

# *Peace on earth and mercy mild*

## *KwaZulu-Natal Anglo-Boer War Centenary*

### *defies its critics*

The seeds for today's Anglo-Boer War Centenary Commemorations (ABW 100) were sown 20 years before they began, with the Anglo-Zulu War centennial commemoration. The province developed an unequalled military historical interest in the conflict of 1879 and before, fuelled by the dynamism of Sheila Henderson, George Chadwick and others. The increased fame of later story-tellers such as David Rattray further established the battlefield tour as a tourist attraction and personal hobby. It was but a natural progression to use this advantage in another, but far more ambitious, centenary to commemorate the second ABW. After all, did not the province have a flying start through its ownership of the best-known battlefields of the early period of the war?

Committees and societies, academia, media and museums all help, but it is the determination of individuals that delivers such grand schemes, and once more the province was blessed with great local talent and enthusiasm. But this time, the critics were many. In 1994 the British High Commissioner, for example, did not judge any formal commemoration, involving serving or retired military personnel, to be a sensible proposition. With thousands of murders a month prior to the general election, this was an easily justified view. The South African government was not encouraged to support anything potentially inflammatory, or be seen to accept something that had a whiff of post-colonial celebration.

Luckily there were those around, and particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, who took a bolder and more imaginative line. Surely there was opportunity for commemoration rather than celebration, and reconciliation rather than polarisation in an event launched just as a new millennium dawned? How better to develop Mandela's legacy than to broaden minds, stimulate entrepreneurial and academic undertakings and to begin community-building? Largely through the energies of Ken Gillings and half a dozen volunteer enthusiasts, KwaZulu-Natal slowly established a plan and network that was to put on the longest-running show the province has seen.

Opposition hardened at the outset, settling into predictable camps. There were the straightforward Doubting Thomases – 'you will never get an Afrikaner to join the British in any ABW ceremony, and that is that'. There were the obfuscators – second, third and fourth agendas dreamed up in secrecy, whilst taking advantage of any funds available. There were those who sat on the wall – politicians, diplomats, local government officials. There were those who were jealous and were hell-bent on ambushing progress – other provinces, extreme societies, some local officials who felt their power being



*The re-enactment of the storming of Pieter's Hill.*

threatened. But the ABW 100 message and offer was too strong for them all – you could sort out the differences peaceably and hold hands together to make the event a happy experience for all. Even the black community, buried in a conviction that ABW 100 was for whites, by whites, and that it ignored the mass of South African society, could be convinced otherwise, and be encouraged to share in commemorating the loss of thousands of their forebears on both sides.

The three years before the ABW 100's launch were filled with provincial cabinet briefings, the establishment of effective committees to local level in 13 towns and villages, constant visits to refine plans, promotional marketing at home and abroad, and of course the unrelenting search for sponsorship. By April 1999 the definitive KwaZulu-Natal

ABW 100 programme had been published and scattered across the world, with its 100 commemorative events. A website and an office were opened at Talana, commitments from abroad were sealed, and eventually funds were secured from government. The KwaZulu-Natal stimulus fired other provinces into action, although only Northern Cape and Free State were to mature into anything like the KwaZulu-Natal example. A national committee was formed with an Afrikaner at its head in Bloemfontein and official lines of communication established with national government. Undoubtedly the early participation of the Duke of Edinburgh and the Deputy President accelerated things and served as a useful springboard for initial events.

As the plot unfolded, and the events rolled by, each commemorating an encounter or important political moment one hundred years before, the public was entitled to feel all was serene. In fact all the early events were fraught with squabbles and spoiling tactics that were in the best tradition of South Africans squandering a position of advantage through factionalism. It has to be recorded how government agencies were rarely wholeheartedly behind the ABW 100 effort – often it was only political pressure from on high that forced unwilling hands to fulfil professional undertakings. Additionally a new organisation calling itself the Anglo Boer War Foundation in Bloemfontein promised to pay over one million rands to ABW 100 in exchange for the right to trade under the KwaZulu-Natal-invented ABW logo. As I write, over a year later, not one cent has been forthcoming. And 'shadow' ABW interests emerged, designed to 'piggy-back' on the authentic model until funds were obtained before deviating from the programme for their preferred interpretation.

