THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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No. 56

THE BOER WAR
John Bull's Bitter Victory

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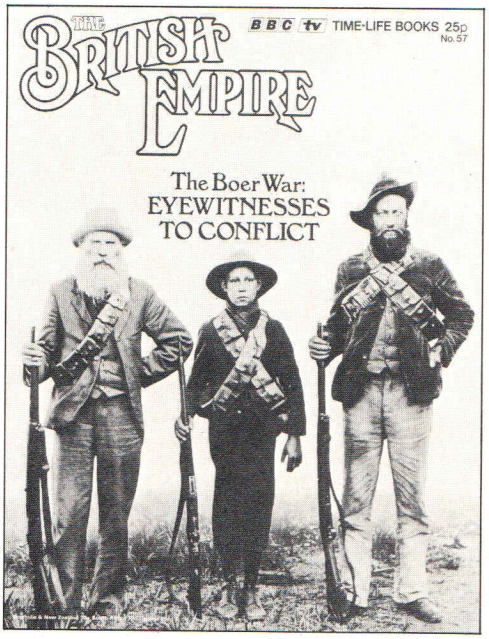

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Cover: Typecast soldier-heroes of the Boer War artist's imagination play a glorious part in the Battle of Paardeberg, a long-drawn-out British victory in February, 1900.

THE BOER WAR

In a complacent British cartoon of July, 1899, John Bull invites the Boer leader, Paul Kruger, to choose negotiations or war. Feeling he had little alternative, Kruger chose war and all that it entailed.

The clash of Boer and British interests in southern Africa, which had been building up for almost a century, finally erupted in all-out war in October, 1899. Having renounced imperial rule, the Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State resolutely blocked plans for one huge dominion of southern Africa united under the British Crown. The Boers were, as Queen Victoria observed, a "horrid people" and clearly needed a quick lesson. But it was to take 31 months of unremitting effort to lick the obstinate Boers into short-lived submission ❧

By Brian Gardner

In mid 1899, Britain and the two independent Boer republics in South Africa – the Transvaal and the Orange Free State – hovered on the brink of war. It was more than 40 years since the Crimea, and the thought of war did not alarm the British people. There was no reason why it should. Less than 100,000 Boers would be pitted against the rest of the Empire – nearly 400 million people. It seemed hardly fair. It certainly would not take long.

The situation was not unexpected. The minor war with the Transvaal, 18 years previously, in which the British had been humiliated at Majuba, had settled nothing; the Boers had gained confidence by it, and the British – most dangerous this – had been shamed.

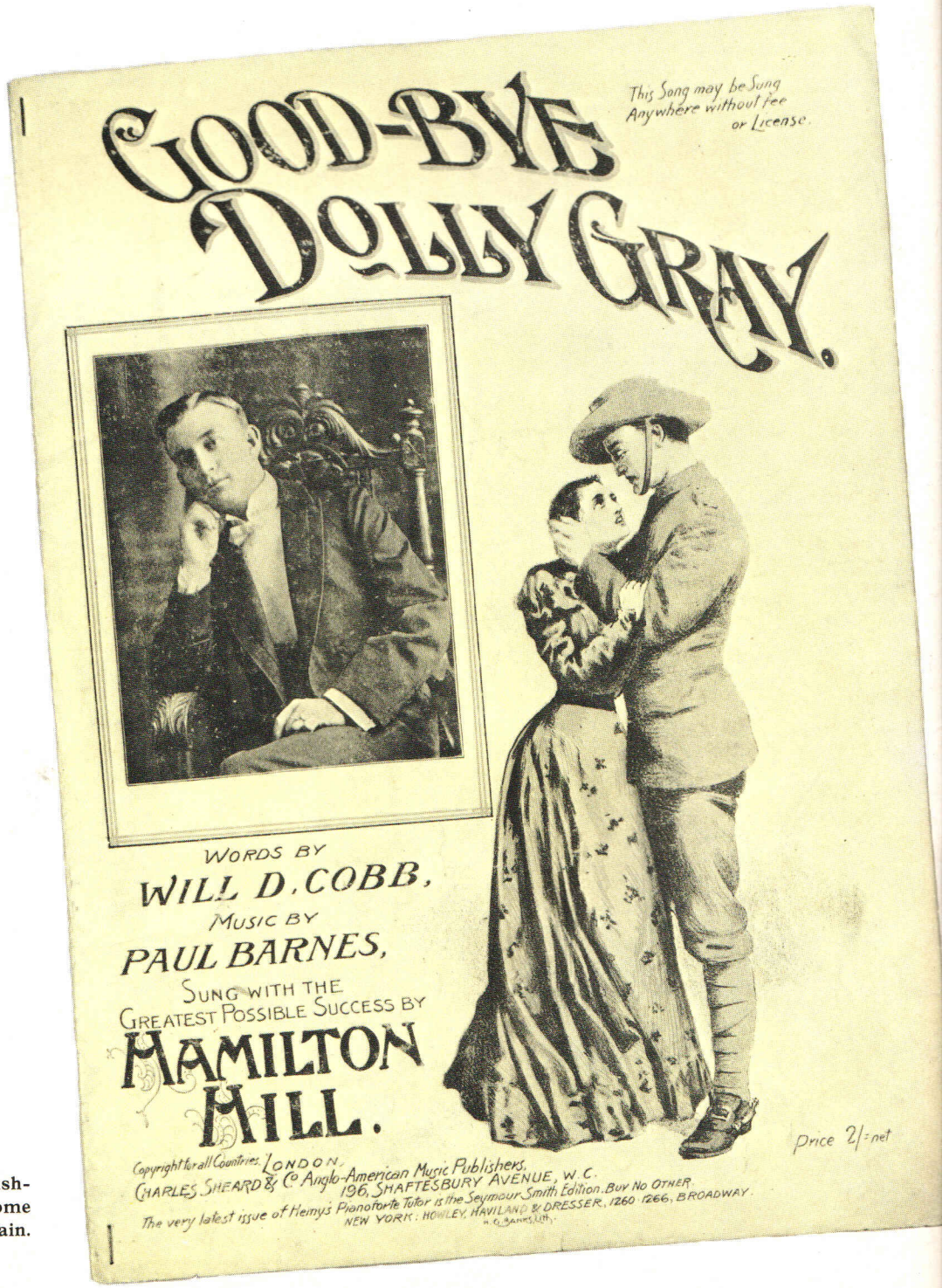
The demands of the British became more vociferous than ever; a principal grievance was that the foreigners, mostly British, in the rapidly developing gold-mining area of the Transvaal on the Rand were denied the vote. Rhodes claimed that the capital being invested in Johannesburg was too great to be left to the mercies of what was considered an inefficient and corrupt administration. The Colonial Secretary, Joe Chamberlain, was inclined to agree.

