

THE BOER WAR: ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE

'A WANTON DEED OF BLOOD AND RAPINE': OPPOSITION TO AUSTRALIAN PARTICIPATION IN THE BOER WAR

Bobbie Oliver

The title of this paper is taken from a cartoon that appeared in the *Bulletin* in 1899. It depicted Australia as a distraught woman, weeping over the fact that one of her first acts as a federated nation was to take part in a bloody war. The caption of the picture reminded readers that, although the public enthusiastically supported the Boer War and 16,000 Australians volunteered to serve in South Africa, there were some dissenters. This paper concerns the dissenters. It commences with a brief historical background to anti-war protest in colonial Australia; then discusses the various issues which dissenters against the South African (or Boer) War addressed and, last, examines the question of who the dissenters were and what impact they had in the community.

Background to Anti-War Protest in Australia

During the nineteenth century, fear of attack by a hostile power was a recurrent theme in colonial Australian newspapers. According to historian and one-time diplomat, R Hyslop, during the 1800s there were almost 200 'war scares'. France, Germany, Russia, the United States of America, China, Holland, Japan and Spain were all regarded as possible invaders. In the last decade of the century, however, evidence suggests that Japan was perhaps the most feared of the supposedly hostile nations.¹

Colonial governments promoted a number of possible deterrents to foreign invasion. Some raised part-time volunteer regiments. Colonial parliaments discussed whether they should acquire their own warships rather than relying on British naval power. But most significant for Australia's future history—and the most hotly debated—were the attempts to extend Australian power and influence by sending a contingent of troops to an overseas conflict.²

A tradition of protest against involvement in other nations' wars had begun with the Reverend John Dunmore Lang who argued, in a series of public lectures in Sydney in 1850, that the Royal Navy and the British Empire did not protect Australia. Indeed, they were a danger, because Australia's allegiance to Britain made Imperial enemies Australia's enemies, too.³ Dunmore Lang objected specifically to the colony of New South Wales supporting Britain's involvement in the Crimean War in 1854. Those who adopted and developed Dunmore Lang's arguments or who took a pacifist stance were a small minority, who were often regarded as voices crying in the wilderness as the Australian colonies adopted the practice of sending armed forces to defend other countries. Nevertheless, the debate began—and continues over 100 years later—as to whether troops were sent as a matter of political expediency or from misplaced devotion to Empire.

The Sudan Contingent was the first state-organised expeditionary force to depart Australian shores. It was sent to help British forces avenge the death of General Gordon at Khartoum in February 1885.⁴ The Sudan campaign's savagery made it unpopular both in England and Australia. Sir Henry Parkes, past Premier of New South Wales, was one of the few who protested strongly against sending troops. He declared that there was no national crisis. A colonial contribution, he argued, would result in the national ethos being damaged by the creation of a 'spurious spirit of military ardour'.⁵ Protest meetings in Sydney throughout March 1885 drew large crowds. The significance in this paper of the opposition to the Sudan campaign is that the protesters of 1885 have been described as 'forerunners' of the Anti-War League which was formed during the South African War.⁶ The Sudan campaign is significant, too, in that it set a precedent for sending colonial—and later, Australian—troops overseas.

When, on 12 October 1899, Britain declared war on the Transvaal over the electoral franchise for British subjects in that state, the Australian colonies were initially reluctant to become involved. Yet, soon, all of the Australian colonial governments yielded to pressure from the British Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, ultimately sending over 16,000 soldiers to South Africa to fight the Boer settlers.

The Basis of Anti-War Arguments

Even before war had been declared, there was some opposition, either to the war itself or to colonial involvement. The matter of sending an Australian contingent in the event of war was discussed in the Western Australian Parliament on 5 October. Premier Forrest and most of those who spoke supported 'cooperat[ing] with the other colonies of Australia in offering to dispatch a military force to the Transvaal'. But the Member for North-East Coolgardie, Frederick Vosper, demurred. Vosper argued that, before making such a commitment, Parliament should acquaint itself with the facts because 'we ... know nothing about the justice or injustice of the [pending] war'. Forrest told Vosper that, to argue in such a way was the same as saying that Western Australia did not belong to the Empire'. Vosper replied that, while he was in full sympathy with the expression of loyalty in the resolution, he was not in sympathy with the 'idea of Western Australia, or any portion of Australia, joining in a war-like policy against a small people, concerning whose grievances we know nothing'. Charles Moran, the Member for East Coolgardie, expressed similar reservations about Britain going to war with so 'unworthy a foe'.⁷

