

‘Let us go’ ... it’s a ‘Blackfellows’ War’: Aborigines and the Boer War

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There remains much mystery, misconception and myth surrounding the history of Aboriginal involvement with the South African Anglo-Boer War (hereafter Boer War). Unquestionably, Aboriginal men did go to South Africa and play a part, but the numbers, identity and background of these men remains sketchy. The war in South Africa remains itself somewhat the forgotten war. Jim Davidson has reflected that its memory ‘slipped from public consciousness relatively quickly ... Collective Memory of the Boer War was soon swamped by the Great War’.¹ In this study I reflect on some of the known and unknown stories and experiences of Aboriginal people during the Boer War. What were the living circumstances of Aboriginal people in Australia leading up to and during the Boer War and did this have any impact? Did Aboriginal people and communities support the war in South Africa? What do we know of the Aboriginal men that went to South Africa? Why were they there? How did they get there and did they get home? Whilst acknowledging the lack of archival sources,² I will address or reveal some of the complexities of these issues through this article.

I wish to acknowledge the groundbreaking work and perseverance of a number of scholars and amateur enthusiasts including Dale Kerwin, Philippa Scarlett, Colin Renshaw, Bill Woolmore and Peter Bakker amongst others who have conducted work over many years trying to piece together the largely fragmented and previously missing place of Aboriginal people associated with the war

1 Davidson 2015: 25.

2 ‘The relative paucity and diffusion of official Australian records of the war was made worse when many records were lost or deliberately destroyed, not through any fears that official secrets and methods might become known, but because the records concerned seemingly mundane matters relating to a conflict which seemed minor and trivial in the wake of the First World War.’ Wilcox 2000: 9.

in South Africa. It is hoped as a result of this article that I have added a few more pieces to the puzzle and that over the next three years of my involvement with the Australian Research Council-funded 'Serving Our Country: A history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the defence of Australia' project,³ further knowledge and discoveries may continue to fill the gaps in our understanding of Aboriginal people and the Boer War. In that context this article is simply a precursor to a wider and hopefully more revealing study in the future.⁴

Patriotism, dissent and opportunity

As would be seen in 1914, patriotism and excitement clearly gripped the Australian public's imagination during the Boer War. The *Brisbane Courier* reported, 'One of the largest public meetings ever held took place in the [Sydney] Town Hall'⁵ at which the NSW Premier the Hon. John See and the Leader of the Opposition Charles Lee gave stirring addresses to a highly supportive crowd. A resolution was endorsed:

That this meeting of citizens, assembled under the auspices of the Australian Natives Association, takes the opportunity of expressing its entire confidence in the British Government in the course they are pursuing in connection with the war in South Africa, and also in the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial federated army engaged therein.⁶

People were clearly caught up in the excitement of the moment, and from the beginning 'men left Australia through rapturous crowds' and as one observer remarked: 'An epidemic of war fever set in'.⁷ There was no consideration of whether the Boer War was just, or in the interest of the Australian colonies. Thomas Pakenham in his 1979 epic study of the Boer War concluded that for the Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders, 'blood was thicker than water' and they all 'felt a natural solidarity with the mother country'.⁸ But Pakenham also raised the issue that the stampede to support Britain was at odds with the

3 See website for more details: www.ourmobobserved.com.

4 The 'Serving Our Country' project is based at The Australian National University with the National Centre for Indigenous Studies and the Australian Centre for Indigenous History. The study is examining the historical contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian defence and auxiliary services from the Boer War to 2000. It draws upon community consultation meetings including oral history recording sessions around Australia and archival research to tell a more comprehensive history of Indigenous defence service. The project includes several partner organisations including the Department of Defence, Department of Veterans' Affairs, National Archives of Australia, Australian War Memorial, Australian Catholic University and the University of Newcastle.

5 *The Brisbane Courier*, 11 February 1902: 5.

6 *The Brisbane Courier*, 11 February 1902: 5.

7 Judd and Surridge 2003: 79.

8 Pakenham 1998: 249.

very tangible connection the colonials had with the Boers and argues that they 'were of the same class. They had the shared experiences: cattle ranching, gold-mining, making fortunes and losing them again'.⁹ Any sentiment for the battler and the 'fair go' was clearly lost in the minds of many Australians at the time. Henry Reynolds has raised these very issues and revealed that there were some Australian politicians prepared to question 'why the colony's soldiers should be expected to "butcher those with whom they have no quarrel and who they knew nothing about"'.¹⁰ Charlie McDonald, a Labor politician in Queensland, was adamant that the war in South Africa was 'the most unjust war England has ever taken part in'.¹¹ But in all of this excitement and controversy, voices of dissent were in the minority, and what did the Boer War mean to Aboriginal people and communities?