Paul Kruger, President of the Transvaal since 1883, was equally firm; if he gave the vote to the *Uitlanders* – as the non-Boers were called – they would take over his country. Anyway, he asserted, the internal affairs of the Transvaal were no concern of the British. The abortive Jameson raid of 1895, in which a party of British irregulars, backed by the mining magnate, Cecil Rhodes, invaded the Transvaal, had failed in its attempt to solve the problem of Boer intransigence by a bloodless coup; it had merely succeeded in shaming the British again.

What made war even more likely was the presence in Cape Town, as High Commissioner, of Sir Alfred Milner, who until recently had been Britain's leading tax expert. He was also a fervent imperialist: he saw his mission as getting all South African under the umbrella of Empire. He believed – as Kruger did – that if war was inevitable, it was better to have it sooner than later. This policy, however, ignored one important consideration: there were hardly any British troops in South Africa.

The Commander-in-Chief in Cape Colony was General Sir William Butler, a tall, genial man with an Irish brogue. He was one of those in authority who believed that war was not only unnecessary but also avoidable. He said so, forcibly, and as often as he could. He even referred to a "plot to force war on the Transvaal." This did not endear Butler to Sir Alfred Milner, who severely censured the General. It was no good. Sir William would not be silent. "Present policy, in my opinion," he said, "can only end, if persisted in, in producing a war of races – a conflict the ultimate consequences of which no one could adequately estimate. . . . I believe war between white races would be the greatest calamity that ever occurred in South Africa." It was the end for Sir William Butler. He took the boat for home.

The British government, however, did little to reinforce the South African garrison. One of the few things that it did do was to send out a small party of officers under Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, an ambitious, balding, slightly-built officer of 42. His orders were to raise a force to patrol the Rhodesian-Transvaal border and repel any Boer attacks. An insig-



"Dolly Gray," originally written for the Spanish-American War of 1898, went on to become the most popular song of Boer War Britain.

Patriotic postcards like this helped to stimulate popular indignation against the Boers and admiration for British "grit."

nificant township on the railway from the Cape to Rhodesia, called Mafeking, was named in his orders as "the place with the nearest friendly force," a contingent of police. Although it was over 300 miles from his official destination, Bulawayo, Baden-Powell made for Mafeking. His commanders in Cape Town refused to give him permission to enter the town, but he went in none the less. Afterwards, he changed his orders and his reasons for moving into Mafeking practically every time he wrote of them. Baden-Powell was risking a court martial, but he was a protégé of Lord Wolseley, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, and he was a long way from authority. Instead of keeping himself mobile, as had been intended, the only measure he took against Boer attack was to prepare for a lengthy siege.

Financial credit for the enormous stores ordered for Mafeking was provided by "a note of hand" for £500,000, signed by one of Baden-Powell's staff officers, Lord Edward Cecil. Cecil, son of the Prime Minister, told the contractor in Cape Town: "I place this order with you without the authority of my superiors. I may have to pay for it myself, but I will take the responsibility on my own shoulders." Goods wagons chugged up the line with supplies of all kinds.

The Boer Army prepared for action. It consisted of irregulars, organized into hard-riding "commandos." The burghers of every electoral district, of which there were 40 in the two republics, were obliged to raise and have ready their own commando. Commandos varied in size, according to the population of the district, but every male between the ages of 16 and 60 was liable to be called up.

These military units were unlike any others in the world. The commandant of each commando was elected, often more for political reasons than for any military expertise. Discipline was virtually unknown, and although a Boer could be compelled by law to serve in the local commando, no one could compel him to obey any orders. But every Boer was a patriot. The response was, initially, high and Kruger mobilized his commandos on September 27, 1899.

On October 5, two Boer forces began concentrating near the borders of British South Africa, one near Mafeking, and one, on the other side of the Transvaal, near Natal. Kruger, who was no fool, believed that the railways would be the key to the coming war. In the east, the important railway junction was Ladysmith; in the west, "the diamond city" of Kimberley. Kruger's mounted forces were dependent on the state of the grass, and the grass was now ideal for invasion.

On October 8, Kruger, supported by the President of the Orange Free State, issued an ultimatum demanding, among other things, the withdrawal of British forces from the Boer borders. War was imminent. But the only military force near the Boer borders was the hotchpotch of police, regular officers, and half-trained civilians – a mere 1,200 men – that Baden-Powell had dug in at Mafeking, far up in the north of Cape Colony and only eight miles from the border of Transvaal. The British were in a precarious situation.

Farther south, at Kimberley, close to the border of the Orange Free State, the population had been alarmed by the arrival of Cecil Rhodes, who virtually owned the town. Fearing that his presence would act as provocation to the Boers, they had asked him to stay away, and the Mayor begged him to leave. Rhodes refused.

Kruger's ultimatum became effective at 5 p.m. on October 11 and Britain found herself at war with the Boer Republics. That day Boer patrols crossed the border of Cape Colony near Mafeking, and late in the evening a strong Boer force began to ride into the province of Natal. On October 12, the telephone line to Mafeking went dead. Two days later, the line to Kimberley was cut while the commander of the small garrison there, Lieutenant-Colonel R.G.Kekewich, was talking to G.H.Q. in Cape Town. From the north – silence.

Over in Natal, about 14,000 Boers had begun the invasion. They streaked down the passes, towards the coast where fresh arms and ammunition could be landed. Under Commandant-General Piet Joubert, they rode in bitter cold through the mountains that formed a natural barrier between the Transvaal and Natal, then down into the the plains, past Majuba Hill, symbol of British humiliation. "As far as the eye could see," one of them wrote, "the plain was alive with horsemen, guns and cattle, all steadily going forward." To their amazement, there was no opposition. Passes were unmined, bridges were still standing, the railway was unsabotaged.

The British commander in Natal was General Sir George White, who had won the Victoria Cross in the Afghan War of 1879. Having just arrived in South Africa, he knew next to nothing of the Boers, their tactics or the conditions. The traditional Boer tactics were, in fact, to keep themselves mobile and, if possible, the enemy immobile; this they had learned from numerous wars fought with the native Africans.

After two weeks of skirmishing in Natal, and five fierce little engagements on the road south into Natal, about a quarter of the colony, and some 100 miles of railway, were in Boer hands. White, bewildered by the rapidity and ferocity of the Boer movements, decided to concentrate his force, 13,500 strong, at Ladysmith. There, the Boers gratefully put him under leisurely but effective siege.

There was a strange lull in the war, while the world waited with intense interest to see what would happen. Nothing happened. The two towns of Ladysmith and Kimberley, and the outpost of Mafeking, were besieged – after a fashion: hardly a rifle was fired, no attempt was made to encircle the towns with troops. The Boers remained in their camps, mostly out of sight. It was as if the Boers were frightened by the immensity of the prizes which lay waiting for them. All Natal and Cape Colony, virtually defenceless, were at their mercy. In the Cape, Boer sympathizers were waiting to rise in revolt. But the Boers continued to laze around Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking.

