OUR FIRST FOREIGN WAR

Newtown Park camp in Wellington, which housed the Second Contingent and elements of other contingents prior to their departure for South Africa. After rain, the camp became a muddy quagmire and in 1901 Volunteer corps members infuriated Premier Seddon by parading down Lambton Quay in a protest at the quality of camp rations. Alexander Turnbull Library, 1/1-006666-G

OUR FIRST FOREIGN WAR

THE IMPACT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR 1899–1902 ON NEW ZEALAND

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**This book is dedicated to my wife, Cho Young-hae,
whose unwavering support, encouragement and patience
over many years has made it possible.**

Contingent members ride onto Queen's Wharf in Wellington to board their troopship for South Africa. Alexander Turnbull Library, 1/2-110815-F

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PREFACE

On a busy street in the Wellington suburb of Johnsonville, a wrought-iron street lamp stands incongruously as a reminder of a largely forgotten war. Awkwardly wedged between a medical clinic and a real-estate agent, its design is in stark contrast to the architecture of its surroundings. Although its concrete base is chipped, its marble tablet discoloured and its three original glass globes long ago replaced by a single four-sided lantern, the lamp nonetheless hints at its former grandeur. Its unveiling on an autumn day in 1905 presented a very different spectacle.

Arriving from the city by special train, Sir Joseph Ward, a senior Cabinet minister and member of the House of Representatives (MHR) for the Southland electorate of Awarua, addressed the crowd that had gathered for the occasion. While New Zealand's governor, Lord Plunket, and Premier Richard Seddon forwarded their apologies for not attending, among those present were Defence Department officials, William Field, the MHR for Ōtaki electorate, the chairman and members of the Johnsonville Town Board, school cadets, and members of the public, including the parents and brother of Leonard Retter, the local blacksmith in whose honour the 'very handsome' acetylene lamp paid for by public subscription had been erected.[1]

Five years earlier and 11,000 kilometres away, war had broken out in South Africa. The conflict, which continued until 1902, pitted the combined military forces of the United Kingdom and contingents from other nations of the British Empire against those of the two Boer republics — the South African Republic

and Orange Free State. One of many young New Zealanders eager to take part, Retter enlisted in the Seventh Contingent in April 1901. Nine months later, he was among 23 Seventh Contingent men who lost their lives during a desperate Boer night attack on New Zealand positions on a hillside in Orange Free State.

It was the biggest single loss of life by New Zealand troops during the war, and its significance was reflected in the Johnsonville unveiling ceremony. Yet, today, comparatively few New Zealanders are familiar with what occurred at Langverwacht (or the Battle of Bothasberg, as it was then known), and most have little more than a cursory knowledge of the war in which it took place. In my own case, I have no clear recollection of when I first heard of the 'Boer War', as the conflict was commonly known during my childhood, but it was sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

Once a week, my grandmother would visit our home and, if I was lucky, she would ask my mother to retrieve a battered leather suitcase from its place in a cupboard beyond my reach. Inside were the remaining possessions of her husband, a First World War veteran who had survived the horrors of the Western Front only to die in a car accident in 1941. Lifting the suitcase's lid was like being transported back in time. Neatly arranged within were the three service medals of the grandfather I had never known, dulled by time, but still suspended from their brightly coloured ribbons. Beside them were a pair of enamelled cufflinks, bought in Egypt in 1916 and made in the form of sarcophagi, a faded French flag souvenired from a Paris street on Armistice Day 1918, and my grandfather's stitched Medical Corps Red Cross sleeve patch.

After my grandmother's death, I became custodian of the suitcase's contents and, as time passed, slowly expanded the collection. At the time, it was not difficult to acquire military items brought back to New Zealand by veterans, but the oldest item in my collection came neither from France nor Egypt — it was a book on the Boer War published in 1900. Its spotted pages featured patriotic engravings, including depictions of British soldiers gallantly taking Boer positions at the point of a bayonet. As a child, I considered neither the accuracy of the images nor the book's repeated references to the Boer War, a title that both downplayed British involvement and implied that the responsibility for the death and suffering that occurred lay solely with South Africa's Boer population. The war now goes by a number of names, but in an attempt to correct this bias

I have chosen to refer to it simply as the South African War.