ABW 100 was never going to be for the faint-hearted. Neither was the spirit of reconciliation to be bowed by such disappointments, and quickly a pattern of social behaviour identified itself. The wise amongst the ABW brethren knew from the outset that the ‘skies over Johannesburg and Durban would not be black with bulging 747s full of tourists hell-bent on supporting ABW 100’. Those with a privileged insight into the likely foreign institutions – British Army regiments, historical societies, veterans’ organisations, academic and museum services, educational groups, etc. – had clear readings that a full-blooded presence at the events was never on the cards. The South African government’s tempered and late support contributed to an unease about the ‘official’ nature of ABW 100, whilst the air fares and rural violence (invariably distorted by a foreign medium seemingly devoted to denying



*Thirteen-year-old Alexander Sandys, playing the role of his great-grandfather Winston Churchill, is marched off to captivity by a group of burghers in a re-enactment of the armoured train incident that took place outside Estcourt. (Photograph: *The Natal Witness*)*



South Africa praise for its remarkable political and social progress) kept the waiverers at home. Instead, foreign representation was respectable but slight, with no more than twenty regimental parties seen in the province. There were notable exceptions, particularly amongst the Irish, whose contribution included a full-blown, fifty-strong group of former soldiers and wives who left a plaque in a church to commemorate the formation of the Irish Guards one hundred years before, as a result of the dying Queen Victoria’s wish that their outstanding bravery and sacrifice should be recognised. The Military History Society of Ireland, an absolute model for other nations to follow, also sent two groups of forty enthusiasts.

*Laying wreaths at the Irish memorial, Hart’s Hill.*

The lukewarm foreign involvement should be kept in sensible perspective – the several thousand that have visited specifically have already broken existing records in rural north KwaZulu-Natal. They have been outnumbered by those foreign tourists who now include a battlefields visit as an incidental element in an otherwise traditional South African holiday itinerary. All this vindicates ABW 100's belief that tourist interests will burn slowly, and commercial objectives should concentrate on sustaining the attractions rather than criticizing the relatively low early attendance figures. To the average inhabitant of the thirteen towns – Colenso, Dundee, Durban, Eshowe, Estcourt, Ladysmith, Mooi River, Newcastle, Pietermaritzburg, Utrecht, Volksrust, Vryheid and Winterton – ABW 100 has been an outstanding success. You will not find a shopkeeper, hotelier, B&B owner, tour guide, car hire company,



*The monument at Pieter's Hill.*

coach owner or mayor to complain about poor showing because they have all witnessed the real success story of ABW 100 – the South African has surmounted his parochialism and ventured beyond his community to support regional, and often national, events in full force.

Dundee had the largest crowds in living memory at its Talana commemoration in October 1999 – probably over 7,000 people. Ladysmith filled the largest hall in the region with a superb concert featuring Ladysmith Black Mambazo, the Drakensberg Boys' Choir and the South African Navy Band. Hundreds turned up at local ceremonies at Mooi River, Eshowe and Durban where there was no battlefield 'pull' to draw them. Thousands went to Vryheid, Winterton, Colenso and Estcourt, where there were famous battles to cover and many dead to commemorate. In Newcastle the Mineworkers' Marathon Memorial Relay was run along the route taken by J.S. Marwick and his evacuating reef miners – a unique idea from which it is hoped a rival to the Cape Argus Cycle Race will eventually blossom. The vast majority of the crowds at all these events were South African, and this has become the lasting joy for all ABW 100 volunteers – hatchets can be buried, minds can be opened, hands can be shaken.

Some memories stay in the mind longer through a particularly South African aspect they produced. At Colenso, on a day when events began with a jackstay crossing of the Thukela by proficient youngsters from the Manchester Field Gun Team and the South African Navy, a farmer appeared on the far bank to say that he would not let his land be used: he had received no warning, he was not in favour of the ABW idea, his gates were locked and he would not consider things further unless R1 000 came his way! (Never



*Louis Botha, grandson of the Boer general and first South African prime minister, speaking at Pieter's Hill.*

deny the entrepreneurial initiative of the aggrieved.) A rapid indaba was held – there were 500 visitors waiting to watch the fun and 30 youngsters from UK who had been looking forward to this moment for over a year. It was decided that while an ABW 100 treasurer paid the farmer a cheque, the MC would pass round the hat to make good the financial loss. Within 5 minutes, R1700 was raised – problem solved. But no. The farmer had heard the unkind words of the enthusiastic fund raiser, which he took to be insulting, and unless an unconditional apology was received, no event would take place. Further quick conference, carefully chosen explanation over the microphone, and the show went on. We all heaved a sigh of relief – some skin scratches easily, and ABW 100 has taught us all to consider, and consider again, the potential sensitivities of one another.

Another memory is of Pieter's Hill, where Louis Botha's grandson, amongst others, laid wreaths in an especially poignant ceremony.

As formalities were about to begin, the air was filled with Zulu singing as 1 000 locals wound their way up the narrow path. They took over proceedings for 20 minutes with their iNkosi asking to address the crowd. He told us all how our ancestors who lay in the graves around were safe in their hands. At last a breakthrough with the black African we thought, with an interest and involvement for us all to share and enjoy. Collaborations at Colenso, Eshowe, Ladysmith and Newcastle can be seen as tentative confirmation of this prospective bonding, but the ABW 100 volunteers do not as yet count the involvement and aspirations of the black communities amongst their leading achievements. It has the highest priority for the remaining bulk of the centennial programme. But seeds have been sown: in Colenso, the main local interlocutor is about to initiate a birding tour built on information and support he has gleaned from his ABW 100 friends.

