

THE BATTLE OF STORMBERG

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Preface

The Battle of Stormberg was one of the famous encounters between Boer and Briton in the Anglo-Boer War. This fame was hardly deserved, for it was more of a skirmish than a battle. It did, however, occur at a time when the Boers were triumphant and it formed part of a chain of disasters which the British termed 'Black Week'. The tide turned against the Boers with the surrender at Paardeberg and as the British surged on to the north.

But long after the fall of Pretoria, thoughts still turned to Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso, as well as to the rest of many triumphs and reverses in which the names of South African men and places leapt to the front-pages of newspapers all over the world. Many a man tried to reconstruct what had happened on each occasion, and historians, both amateur and professional, made their reconstructions and wrote their accounts.

Some of these accounts have in recent years been reassessed; a critical eye has turned on famous personalities; and modern eyes have tried to reexamine a war which cut so deeply into the heart and soul of southern Africa. This re-examination has often led to cynicism, if not a ferocious 'debunking' of persons and events which once made world headlines.

As I was born into the world of the Stormberg, I have always been interested in it and naturally in the famous 'battle'. But it was only when I began a thorough study of the Anglo-Boer War period that I examined the relevant material. Then too the people who remembered those wartime days were fast dying out - even as I began my study - and I at once began to put the bits and pieces together and interviewed a number of elderly people whose memories were both reliable and entertaining. My approach is that of the social historian, but even so I was rather taken aback by the farcical element that emerged in some respects.

How then does one construct a book, even a short one, around a battle which was no battle at all? The answer seemed to lie in the villages and daily life of the area and its environs. I have thus focused attention from Aliwal North to Queenstown, and from Hofmeyr (then known as Maraisburg) to Dordrecht. All my sources are acknowledged, but much information has been included that has never appeared in book form, some of it anecdotal, derived from newspaper cuttings, scrapbooks and interviews with quite a number of remarkable old ladies and gentlemen.

Printed sources in English have predominated as few Boer soldiers covered the Stormberg episodes. I know of Stormberg rebels who kept diaries but these have been lost or cannot be located. Books written in retrospect - as in the flood of Boer War literature in Afrikaans published in the 1940's - must be approached with caution and, as the student will discover to his dismay, these books were often not written by their 'authors' and contain no sources, hardly any acknowledgements or references, and have no indexes. In English there are a fair number of books on the subject up to 1907, and these have the stamp of authenticity. But here too one must be wary, as in the case of Michael Davitt and Louis Creswicke, where enthusiasm takes precedence over accuracy. The Times History of the War is on the whole a reliable record and makes a gallant attempt at objectivity; for this reason it has been my main guide.

I am deeply grateful to all those who gave me firsthand information, some who have already passed away. Younger people have also told me anecdotes out of their various family histories, and these I have approached with some caution. Then there are the many people who have either given, lent or shown me Boer War articles such as photographs, passes, letters, scrap books, articles made by prisoners of war and items ranging from field dressings to spent bullets, pocketknives to water-bottles. To all these kind people I should like to convey my gratitude, as well as to the George Vice Public Library of Molteno and the Molteno Museum.

For my illustrations I am indebted to the labours of Molteno's pioneer photographer, Ambrose Lomax, to the Cape Archives, and with deep appreciation to Mr Joe van Rensburg of Grahamstown who painstakingly photographed and re-photographed many items for me.

Finally I wish to thank the Brosters of Broughton for the valuable material put at my disposal, Mr Louis van Zyl who took me over the site of the Battle of Stormberg, and Mr Willie Steyn for showing me the forts at Rooikop and the spot where Montmorency was killed. My appreciation too to my wife Ronell who trudged over the fighting scenes with me, often in bitter weather, to the editor of Personality who published some of my material as the study was in progress, and to the Smalbergers of Stormberg who showed me over the blockhouse on their property.

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