degree to which the unexpected had taken place is obvious in the somewhat muffled tones of the newspaper itself. The same note is struck in the tribute to Harry Escombe whose premature death was announced on 29 December. The death of Escombe, says the editorial, is of a scale with the sad times that the colony is now enduring:

. . . the unexpected has once again happened, and now it is not a household here, or a household there, that has to sorrow over a vacant chair, but the whole Colony over the death of her incomparably ablest man. . . Harry Escombe was great in council and great in debate. . . The knowledge that he was to speak could fill the galleries. And when he did speak it was worth a long journey to hear him. . .

One thinks of the isolated humanists like Merriman in the Cape when one reads:

He had faith in the Boers seeing their error, and disbelieved reports as to the possibility of harsh treatment and discreditable conduct by them during the invasion. . . No one lamented the war more than Mr Escombe and no one would be more useful, had he lived, to help in cementing the peace. . .

The Christmas season, and the approaching end of the century, provoked a certain philosophical mien in the *Witness* editor. What we capture in these editorials is the undented text of Social Darwinism, but by which standards 'the Boer, as we found him at Colenso, is as different from the old Boer of Amajuba as the proverbial chalk is from cheese.' This is a nice documentation of the first astounded responses to the changed technique of war. 'Instead of skirmishing along stone-strewn kopjes, he [i.e. the 'new' Boer] has burrowed like a rabbit in the mountain. Tram lines have been laid — the main positions, or forts, are connected with underground passages. . . '

This really admits a 'progressiveness' beyond the range of British military thinking. Yet two days later the racial comparison is still very much in evidence: there must be no 'responsible government' in the Transvaal after the republics are taken, because that would deprive 'the inferior race — which would return a larger proportion of representatives — of the benefit [that] would derive from contact with the superior race. . . '

From this lofty perch in the scales of Social Darwinism, the black people in Natal are measured with a degree of respect. It is noted that 'civilisation' has not wiped out the American negro, and that 'of what an American negro is capable our Kafirs are assuredly still more capable. . . The Kafir is undoubtedly the finest savage which the white man has met. . . ' Back on the streets of Maritzburg, however, and with the coming of the New Year holiday, the 'finest savages' were having a bit of a field day. Stick fighting led to what was later called the 'Bulwer Street riot', and a solemn warning was subsequently published by the municipality that 'no Native or other coloured person shall carry any sword, assegai, dagger, iwisa, or umtshiza' (the two lastmentioned being clubs or knobkieries), but — gracious concession — he 'may be permitted to carry an uswazi. . . ' (a small stick or switch).

That the word 'Kafir' was used in an unpejorative way is shown by an interesting report of early January. It seems that, as thousands of British troops sailed south of the equator, a black football team sailed north of it:

Several of the Kafir football players now touring in England have created such a favourable impression amongst experts of the game, that it is possible they may be induced to stay in the country and accept engagements to play for professional teams. . . .

Meanwhile the bad news from the Thukela made the 'nation of shopkeepers' in Natal sit tight and endure life from day to day. Why not make a silver lining out of these dark clouds? Messrs. McNamees, furnishers, placed a large advert: 'Furniture Destroyed by the Enemy: We are prepared to supply furniture at the shortest notice and on the best terms. . . .' Midlands farmers would have been attracted by another bold-print piece: 'The Inspector of Remounts will be at Nottingham Road Station on Thursday to look at any Horses suitable for the Imperial Government that anyone may care to bring for his inspection.' The trade in horses brought further variations: 'Wanted immediately, Six Shoemiths, for Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry.' The horse shortage was perennial: again and again there are advertisements for 'cobs, fourteen hands and up.' It is suggested (with a slight needling of Natal's mounted aristocracy) that 'the race horse is still far too fashionable here' and that 'carriage and saddle horses are far more what is wanted. . . .'

Draught oxen were needed too — and the modern reader discovers that this involved a much more sophisticated trade than one would have expected. David Whitlaw and Son announce that they presently stock: 'yokes, skeys, reims, strops, bucksails, anti-friction grease, trek-chains, shackles, brake blocks, lynch pins, and every description of oxwagon gear'. The demand for oxen saw strange fluctuations in agricultural life. With the 'record price for oxen', says the *Witness's* farm correspondent, 'natives have had considerable difficulty in getting their ploughing done, as oxen have been too valuable to lend', and he quotes as a typical price fetched by 'native' cattle £16 per head.

Meanwhile, with Christmas and New Year, Maritzburg's ambivalent relations with its 'refugees' reached a new intensity. One report almost rejoices in the 'record crop' of 'drunks and disorderlies' that a 'too liberal use of the cup that cheers' has brought about, and which has led to 55 names appearing on the charge book. This will 'make a substantial addition to the Borough treasury' (and don't worry: it is not the local citizenry who are to blame. 'It must be remembered that. . . our present population is far above its normal strength. . .') Maritzburgers might have believed that they had done their bit for empire and accommodated the Johannesburgers. 'Our uitlander visitors are settling down, the streets do not present the same packed appearance. The Public Reading Room has proved a boon to many ex-Transvaalers.' Whereas 2 009 visitors passed through the museum in September, the visits for December (to see the likes of Master James's moth) total 4 321 — a figure I presume even the same museum would be pleased with today.