The Calvinist Protestant Boers were descendants of Dutch settlers who had emigrated from Europe to the Cape of Good Hope in the mid-seventeenth century and were later joined by French and German Huguenots. Although these settlers mainly spoke Dutch, over time the Boers developed their own language, Afrikaans, which combined Dutch with elements of other languages in the region. The early Boer settlers established Kaapkolonie (Cape Colony), which was administered for approximately 150 years by the Dutch East India Company. Concerned by the prospect of France securing a foothold in southern Africa, the British first took control of Cape Colony in 1795 following the Battle of Muizenberg, before returning it to the Boers in 1802 and then resuming control again in 1806 during the Napoleonic Wars.

Although some Boers had moved northwards in the eighteenth century, in 1834 the British increased resentment among the Boers by abolishing slavery in the colony. This, together with the imposition of the English language and British law, saw thousands of disaffected Boers embark on Die Groot Trek (the Great Trek), a migration to the north-east. This took them into regions that were largely uninhabited due to what indigenous Africans call Mfecane (the scattering) — the chaos and devastation caused by Zulu attacks on other African tribes living in the area. Nonetheless, the Boer migration increasingly brought them into contact, and sometimes conflict, with the indigenous African population. In 1843 the British annexed the Boer republic of Natalia, which became the British colony of Natal. In 1852 the Boers established the Suid-Afrikaanse Republiek (the South African Republic), followed by the adjoining Oranje Vrystaat (Orange Free State) in 1854.[2]

Although the British initially recognised the independence of the two Boer nations, concerns that the expansion of German interests in Africa could threaten British colonies in the region saw the British annex the South African Republic in 1877. Tension between the British and the Boers, who resented British attempts to again exert control over their affairs, led to the First Anglo-Boer War (1880–81), in which the British were defeated. The South African Republic, known to the British as Transvaal State, obtained full independence in 1884.

In late 1895, tensions again arose when Leander Starr Jameson, a colonial

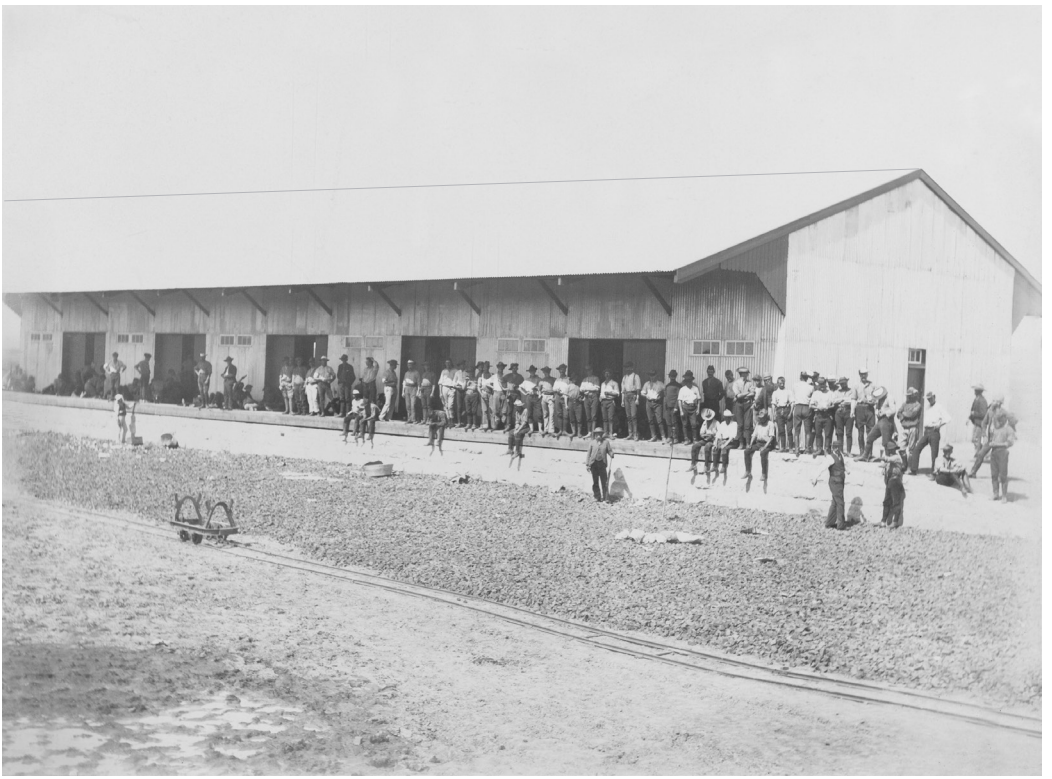
administrator and confidant of Cape Colony prime minister (and ardent imperialist) Cecil Rhodes, invaded Transvaal with a small force of predominantly British South Africa Company police. The invasion, known as the Jameson Raid, was an attempt to overthrow the Boer government of Paul Kruger, the president of the South African Republic. The raiders aimed to foment an uprising in Transvaal among the 'uitlanders' (the predominantly British immigrants living in and around Johannesburg), and wrest the region's extensive gold reserves from Boer control.

