

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES: THE NATAL CAMPAIGN IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR 1899–1902

by HUGH RETHMAN

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F*RIENDS and Enemies* is an account of the Natal campaign of 1899, and is novel for its attention to the participation of Natal colonists in military operations. The author describes their involvement by drawing heavily on personal reminiscences and diaries of Natal volunteers. Although he now lives in England, Mr Rethman was born and raised in Natal, and by his own account was an enthusiastic student of the war and a frequent visitor to the battlefields. His earlier passion is enduring and is reflected in his work.

The introduction provides a conventional overview and the first four chapters enlarge upon events anticipating the war. Chapter 5 discusses the opposing forces. The Boer invasion and advance to Ladysmith are covered in Chapters 6–11. The siege is the main subject of Chapters 12–15. The British relief is dealt with in Chapters 16–17 and 19–22 and expulsion of the Boers from Natal in Chapter 24. The chapters vary greatly in evenness and length, depending on the number of anecdotes (and occasional digressions), but generally the narrative is sustained, assisted materially by the author's manifest enthusiasm for his subject.

Mr Rethman's enthusiasm for the topic carries with it a bias as he is a British patriot of yore. Although he is critical of the British commanders and forces, he is favourably disposed towards and almost never critical of the Natal colonists and volunteers. He has little good to say about the Boers, apart from complimenting their marksmanship.

It must be borne in mind that Mr Rethman is not a professional historian. His aim is to produce a popular book, and popular books are invariably stripped of excess scholarly baggage. In this case one should not expect strict scholarship in respect of the bibliography and notes. Even so Mr Rethman should have been more meticulous with notes; he seems to have dropped them in just as he pleased (and sparingly), which is particularly unfortunate with regard to quotations. The maps leave much to be desired. The tactical ones, apart from the one of the siege, are rather too schematic. There is one regional map, an old thing lacking sufficient detail to illuminate strategy. There is nothing at all at the operational level and the reader, unfamiliar with the geography of upcountry Natal, will flounder blindly trying to keep track of troop movements.

It is unfortunate that the print size of the text is 9 or 10 points. It makes for slow reading and more so with long quotations in italics. There are also defects in the composition. Mr Rethman knows how to write well, but his manuscript needed some editing. It is as though the chapters were written at various times, with varying source material and varying verve. Some chapters seem unnecessarily long (9, 14, 17) and a few are disjointed because of disparate material (4, 5, 21); one seems out of place (18) and another extraneous (23), nor are the appendices germane. The final chapter is too short, and ends abruptly with an anecdote of questionable relevance. The book lacks a Conclusion

with only a two-page Postscript to fill in some detail. One wonders if Mr Rethman, having laboured long and hard over his manuscript, could not bring himself to round things off properly. It seems as though he just threw down his pen and said 'That's it!'

There is much to be said for this book. It brings out the contributions of the colonial volunteers and stresses the important role they played in support of the main British army. Teachers and tour guides alike will dip deeply into the book for many details to vivify their talks.

PAUL THOMPSON