But the love-hate relation rumbled on. The correspondent 'Uitlander', while admitting the 'overall debt of gratitude' to the city of his fellow-Johannesburgers, deplores the 'contemptible and mean action' of its landlords and hoteliers 'in taking

undue advantage to enrich themselves by bleeding the unfortunate refugees.' There is an inverted discrimination; the 'destitute are looked after' while those 'with a bit of money are asked utterly unreasonable sums for the merest damp hovels.' There was a choice: did one appear destitute, and thus have hope of charity, or did one retain respectability, and forfeit charity altogether? 'Even the leading hotel', complains Uitlander, 'has raised its tariff. . . .'

The place where this social tightrope was publicly exhibited was the eating-house of Mr Paterson in Pietermaritz Street. This hostelry was subsidised: to the destitute it gave free meals, and to those who could pay it gave meals at a discount. But how did you tell the difference? The 'respectable' did not want to sit with the unrespectable. Mr Paterson duly rigged up a dividing curtain that sorted out payers from non-payers. But the payers maintained — with one long, never-ending moan — that they did not get value for money. By February Mr Paterson was exasperated and begged the *Witness* to come in, incognito, and inspect his quarters. 'Popping in at odd times' 'Q' found 'the soup excellent, and everything well-cooked and served up in a clean manner. Yet on all sides there is grumbling. . . .'

One visitor who rather misjudged Maritzburg hospitality was an Irishman who deserted from 'the notorious Irish Brigade' (the brigade, that is, that fought on the Boer side). Leaving his comrades 'when matters became a trifle too hot at Ladysmith' and expecting 'to be received here with open arms', this good man 'had already made himself comfortable at Lord's when the detectives called. . . .'

With a large British army floundering in the field some 100 miles off, and with martial law restricting movement and news, there was a touch of sheer escapism in the public deportment at 'the Park Oval' in the New Year. Professor J. Michael, 'the world-famed aeronaut', was to give one of his daring 'ascents and parachute descents', which would be 'paced' by an electric motor. One review of the Park entertainments in this, the first week of 1900, gives the citizenry something of a wiggling. It finds the greensward to be 'strewn with paper, empty sardine and meat tins, bon-bon boxes, bottles and all sorts of debris. By Monday evening the Park looked more like the floor of a New York retail emporium. . . . 'Q' was annoyed to find 'a deep trench dug at the Oval immediately in front of the Pavilion. . . .', an 'abomination' which was the work of a professional visitor who had been granted the use of the Oval for the purpose of making a balloon ascent. . . . 'What trivial stuff, says 'Q' of Professor Michael's airborne effort, compared 'with a hawk or eagle', where 'every moment is the embodiment of grace. Yet people ignore such sights to go and see a human being. . . dropping with a large umbrella over his head. . . .'

Squalor there may have been, noise there was not:

The new year was ushered in without the usual noisy demonstration. . . . There was no clanging of bells, or loud reports of squibs and crackers, and an absence of the horseplay which has been a feature in past years. . . . There was not such an exodus of picnicking parties as in years past. A good many people visited the Albert Falls, and entrained for different places on the line as far as Howick. . . . The Masonic fraternity entertained about 800 refugee children at their hall in Longmarket Street.

Gradually the talk of the town turned to other forms of travail than that suffered at the front. The Meldrum family suddenly came into prominence:

Yesterday at noon citizens were surprised to see a red flag guarded by a policeman standing at the end of Henrietta Street. On enquiring it was found that Mr A.C. Meldrum, of bicycle fame, had been declared. . . suffering from small-pox. . . .

In years to come the Meldrums of Henrietta Street would be associated with mineral waters rather than bicycles. Mr A.C. Meldrum did not survive the attack, but there were other Meldrums around. With a shrewd eye to business, one of them asked the *Witness* 'to state that Mr Meldrum of Pietermaritz Street, riksha owner, has not been near his relatives in Henrietta Street for several months. . . .'

The Meldrum clan were to entertain a war-worried citizenry again a week later. Even in the midst of war there is nothing as spicy as a well-reported divorce. An article entitled 'An Unhappy Marriage' took up column upon column of small print. If one could not say much about General Buller and his problems, there was much to say about Mrs Kate Meldrum, wife of Mr Paul Meldrum, farmer of Nottingham Road, who was having a wretched time of things by reason of her husband's 'repeated cruelty, neglect, and intemperate habits.' In vain did the Bar try to find any shaft of light in the unredeemed Mr Meldrum:

Judge: How did your husband fill up his day?
 Plaintiff: By dawdling about, rolling cigarettes, visiting neighbours, and brushing his clothes.
 Judge: Then he did exert himself to that extent – to brush his own clothes.
 Plaintiff: Yes. . .