At least four distinct anti-war arguments emerged over the following months and years. First, there was the point of view that Britain was fighting to secure control of the Rand gold mines and to acquire territories that would provide a land link between the British colonies in Central and Southern Africa, whereas the Boers were fighting to preserve their independence. While many who expressed this view did not object to war per se, they regarded this war as unjust and unChristian. Consequently, holders of this view believed that the British could not regard their cause as just because it was driven by greed. George Arnold Wood, Professor of History at Sydney University, was one of the few individuals to voice an opinion early in the war. His opposition to the war will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

A second group of dissidents argued that Australia should refrain from taking part on pragmatic grounds. They believed that Australia would be left unprotected if the few trained military and naval forces were fighting overseas. Australian forces also went to fight in the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900, thus stretching military resources even more thinly. Apart from the security risk, some opponents argued that participation in the South African War would deplete the nation of urgently needed manpower and retard economic development. For the first time since European settlement, emigration exceeded immigration. Furthermore, some soldiers were taking their discharge in South Africa and not returning to Australia after their 12 months' service.⁸ This view was expressed by AB Piddington, who later became a prominent jurist. Piddington wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, that 'siding with England in a quarrel that was none of Australia's making' was indefensible; and that if Australian blood was to be spilt it should be 'spilt like that of the Boers, in defence of freedom and fireside'.⁹

A third group voiced their dissent later in the war after reading stories of human rights abuses. In 1902, the Australian public began to learn of the 'methods of barbarism' used by irregular units, such as the Bushveldt Carbineers, which included farm burning and keeping the defeated population—including women and children—in concentration camps where the death toll from disease and neglect was enormous.¹⁰ Added to this was public indignation over the court-martial and execution of Lieutenants Harry Morant and Peter Handcock for shooting Boer prisoners.¹¹ The major opposition in this period came from the Australian Anti-War League, which was formed in Sydney in December 1901, with Professor Wood as President, but individuals such as feminist reformer, Rose Scott, also deplored the establishment of concentration camps where 'Boer women, children and elders were incarcerated, as a strategy to secure the surrender of the Boer army'.¹²

The fourth and final body of opposition identified here came from the Australian labour movement, and was based in a deep suspicion of capitalists, increased by the outcome of the 1890s strikes and the depression. Griffiths, in the NSW Parliament, and Higgins, in Victoria, both argued that the mining companies' indignation over the Boer treatment of African labourers was hardly philanthropic. Was it not just a ploy to force white diggers off the fields and enable them to employ cheaper African labour? In this argument, the main villains were not the British, but Jewish entrepreneurs who were supposedly the power behind the British mining companies such as De Beers and British South African Chartered Companies.¹³

Who Were the Dissenters?

CN Connolly claimed, in a 1978 paper, that 'those responsible for the persecution of the so-called "pro Boers" were usually middle class' and, conversely, that there was 'no record of employees in NSW objecting to having to work with "pro Boers"'. In the early stages of the war, however, dissent was confined to a few, middle class individuals writing letters to the newspapers. Chief among these was Professor Wood.

George Arnold Wood came from an English Liberal tradition, and was educated at Oxford, prior to taking up the first Chair of Modern History at Sydney University in 1891 when he was 26 years old. In 1899, he married and spent most of the year touring England with his new wife. They returned to Australia as the matter of sending troops to the Transvaal was being debated in the New South Wales Parliament. Wood wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*, claiming that opposition to the war was widespread in England. His recent travels had placed him in a good position to judge public opinion in Britain. He argued that the Australian public were victims of biased reporting because virtually all news came from one source—*The Times*. Wood was quite unprepared for the response. He found his colleague at Sydney University, Mungo McCallum, to be 'a bitter, unrelenting and clever opponent'. After a short, sharp exchange of letters with McCallum, via the *Daily Telegraph*, Wood fell silent and remained so for most of the rest of the war.¹⁴

A position similar to Wood's was held by the Reverend Charles Strong, founder of the Australian Church in Melbourne in the late 1880s. Like Wood, Strong regarded the British Empire as 'a force for good, as a means of holding and spreading such values as liberty, justice, and humanity'. But he felt that Australia, as a new country, should avoid getting involved in European wars. He also had particularly forceful views on the involvement of Christians in war. Strong believed that war was incompatible with Christianity. He quoted the words of the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks', as well as Christ's statement, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God'. Every real Christian, he believed, must deplore war and be prepared to work actively against it. Strong was appalled that members of the Christian clergy should not only sanction war but actively promote it. He accused some clergy of acting as 'recruiting sergeants' and of 'prostituting themselves'. He pointed out that the clergy had 'enormous power to effect a change in people's thinking', and therefore, that the church as a whole should be 'one gigantic peace movement'.¹⁵

