

*BOER CRITICS ON 'THE GREAT BOER WAR.'*

\* \* LAST winter some copies of Dr. Conan Doyle's book, 'The Great Boer War,' were sent through the Colonial Office to the Boer prisoners of war in Ceylon. A warm letter of thanks was received, and the suggestion followed that the author would be much interested in any criticisms on his work which the prisoners of war might offer. Thanks to the courtesy of the Colonial Office and of the civil and military authorities in Ceylon, the Editor prints the following expressions of opinion from some of those who fought against the British arms.

The most important criticism is signed by W. G. H. Koenneker, who describes himself as 'one of Kruger's Mercenaries.'

*Conan Doyle's 'The Great Boer War.'*

I have been asked to give my impressions of the above work, and have done so with pleasure even at the disadvantage of using a language not my own, because it has appealed to me very strongly and pleasantly. But I must insist that they represent exclusively my personal opinion, given, moreover, at a time when I am a prisoner of war still, and therefore not able yet to look at the events treated therein, either from the broad point of view given through general knowledge or information from both sides, or with the well-weighed criticism exercised over past experiences.

The introduction is a masterwork in its way for the unbiassed valuation of the good and bad qualities of the Dutch race, deducing them from and explaining them by the racial composition and the gradual development and conditions of life of the South African Dutch, and for the brief but clear summary of the causes of the great struggle and the final complications which led up to its outbreak. Yet there might have been still more allowance made for the pernicious influence of red-tapeism and the often displayed incapability of British authorities to adapt themselves to the way of thinking of a people who have gained everything they possess by incessant fighting, are highly self-reliant and conservative, and therefore naturally distrustful against all innovations.

Especially their misunderstanding of the principles according to which the British claimed full human rights for the black population cannot be counted high enough as one of the reasons for such mistrust, considering that there is scarcely a Boer family to be found who has not lost, *i.e.* had slaughtered and mutilated, some of its members in one or other of the innumerable Kaffir wars, while, on the other hand, the average Boer is not given much to general literature, and therefore little amenable to reason and progressive ideas.

The healthy influence which the author ascribes to the many points in common between the two races, as religiousness, personal bravery, love for sports, respect for women, &c., was certainly existent but more than counterbalanced by the influence of education which all over the Transvaal and a great part of the Free State was in the hands of Hollanders, who, for the outlying districts at least, were often recruited among a very low class of men of all trades and all shades of morality. Having gained a comparatively great influence by their readiness to adapt themselves to Boer fashion, and by the fact that in their districts they were generally the only men who were in constant touch with the outer world, they did everything to prohibit British influence and a better understanding from growing, because they knew full well that, as soon as those gained a secure foothold, their *rôle* would be played out.

Besides there was the cherished tradition of victories gained over the British before, which in so tenacious, old-fashioned people was a greater hindrance to their acceding to any British demands than any modern European can realise.

A minor point to be mentioned is the weight which the author attached to the great Uitlander petition of '94. Though the justice of the demands raised is undeniable, yet there might be less boasting of the number of 35,000 inscriptions, since the memory of the more than dubious way in which a great part of these inscriptions have been brought together is too fresh still.

For the rest I think that he weighs each party's share in the bringing about of the war with admirable impartiality and fairness, especially in such matters as the influence of Cecil Rhodes' personality on South African politics and other similar ones. In one instance only I consider his judgment somewhat harsh, *viz.* in qualifying as 'wanton' the way in which the Free State threw in its lot with the Transvaal.

It is and will probably always remain impossible to decide exactly by which motives the leaders of the former were caused to prepare an offensive and defensive alliance long before the crisis. There is even a strong inclination on the part of many, who have been able to follow political life before the war narrowly, to believe that in President Steyn's decision personal ambition and the hope of replacing the older and less diplomatic President Kruger in the position of leading spirit of the South African Dutch have played a great part. However that may be, there cannot be any doubt that the overwhelming majority of the Free Staters themselves were moved solely by a strong feeling of sympathy with their brethren in the Transvaal, and of fear that if those were allowed to be conquered by Great Britain, their own turn to give up their independence would soon come too.

About the actual history of the different movements and actions of the war as described by C. D. I can judge very superficially only, since during the first ten months, until I was made prisoner, I was continually with our commander at the front, and therefore unable to gather much information about things which did not concern us directly. Besides that, the author views the course of events from the British centre, while the scanty information we got concerns more the movements on our own side, but the general observations which I have found I can for the greater part fully and entirely endorse.

There is first of all the underrating of the enemy, which was carried on to the same extent in both sides. The fault of not following up advantages gained on the Boer side, the pedantic sticking to obsolete military traditions and consequent waste of blood on the British side, the respective advantages and drawbacks of the two so fundamentally different methods of warring, the difficulty and ever changing conditions of the fighting ground, the mutual relations and influences of far distant actions, are all so splendidly and clearly discussed that for the casual observer nothing remains to add.