A mark of Aboriginal involvement later with the First World War was a widespread demonstrated sense of patriotism within Aboriginal communities, with many supporting the war effort through contributions to war fund appeals.¹² This support was girded by a belief (although in hindsight on the First World War clearly misguided) that military service might also make an impact on improving the social, political and economic well-being of Aboriginal people, their families and communities. The patriotism displayed by Aboriginal communities during the Great War was also evident during the Boer War. A South Australian journalist writing at the start of the First World War drew explicit parallels, writing of how when the:

war was in progress in South Africa a few years ago there was great excitement among the blacks on the mission. That was more a 'blackfellows' war. Our soldiers had to crawl on their hands and knees and lie in ambush for the enemy, and the enemy did the same. During the Boer war, the old men at Point McLeay used to come up from their camps to meet the mail with the newspapers and hear the news ... I remember when the news came through of some of the mistakes made by the British troops in South Africa because they were not accustomed to the style of warfare adopted, the old men felt that they would be equal to the occasion and in their native language they would say, 'Let us go.' They seemed to think that they would be able to do better, because they were more accustomed to sneaking on the game.¹³

During the Boer War there were opportunities for those with initiative. Legendary Aboriginal athlete and boxer Jerry Jerome was certainly one who took advantage of the situation. During the South African War he 'was making

9 Packenham 1998: 249.

10 Reynolds 2010: 56.

11 Newton 2014: 23.

12 Maynard 2015: 8.

13 *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 28 August 1914: 9.

£2 a day by breaking horses for the military authorities'.¹⁴ Another Aboriginal horse handler, Alfred Polson, served in South Africa. Polson, an Aboriginal man from Taree on the mid north coast of New South Wales, had been the horse handler and carriage driver for the local Taree District doctor Neville Howse. When the young doctor 'enlisted in the New South Wales Medical Corps to go to the Boer War, Polson went with him as his batman [a soldier assigned to an officer as a servant]'.¹⁵ Howse and Polson were present at a clash between British and Boer forces near Vredefort in 1900:

[A]t the height of the fighting as a line of horsemen charged toward the Boer position, Neville Howse noticed a young trumpeter fall from his horse, wounded in the foremost line. He was some two hundred metres from Howse when he cried out, clutched his stomach, fell from his horse and was on the ground writhing in agony. Despite the enemy fire being extremely heavy, Howse did not hesitate to mount his white stallion held in readiness by Alfred Polson of Taree. Howse galloped out furiously onto the battlefield to rescue the wounded trumpeter. On his way there, his horse was shot from under him by a Boer bullet or two. Nevertheless, he continued coolly on foot, reached the wounded man who was still alive and, still under severe crossfire, dressed the wounds, particularly a serious wound of the bladder. Howse then lifted the man and carried him in a series of short rushes back to the British line and to safety ...¹⁶

Alfred Polson in his supporting batman role for Howse had been on hand to witness his friend's incredible bravery. Howse subsequently became the first Australian to be awarded the highest recognition for courage in the British military, the Victoria Cross. Emeritus Professor John Ramsland, who has conducted historical research within the Manning Valley over many years, indicated that Polson was most likely Aboriginal and that Aboriginal descendants remain convinced of his ties to them.

Why did they want to go?

In analysing Aboriginal involvement with the Boer War it is important to recognise that the freedom, movement and enterprise of Aboriginal people during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was far greater than many people think. In that context, Aboriginal opportunities to go and fight in South Africa did not suffer the same level of opposition and restriction that was in place by 1915. The changing environment and tighter control over Aboriginal lives began to accelerate after 1910 and particularly so during the First World War. The time period of the Boer War is reflective of Aboriginal experiences

¹⁴ *The Leader*, 26 June 1915: 20.

¹⁵ Ramsland 2014: 6.