The raid ended in ignominious defeat when Jameson and his men were quickly overwhelmed and forced to surrender to the Boers. Though the British government denied any involvement in the ill-advised debacle, the Jameson Raid nonetheless proved acutely embarrassing. The raid, together with British demands that the republic's non-Boer population be granted the vote, and the Boers insisting on the withdrawal of British troops from the republic's borders, were catalysts for the South African War that broke out in 1899.

The conflict followed a period where the supremacy of the British Empire was assailed on several fronts. While the United Kingdom and its allies had finally negotiated an end to the costly Crimean War with Russia in 1856, later in the century the empire suffered humiliating defeats in Africa. First, British forces, trained and armed with modern weaponry, were comprehensively routed by Zulu warriors at the 1879 Battle of Isandlwana during the Anglo-Zulu War. Then, two years later, came the defeat by Boer forces during the First Anglo-Boer War. Equally chastening for the British public was the death in 1885 of Major-General Charles Gordon at Khartoum in Sudan, at the hands of the Muslim forces of the self-proclaimed Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah.

Just as reports of the 'frightful disaster' at Isandlwana and the Boer victory at Majuba Hill in 1881 appeared in New Zealand newspapers, so too did stories of Gordon's demise in Sudan.[3] Closer to home, the competing designs of Germany and the United States in Sāmoa in the late 1880s caused consternation. With New Zealand heavily reliant on exports to and imports from the United Kingdom, any challenge to the British Royal Navy's ability to secure trade routes had serious implications for the empire's South Pacific colonies.

British military pride had been partly restored by the destruction of Zulu forces at Ulundi in June 1879, and was further reinforced by the comprehensive



Jameson Raid prisoners under Boer guard following their surrender at Doornkop in 1896. National Army Museum, London, 1980-12-47-1

defeat of the Mahdist forces in Sudan at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898; but in the South African Boers, the British Empire faced a much sterner challenge. The men in the Boer kommandos were largely volunteers, but what they lacked in training they made up for in sheer determination. Armed with modern German rifles and supported by predominantly French and German manufactured artillery, the kommandos contained a leavening of battle-hardened veterans who had tasted victory in the First Anglo-Boer War and fought against the indigenous African population.

That New Zealand would support British actions in South Africa was never seriously in doubt. At the end of the nineteenth century, many Pākehā New Zealanders either were born in the United Kingdom or had relatives there. The cause was writ large during a parliamentary debate two months prior to the war when Seddon spoke of 'those of our flesh and blood in South Africa'.[4] Although there were New Zealanders in South Africa at the time, Seddon was most likely referring to the empire's wider European, English-speaking population.