But the thing which in my opinion gives the book its intrinsic and lasting value is here again the absolute impartiality with which the author treats friend and foe alike. With loyal admiration he values everywhere the much enduring bravery, the dour tenacity of a people of herders and peasants fighting against the trained troops of a mighty empire, their military qualities developed in the hour of need, and their touching devotion to their

country which makes them sacrifice everything for the one all absorbent aim for freedom and independence. And, on the other hand, the gallant pluck, the death-contemning bravery of those British troops, who ever on the attacking side pave with their dead and wounded the slopes of the hills from whose crest the enemy must be driven, yet never look back at the cost as long as the price is won; their stolid endurance when being marched to utter exhaustion after a slippery enemy on half or quarter rations, with a heavy weight to carry under a blazing sun and with scanty cover during the chilly nights—they are related in a language worthy of the subject and illustrated by dates and facts.

Again, when the parts are reversed, the Boers storming right up to the British rifles with supreme dash, or a small British garrison keeping an exposed position, an open townlet, against overwhelming odds with downright bulldog tenacity, one seems to read a tale of knightly time of old and not an episode of our modern century of crass materialism. Surely such books are not written in vain, and will be read by generations to come on both sides.

There are, of course, many things which the man on the other side must find difficult to understand or explain, chief amongst them the insignificance of the losses on the Boer side in many engagements as compared with those on the British side. Yet the fact is there, and even on occasions where the Boers were the attacking party, their casualties were far beneath the author's estimate. So were, for instance, on January 6th in the storm on Ladysmith (Platrand) our losses all round in killed and wounded well under three hundred, *i.e.* less than half as much as presumed by the author.

But on the whole his exposition of the great drama is clear and consequent, and apparently based on much studious and careful collecting and sifting of detailed intelligence.

And now the chapter entitled 'On End of the War.' Well may the author be excused for his sanguine anticipation of the end, since, from a European point of view, the taking of both capitals, of the principal towns and lines of communications, and the keeping in captivity of about one-fourth of the entire fighting strength of the enemy would indeed indicate that all was over. But subsequent events have shown clearly enough that such was not the case and that the expectation of a final settlement, honourable for both parties, was not to be realised yet.

How all will end we do not know even yet, but it is sincerely to be hoped that the long-drawn fighting will not embitter both parties past redemption, and that those lately employed measures which may or may not be necessitated by the exigencies of warfare will not separate two fine races so far that no friendly understanding or blending may be looked forward to in later years.

In that respect there should be praised, too, the good taste of the author in refraining from chronicling all the regrettable incidents, where the strict rules of civilised warfare have been disregarded on either side. Insignificant facts in themselves and generally caused by irresponsible individuals or by misunderstanding, they are yet able to create more ill feeling than anything else if dwelt upon too much.

To discuss the merits of 'Some Military Lessons of the War' I must leave to more competent judges, but I should think that they are at least founded on sound common sense and derived from practical experience. Especially where the author insists on the necessity of giving young officers a more scientific and thoroughly professional military training to temper their fine natural courage and sporting instincts, one would take the author's advice as doubly valuable, since from such a training of the officers all other improvements would automatically result in the course of time.

However that be, honour to the man who wrote 'The Great Boer War' in the way he did, while the din of battle was still filling the air.

*Ragama Camp, Ceylon,*  
28. 3. 1901.

In addition to this, Lieut.-Colonel A. C. Vincent (the English officer through whom the books were presented to the Boers) summarises some further expressions of opinion as follows:

*General Roux* admits that the book is written in a most fair spirit, though not strictly accurate from an historical point of view, it being very evident to him that the descriptions of battle scenes are not those of an eye-witness, but gathered from hearsay.

*Commandant Runck*, leader of the German commando, says that from his own personal knowledge no reliance can be placed on Conan Doyle's figures, or minor details. The numbers of Boers engaged in various actions, the numbers they lost in killed

and wounded, and the estimate of the guns they had in action, are all greatly exaggerated.

This is the opinion of the other Boer officers who have read the book.

*Several English-speaking Burghers* who have read the book praise it as by far the fairest one written from an English point of view, but they question its details. They all condemn Conan Doyle's strictures on the British artillery, and say that the guns were certainly outranged, but the practice of the British gunners was superb, and our shell-fire did much more execution than our infantry fire.

9th May, 1901.

To the last two criticisms Dr. Conan Doyle makes reply :

*Note to Commandant Runck's Statement.*

We have captured up to date about 20,000 Boer fighting men, and roughly a hundred guns large and small. By no calculation can the total number of their armed men at the outset be placed under 50,000. This large number of men and guns must have been employed, and if I have over-estimated them at one point I have probably under-estimated them at another. Occasionally I have been able to check my figures from Boer sources.

*Note to the Criticism about Artillery.*

This is a misapprehension. My actual words are: 'In dealing with our artillery it must be acknowledged that for personal gallantry and general efficiency they take the honours of the campaign.' My criticism was directed towards their armament and some details of their drill.