¹⁶ Ramsland 2014: 6–7.

nationally between 1870 and 1910. The general living conditions and freedom of Aboriginal people during these decades are complex and not uniform, but what can be ascertained quite clearly is that in many areas of the continent Aboriginal people had re-established themselves on country and through a combination of traditional methods of subsistence and European farming had become very successful on land. As Heather Goodall has explained, 'Aborigines had resettled small patches of their traditional lands and demanded inalienable, freehold title'.¹⁷ This was certainly the case across areas of New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland. These were not the heavily congested and tightly controlled reserves of the 1930s, but in most instances independent farms with one and two Aboriginal families prospering on areas of land encompassing 40 to 50 acres which they had cleared, fenced, cropped, built homesteads on and grazed livestock. Records indicate that Aboriginal people were winning blue ribbons in local agricultural shows, and in many cases clearing in excess of £100 annually from their labour.¹⁸



Figure 1: 'Men of the Fourth Queensland Contingent, who returned to Brisbane last week' reproduced in the pictorial supplement of *The Queenslander*, 17 August 1901, by W. T. Farrell, Tosca Portrait Studios. The Aboriginal soldier is visible on the right of the photo.

Source: Copy from original photo, courtesy of AIATSIS.

¹⁷ Goodall 1988: 32; 1996: 155.

¹⁸ Maynard 2007: 61–63.

Aboriginal people were effectively running their own lives and these 'reserves were not an instrument of segregation, as is often assumed, but instead reflected an Aboriginal Land Rights movement'.¹⁹ Initially, the New South Wales Protection Board had operated with a non-interventionist approach, but by 1910 Board policy was changing dramatically and beginning to exert its power over Aboriginal lives.²⁰

It was during this period of infamy that all the gains that Aboriginal people had made began to be wound back. Restrictions were placed over Aboriginal children's access to schools, hospitals were segregated and a sudden acceleration in removing Aboriginal kids from their families was applied in earnest:

From 1911 to 1927, around 50 per cent of the existing Aboriginal reserve land was lost to closer or 'soldier' settlement. Most of the land lost in this second dispossession was the most fertile farming land of the south-west of the state and particularly that of the central and north coasts.²¹

Sue Johnson has estimated that in the later stages of the nineteenth century, around 81 per cent of Aboriginal people in New South Wales had been self-sufficient.²² It was during this period of success that Aboriginal men had stepped forward to enlist in the Boer War.

It is important to understand that when the Boer War broke out Australia had not yet federated, and even after Federation there were no official restrictions on Aboriginal people enlisting with the Australian military until 1909. The introduction of the Universal Training Scheme in the *Defence Act 1903–1909* restricted inclusion to the military to men being 'substantially of European descent'.²³ In fact, before and during the Boer War 'there were Indigenous Australians who were actually in units within Australia' and during the South African campaign more Aboriginal men had come forward 'from rural areas to join up as regular soldiers, or some units actually took over a tracker with them, and they came back with the unit'.²⁴

The question remains why did these Aboriginal men want to go? Were they simply caught up in the excitement of the moment or was there something else underlying their desire to fight? Masculinity forms a major focus of the Boer War. But where did this situate the Aboriginal man? David Huggonson reveals the level of the Aboriginal challenge, stating that 'the majority of the

19 Goodall 1988: 32.

20 Goodall 1988: 32.

21 Goodall 1988: 32.

22 Johnstone 1970: 76.

23 Hall 1997: 2.

24 'Rare photo of Indigenous involvement in the Boer War – Gary Oakley interview', AIATSIS, aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/rare-photo-indigenous-involvement-boer-war.

general public saw them as a dying race and as a subject for ridicule'.²⁵ The Boer War was both fought as a 'man's war' and covered through the press as a man's war. This may have also played a part in encouraging Aboriginal men to step forward and break the shackles that had for so long portrayed them as useless, worthless and less than men. As Patricia O'Brien has illustrated, historians themselves have been complicit in reinforcing and perpetuating some of these long ingrained misconceptions:

These writers were influenced by a derogatory stereotype of the Aboriginal male which had been common in early colonial literature in Australia and was (and remains) a prominent colonial stereotype of the 'black man' applied in many other theatres across the globe.²⁶

Victoria Haskins has revealed that the 'role of Aboriginal men within their families and the broader Aboriginal communities was denied, displaced, and destroyed by the state'.²⁷ Clearly some Aboriginal men would have wanted the chance to prove that they could ride and shoot as well as any white man and track better than anyone on the planet. This was an opportunity for redemption and reclaiming their space of respect both within their own families and communities as well as the wider population.