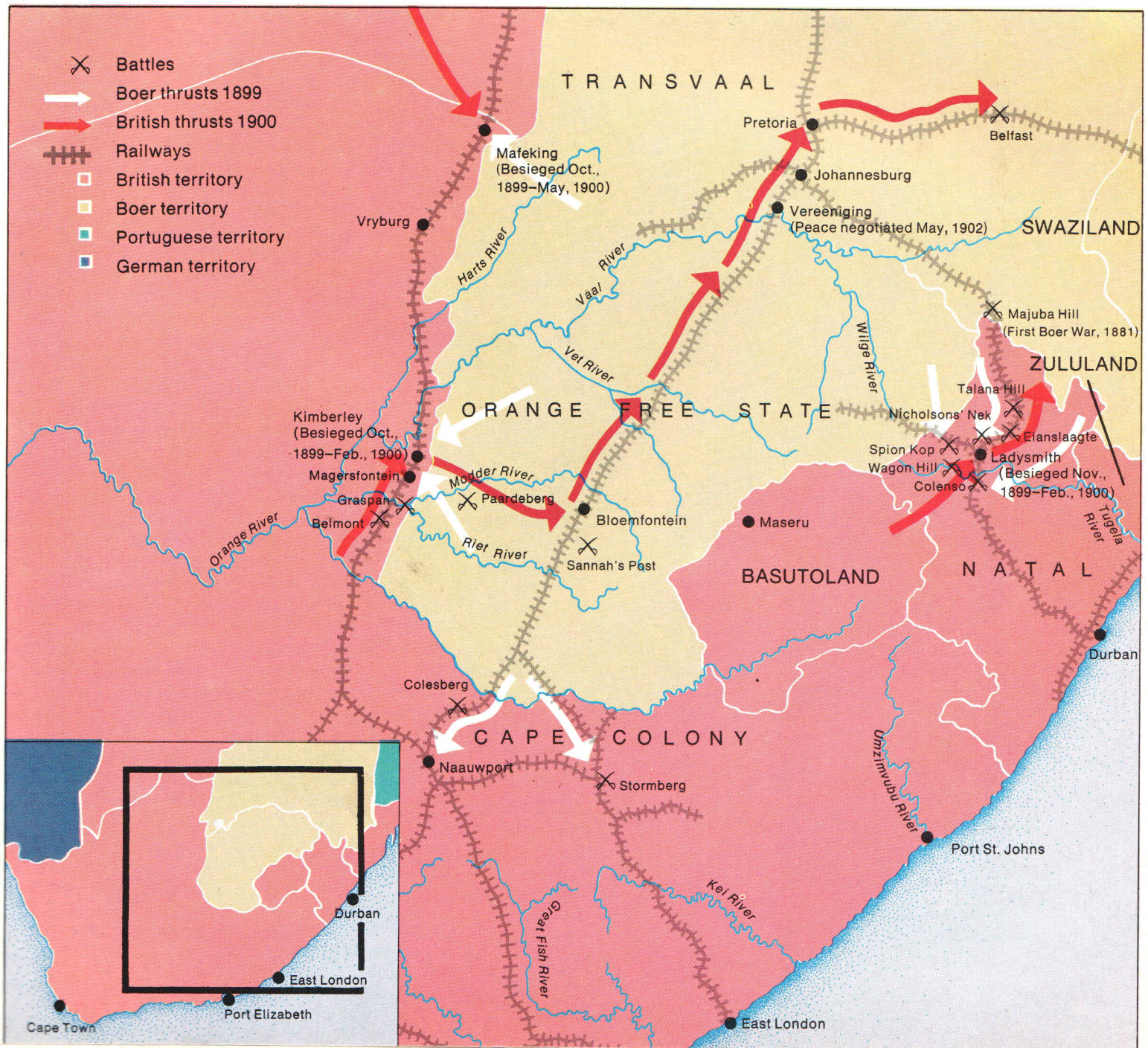
It was a fatal error. A great army corps was being hurriedly assembled in Britain. The late Victorians prided themselves on being imperturbable, but a slight air of frenzy could be detected. The thought of any of the besieged towns falling to the arrogant enemy, and to an army which did not even have a uniform, was not an attractive one.

Reservists and volunteers rushed to the colours. Most of them marched through the streets of London before embarkation, so that the public could get a good look at the kind of men who were going to deal with Kruger. "The troops were of splendid physique, a large proportion being reservists," noted one observer with satisfaction; "their conduct was sober, steady, and irreproachable." The Queen felt "quite a lump in my throat" for her departing soldiers.

The Brigade of Guards marched to Waterloo Station. "Women hung sobbing to the arms of husbands and sweethearts," said the *Daily Mail*; "relatives and even total strangers, carried away by the enthusiasm, broke into the ranks and insisted on carrying rifles, kit-bags." A cartoon in *Punch* depicted one urchin confiding to another: "The Boers'll cop it now. Farver's gone to South Africa, *an' tooken 'is strap.*"

Well might the naughty Boer quail. The British saw themselves as patient, but firm when righteously aroused as they now were. In addition Jingoism was at its

As the map clearly shows, the Boer War campaigns centred on three British towns besieged by the Boers: Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith.



On the dapper, diminutive shoulders of "Bobs" Roberts rested the hopes of a nation shocked by early reverses. "I shall hope," he said, "to end the war in a satisfactory manner."

peak. The country was more aware of Empire than ever before; the word "imperial" was uttered with pride and frequency, and there were constant comparisons with the Romans. Most people were determined not to allow a lot of irritating Boers to disturb imperial rule. It would be embarrassing in other places – especially in India – if the word was spread that a few thousand armed farmers could shake the British Empire.

However, there were some, and their numbers were growing, mostly in the Liberal Party, who spoke out strongly against war in South Africa, and even said that Britain should not interfere with the Boers at all.

Soon stokers were sweating away in the transports, speeding the arrival in South Africa of the invincible Soldiers of the Queen. But the ships that the government had chartered to transport the troops were old and slow. The soldiers, many of whom had never been out of Britain, were crowded, sick and dispirited. Moreover, of the 50,000 men being sent out straight away, only 5,000 were mounted, although it was well known that the Boers had virtually no infantry. But it was felt that the Army was of such quality that it would overcome this handicap without difficulty.

In command of the force now assembling was General Sir Redvers Buller. An Etonian from Devon, Sir Redvers was known to the public for his outstanding gallantry (he had won the Victoria Cross in the Zulu War), and to the Army for his prodigious alcoholic capacity.

Buller decided to split his force in two: half to Natal, to join up with White at Ladysmith, and half to march to Kimberley. He himself would command in the Natal sector, his force disembarking at Durban. The relief column for Kimberley, disembarking at Cape Town, was to be commanded by Lieutenant-General Lord Methuen. Methuen, a hereditary peer, was 54; for one of high rank, his experience of war had been minimal. Like Buller, he was a Wolseley protégé.