This small virtue failed to exculpate Mr Meldrum, and his farm and stock were duly ceded to his wife.

At last, some good news on 10 January. The 'clock and bells for the Town Hall have arrived in Durban by the *Inyoni*'. But, in the nature of the times, this is immediately followed by bad news. The maker 'declines to send a man out to erect the clock, in consequence of the war.' Such pusillanimity in the face of the Boers draws from 'Q' one of his most barbed rejoinders:

I would suggest that by this week's mail a map of the Colony be sent. . . with British and Boer positions marked, while in a covering letter it might be stated that in this present time. . . between the Town Hall tower and the Boer positions there are some tens of thousands of British troops, who may be relied upon to protect the clock-maker's precious employee from harm.

'Under the rigorous censorship it has become very difficult to find subjects of interest for an article. . . ' notes the leader of 18 January, and, as if to belabour the point, presents local news that is more local than ever:

Yesterday a box containing six dozen eggs was received at the market and on being opened the contents were found to be in that condition which is described as 'scrambled'. . . Are the porters at the station getting into trim for the ensuing football season?

The unruly porters at the station seem to bespeak a railway system over-stressed. Just as the Spioenkop battles reached their culmination, some citizens of Maritzburg suffered a somewhat violent train ride. The paper for 27 January reports that the 8.45 train for Durban, at Umsindusi Station (Pentrich), 'the through points being wrongly placed. . . ran into a siding, the engine striking the dead end with some force. Passengers were much bruised and shaken.' Dangerous stuff, this; a vast number of the empire's VIPs were then using the tracks. One bulletin reports that 'among the passengers by the down mail last evening were Lady Randolph Churchill, Bishop Baynes, and Colonel Young. . . .'

But the doldrums continued. Both the Horticultural Society and the Maritzburg Agricultural Society announced the cancellation of their annual shows. In the latter case there was not much option, since the show-grounds were 'occupied by the military authorities, having been taken over by force under martial law. . . .' During the long wait for Buller's next advance, we find the Sports Column, presided over by 'Meteor', coming back into prominence, and that simply because of the psychological vacuum that prevailed. As 'Meteor' explained:

The other day, when it was an even money chance on Slim Piet and his hosts executing their threat to indulge in the luxury of oysters and stout on the Bluff, it was impossible to concentrate one's interest in sport. . . .

But things have changed:

Now that Natal is no longer permitted to know what is going on at the front, and is consequently debarred from taking a live interest in the fortunes of the brave fellows. . . there is no reason why sport should not revert to its normal condition. . . .

To Meteor's consternation, one consequence of the cultural doldrums was that the bandstand, which recently exuded regimental airs, was now handed over to school drum and fife bands. 'Meteor' would 'as lief listen to the music of the Boer Maxim and Nordenfeld. . . .' Why did the Park bar show an increased profit last weekend?

Small boys in tight-fitting jerseys and knickerbockers three sizes too small [were] allowed to murder 'Annie Laurie' and the like, people were compelled to drown their sorrows in Dewars.

The long weeks of January and February tend to become a record of energetic concertising to raise funds for 'relief' — not so much of refugees, these days, as of the wounded now filling the military hospitals. The need to show that one was on 'Tommy's' side was felt, it seems, by the German community at New Hanover. The Natal Germans must have been a little sensitive to the fact that — despite the Kaiser's coming out for Rhodes rather than Kruger — some of Germany's best military brains

and best field-ordnance were now being used against the British. New Hanover, these days, was perhaps a little more in range of the eagle eyes of the press. That great harbinger of civilisation, the Natal Government Railways, had actually reached there. Adverts in January tell us that the 8.20 from Maritzburg arrives in Albert Falls at 10.08 and New Hanover at 11.10. At any rate, the 'relief' concert of 18 January was certainly not run by English colonists only:

Mr Schroeder followed with the 'Battle Hymn' to which he did full justice with his powerful voice. Perhaps the star of the evening was Miss Konigkramer, who sang 'Carnival' and 'Daddy' and was vociferously encored. . . The comic element was well sustained by Misses Smith and Westbrook, and Messrs. Oellermann and Surendorff, who, to the accompaniment of the auto-harp, kept the house in one long roar of laughter.

But the hawk-eyes of the press noticed one little dissension. 'Q' asks in his next column 'whether the loyalty, fidelity and integrity of a certain resident in the New Hanover division are not open to question? Whether he did not rise and leave the hall as soon as the opening chords of the National Anthem were struck? Whether he did not return as soon as the National Anthem had been sung?'