Certainly and somewhat ironically from an Aboriginal perspective, as the twentieth century unfolded with the establishment of more heavily controlled and debilitating government Aboriginal reserves, a similar program had been earlier instigated against the Boers.²⁸ The repercussions of the collision in South Africa over wealth and power did not preclude targeting women, children and the innocent. The British adopted a 'scorched earth' strategy and established concentration camps to confine the Boer population and their families as a means of breaking resistance (later remaining a model for Nazi Germany to follow).²⁹ Discussions in British Parliament highlighted the 'alarming rate of mortality amongst the women and children detained there'. Admissions revealed that some 63,127 people were detained and that the death rate over a year was estimated to be at 12 per cent.³⁰ After the war the magnitude of that loss 'would show that 27,927 Boers almost all of them women and children – had died in the camps, more than twice the number of Boer Soldiers killed in combat'.³¹

25 Huggonson 1993.

26 O'Brien 1998: 321.

27 Haskins 2003: 109.

28 Huggonson 1990: 20.

29 Hochschild 2011: 33.

30 Pakenham 1998: 508.

31 Hochschild 2011: 35.

Barriers, offers, refusals and participation

There is evidence suggesting a number of requests and offers were made by or for Aboriginal trackers and volunteers for South Africa. For example, Don and Bev Elphick's history of Warangesda mission at Darlington Point records that five Aboriginal men volunteered for the Boer War. They wanted to 'go with the "Bushmans Contingent" to South Africa as scouts'.³² But their offer was rejected by the NSW Aborigines Protection Board: 'these five Australians were ignored, whilst the white colonials were queuing up to become involved in this "volunteers only" war'.³³ A Noongar man Fred Mead complained to the press of unfair treatment:

Sir. – I wish you to make known that there are a number of half-castes in this colony who would gladly serve under the King's colours in South Africa if they were given the chance. I volunteered once, but was not accepted.³⁴

The Chief Protector of Aboriginal people in Queensland, Archibald Meston, took a completely differing approach to that of the Protection Board in New South Wales. Meston wrote to the Queensland Premier offering to:

organise and lead a small body of fifty bushmen, expert horsemen and dead shots to accompany any further troops sent from Queensland to South Africa. The body, Mr. Meston points out, could act as guerrilla fighters and scouts, his opinion being that a properly organised and reliable body of scouts has been the most serious necessity in the war from the beginning. The Premier has, it is understood, replied to Mr. Meston to the effect that the offer has been referred to the defence force authorities.³⁵

Meston's correspondence does not stipulate or identify that these bushmen were to be Aboriginal. However, he clearly did not forget his offer, as 16 years later during the Great War he sent through a similar offer to the Queensland Minister for Defence offering up '50 to 100 North Queensland [A]boriginal warriors to the front':

You may confidently accept my assurance that the [A]boriginals selected by me are capable of doing useful and creditable work as scouts and hand grenade throwers and that their courage will not fail them when called upon to face hand-to-hand combat with weapons specially made and suitable for their peculiar system of fighting.³⁶

Meston's offer was turned down.

32 Elphick and Elphick 2004: 26; see also Scarlett 2013b.

33 Elphick and Elphick 2004: 26.

34 *The West Australian*, 28 November 1901: 5, quoted in Bakker 2015.

35 *The Brisbane Courier*, 21 December 1899: 5–6, cited in Kerwin 2013: 6.

36 *The Cairns Post*, 29 July 1915: 2.

Another interesting angle to Aboriginal involvement with the Boer War is that there were experienced Aboriginal men who had already fought a war wearing a uniform. The much-feared Native Police had been heavily involved in the 'dispersal' of Aboriginal people during the Australian frontier war period. The often described 'state of war'³⁷ between settlers and Aboriginal people had intensified and fluctuated in differing locations and time periods across the continent. One Professor Rentoul in a letter to *The Queenslander* in 1891 had stated that the 'quite ruthless and matter-of-fact way in which the "dispersing of the blacks" is described to you is a distinct and ugly fact'.³⁸ Another earlier letter to the editor in *The Queenslander* in 1866 could not have been more explicit: 'a war of extermination is the only policy to pursue'.³⁹ The Native Police of Queensland in the late nineteenth century were great shots, excellent horsemen, had proven highly effective, served under commanders and responded well to orders, and were proven killers in the field. Richards points out that today the clinical and trained Native Police would be likened to a 'Special Forces' unit: 'the Native Police should be regarded as a military force, albeit an odd or irregular one. Just as it was an exceptional police force, it was an exceptional military force'.⁴⁰

It is possible that some of these men may well have stepped forward to join the military as either soldiers or trackers for the chance to serve in South Africa. They certainly fit the criteria as expressed by Lord Kitchener's request for men in 1902, that besides an ability to 'ride and shoot', 'tracking ability by applicants will be a recommendation'.⁴¹

A telegram from the Police Magistrate of Burketown in Queensland sought to clarify whether 'half-castes' were acceptable as recruits within the Imperial Bushmen's Contingent: 'Will you accept half castes', asks Burketown's acting police magistrate, 'one is offering and is a good man, he is by a white man and [A]boriginal mother and has received schooling'.⁴² There is no further evidence to reveal whether the Aboriginal man was accepted or not.