One more recollection is of the Spioenkop centennial day, which had been preceded by a fair measure of 'marking out of ground' by those involved. Being the powerful media draw card it was, the threat by several hundred burghers to hijack the event concentrated the minds of those who fondle worry beads. The day itself was a magnificent slice of modern South Africa. The memory of two African schoolchildren laying a wreath at the British monument, to be followed by two bearded Afrikaners, resplendent in long leather coats, slouch hats, bandoliers, rifles and a Boer Republic flag will linger long. As will the pleasant surprise at being hugged spontaneously by a young Afrikaner woman after laying a wreath at the Boer Monument: 'I just want to thank you for coming here with those flowers to put on our grave,' she said. As we all looked up, the sun had been ringed by a shimmering halo of light directly over the monument – for the superstitiously-inclined, this lent the moment a seemingly prophetic significance. The meticu-

lous attention to honour all participants at Spioenkop made it a worthy day and yet again educated those who deny these things can happen in South Africa.

The dedication of the inspired few apart, the effort made in all the communities is the real reason for things holding good so far in KwaZulu-Natal's ABW 100 efforts. The commemoration programme committee has more Afrikaners than first-language English speakers and is chaired by an Englishman. The mix is potent and the atmosphere open but often charged. The deeper we reach into the programme the more the communities have taken over. The blend of commerce and history is there to see, with only 15 people out of a thousand visitors present choosing to listen to the account of the battle of Scheepersnek, which centenary we were all there to commemorate. To the dry historical purist this was unsatisfactory, but is this not missing the point? The small, mainly Afrikaner community of Vryheid, with its former Transvaal identity, had got together in force to enjoy each other's and any visitor's company. The catalyst had been ABW 100, although the technical detail had been largely overlooked. In my view, ABW 100 had scored heavily that day, putting pride and purpose into an insular area. Vryheid had done its bit. Follow that, Utrecht and Volksrust!

ABW 100 has not changed history, but it has encouraged historical interest and research. The Ravan Press series of seven pamphlets of notable ABW battles in KwaZulu-Natal, *Hall's Handbook*, and the *In Memoriam* compendium of British graves in South Africa were all edited or written by KwaZulu-Natal authors.<sup>1</sup> They form a fitting complement to authoritative works such as Pakenham's *The Boer War*, and again stem from ABW 100 volunteer contributions. There are few historians outside the province who can compete professionally with these accomplished and knowledgeable few, all of whom are practising and fully qualified battleguides. There have been entrepreneurial flourishes elsewhere too, from florists to booksellers, B&B owners to printers and publishers, hoteliers to guides, flag makers to associated local Africana dealers, tour operators to clothes manufacturers. We must wait to see whether this becomes a sustaining legacy of ABW 100 beyond 2002; the early signs are good for a developing clutch of cottage industries that might prolong their lives in the key ABW 100 areas.

In sum, my assessment of KwaZulu-Natal's ABW 100 is extremely positive. There might be intimidating overseas comparisons worth making, but they would be invidious. Only South Africa has had the welter of opposing views against which to make something of a war that in many ways still dominates and divides family and community beliefs and attitudes. It took KwaZulu-Natal to show the way, and the province can be proud of what has gone on so far. At an indaba at Utrecht recently we discussed the best way to run the highly ambitious and internationally significant event planned for 9 December 2000. As we relaxed during a traditionally-run Afrikaner braai evening, I debated the rights and wrongs of Kitchener's internment policy of 1900-01. I was told it was the longest conversation in English that my new associate, the 'village elder' of the local community, had had since he left school! I put over the soldier's perspective in war and the operational imperatives for the British to snuff the Boer ability to strike at will from heartlands adjacent to the perilously long supply lines of their foe. He listened calmly, and then thanked me: 'You know we were only told one story at school and I have never heard anyone explain it this way', he said. 'Maybe people like you should have been heard two years ago'. I afterwards learned he had been the moving spirit in denying the international day taking place on 16 December, the Day of the Vow.

To me, these moments are the true value that ABW 100 has brought us, multiplied a thousand-fold across the province during more than 100 formally programmed events. With the bulk of the centenary still to run, my hope is that it will be exploited fully as an accommodating focus for reconciliation. After a career following one flag that eventually led to, and ended in Pretoria, I can vouch for the brotherly regard that soldiers have for each other, including their enemies when encountered away from the battlefield. It is a travesty to act out an enmity that I suspect was just not there in the hearts of Boer, Brit, African, Indian and supporting foreign cast when peace was reached in 1902.

**NOTES**

1. The Ravan Press series was reviewed in *Natalia* 29. A review and a note on the other two publications will be found elsewhere in the present edition.

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