Buller, against his inclinations, had been forced to treat the relief of Kimberley as an urgent matter. Cecil Rhodes, ignoring the authority of the military commander, Kekewich, had been getting messages out of the town claiming that

it was on the verge of being taken. "Boers oozing around on every side," he told Milner. He predicted a "terrible disaster." He even managed to contact his friends, the London Rothschilds, who had financed him in the first place, and the Rothschilds exerted pressure on the Cabinet. There was real alarm, despite the fact that official dispatches from Kekewich raised no cause for it. Rhodes was the most famous man in Africa, a Privy Councillor, and presumably he knew what he was talking about. Kimberley covered some of the richest few square miles in the world, and its loss to Kruger would have sensational consequences.

In fact, the defence of Kimberley was progressing without the slightest trouble. Rhodes had grossly exaggerated the situation. He was worried, not only about his mines and his dividends, but about the route from the Cape to his beloved Rhodesia, which passed through both Kimberley and Mafeking. Bombardment had done little damage to property, and had killed no one. There had been no attempt to storm the town. The enemy was seldom seen. There were few shortages, and life continued much as usual.

Rhodes, however, felt far more restricted than most men would have been by such evidences of siege life as there were. He was used to getting his own way. He had always moved about Africa where and when he pleased. Above all, he had no time for military regulations, and he was prejudiced against officers. From the start, the relationship between Rhodes and Kekewich was frigid.

Blandly ignoring correct procedure, Rhodes sent off a message to Baden-Powell, at Mafeking. He urged him to exaggerate the situation at Mafeking, as he himself had exaggerated the situation at Kimberley. "Do not be foolhardy and pretend you can hold out for months. My theory is, if you make out you are all right they will not bother." This, however, was not at all Baden-Powell's style. Unlike Rhodes, he was enjoying himself. A chirpy, jolly little man, he sent back cheery reports about the real state of affairs. The Boer bombardment was so inefficient, it was a joke. With Cecil's huge stocks of food, the population was in some respects better off than they had been before the siege began.

Baden-Powell's first message to reach London said: "All well. Four hours' bombardment. One dog killed. Baden-Powell." It was received with delight in London, as a classic example of British understatement of the kind that Wellington had made famous. Who was this man Baden-Powell? Clearly he had true British "grit." The public could not hear enough from and about him.

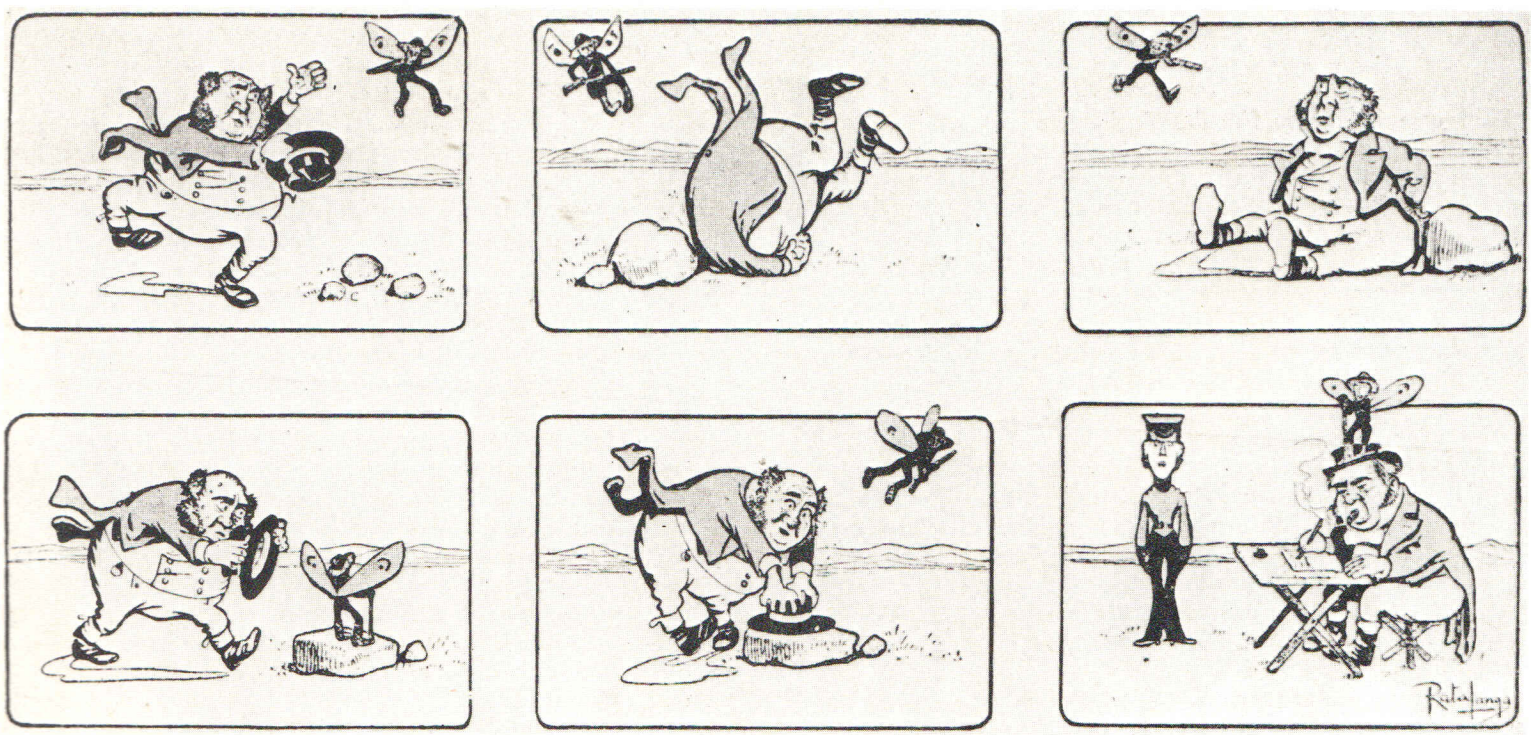
The heroic Baden-Powell in which the public believed did not exist. The real man was quite different: a showy, artistic and thoroughly unbellicose man. He had always been "the life and soul" of every party, and he had never had such an excellent party as this. He designed currency for use in the town. He issued stamps with his own portrait on them. He organized camp concerts in which he played a prominent part, sometimes a frenzied portrayal of Paderewski at the piano, sometimes a mad impersonation of a high-pitched prima-donna. It kept the garrison, some of whom were restless for military activity, fairly content.

Baden-Powell told his troops: "We only have to sit it out." (After the war, he declared, "We acted as much as possible on the principle that aggression is the soul of defence.") Officers who suggested offensive action were disappointed.