Against this patriotic backdrop, *Our First Foreign War* considers the war's social, economic and political impact on New Zealand society. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive military history of battles and tactics, though where military actions influenced New Zealand public opinion they are discussed. In many ways, it is the story of individuals told through the accounts of New Zealand civilians and soldiers who were in South Africa, and their families and friends in New Zealand. To varying degrees, their actions influenced the nation, and despite hostilities ending, the war continued to exert its own influence on their lives and the lives of those around them.

The impact of the South African War on New Zealanders within their own country, including women, children, Māori, politicians, trade unions and the clergy, is of no less importance. When considered in the context of the larger conflicts that followed, New Zealand's contribution to the South African War was relatively small. At the time, however, the nation's role was most definitely not seen as insignificant.

From an historian's perspective, studying the impact of the war on New Zealand has distinct advantages. New Zealand's small population, coupled with the limited number of men and women who played an active role in the conflict, has allowed me to identify and contact the families of several of those who

served in South Africa. Through their generosity, I gained access to information that until now has not formed part of New Zealand's historical record of the war. I have also relied on a number of other sources, including parliamentary reports and returns, archival records in New Zealand and overseas, letters and newspaper reports. The *Wanganui Collegian* proved an especially useful source, given that Wanganui Collegiate School Old Boys served in multiple contingents, as well as in irregular forces raised in South Africa.

Perhaps inevitably, New Zealand's role in the South African War and the impact of the conflict on New Zealand society were eclipsed by the much larger global conflicts that followed. For years, the sheer enormity of the two world wars has relegated the South African War to little more than a prelude to the main events. With notable exceptions, the primary focus of many existing texts that do consider New Zealand's involvement in the South African War is the actions of New Zealand men and women in South Africa, often with an emphasis on military operations. Until now, there has been no fine-grained analysis of the war's impact on New Zealand society as a whole. Given that nearly 120 years have passed since the conflict ended, an in-depth examination of its influence is long overdue.

Our First Foreign War seeks to address this imbalance by providing new insights into a number of areas, which include: the economic impact of the war; its influence on education in New Zealand schools; the behaviour of New Zealand troops (both within New Zealand and in South Africa); the role of those who opposed New Zealand involvement; and the role of the church. The war occurred at a time when New Zealanders were continuing to develop a sense of national identity while at the same time maintaining strong imperial links. In September 1899, Seddon informed Parliament that an 'emergency' had arisen in South Africa, adding that 'the occasion now exists for us to prove our devotion to the Empire'.[5] Two weeks later, Dunedin citizens perusing their *Otago Daily Times* learned that hostilities had commenced in an article titled 'War at Last'.[6]

CHAPTER ONE

'THE FLAG THAT FLOATS OVER US'

PATRIOTISM AND SOUTH AFRICA

Under normal circumstances, Dunedin residents being roused from their beds by the tolling of the town hall bell and the piercing shriek of steam whistles would be cause for general alarm. However, the circumstances surrounding this cacophony on 18 May 1900 were anything but normal. If further proof was required, the sight of Robert Chisholm, the mayor of the southern New Zealand city, repeatedly discharging his shotgun into the chilly morning air provided it. As lights appeared in windows across the city the noise increased with the addition of school bells, fire bells, explosions, and rockets arcing across the pre-dawn sky. In response, Dunedin's citizens spilled onto the streets, enthusiastically striking anything capable of producing a sound, from gongs to empty kerosene tins.[1]

The cause of these uncharacteristic displays was neither invasion nor emergency. It was confirmation that after a 217-day siege the British Army had finally liberated 'dusty, dirty, dilapidated Mafeking' — a remote and ordinarily insignificant way station of British imperialism in southern Africa.[2] A New Zealander who had been in the town during the siege described Mafeking as 'only a small place (about the size of Patea)', but for most its size was immaterial.[3] What Mafeking had come to represent was far more important, and the celebrations in Dunedin mirrored similar rapturous scenes across the British Empire. The relief of this nondescript town thousands of miles from New Zealand shores had been eagerly anticipated. When the news finally arrived, it unleashed a tumult of patriotism.