37 Reynolds 1999: 144.

38 Richards 2008: 39.

39 Richards 2008: 81.

40 Richards 2008: 8.

41 *Portland Guardian*, 8 January 1902: 3; *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate*, 11 January 1902: 5.

42 Wilcox 2000: 40; Telegram from Police Magistrate Burketown enquiring if half-castes are acceptable as recruits for Imperial Bushmen's Contingent, 1900, MP744/11, 1900/2878.

The missing trackers?

There has been much speculation that a large group of Aboriginal trackers had been sent to South Africa and left behind after the conflict ended.⁴³ It appears that much of this has stemmed from media coverage in 1902 highlighting that Lord Kitchener had cabled the Governor General of Canada requesting that Canadian Indian scouts be provided for the British Force's assistance. This drew the ire of some in the Australian press in that Kitchener had clearly overlooked a far superior tracker commodity down under:

Lord Kitchener is probably un-aware of Australia's limitless resources in this respect. While Winnipeg Bill, Saguenay Pierre, and Man-not-afraid-of-Rain are, English, French, and Red Indian, one and all able trackers and likely to be holy terrors to the wily De Wet when once they get to work on the veldt, we may make bold to say that King Jacky of Turramurra and King Tommy of Binalong, aforetime warriors bold and lusty, could be advantageously employed in South Africa in guiding the rooineks by spruit and kloof to the secret haunt of Stein and his peripatetic 'Government'. The spectacle of one of our [A]borigines in full attire of white clay stripes, fluff, spears, and waddy, suddenly appearing at dawn, would severely bother Botha and perhaps demoralize the most adamantine dopper.⁴⁴

The Australian government for their part had earlier communicated 'with the Imperial Parliament in order to learn what is required by Lord Kitchener for the further prosecution of the South African campaign'. There was nothing in this correspondence or offer specific to Aboriginal trackers being provided. Kitchener was somewhat dismissive and replied that he was 'fully satisfied with mounted troops now at his disposal'.⁴⁵

Some eight months later with British losses and reversals in South Africa mounting, Kitchener had a change of heart and there were dispatches and cables sent to Prime Minister Edmund Barton requesting Australian 'bushmen and trackers'.⁴⁶ In response, Barton requested that the Governor General notify Lord Kitchener by telegram that he would 'dispatch 50 Bush Trackers by the S.S. "Euryalus" carrying a consignment of horses'.⁴⁷ Again it was not made clear or specific that the men requested were to be Aboriginal. The term Australian 'bushmen' was widely circulated at the time, the famed Sir Arthur Conan Doyle reported that 'a small force of Australian bushmen' arrived at Rustenburg and

43 Kerwin 2013: 4–12.

44 *The Register* (Adelaide), 8 January 1902: 4.

45 Lord Kitchener's cable in 'Age' 18 July 1901, NAA A8, 1901/20/12.

46 Kerwin 2013: 8.

47 Dispatch of Bush Trackers by Mr. Willis on SS "Euryalus", NAA A8, 1902/25/71.

added when 'the ballad-makers of Australia seek for a subject, let them turn to Elands River, for there was no finer fighting in the war'.⁴⁸ These men established a reputation for the Australian fighting man 'both good and bad':

They did sterling service as scouts: the third, fourth and fifth contingents sent from Australia were labelled as 'Bushmen' and were used in pursuit of Boer guerrillas.⁴⁹

It is highly improbable that the men proposed by Barton were Aboriginal, but it is possible that this bushmen's contingent did include a couple of Aboriginal trackers. The Boer War was one of the first wars to receive widespread newspaper coverage. It witnessed a clamouring by some of the world's literary giants to rush to South Africa to cover the conflict, including Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle and Australia's own Banjo Paterson to name but a few. Paterson did record one tongue-in-cheek incident of an Aboriginal tracker in the Boer War:

One of the Australian regiments brought over a black tracker, and was going to do great things with him. One day news came in that the supply wagons had gone astray. 'Very well,' said the captain, 'send in the black tracker!' 'Please sir, he's lost too!' was the discouraging answer.⁵⁰

It seems inconceivable that with such a high level of media interest that large numbers of Aboriginal trackers present in South Africa would not have been picked up as something of great interest. That is not to say that Aboriginal men were absent, but it indicates that the numbers were not high.