Another middle class intellectual who opposed the war was Henry Bourne Higgins, the Irish-born son of a Methodist Minister, who had received a Liberal education at Scotch College, Melbourne, and at Sydney University, before entering the Victorian Parliament in 1894. When the Victorian Parliament voted late in 1899 to send a contingent to the South African War, Higgins was shocked that people could 'go into war with a light heart/and without inquiring closely into the justice of it'. Like Vosper in Western Australia, he 'objected that Imperial sentiment was being exploited to excuse the colony from making its own assessment'. Campaigning in his seat of Geelong in 1900, Higgins was asked why he had opposed involvement in the war. He replied: 'Because I regarded the war as unnecessary and unjust'. Members of the audience began waving Union Jacks and the meeting broke up in disorder. Higgins lost his State seat but was elected to the Federal seat of North Melbourne by a predominantly working class constituency in 1901.¹⁶

Higgins' experience supports Connolly's previously-mentioned assertion that, in general, the working class did not persecute or resent anti-war protesters. Yet, within the Labour movement itself, there was only limited opposition to the war. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) was divided over whether to support Australian involvement in the Boer War. Anderson Dawson, leader of the world's first Labor Government—which governed in Queensland for five days from 1 to 5 December 1899—objected to 'sending a mob of swash bucklers to South Africa to show off their uniforms'.¹⁷ EA Roberts, Member for the South Australian seat of Gladstone, initially sneered at "'featherbed" soldiers who would involve themselves in such an unworthy enterprise' but later changed his opinion to the extent that he enlisted and performed two tours of duty in South Africa.¹⁸ The fact that the Boer War is not mentioned in Jim Moss' history of the South Australian Labour Movement suggests that it was not a major issue in that State.¹⁹

WA Holman was probably the most prominent ALP Member who opposed the war. Holman's position on the war was similar to that of Higgins. In January 1900, he was asked to lecture in Hobart on the subject of 'The Labour Movement and Militarism'. Holman contended that militarism was 'always used by us capitalistic controllers to check the rising tide of socialism and democracy'. When he illustrated his argument with references to the situation in the Transvaal, a group of sailors who were present began to hiss and boo. Joined by some 'larrikins' looking for a fight, the sailors rushed the platform and threw Holman to the floor. The police prevented him being thrown off the platform, but Holman was attacked again and struck from behind as he returned to his hotel. No arrests were made.²⁰

Despite threats to his physical safety, Holman continued to speak about his opposition to the war. In his biography of Holman, HV Evatt painted a graphic portrait of Holman talking to the miners at Grenfell on the war issue one night in April 1900:

All the men on the field, nearly 400, attended; and the chairman and Holman both spoke in almost complete darkness while a strong, cold wind kept the rushlights smoking ... [According to an observer] 'There was only one interjection. In answer to some grave reference to English policy, "You couldn't say that at Hobart" was projected from the edge of the crowd like a missile ... [to which Holman—who was generally not good at repartee—responded:] "Thank God. I can say it here". It looks little enough on paper, but in the darkness in those wild surroundings, and before the audience, it was most telling. Interruptions ceased then, and Holman pursued his theme pitilessly to the end. I have never seen an Australian meeting devoted wholly to foreign policy before.'²¹

But Holman did not win everyone over. The following month, some of his opponents celebrated the relief of Mafeking by burning Holman's effigy, labelled 'Traitor'. Holman expressed his disgust in the pages of the local newspaper, the *Grenfell Vedette*, which he owned:

The skunks, to whose bright genius Grenfell owes the insulting exhibition, considerately went and hid themselves and are even now unknown to fame. If the gentlemen (?) who prepared the effigy thought they could thereby harm the member for the district, the overwhelming disapprobation which their action has evoked must have quickly undeceived them.²²

Perhaps the action was more popular than Holman perceived, for, in the so-called 'khaki election' of 1901, his opponents used his anti-war stance against him and (in a two candidate contest) he scraped home by a mere 86 votes.²³

No Federal Labor politician adopted an anti-war profile similar to Holman's. The Federal Parliamentary Labor Party (FPLP) seemed more concerned with preventing the employment of 'native' labour in the gold mines of the Rand than in criticising the war.²⁴

While the ALP had both opponents and proponents of the war among its ranks, the Left of the Labour movement was strongly critical of Australia's involvement. The Victorian radical Labour journal, the *Tocsin*, had criticised Britain even before the war began, on the basis that 'the Mother Country' appeared to be 'departing from her traditional policy towards weaker and dependent peoples'. The *Tocsin* accused the British Government of acting at the behest of 'the Stock Exchange people in England and Africa, of greedy diamond speculators, gold bosses, and a Chartered Company which, by its own admissions of piracy, has placed itself outside the pale of civilisation'.