The only siege which was, in fact, severe was at Ladysmith. Joubert, ignoring the advice of younger men like Louis Botha, who begged him to forget about Ladysmith and drive for the coast, had made a better job of his siege. But, as at Kimberley and at Mafeking, it was to be a matter of starving the town out rather than rushing it. Although White was able to keep in touch with the coast by heliograph and searchlight, movement in and out was almost impossible.

There were about 22,000 people inside the perimeter at Ladysmith. Since there was much more artillery, and over ten times more troops than at the other two defending towns, White was able to construct a sophisticated system of defence, with forts and posts, all linked by telephone. The Boers, with more than 20,000 men, also began digging in. The bombardment, with two heavy "Long Tom" siege-

An elusive Boer gadfly gives John Bull "a lesson in gymnastics" in a French cartoon exemplifying the hostility of Europe to Britain's cause.



In a resigned *Punch* comment on the inevitable cost of the war, John Bull hands Joseph Chamberlain the vital cash he needs to fight the Boers.

guns, was no joke. To Botha's annoyance, Joubert allowed the sick, wounded and some non-combatant British to be moved from Ladysmith to a special camp outside the town. This was supplied by the British from the coast, and its establishment was a considerable boon to White, for it probably prevented Ladysmith from falling to the ravages of disease, caused by confinement and shortages of fresh food, which were beginning to take a serious toll.

Away in Cape Colony, Lord Methuen had assembled his column for the relief of Kimberley and Mafeking. His 8,000 men were ready to march off, some 65 miles south of Kimberley. Methuen had been schooled in traditional methods: he relied on the invincibility of British infantry. They would march up the railway track to Kimberley, brushing the unskilled opposition aside. The Boers, appreciating Methuen's supply problems, and his reliance on the railway, were preparing themselves at a number of strongpoints on the way.

Under a burning sun, the first 20 miles to Kimberley were covered in two days. As it progressed across the grassy plain, the column, observed by Boer scouts on the distant heights, was a magnificent sight. Shrieks of command drifted across the veld; sometimes faint whistling and singing could be heard. Row upon row of dun-coloured helmets steadily advanced with rifles and brasses gleaming through clouds of dust.

At Belmont, a steep escarpment, defended by the Boers, barred the way. A staff officer asked Methuen whether he was going round it. "My dear fellow," said Lord Methuen, "I intend to put the fear of God into these people." His troops succeeded in taking the ridge, but not without heavy casualties. After only 24 hours' rest, the march was resumed. The troops, undismayed by the first action, proceeded to the next enemy position, a ridge of hills at Enslin.

As Methuen's men advanced over the grass, in the brightness of the morning, in perfect order, they were mown down; as they clawed their way up the side of the hills, they were picked off by the sharpshooters above. Nearly half of the attacking force was killed or wounded. The column prepared to march on to the Modder River. That night, far away, a searchlight could be seen stabbing the sky; it was Kimberley beckoning them on

THE DEATH AND GLORY BOYS

The courage of the lone British soldier was a quality the country loved to admire.

In the opening weeks of the Boer War, Kruger's shoddy, ill-disciplined guerrillas inflicted a stunning series of defeats on Britain. Yet British artists had no hesitation in glorifying the British Tommy and his mates, drawing individual heroism out of collective disaster. In presenting heroic pictures like those shown on these pages, they helped obscure the realities of the war for the British public, which foresaw rapid British victory. As it turned out, there was nothing rapid about it: it took two and a half years, 450,000 imperial troops, 22,000 deaths and £222,000,000 to crush the Boers.

rave British gunners standing fast against the oncoming
nemy had an irresistible appeal for Boer War Britain.

An Army of Lions

On December 15, 1899, British troops suffered their third major defeat in a week, when a force trying to reach the besieged town of Ladysmith was bloodily repulsed at the Battle of Colenso. The British, led in person by the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Redvers Buller, suffered 1,200 casualties to the Boers' 29. "No-one believes in our generals," wrote one irate resident of Ladysmith. "We are an army of lions led by asses."

The public at home would have agreed. United by the disastrous events of what came to be known as "Black Week," the country saw British troops as heroes courageously defending the beleaguered outposts of Empire against the dark and diabolical forces of Boer barbarism.

The government acted swiftly. Within 48 hours, supreme command was wrenched from Buller's incompetent grasp and invested in Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, whose only son had died trying to rescue the guns at Colenso. Kitchener, who travelled with Roberts to South Africa as his Chief of Staff, found the war being waged "like a game of polo, with intervals for afternoon tea."

By the beginning of June, 1900, the new military regime had won control of Kimberley, Mafeking, Ladysmith, Bloemfontein and Pretoria. Imagining he had won the war, Lord Roberts returned home to England in triumph.

In this stirring painting, a classic of its genre, men of the Royal Horse Artillery thunder across a pontoon bridge and whip their horses up a hostile hillside under heavy enemy fire.

At the crisis of the Battle of Colenso, British soldiers struggle desperately to rescue their artillery, but in vain. "I do not believe," said General Buller later, "any living man could have got those guns away."

British officers order their men across the Modder River during the decisive Battle of Paardeberg: 4,000 Boers on the far bank surrendered.

Troops of the 17th Lancers fight stern-faced against hopeless odds in September, 1901, to repulse an attack by the Boer guerrilla leader and former Cambridge student, Jan Christiaan Smuts. After losing 30 dead and many wounded, the Lancers surrendered.


1553

II. All out War

At the Modder, Lord Methuen at last decided on a turning movement. But he lost control of the battle. Going up to the front himself, he splashed about in the mud, giving commands to small parties of troops. Although some of his men, showing great courage, got across the river, the main Boer position remained inviolate. But, next morning, the Boers were found to have evacuated their positions in the night. Once again, British casualties had been heavy. Methuen had lost about one-seventh of his strength since he had started out. On the other hand, he had successfully taken three strong Boer positions and had made rapid progress towards his main objective.

The column marched on, still sure of its own invincibility. Reinforcements had arrived, including the famous Highland Brigade, which contained such legendary regiments as the Black Watch, the Gordon Highlanders, the Seaforth Highlanders and the Highland Light Infantry. Two of the most illustrious military units in the world, the Brigade of Guards and the Highland Brigade, were also now part of Methuen's column.

Only one obstacle remained before Kimberley was reached – a low ridge known as Magersfontein. Methuen did not need Kekewich's warnings to tell him that the Boers would make a determined stand at this obvious defensive position. With hardly any mounted troops, he had no alternative but to take it as he had taken the previous ridges. This time, the Highland Brigade would storm the heights. Their attack was due to begin at dawn.

The brigade formed up in drizzling rain at about midnight. It advanced slowly, kept in tightly packed formation by men on the flanks holding ropes. In command was Major-General "Andy" Wauchope, one of the best-known and most popular personalities in the Army. He had political ambitions, and had twice stood at elections, once against Gladstone himself; the size of his vote against the Grand Old Man had astonished the whole nation.