Reading between the lines, one has to conclude that only the imperially dutiful and the inexorably patriotic patronised the 'Minstrel Entertainment' (put on for 'the Maritzburg Refugees') at Scott's Theatre. No doubt 'Snowdrops' and 'Bohemians' warranted repetition, but the price for a box was two guineas, and for seats in the stalls one guinea. How one must have chafed at that sober entertainment when one knew that, just around the corner in Church Street, *Dell's Palace of Varieties*, frequented by off-duty soldiers and the more out-of-pocket refugees, charged only one shilling. It was 'open every evening with a first-class variety entertainment' provided by the likes of Miss Mary Bell, Miss Stella D'Evran, Miss Louise Melanti and Professor Hal Sesor, the Celebrated Ventriloquist. At *Dell's* you would also see Edison's '98 Bio scope', with 'all the latest pictures.' That one of the city's top brass *did* find patriotic attendance at Scott's too much for his pocket is suggested by some questions raised in 'Topics of the Town'. 'Q' asks

whether a certain municipal dignitary is not just now in bad odour with the local minstrel troupes? Whether the trouble has not arisen through the individual in question cancelling an order of a couple of rows of stalls at Scott's theatre?'

'Vox Humana', the *Witness's* musical correspondent, notes that 'no-one is interested in music at the moment, only in the war.' What with 'no Town Hall and organ', and 'all the military bands being away', the city seems 'quite dead'. There is only one small triumph in these grim times: the 'chimes' for the Town Hall clock have arrived in the city. The twelve bells have been promptly locked up in a shed near the City Hall. There will be 'fourteen tunes played by the clock mechanism' and also, alas, 'an ingenious arrangement whereby any tune possible can be played. . . .' Vox Humana says soberly: 'It is to be hoped that no one but an expert will have access to the ropes, otherwise the consequences would be too distracting.' What Vox

Humana does not say is that in these 'dead' times 'live' music was already competing with twentieth-century technology. A phonograph concert given on 18 January in the YMCA hall was 'an unqualified success. . . The instrument used was one of Edison's latest improvements, and the various items were rendered with a clearness and fidelity that took the audience by storm. . . . ' Door revenues, as usual, went to Relief funds. As each organisation vied to top the 'relief' figures, Kipling's challenge to 'pay, pay, pay' affected almost every performance. A concert at Scott's made £64 4s 7d for 'Ladysmith sick and wounded' but Mr Douglas, passing around a hat after rendering 'The Absent-minded Beggar', raised a further £10 16s 6d for that item alone.

But over-use creates an inevitable reaction. The familiar strains had become excruciating; nowhere more so than in beleaguered Natal. Says 'Q':

When you get the Absent-minded Beggar groaned out from the phonograph, sung at every concert, shrieked by every alleged elocutionist, when there is hardly a paragraph about our soldiers in which they are not referred to as 'gentlemen in khaki', and when all the young ladies in town are tinkling out Sir Arthur Sullivan's melody on their Broadwoods and Collard and Collards, well then, I think the enjoyment begins to fizzle out.

I suppose no South African paper was slow to quote the delightful take-off of Kipling that had come out in the Christmas number of *Punch*, following the news that 50,000 plum puddings had been sent to the front. It was certainly there in the *Witness*:

When you've eaten Christmas pudding — when you're groaning in your grief
When you've woken with a taste about your mouth —
Will you drop a tear of pity in your little handkerchief
As you think of all those puddings ordered south. . .

Was it only 'Q', however, who realised that a satiric pastiche might just get past the military censor, and — late in the day — deliver some tactical criticisms?

When you've finished with your pipe-clay,
Won't you try a little change
(It's useless killing Kruger with your mouth),
By sending out some cannon of a slightly longer range,
For the gentlemen in khaki falling south?

New guns, true guns, guns of a modern make,
Ship them out for Tommy's sake, out to Table Bay
We've got the men but not the guns, so we'll pay, pay, pay. . .

Even the 'Minstrels', as they got to the end of their 'Scotts' season, became a little bolder. Of course, there was always the excruciating rendering of patriotic numbers — one of their reviewers 'suggests' that 'even the most patriotic are surfeited with "Soldiers of the Queen"' But an element of satire does creep in: the review admits that 'Mr H Fuller as General Buller was genuinely funny, and his expression "Let the battle proceed" really first class humour. . . . '

Meanwhile the city council wrestled with the problems of war-time water supply and the state of the streets in crowded Maritzburg. The trouble is, said 'Q' that the costly 'Borough Engineers' Department' does not share pedestrian locomotion with the ordinary man in the street:

A magnanimous corporation has provided the Borough Engineer with a carriage and pair, and the members of his staff with hacks, and consequently their acquaintance with the condition of sidewalks may be somewhat distant and formal.

Hence the neat satire in which he welcomes the coming of improvements to Church Street in supra-historical terms:

Relief at last — No, not Ladysmith. Church Street is being paved. It will be the high and mighty privilege of the now babes-in-arms to gaze upon the actuality of Longmarket Street with its footpaths respectable, when we of this day are dust and cinders. . .