To an anxious New Zealand public, the prolonged siege of Mafeking by Boer military forces had seemed interminable. As weeks turned into months, newspapers closely followed the town's fortunes, with hopes of a British breakthrough dashed as rumours of the town's imminent relief came to nothing. Admittedly, the lifting of the sieges of the two other South African towns invested by the Boers — Kimberley and Ladysmith — had also resulted in feverish public outpourings. Nonetheless, by the time the first imperial troops trotted into Mafeking the town had become a symbol of British resolve in the face of adversity. That it was besieged in the first place was undoubtedly a British reverse, but the empire had been spared a morale-sapping capitulation. Even if holding out longer came largely at the expense of Mafeking's starving black African population, the refusal of the town's commanding officer, Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, to surrender was seen as an exemplar of British determination and pluck.

As the sieges showed, the war's initial progress had hardly been encouraging. While New Zealanders familiar with Boer tenacity had initially expressed reservations, once hostilities broke out in October 1899 the general expectation was for a swift British victory. With the overwhelming might of British arms brought to bear on the numerically smaller Boer forces, Britain would surely prevail. Three months prior to the declaration of war, the *Feilding Star* optimistically predicted that within a week of war's outbreak all of Transvaal would be part of the British Empire: 'England would crush the Transvaal as a giant would crush a worm.'[4]

But it soon became clear that Boer leaders had no intention of meekly accepting peace on imperial terms. Seizing the initiative, they took advantage of Britain's lack of preparedness. Before vessels carrying reinforcements could dock at Cape Town and Durban, disgorge their khaki cargoes and turn the tables in Britain's favour, the Boers hoped to use force to lever political advantage. For the British, the enemy's resolve proved as disturbing as it was unpalatable. There were no decisive victories cast in the mould of Lord Kitchener's 1898 rout of Mahdist forces at Omdurman in Sudan. Instead, in the initial stages of the war the British public was forced to subsist on a diet of humiliating defeats and inconclusive victories. At the battles of Magersfontein, Stormberg and Colenso in December 1899, British troops were repulsed with heavy losses. Rather than

accept battle on British terms, the Boers engaged the enemy from concealed defensive positions. Their kommandos used their mobility and superior knowledge of the terrain to inflict British casualties and withdraw when their positions became untenable.

Shortly before the war, the New Zealand premier, Richard John Seddon, addressed the House of Representatives. Seddon claimed it was well known what New Zealand was prepared to do 'to maintain the good old British flag' should necessity arise.[5] He also spoke of wiping out the stains of the military defeats the British had sustained at the hands of the Boers at Majuba Hill and Bronkhorstspruit during the First Anglo-Boer War.[6] There was a widespread belief that the British had unfinished business in South Africa. In time for Christmas 1899, the British children's annual *Chatterbox* was sold in New Zealand bookstores.[7] It featured an account of the 'inglorious' fight at Majuba that also spoke of 'wiping out the stain of that defeat'.[8] A reporter who visited a Dunedin school classroom in December 1899 said that all the children in the class raised their hands when asked about Majuba.[9]

The New Zealand governor, Lord Ranfurly, echoed Seddon's views, telling Wanganui Collegiate School students that Majuba Hill and the death of General Charles Gordon at the Mahdist siege of Khartoum were stains on Great Britain's reputation.[10] However, by the early months of 1900 the overarching desire to avoid further costly defeats meant that if the British public could not have another Omdurman in southern Africa, they at least wished to be spared the ignominy of another humiliating Khartoum at Mafeking. Mayor Chisholm informed the Dunedin crowd that the relief of Mafeking was the best news they had received since the war began.[11]

In the preceding days the excitement had been palpable as British forces edged closer to Mafeking. The MHR for the City of Auckland electorate, George Fowlds, suggested that regardless of the hour when news of the relief was received guns in the city's forts should be fired.[12] Having first sought Lord Ranfurly's permission, Seddon instructed Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Penton, the Commandant of Forces, to have 'royal salutes' at the ready.[13] The long-awaited news finally reached Wakapuaka Cable Station on the Nelson coast at two in the morning on 18 May and was transmitted to the *Otago Daily Times*' Dunedin offices. Despite the hour, the newspaper notified Chisholm who