The *Tocsin* reminded its readers that the Labour Party in Johannesburg supported Kruger and 'dreaded' Rhodes, and that:

this is not a war of Britain against Boer, but of capitalists against Kruger's anti-Capitalistic government; and that the defeat of Kruger means the irruption [sic] of Rhodes and all his works and all his pomps, of free competition and all its horrors, of the sweater and all its paradoxes of monopoly and ring and trust and combine into the hitherto comparatively uninfested Transvaal.

You hear talk of avenging Majuba Hill, by which the Boers got their present Constitution. Before acceding to that argument, do not forget that Victorians, too, have had a Majuba Hill, which they call Eureka Stockade. What if Jingoese talked of wiping out the memory of that Eureka by which you got your Constitution? Would you be impressed by the sanity of their reasoning?²⁵

As with the ALP, the response to the war varied among trade unions. Through the pages of the Sydney-based *Australian Worker*, the Australian Workers' Union was mildly critical of Australia's involvement. William Lane, however, believed that the war would assist in levelling class differences—as did Henry Lawson.²⁶ The *Westralian Worker*, which was not controlled by the AWU until after the First World War, was generally silent on the war, except for a few comments about its cost, the numbers of soldiers and civilians killed, and the editor remarking that he was personally against it. In April 1902, however, the paper commented on the execution of Morant and Handcock. The *Worker* referred to the two men as 'murderers and ruffians' and stated that Lord Kitchener had 'no choice but to dispatch them'.²⁷

The other main source of criticism came from the *Bulletin* itself, often via the satirical pens of artists such as Livingstone Hopkins (Hop), Alf Vincent and Norman Lindsay. The *Bulletin's* editor, AG Stephens, was sufficiently opposed to the war to join the Anti-War League.

Anti-War Organisations

The middle class Liberals and members of the Labour movement found common ground in Melbourne and Sydney in the only two anti-war leagues formed during the South African War. The lesser known of these two organisations, the Peace and Humanity Society (PHS), was formed in Melbourne by a group of academics and clergy in May 1900. It was Australia's first peace society. Apart from the Rev Dr Charles Strong, mentioned previously, other prominent PHS members included Professor John Laurence Rentoul of Ormonde College, University of Melbourne. According to historians Saunders and Sumy, Rentoul was nicknamed 'Fighting Larry' because of his 'energetic manner'.²⁸

The Anti-War League formed in NSW only in December 1901, and was a reaction to particularly disturbing accounts of starvation and deaths among the Boer prisoners in concentration camps. Professor Wood was President, and Ada Holman (WA Holman's wife) was Secretary. Members included Holman and AG Stephens, editor of the *Bulletin*. The membership comprised about one-third women—unusual at that time. The AWL drafted and circulated a petition to the British House of Commons, seeking peace terms including 'a complete amnesty', compensation, and a guarantee of immediate self-government to the former Boer States. The petition stirred up a storm of rage and indignation. As AWL President, Wood became the main target. Yielding to some extent to public pressure to

dismiss him from his Chair, the University Senate passed a resolution, on 10 February 1902, censuring Wood for his public opposition to the war. On the same day, Wood despatched an article to the *Manchester Guardian*, on Australian opinion about the war. It was a balanced discussion, but Wood made the mistake of signing it as 'Professor of History', rather than as President of the Anti-War League. When confused accounts of the article's contents reached the University, his opponents called for his dismissal. It was fortunate for Wood that the Barton Government was dependent upon Labor members to get its legislation passed on the floor of the House. Wood's Labor friends intervened, making it clear that they would vote against the University estimates if Wood were expelled. Wood's expulsion was postponed and finally removed from the Senate's agenda.²⁹

Some Outcomes of Opposition

Ironically, the terms of peace agreed in South Africa shortly afterwards were not far removed from those suggested by the AWL. But this was little comfort to Wood. His position was saved, but his spirit was broken. Throughout the dark days of the First World War, he remained silent, never again entering into controversy about the justice or otherwise of going to war. Holman, on the other hand, adopted the belief that conscription of men for overseas service was necessary and consequently was expelled from his own Party.