At 4 a.m., Magersfontein was just discernible, looming ahead. Suddenly, unexpectedly, there was a shattering volley of rifle fire. Then another. Then steady, remorseless firing without cease. The brigade shuddered; men fell, some charged

Tins of chocolate bearing the Royal Countenance provided British troops with patriotic encouragement as well as material comfort during Christmas, 1899.

A fan showing the British generals, "a gentleman in khaki" and "a handyman" was one of the many products sold on the buoyant market in Boer War mementoes.

blindly ahead, others turned about. Consternation turned to panic. A horrible truth dawned on every man: the Boers were not, as they had always been before, at the top of the ridge; they were entrenched at its foot, where they could fire blindly and hardly miss. This had been done at the suggestion of a brilliant amateur tactician, Koos de la Rey, a much-respected farmer, who was one of the most Anglicized of the Boers. Before hostilities, he had personally taken his children's English governess to safety at Kimberley. He had just lost a son killed in action in Natal.

His tactics could not have had greater success. Wauchope was one of the few who kept calm. He shouted, "Gather round, Black Watch, it's not my fault." But within seconds he fell, muttering as he died, "What a pity." Panic had brought a wild stampede to the rear. Fallen men, including the commander of the Highland Light Infantry, were trampled underfoot by their comrades. As one of them admitted later: "It was like a flock of sheep running for dear life." About one in five were killed or wounded. Magersfontein, a word not popular in Scotland to this day, was the most appalling reverse that British arms had suffered in any war since the American War of Independence. The remnant of the brigade did not stop its flight until it reached the Modder River.

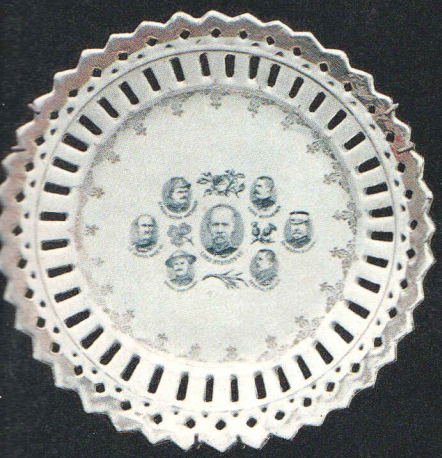
In Natal, as well, there was disaster for the British. Young Botha had at last got his way, and Joubert, while maintaining the siege of Ladysmith, had agreed to a column 4,000 strong pressing on into Natal. It found Buller, now slowly advancing to the relief of Ladysmith, at the Tugela River. Here, at Colenso, the two forces met, and Botha inflicted a severe defeat. Buller, although displaying his usual personal courage, made a terrible mess of his attack, through lack of intelligence and bad reconnaissance of the terrain. His attempted flanking movement became trapped in a loop of the river, and his artillery opened up within a few yards of unsuspected enemy trenches. As a result ten guns were lost. "A very trying day," he commented. Sir Redvers Buller, like Methuen, was nonplussed, and unable to decide what to do next; he even suggested the capitulation of Ladysmith.

Each bank-note printed in Mafeking during the siege was signed by hand. The notes could be cashed up to six months after the relief, but most were kept as souvenirs.

"Our boys" adopt standard once-more-into-the-breach postures for mothers back home.

General White successfully resisted War Office pressure to abandon Ladysmith.

Field-Marshal Lord Roberts holds the place of honour among his colleagues.



A Boer War victory crest united the symbols of Queen, Country and Empire.

The Boer General, Piet Cronje, surrenders to Lord Roberts at Paardeberg.

BRITAIN'S SOLDIER-HEROES in South Africa were depicted on plates that were welcomed by housewives at home. Wishing to impress neighbours with their patriotic zeal, they could display generals on the dresser or battles under the tea-buns.

Meanwhile, a minor column, under Lieutenant-General Sir William Gatacre, had been advancing up the railway from East London, towards the Transvaal. Attempting to surprise the enemy by a night attack near Stormberg, the column got lost, was itself surprised by the Boers and forced to withdraw with heavy losses. These three humiliating defeats – at Magersfontein, Colenso and Stormberg – occurred within a single week. They effectively halted all three of Buller's probes against the Boers. It became known as "Black Week": a dreadful, almost unbearable hurt to the pride of the British people. There was no doubt about it, the Empire had been utterly defeated on the field by the two nearly bankrupt Boer republics. This was not an incident in imperial policing; it had turned into a major war.

The British government felt itself threatened, and acted with unaccustomed speed. Wolseley's men had wasted their chance. There was only one other great figure in the British Army, equal in prestige to Lord Wolseley himself: Field-Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, V.C., beloved of the nation, and known to all as "Bobs." Roberts, now in Ireland on the verge of retirement, had spent nearly all his long career in India, having begun half a century before in the army of the East India Company. He had lost his only son at Colenso. Now he was given the command in South Africa. A small, trim, unhappy figure, with a darkly tanned leathery face, he left Southampton on a bleak day before a silent crowd. With him went the hopes of all those who cherished the British Empire. His Chief of Staff was to be Major-General Lord Kitchener of Khartoum, who had recently achieved glory by decimating the dervishes at Omdurman.

There was just one piece of good news to cheer the public. It concerned a well-known newspaper correspondent, named Winston Churchill, who was so highly thought of in Fleet Street that he was being paid a salary, as he said, "higher, I think, than any previously paid in British journalism to war correspondents." Although only 25, he had already seen a great deal of action: in the Cuban revolution of 1895, in the North-West Frontier campaign of 1897–98 and at Omdurman, where he had charged with the 21st Lancers. Now, in the thick of the war, he had been captured by Louis Botha's guerrillas.

Churchill insisted that he was a war correspondent, and as such should be released; the Boers, with some justification, insisted that he had acted as a combatant, and would be treated as such. But Churchill escaped from the prisoner-of-war camp in Pretoria by scaling a ten-foot wall while two sentries chatted with their backs towards him. He reached neutral Portuguese territory by jumping aboard a goods train, and returned to cover Buller's operations after Black Week, barely a month after he had been taken prisoner. The public were grateful for this display of daring, for this show of defiance, at such a depressing time. As Churchill put it: "I became for the time quite famous."

The British public had assumed that the war would be a short one, over by Christmas. But far from being over, it seemed the war had still hardly begun. Both Boer and British armies celebrated Christmas as best they could. At Ladysmith, the Boers thoughtfully sent plum puddings in to the town, one of the several gestures that won the conflict a deceptively reassuring nickname, "The Last of the Gentlemen's Wars."