Somehow, in 1999, it is easier to imagine Ladysmith being besieged than it is to believe that Church Street was once unpaved, and blurred by the dust of passing carts.

But what of water consumption, which had more than doubled since 1895? The three chief culprits were the Camp, the Railway, and the Brewery. Yet, at a well-reported council meeting of 8 February, Councillor C.W.B. Scott (of Scott's Bridge and presumably Scott's Theatre fame) found his motion for inspecting the water supply to be ruled out of order.

Councillor Scott (*interrupting*): This is funny. . . I don't like things being held back until it is thought convenient; you ought not to keep things back in this way. . .

The Deputy Mayor (*wrathfully*): I won't put up with your remarks, sir; sit down! I will not have any of your insinuations. You are always coming in with these insinuations. You judge other people by yourself. . .

Councillor Scott (*who had resumed his seat*): Probably. . .

The mayor's office was furious with the *Witness* for exposing this civic dissension in time of war. 'Q's response was immediate (Councillor SBWC being, in this spoof, Scott with his initials in reverse.)

At a Roarporation Meeting

Cr.A: 'Has I was a-sayin' of, if them bricks isn't. . .'

Cr SBWC: 'On a point of order I would like. . .'

The Mayor: 'Cr A has the floor. . .'

Cr SBWC: 'I beg your pardon.

Cr.A: 'Has I was a-sayin' of, when that little. . . .'

Cr SBWC: 'On a point of order, Mr Mayor, I. . .'

The Mayor: 'I must call Cr SBWC to order. . .'

Cr A: 'When that little. . .'

Cr SBWC: 'Mr Mayor, I. . .'

The Mayor: 'Sit down!'

Cr SBWC: 'You can all go. . . .' (*Exit*)

The Mayor: 'We have much to be thankful for. Let us pray. . . .'

Not that Councillor Scott was entirely let off the hook. The military hospital at Maritzburg College had vastly increased the traffic down West Street and across the Umsinduzi River. 'Q' asks: 'Whether Councillor Scott might not deal with the bridge bearing his name? Whether the flooring thereof will not be flooring some horseman. . . .?'

Wartime discussion becoming somewhat parochial and introverted, it was often noted that the Maritzburg Market was the 'chief means of relaxation that the City possesses.' Here politicians argue their new ideas, here everyone 'bull[ies] Buller for not adopting their particular plan of campaign. . . .' It sounds an excessively masculine enclave, but a feminine presence was beginning to make itself felt. This is proved in an interesting test case heard before the City magistrate from 17 February. The pecking order at the market was under racial strain. Did 'coolies have the right to place their goods in the most advantageous position possible on the "'first come first served"' principle' or do 'Europeans. . . have the pick of the tables for their goods. . . .' The case was set to drag on and on. One colonial growl was that Indians did not have to pay tax. Whereas black 'riksha pullers, toggt boys, and monthly servants pay a tax' the 'hawker of fruit, fish, and other commodities' does not. The racial innuendo is there in the observation that white ladies now used the market arena, raising the question 'should coolies presume to shove in front of them?'

The 'feminine presence' is indeed rather hard to find in the reports of these times. I suppose the early phase of any war tends to present it as a man-only affair, where 'warrior' women like Kate Bishop are only too happy to hand over history to the all-active male. The absence of women from centre stage suggests a background presence, rather like that of the queen herself. R.D. Clark, in the Christmas Day address to soldiers already mentioned, referred to the painting of the queen that he had chosen for the Victoria Hall:

. . . just as those gracious eyes look down upon you in blessing now,
Her Majesty's thoughts and prayers are much with you today. . . .

In this vein, the women in Ladysmith provided a central icon. One report notes that

while shells were hurling through the air and bursting on the ground, they (the women) moved through the streets, in ordinary costume and with ordinary demeanour, as though no hostile Boer or bellowing gun was within a hundred miles of them. Not a trace of fear or panic was manifest.

In Maritzburg itself one cannot read the pages of the *Witness* without noticing how often Mrs F.S. Tatham — wife of the Natal politician, and (later) donor of the Pietermaritzburg Art Gallery — is the central, unassuming, figure. Who is it that, on 1 December, takes fifty refugee children down to the Park in rikshas, and hands out 'dainties'? Mrs Tatham. Who receives the proceeds of the New Hanover concert to

purchase linen and clothing for military hospitals? Mrs Tatham. Who meets an ambulance train, carrying 'a large number of sick and wounded', that arrives in the city on a Saturday evening after 'Spionkop'? Answer: 'Mesdames Wesley Francis and F.S. Tatham, who dispensed from a capacious store, tea, milk, aerated waters and eatables.' (I gather from Tatham descendants that she would have then been about 30 years old.) I wonder whether it crossed her mind that the woman's voice was going to become much more politically powerful as the war went on. (Certainly after the war her husband was to associate himself with radical politics; he earned notoriety on one occasion for congratulating the *Witness* on 'breaking secrecy' on one of the Prime Minister's covert plans.)