Interestingly enough, it had also been revealed that, around the same time, of the New Zealand contingent of 200 men being sent to South Africa, 'half of them [were] Maoris'. The Hon. W. P. Reeves, Agent-General for New Zealand, stated, 'I undertake to say that nothing will be found in their conduct on the battlefield to take the slightest objection to. They will be courageous and humane'.⁵¹ Another newspaper report noted that the Māoris of the Wairarapa district 'were said to be taking a great interest in the state of affairs in South Africa, and it is expected that about 300 native horsemen will be enrolled in the district'.⁵² Another revelation in the New Zealand press surrounds the presence of an Aboriginal man on the Coromandel Peninsula and enlisting with a New Zealand contingent: 'Teddy Collins is a very intelligent Australian black, who has been living here several years. He is reported to be a good black tracker. He is also one of our local crack sprinters. All of the men who have volunteered

48 Conan Doyle 1900: 479, 483.

49 Judd and Surridge 2003: 80.

50 *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 12 May 1900.

51 *The Kalgoorlie Western Argus*, 26 February 1901: 40–41.

52 *The New Zealand Herald*, 5 October 1899: 5 (I acknowledge and thank Damien Seden for providing this great link and information).

are general favourites here'.⁵³ There is no evidence to reveal how Teddy Collins came to be in New Zealand, but the work of Lynette Russell has Aboriginal men working on ships through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and travelling widely. Russell's investigations have revealed the 'enterprise and entrepreneurship' of Aboriginal people and 'we see Aboriginal people exerting their individual autonomy and agency as they seek the opportunity to profit from a life at sea'.⁵⁴ It is highly likely that Collins had simply disembarked in New Zealand, liked the place and stayed on.

Aboriginal soldiers and trackers in South Africa

There are a small number of references that draw attention to the presence of Aboriginal trackers in South Africa. E. B. Kennedy's *The Black Police of Queensland*, published in 1902, has proven highly influential, telling the story of an Aboriginal tracker named 'Billy' who served in South Africa.⁵⁵ British officers derided Australian claims that Billy could track anything over any terrain. The British challenged the Australians: 'We have heard all these wonderful accounts of reading the ground, and though there may be some shadow of truth in the matter, yet we don't believe more than half your fairy stories'. The Australians, never slow off the mark in laying a bet, countered the British scoffing by telling the British officers to 'put their money where their mouth was'. The bet was taken and Billy was given the task of tracking five men, two on foot and three on horseback, returning with a verifiable report:

The tracker, first stating that the men had chosen their various routes over all the hard and rocky ground of the neighbouring veldt, then proceeded to draw five lines in the sand, and descanted on each track: these of the mounted men he had followed at a run – described how one had got off his horse and had then proceeded to light his pipe, producing the half burnt match to prove it.⁵⁶

Billy's account was breathtakingly accurate, including that one of the men had been thrown by his horse and another had tied his horse to a tree and 'climbed one of these, presumably to get a view as there was neither "possum" nor "sugar-bag"' in it said Billy'. He revealed that one of the men on foot had cut his foot badly.

⁵³ *The New Zealand Herald*, 5 October 1899: 5.

⁵⁴ Russell 2014: 97.

⁵⁵ Kennedy's account was subsequently taken up by A. L. Haydon in *The Trooper Police of Australia* in 1911, Gary Presland's 1998 book *For God's Sake Send the Trackers* and in 2010 by Dale Kerwin with *Aboriginal heroes: Episodes in the Colonial Landscape*.

⁵⁶ Kennedy 1902: 171–173.

Overall the finding was conclusive: 'Billy proved beyond doubt that he had run and read every track faithfully; and afforded other proofs, by recording many minute finds and incidents that he had done so'. The officers were thoroughly convinced, and willingly handed over their bets to the Australians.⁵⁷

A discovery of a photograph of the Fourth Contingent of the Queensland Imperial Bushmen, taken on their return from the Boer War in August 1901, clearly identifies an Aboriginal soldier as part of this contingent:

The vintage silver gelatin photograph on the original flush-cut mount was in excellent condition. But even more astounding was the Aboriginal serviceman clearly visible in the right side of the photo ... initial research suggests the serviceman's name may be Martin Grogan, but community help is needed to make a positive identification.⁵⁸

The Grogan name is of a very well-known Queensland Aboriginal family and it appears that this Aboriginal man did go to South Africa. Oakley reinforces the fact that there were already Aboriginal men serving in the military from as far back as the 1860s and that some of these men went to South Africa:

People tend to forget that Indigenous Australians were in uniform since the 1860s in this country. So there were Indigenous Australians in Light Horse Units. These men would have come out of a community, they would have basically joined the military, served overseas as part of that unit as an equal, then they would have come back to Australia and probably disappeared back into their community.⁵⁹

Two other Aboriginal men were identified as assisting operations in South Africa: 'two black trackers. Davis and F. King have been taken on the strength'. The press coverage in the *Sydney Morning Herald* highlights the possibility that they served with the Federal Contingent.⁶⁰ Certainly for Aboriginal trackers fighting in South Africa there was an added danger. Lord Kitchener had reported that a small British patrol had been cut off and forced to surrender to over 200 of the Boer forces and after 'the surrender the Boers shot all the native scouts who accompanied the patrol'.⁶¹ In contrast, after their weapons were removed, the British soldiers were released. Boer general and guerrilla commander Pieter Hendrik Kritzinger went so far as to release a letter stating that he 'will shoot all natives in the employ of the British, whether armed or unarmed'.⁶²

57 Kennedy 1902: 171–173.

58 'Rare photo of Indigenous involvement in the Boer War', AIATSIS, 50years.aiatsis.gov.au/our-stories/stories/rare-photo-indigenous-involvement-boer-war.

59 'Rare photo of Indigenous involvement in the Boer War', AIATSIS, 50years.aiatsis.gov.au/transcripts/rare-photo-indigenous-involvement-boer-war.

60 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 January 1902: 7; see also Scarlett 2013a.

61 *The Age* (Melbourne), 3 August 1901: 13.

62 *The Age* (Melbourne), 3 August 1901: 13.

William Stubbings and Jack Alick have been confirmed as two Aboriginal men who did serve in the Boer War. Stubbings served in South Africa with D Squadron of the 3rd Regiment, New South Wales Mounted Rifles between 1899 and 1902. Philippa Scarlett has indicated that Stubbings' identity was revealed as far back as 1993 when details of his Darug heritage and service in the Boer War was covered in James Kohen's *The Darug and their Neighbours: The Traditional Aboriginal Owners of the Sydney Region*.⁶³ Peter Bakker is responsible for unearthing Jack Alick as serving 'in the pre-Federation New South Wales First Australian Horse'. Bakker has revealed that Alick links to 'a well-known Aboriginal family originating in the Braidwood area of New South Wales'. Alick posted a letter home but it is assumed someone else wrote it for him since in his 1902 Attestation he could only make 'his mark'. In the letter he confessed that he had 'seen quite enough fighting and have had some very narrow squeaks'. He was certainly hopeful that he would be returning home 'which I hope won't be long, as I reckon it has lasted long enough'. On his return to Australia, Jack Alick and some of his fellow comrades were given a civic reception by the mayor of Braidwood. He obviously quickly recovered from his ordeal and homesickness because he volunteered again and went back to South Africa with 1st Battalion of the Australian Commonwealth Horse. This second foray in February 1902 was short lived, as peace was declared on 31 May. There was, it seems, no welcome home celebration for Alick and the Australian Commonwealth Horse and, perhaps, as Scarlett has pointed out, there may have been a 'change in the mood in relation to the war in some quarters following the discovery of the mistreatment of Boer Civilians'.⁶⁴

An Aboriginal man, John Searle, served in the Boer War as a private with the Western Australian Mounted Infantry. He fought at Stinkhoutboom, the battle of Rhenoster Kop, the great De Wet hunt and the attack on Pietersburg. He survived the war and it is assumed that he returned to Australia on the *Britannic* in 1901. Peter Bakker has concluded that he was 'obviously affected by his time in the Boer War and a bit disillusioned when he came back and he apparently tried to commit suicide'.⁶⁵

The aftermath

The aftermath of the war in South Africa would hold horrifying, long-standing ramifications for black people in South Africa. The British 'having fought with fervour to put down the Boer insurgents, left the country without determining

63 Scarlett 2013c, 2013d.

64 Scarlett 2014.

65 'John Searle', National Boer War Memorial Association Inc, www.bwm.org.au/site/John_Searle.asp.

the political status of the South African natives – one of the ostensible reasons for [the] intervention'.⁶⁶ Although the numbers of Aboriginal men serving in the Boer War may have been small, it appears that similarly to the First World War, those that did serve may not have returned home to a life as recognised heroes.