At Kimberley, there were also plum puddings, a gift from Rhodes. Rationing was in force, although hardly severe: four ounces of meat, sometimes horse, and 12 ounces of bread per day. Rhodes was as agitated as ever. The distant sound of the battle at Magersfontein had filled him with hope, but now he was in despair. Explosive rows with Kekewich were fairly commonplace, and once he attempted to knock out the unfortunate Colonel, who was only saved by the physical intervention of the Mayor. Rhodes started to talk of surrendering the town to the Boers. His bluff worked. Roberts, who had rushed up from Cape Town, began to prepare an immediate relief.

Mafeking, on the other hand, was still the most pleasant place to be in the war. As the Boers never fired on Sundays, Christmas was celebrated on that day. At the Mafeking Hotel, there was a special menu of 28 items. At another hotel, one of the besieged wrote that "we had quite a royal Christmas dinner. It included everything conceivable; we revelled in plenty." Baden-Powell attended a private party: turkey, plum pudding, wines and brandy. Yet in the official report, written much later, Baden-Powell proudly mentioned that there had been an "entire absence of all luxuries."

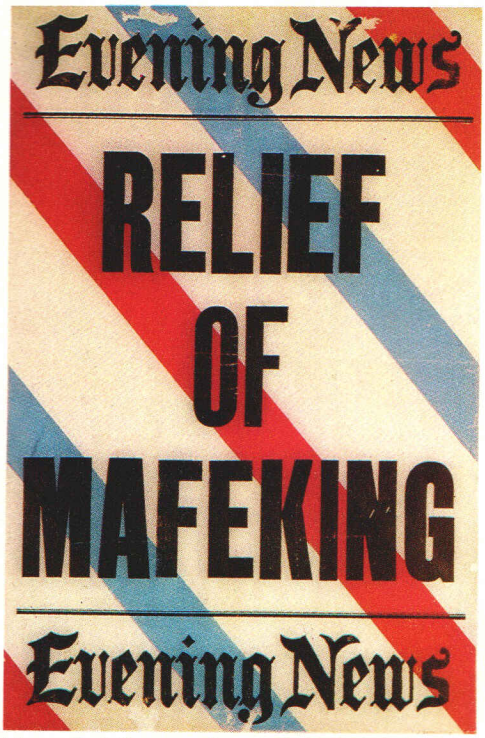
After more than two months of siege, Mafeking had suffered less than a dozen casualties from the ineffective Boer bombardment. Only the Africans, in the native quarter of the town, were feeling the effects of encirclement. The local magistrate wrote: "I am considerably worried during all hours of the day by hungry Natives, who lean against the garden wall and stare at me." On one occasion the desperate Africans streamed out of the town, only to be shot down by the Boers, who mistook the Africans' rush for an attack.

Buller, meanwhile, was battering away at the approach to Ladysmith, the fall of which, as the Queen herself had said, was "too awful to contemplate." Ladysmith was only 20 miles away, but the hills along the northern bank of the Tugela River provided an obstacle which Buller, with his vast supply train of baggage and impedimenta, and his footsore infantry, found a desperate problem. Opposing him was Louis Botha, who had been about to go on leave, but had been persuaded by Kruger to remain and take a senior command.

Buller decided that his best path, of all the hills that blocked him, lay across Spion Kop. He opened up a heavy artillery barrage. One Boer wrote: "Ever since sunrise there had come the unbroken boom of guns and the rattle of small arms. . . . Far below on the plain the Tugela wound shining in the sun, and the bank beyond was alive with English foot and horse. From the wooded hills further back came the flashes of the British guns. There were probably 10,000 or 12,000 burghers in all on these hills, with the bastion of Spion Kop standing like a pivot in the centre. The casualties were considerable, and I saw some men fearfully mutilated. . . . It was a day of strain. Not only was there the horror of seeing men killed and maimed, but there

FRENZY WITHOUT FOUNDATION

Unimportant Mafeking becomes the focus of imperial rejoicing



News that the 217-day siege had ended reached London on Friday, May 18, 1900.

The boys of Charterhouse, Baden-Powell's old school, register their wild delight.

A jubilant crowd jams Piccadilly Circus on Mafeking night, an event that spawned a new verb – "to

was the long-drawn tension and fear of the approaching shells."

The most costly battle of Buller's campaign, which was saying a good deal, was at Spion Kop. The British scrambled courageously to the top of the hill, but were unable to dig more than 18 inches into the rocky surface and, exposed on the plateau on top, came under furious fire. Three thousand men were crowded into an area of little over three acres. Breastworks of corpses were built to protect the living. An officer of the 2nd Middlesex Regiment wrote: "One unit merged into another; one officer gave directions to this or that unit. We lay prone and could only venture a volley now and again, firing independently at times when the shower of bullets seemed to fall away, and the shells did not appear likely to land especially amongst us. Everywhere, it was practically the same deadly smash of shells. mangling and killing all about."

Winston Churchill visited the top of Spion Kop for the *Morning Post*, passing on the way streams of returning wounded: "Men were staggering along, alone or supported by comrades, or crawling on hands and knees, or carried on stretchers. Corpses lay here and there. There was a small but steady leakage of unwounded men of all corps. Some of them cursed and swore. Others were utterly exhausted, and fell on the hill-side in stupor." Churchill warned British commanders that, if cover and artillery support could not be provided, the men might desert the field *en masse*.

After a day of hell, the order to withdraw was given. A surgeon attached to the Army wrote: "In many instances they had not had their clothes off for a

maffick" – and its own song: "Mother may I go and maffick, Run around and hinder traffic."

A "descriptive fantasia" extolling the defenders of Mafeking sold well in 1900.

A Baden-Powell mug portrays the man who saved both Mafeking and "a people's hope."

week or ten days. Some of the men, although severely wounded, were found asleep upon their stretchers when brought in. One poor fellow had been hit in the face by a piece of shell, which had carried away his left eye, the left upper jaw with the corresponding part of the cheek, and had left a hideous cavity at the bottom of which his tongue was exposed. He had been lying hours on the hill. He was unable to speak, and as soon as he was landed at the hospital he made signs that he wanted to write. Pencil and paper were given to him, and it was supposed he wished to ask for something, but he merely wrote, 'Did we win?'"

At home, there was an uproar about the heavy casualties at Spion Kop. The Liberal Opposition demanded and got a debate in the House of Commons deploring "the want of knowledge, foresight and judgement displayed by Her Majesty's Ministers." The debate turned into a bitter discussion, not so much on strategy, but on whether the war was necessary at all. Joe Chamberlain was presented as a callous warmonger. A Liberal M.P. named Lloyd George made his name overnight by a fierce attack on the war, claiming that it was being waged entirely for the benefit of the Rand mine-owners. "It is simple l.s.d.," he shouted. A political pamphlet appeared with the ominous title, *Are We in the Right?*

When at last Buller bludgeoned his way into Ladysmith, he left behind casualties totalling more than the entire forces opposing him. The besieged were desperate, with rations intolerably low, and disease rife. The first officer to ride into the town was Captain Gough. White greeted him with the inevitable imper-

turbability expected on such occasions: "Hello, Hubert, how are you?"