On 19 January 1900 the *Witness* quotes an interesting 'first sign' of this shift of influence:

To us women, says 'Only a Woman' in a Cape paper, the glorious victories and reverses only mean battlefields strewn with corpses, tortured wounded, hospitals full of wrecks of splendid manhood of English and Dutch, homeless refugees, neglected industries... an undying legacy of racial feeling, and thousands of black-robed figures (ourselves among them)...

It is, of course, that prescient intuition as to the 'legacy of racial feeling' which was to prove more accurate than Milner's 'progressives' ever realised.

A controversy closer to home brings the 'woman's question' to light rather more urgently. The bourgeois 'halo' around women was starving the shop-floor of labour. At last the colonial hierarchy had to recognise its structural limitations — its patent inability to generate a blue-collar class from its own people. A piece titled 'Woman's Labour', on 22 February, exemplifies nicely the typical mixture of insight and narrowness:

When ladies holding good positions in Johannesburg do not consider it 'infra dig' to accept temporary situations during the crisis, there appear to be no serious objections to the daughters of the labouring classes from the Rand helping forward the progress of the Colony by refraining from overcrowding shops and refreshment bars as 'helps' and following the footsteps of their mothers...

The author now goes through the weird drill of holding up upper-class colonial ladies as an example to all. (Notice how he does not even concede that a black working class exists):

We have no female farm servants in South Africa, and at our agricultural shows it is not the butter-making that attracts attention, but the novel sight of seeing well-dressed and comely matrons and bewitchingly attired and attractive farmers' daughters with their sleeves rolled up, working hard to make the butter come. Unfortunately the daughters of the tenant farmers and the artisans giggle and pass on. If South Africa is to prosper, we must put an end to playing at being Ladies and Gentlemen.

The problem is, of course, the author himself, who shows no intention of ceasing to 'play' at 'Ladies and Gentlemen.'

To judge purely from the pages of *The Natal Witness*, Maritzburg women of 7 February 1900 were being persuaded to concern themselves not so much with Buller's difficulties on the Thukela as with getting their children back to school. The paper is crammed with adverts for familiar schools, and for unfamiliar ones. We have St Charles, Girls Collegiate, Merchiston, Weston College, but we also have Blenheim School, the Huguenot Seminary (Greytown), the Hook School (Highlands), The Gables School (Chapel Street), Glen Lynn College (Loop Street), and the Maritzburg High School for Girls (Zwaartkops). 'Q' is only too glad that schools are re-opening — he has found the conduct of the average youngster 'becoming intolerable. The manners and language of the Maritzburg boys is on a par with those of the small fry in the East End of London. . . . Ladies watching boys angling, and leaning over Park Bridge, [heard] words that would not even be quoted by Kipling. . . .' (In my reading, Kipling's worst word is 'bloomin', and I cannot think that the young anglers would be awfully shamed by 'Q's' report.)

Were the Maritzburg boys that bad!? We note that the boys of the cathedral choir voted their 'good attendance' prizes to the relief fund — but, then, perhaps they were not the type who went fishing beneath the park bridge. Someone who knew just how to talk to the young was R.D. Clark, opening the new Maritzburg College session in temporary war-time quarters at the Native High Court building:

He expressed his belief that their temporary exile. . . in a noble cause would prove to have been only a blessing in disguise. A tablet, to be erected in the College Hall, would not only commemorate the fact that her Majesty's brave sick and wounded soldiers had found nursing and shelter during their campaign . . . but would also record the names of old boys, such as Craig Smith, Tucker, and Haddon, who had met heroic deaths in action. . . . He urged every boy to see that he left that court with not a single dint on the dado, or a drop of ink on the parqueted floor . . . (*laughter*)

Not all Maritzburg's boys, it turns out, served at the front with equal honour. One character who earned himself dishonourable mention in the Ladysmith siege might well — a hundred years later — stir up psychological interest. In the official war bulletin for 14 February there is reported the court-martial and imprisonment, in Ladysmith, of one Herbert Foss, for 'circulating reports calculated to cause despondency among the troops'. He was, says the report, 'warned by several civilians. The only wonder is that he was not locked up sooner. . . .' I might have left that news item to anonymity had I not discovered in the 'Sporting Intelligence' of the same edition, an unexpected sequel:

Herbert Foss, Natal champion swimmer, and latterly an aspirant for cycling honours, appears to have fallen upon evil times in Ladysmith. . . . One cannot help feeling sorry for one who was regarded as being made of better stuff. . . .

I suppose every war throws up such lone, highly self-disciplined types, whose trace of mania takes them in a rebellious direction. One wonders whether Herbert Foss was able to patch up his life again after the war, and, if so, in what part of the world he did so.