Another previously unrecognised Aboriginal Boer War veteran was found mysteriously shot dead in 1917:

The dead body of a half-caste [A]borigine named Jack Armstrong, was found in a hut near Drake (NSW), with a bullet wound through the breast. A rifle with a discharged cartridge in the barrel, was found alongside the body. Deceased followed the occupation of a miner. He was well known as a boxer and all-round athlete, and served through the Boer War. He was a beautifully modelled man, and was considered to be physically perfect. The coroner returned a verdict that the deceased met his death as the result of a bullet wound, but there was nothing to show by whom the wound was inflicted.⁶⁷

A 1907 report by George Valder, the Commonwealth Agent in South Africa, compiled information on at least 1,000 Australian men, women and children seeking repatriation at home due to the 'dire depression prevailing in South Africa'.⁶⁸ It was made plain to the applicants that they 'must undertake to repay the amount expended on their behalf' by the Commonwealth.⁶⁹ The report reveals that some of the men requesting assistance to return home were Aboriginal. The uncovering of Valder's report and its reference to Aboriginal men still in South Africa five years after the war has fuelled speculation that this was the missing evidence of the lost trackers. Valder confessed that he received a number of applications 'from coloured people who were natives of Australia, in some instances these were the descendants of American Negroes resident in Australia, others were evidently half caste, and two or three were either Aborigines, or Aboriginal half castes'.⁷⁰

Valder implied that changes to the Australian *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* had in effect locked these people out of their own country. The law was quite clear: 'coloured persons from Australia cannot be allowed to return unless they have, prior to leaving the Commonwealth, obtained a permit'.⁷¹ Despite correspondence from these individuals stating that they had left Australia prior to the Act's introduction, Valder revealed that he had contacted the Prime Minister for clarification. The reply was blunt: 'that all coloured persons born

66 Stevens 1980: 3.

67 *The Bathurst Times*, 19 April 1917: 4; *The Farmer and Settler*, 1 May 1917: 4.

68 Valder 1907: 23.

69 Valder 1907: 3.

70 Valder 1907: 18.

71 Valder 1907: 18.

in Australia must obtain a special permit from the Commonwealth, before they could be permitted to land'.⁷² Dale Kerwin has put forward a case that some of the men looking to get home may have been Aboriginal trackers:

By the decree of the then prime minister of Australia Edmund Barton, and the newly adopted *Immigration Restriction Act, 1901*, their repatriation would have required a special permit and there is no evidence that this was issued. The fact that the Aboriginal trackers could have paid their own fare back to Australia is unimaginable, as they would have been poorly paid.⁷³

The question remains, were the Aboriginal men mentioned in Valder's report veterans from the Boer War in South Africa? Evidence strongly suggests they were, as '80% of the men produced discharges, which showed that they had fought in the South African War, and had borne good characters whilst serving with their regiments'.⁷⁴ Valder advised the Aboriginal men to make 'applications for permits. As these men have all since obtained employment. They will I believe manage to pay their own fares'.⁷⁵ It is also possible that some Aboriginal men may have been in South Africa before the war. A good number of Australians had gone there chasing riches and work with the gold and mining boom.⁷⁶ It is quite possible that some of these men may have been Aboriginal, and this fits with Russell revealing the mobility of Aboriginal men globally in search of work and opportunities.

In conclusion, this article has highlighted the fact that archival sources for an Aboriginal presence in South Africa appear limited. As such, the Boer War experience for Aboriginal soldiers and trackers and those back at home offers more gaps in the stories than any full closure. Clearly, Aboriginal men put their hands up to go and some were accepted whilst others were turned away. Some people had opportunities as a result of the war and Aboriginal communities took an avid interest in the conflict carried along on the patriotic national fervour of the day. It has been important to point out that Aboriginal access to military service and freedom to make their own choices in life were far greater in the late nineteenth century and during the Boer War years than was to come in the early decades of the twentieth century. The desire to enlist in the Boer War and following Great War may in fact have been an Indigenous challenge to the historical emasculation of Aboriginal male identity from the earliest point of European occupation of the continent. Finally, regardless of the fact that the numbers of Aboriginal men serving in South Africa may have been small, in a similar vein to the First World War they took the opportunity to prove themselves as equal or superior to white men on

72 Valder 1907: 18.

73 Kerwin 2013: 11.

74 Valder 1907: 19.

75 Valder 1907: 18.

76 Blainey 2001: xvii; see also Limb 1999: 3, 'included many Australians working in South Africa'.

the biggest level playing arena, the battlefield. It is also important to note that despite limited archival resources, Aboriginal community members clearly carried memories of Aboriginal service in the Boer War long after the event. In a 2GB radio broadcast in 1941, famed Aboriginal activist Pearl Gibbs reminded listeners 'that men of my race served in the Boer War, more so in the 1914–18 War'.⁷⁷

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