The official inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia took place in Sydney on 1 January 1901, more than a year before the South African War ended. Section 69 of the Federal Constitution granted the Commonwealth control of the former colonial military forces. A Defence Act, establishing a national military force, was an urgent necessity. Australians knew that they did not have sufficient men or resources with which to defend themselves if attacked by a powerful nation. They were divided over the best means of achieving security—whether to offer troops to assist the Empire in its wars in the hope of receiving reciprocal aid, or to adopt an isolationist stance in order to avoid the notice of aggressive foreign powers. The solution that the Federal Government devised was a curious one, which was to be branded by its most eloquent opponent—the Quaker John Hills—as 'child conscription—our country's shame'.

From the hesitant beginnings of the Peace and Humanity Society and the Anti-War League, developed much stronger anti-war and anti-conscription organisations, such as the Australian Freedom League, founded by Quakers in South Australia to end the system of boy conscription for compulsory military training; the campaigns which defeated the conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917; the peace societies of the 1930s and 1940s, and ultimately the mass demonstrations of the Vietnam War era.

Throughout the devastating wars of the twentieth century, with their attendant loss of civil liberties such as freedom of speech and freedom of movement, the flame of opposition has often been weak although it has never been snuffed out. But the vision that sustained those peace movements is yet to be realised—of a world where war as response to international disagreements is not only preventable but unthinkable.

Endnotes

1. R Hyslop, 'War scares in Australia in the 19th century', *The Victorian Historical Journal* 47 :1 (1976), 23. Hyslop had previously served as Deputy Secretary-General of the South East Asia Treaty Organisation, a position which may well have both reflected and influenced his attitude to Australia's preoccupation with the 'yellow peril'.
2. JL Mordike, *An Army for a Nation: A History of Australian Military Developments 1880-1914* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), 1; Neville Meaney, *The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901-1914* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1976), esp 18-22.
3. DWA Baker, 'Republican: John Dunmore Lang', in E Fry (ed), *Rebels and Radicals* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 100.
4. WA Wood, 'The Sudan Contingent of 1885 and the anti-war movement', *Labour History* 3 (November 1962), 53.
5. *Ibid*, 52-69.
6. *Ibid*, 69.
7. *WA Parliamentary Debates*, vol XV, 3 October to 16 December 1899, 1557-59.
8. Cited in Barbara Penny, 'The Australian Debate on the Boer War', *Historical Studies* 14: 56 (April 1971), 537. See also LM Field, *The Forgotten War: Australian Involvement in the South African Conflict of 1899-1902* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1979), 33; RM Crawford, 'The Antipodean Pilgrimage of Arnold Wood; A Manchester Liberal and the Boer War', *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings* 48: 6 (March 1963), 418.
9. Quoted in Field, *The Forgotten War*, 33.
10. *Ibid*, 2.
11. BR Penny, 'Australia's Reactions to the Boer War', *Journal of British Studies*; VII: 1 (1967), 122.
12. JA Allen, *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 149.
13. *Ibid*, 110-11.
14. Wood's letters appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* on 11 and 22 November 1899, and 10 and 25 December 1901; McCallum's on 15 and 24 November 1899, 18 December 1901 and 2 January 1902. See also Penny, 'The Australian Debate on the Boer War', 527; 533-34.
15. Malcolm Saunders, 'The "Pacifism" of the Reverend Dr Charles Strong: 1844-1942', *Interdisciplinary Peace Research* (May/June 1993), 8-9.
16. John Rickard, 'Henry Bourne Higgins', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 9 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1983), 286-87.
17. Quoted in Ross McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party 1891-1991* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1991), 28.
18. *Ibid*, 33.
19. Jim Moss, *Sound of Trumpets: History of the Labour Movement in South Australia* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1985).
20. HV Evatt, *Australian Labor Leader: The Story of WA Holman and the Labour Movement* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1954 edn), 91-92.
21. *Ibid*, 93.
22. Cited in *ibid*, 94.
23. *Ibid*, 99.
24. P Weller (ed), *Caucus Minutes 1901-1949*, vol 1, 1901-1917 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1975), 56, 87, 91, 92.
25. *Tocsin*, 5 October 1899, cited in B McKinlay, *Australian Labor History in Documents*, vol 3, *The Radical Left* (Melbourne: Collins, Dove, 1990), 23.
26. M Hearn and H Knowles, *One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89-90.
27. *Westralian Worker*, 11 April 1902.
28. M Saunders and R Sumy, *The Australian Peace Movement: A Short History* (Canberra: Peace Research Centre, 1986), 13.
29. Crawford, 'The Antipodean Pilgrimage of Arnold Wood', 422.