Meanwhile, the temporary hospitals for the wounded were, as the College headmaster said, very much in the public eye, and none more so than the building handed over by the government of Natal, the Legislative Assembly. By 1 February 272 men had passed through its wards. An article writing up the achievements of this hospital rather takes one's breath away: it is difficult not to discern a certain 'class' implication:

A generous public keeps them (the patients) well supplied with papers and magazines; there are the beautifully cool vestibule and balcony where they can take an airing, and the members' billiard room is always at their disposal... Mrs Topham... adds considerably to the attractiveness of the place by her artistic arrangement of flowers.

'Q' saw the social implication pretty smartly. He asks in his next column: 'Whether the men in the Garrison Hospital might not receive a little more attention from the citizens? Whether a plethora of kindness is not showered upon the Assembly Hospital?' (One attention that the Garrison wounded *did* receive, by the way — and which made all the more shameful the non-erection of the clock bells — was the discontinuance of the 'time gun' fired daily at 8am and 1pm, 'on account of the bad effect it had on the wounded men in camp...')

Meanwhile all was not running as sweetly at the College hospital as R.D.Clark might have hoped. Out on the tented fields the men were not subject to the elegant visitation of Mrs Topham. On 3 February, two days after the Assembly Hospital report, *The Times of Natal*, in a Special Edition, carried the juicy headlines: 'Military Hospital Deficiencies. Serious Complaints by the Wounded. Wounds Undressed since Spion Kop.' The paper quotes some thirteen areas of complaint derived from the patients themselves. An enquiry was instituted under no less a personage than Sir William Stokes, 'Surgeon-in-Ordinary to HM the Queen', who was renowned for work at Richmond Hospital, Dublin. The unfortunate reporter for the *Times of Natal* was made to accompany the inspecting party. Sir William felt 'compelled to state that the charges are as mischievous and cruel as they are false'. The *Witness* must have rather enjoyed this spectacular discomfiture of a rival newspaper. In fact, the report shows that the complaints were not totally unfounded. 'In one or two cases concerning the beds', it says, 'a deficiency of sheeting was observed. This, we were informed, was due to the want of a heating apparatus for drying linen...'. As to the most general complaint, regarding the quantity of food, Sir William has a sagacious reply: 'Cases continually occur... in which strong convalescent young men find, or think they find, the regulation diet supplied to them insufficient.'

Was this rebuttal assisted by the ever-present filter of military censorship? By February the papers in Natal were beginning to regain composure as regards the censors. As early as 5 January it was reported that the mails recently arrived on the *Majestic* of the Atlantic Greyhound Line made up 'the quickest delivery on record',

and they revealed to the colony that the home papers 'contained some very outspoken comments', including calls for resignations at the War Office. The *Witness* was to learn — an item of fame that, to my knowledge, it has never traded upon since — that its blacked-out column for 30 November 1899 had become an international exhibit in the history of press censorship.

'Q' tells us jauntily of the paper's present relations with the censor. 'Nightly, at 12 o'clock promptly, the staff of this paper warble through their telephone:

Send him censorious
Red pencil glorious
Long to out-score-ius
Greatest of men. . .

He makes it clear that the only news the public can trade on these days is the gossip of the hour:

Overheard in Church Street:
'Any news this morning?'
'Yes; Nqutu has fallen.'
'You don't say.'
'It's a fact.'
'Then I suppose England will sue for peace.'

Gossip has become more trusted than official news. That is the burden of the paper's rather more defiant treatment of the Spionkop reverse than had so far been allowed. The news broke on 29 January. 'Q' in that edition remarks how 'last Saturday evening. . . the heat wave and muggy atmosphere' that Natal has been experiencing was 'dispersed by. . . one of the most magnificent electrical duels ever witnessed in Natal. . . . Another storm came over the Zwaartkop about 12.30am A grand sight was witnessed by those who took the trouble to rise. . . .' He would not have known it, but that same break in the Natal weather overtook the British troops retreating down Spionkop. Meanwhile, the paper's editor, treading carefully, makes his feelings plain:

General Buller's official despatch has confirmed in almost every particular the miserable rumours which had been current in the city. . . . Few military despatches have ever, perhaps, invited the criticism of which this one would admit. The man in the street may discuss it in all its bearings. The Press may not. All that is permissible to them is to join the General in its congratulations on the force having been withdrawn 'without the loss of a single man'.

The inverted commas around 'without the loss of a single man' show reservations, doubts that the subsequent display of column after column of casualties seemed to justify. But now comes the bitterest sentiment:

One thing we will say further in reference to this despatch, and that is only an expression of universal public feeling that the suspense in which colonists have been...kept is refined cruelty. The compliments... which have been bestowed upon the Colony for its loyalty... do not outweigh or compensate for the anxiety to which military thoughtlessness has subjugated them after almost every engagement... .

But Buller's unhappinesses were at last to be sidelined by the first unadulterated good news of the war: the information that Lord Roberts had crossed into the Free State — a 'pick-me-up' (says the *Witness* on 15 February) for 'every man, woman, and child of intelligent age in Natal.' Surely the three 'sieges' must soon be raised:

Overheard in Church Street:

'Where is 'Bobs'?'

'Somewhere near Kimberley, I imagine.'

'I'll take 20 to 1 that he's not a hundred miles from Van Reenen'

'In other words, that he reaches Ladysmith before Buller does...?'

The relief of Kimberley was the dress rehearsal for that release of suppressed emotion that Natal was waiting for. The news broke on 21 February:

The streets rapidly filled with excited streams of residents and refugees, many of the latter letting off superfluous hurrahs from time to time. The Stock Exchange, Post Office stoep, the corridors and verandahs of the principal hotels, were all taken up by groups of would-be generals and a perfect babel of 'I told you so', 'Bully for French!', 'Grand old Bobs' and other expressions arose on all sides... .

There was a new moral confidence in the air. The paper that announces 'Cronje smashed and captured' has 'Q' noticing 'quite a change since my last scribbling... Then we were down in the dumps; now we are as happy as sand-boys... .'

As if to relish the change in public morale, the *Witness* chooses this moment to reveal a colossal bloomer committed by the military censor. Throughout the Ladysmith campaign readers have been aware that the troops are being accompanied by 'the Warwick Portable Biograph Co.' The new technology is amazing: 'one camera with its tripod can be carried on a bicycle, a pack mule can carry three or four'. But, alas, the London *Daily Mail* has received three tins of undeveloped film with 'Opened under martial Law' written on them, under the signature of the Cape Town censor. Result: some 'interesting and unique films' have been ruined by careless exposure. 'Martial law' is thus responsible for 'the loss to the British public of some exceedingly interesting pictures.'

Another shift in tone is evident in the way that the siege of Kimberley is subsequently reported. No Rhodes-worship; no Baden-Powell-type heroics. What takes the public interest is not the military crisis but the crisis in health: 'The sad, but expressive, news from Kimberley' says an article on 24 February, is that 'during the

siege, owing to want of milk. . . babies died like flies. . . . It is perhaps the young ones who suffer most during a siege.' The lesson is one of civic hygiene: 'However careful some milk vendors may be with their habits, little is known of what happens to the milk whilst being carried about the streets.'

But now Natal's turn really did come. Even the war with the censor was forgotten in the great news that broke on Saturday 3 March 1900. Ladysmith was relieved. No matter how much a more sceptical, more revisionist view of history overtakes us a hundred years later, the depth of the emotion cannot be gainsaid. If, today, we can smile at the tone of the leader — 'neither the courage of the Boer, of which the display has been remarkable, nor the science of Europe, can avail against the unflinching determination of an Empire at arms' — the actual description of the street scenes speaks for itself:

Nothing was allowed to mar the general joy. There were those whose sombre habiliments told of recent losses, keeping back their tears, cheering and waving handkerchiefs in thankfulness and sympathy with those who joyed for dear ones emancipated from a living tomb. . . . As though some band of genii or fairies with deft fingers had sprung from the shades, the streets of the City assumed with magical transformation a new aspect. Stern and cold iron pillars blossomed forth like Aaron's rod into life and colour. Festoons of banners and ribbons of bunting ran across the streets. . . .

This time it was the female of the species, and not the club male, who took centre stage:

Here one met with a dainty face peeping from under a network of red, white and blue, there a vision [looked] in a bewildering display of lemon with the Scottish lion. . . . [There were] fetching gowns in green, with harps galore on them. . . . Ribbons, bows and rosettes flashed everywhere on the female form divine, even to tiny rosettes on tinier feet. . . . The girls of various schools in the City paraded the streets carrying banners — babies were not forgotten; they were quite as fearfully and wonderfully dressed as their mothers.

And the reporter notices how, here and there, 'groups of natives burst into song.' It is often remarked that this public catharsis was never experienced again in a war that was to drag on for another two years. As Simon Haw remarks in his history of *The Natal Witness*, the headlines on the Peace of Vereeniging in May 1902 are almost perfunctory.²

If only it had happened, then, that prior to that Saturday, the 'expert from England' had arrived, and set up the new City Hall clock-tower carillon. But wait! — it seems that some inspired party managed to release even that gagged voice:

Unfortunately the bells for the clock tower had not been placed in position, but during the morning their voices were made heard from the basement. . . .

An inspired intervention: even Maritzburg's bells did manage to speak! It was a nice culmination of the colonial city's more parochial saga.

REFERENCES

All excerpts taken from 1899–1900 editions of *The Natal Witness*, unless otherwise stated.

NOTES

1. Haw. Simon, *Bearing Witness: The Natal Witness 1846–1996*, (Pietermaritzburg, Natal Witness, 1996) p. 137.
2. Haw. *Bearing Witness*, p. 142.

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