Roberts, rounding Magersfontein with a mounted column, had already relieved Kimberley without difficulty. Rhodes had succeeded in getting Kekewich reprimanded for discourtesy to him; his threat to ruin Kekewich seems to have had some success, for when the Colonel committed suicide 14 years later, he had risen only once in rank. But Rhodes, who had a weak heart, may well have fatally injured his health by his apoplectic behaviour during the siege; he died two years later, aged 49. With Ladysmith and Kimberley safe from the Boers, only gallant little Mafeking remained.

The defence of this remote place had gripped the public as nothing else in the war. It seemed to symbolize British pride during a difficult and miserable time. But Lord Roberts thought that less than 1,500 men were all that was necessary to relieve the town. They rode north from Kimberley, with a posse of newspaper correspondents, all anxious to see the now world-famous Baden-Powell, and to observe for themselves the plight of the town. After a brief skirmish, the Boers raised the siege, and the advance party entered Mafeking on May 17, 1900. They were surprised at the lack of interest shown in their arrival; drawing the attention of a man in the street to their presence, they received the answer, "Oh yes, I heard you were knocking about." Most people in Mafeking seemed more concerned with the final of the billiards tournament, which was being held that day. The remainder of the relief column entered the town at night to find Baden-Powell in bed.

The relief of Mafeking unleashed delirious, unbridled rejoicing that not even the Armistice in 1918 or V.E. Day in 1945 were to equal. As word spread at home that the siege of the distant African town under the indomitable command of Colonel Baden-Powell had been raised after 217 days, the whole country exploded into a frenzied celebration that lasted five days. Never before in the history of Britain had such a wave of patriotic hysteria swept the nation. London went mad. People swarmed into the streets of the capital, singing, cheering, embracing and weeping in relief and joy.

It had all happened very suddenly. The news, flashed round the world, was picked up by Reuter's News Agency in Fleet Street at 9.17 p.m., May 18, and 18 minutes later the Lord Mayor strode on to the balcony of the Mansion House to announce the relief to a gathering crowd.

No sooner had the words "Mafeking is relieved!" left his lips than, in the words of the *Daily Mail*, "the cry was taken up on the omnibuses and the people were clambering down in hot haste to hear the news repeated over and over again. Most of them stopped still as if it were too good to be true." Within five minutes the Mansion House was surrounded by a crowd of 20,000 singing the National Anthem. "Women absolutely wept for joy," the *Daily Mail* went on, "and men threw their arms about each other's necks – strangers' necks for the most part; but that made no difference, for Mafeking was relieved." Theatres announced the news in mid-play, and audiences stood in uproar. Restaurants were in chaos. In the streets, crowds were thick and frenzied, waving flags and pictures of Baden-Powell, which had been prepared for the event, singing and dancing.

The news spread across the nation rapidly. Express trains from London progressed through the countryside with whistles in constant shrill acclaim, announcing the news to village and town. The sky was alight with rockets and bonfires. Next morning many factories and offices were closed, and the celebrations went on over the weekend. It was five days before the country returned to normal. There was a genuine and immense feeling of relief. Mafeking had been built up as a place which would never fall to the Boers, no matter what it had to suffer, and fall it had not. The mild, unwarlike Baden-Powell had become a strong, calm soldier given to superb understatement, the greatest British hero since Wellington and Nelson. Everyone was overjoyed at his brave defiance of the insufferable Boers. It was the same all over the Empire. In Canada, a correspondent reported that "every town and village went wild with patriotic fervour." In Melbourne, Australia, guns were fired, bells rang all day and crowds packed the streets. In London, *The Times* declared: "The spectacle presented by seven months of suffering and struggle has fired the spirit of the nation beyond all former precedent. There has been nothing like the defence of Mafeking in modern history. . . . We have here the demonstration of the fundamental grit of the breed, the unanalysable qualities that have made the Empire."

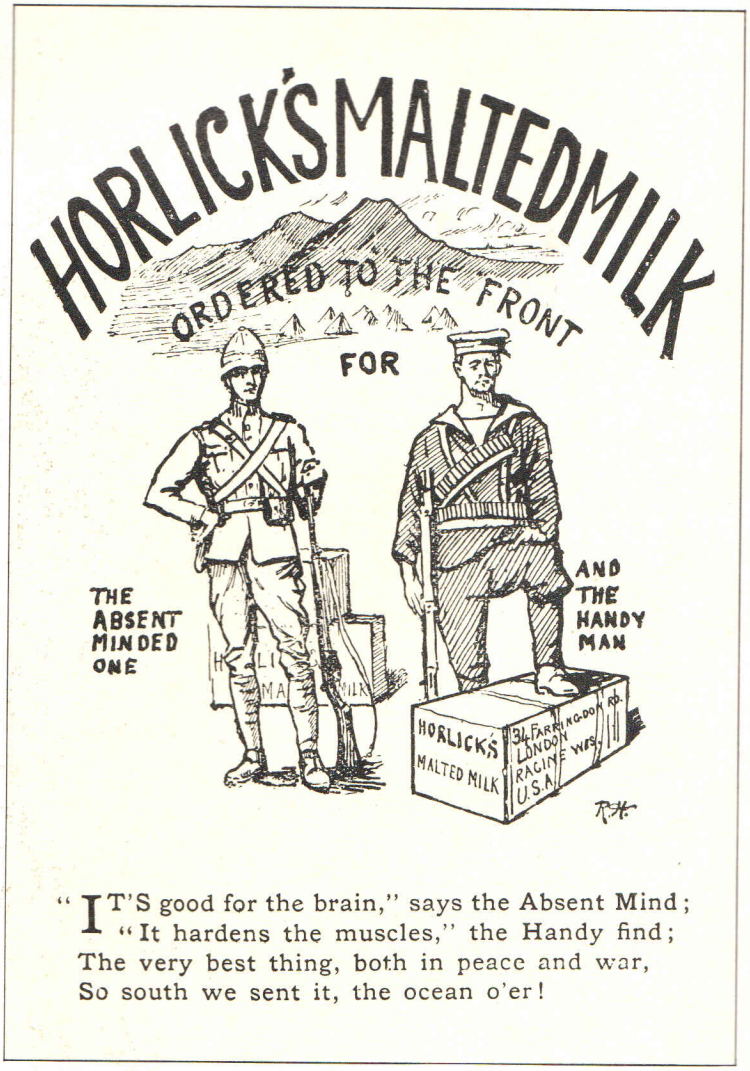
In Mafeking itself there was some tension among the relievers, who had been infuriated to find the besieged better fed and more comfortable than themselves. "I have not known," said one relieving officer of his troops, "men so sulky or march with such bad grace." The reporters seemed unable to face breaking the myth to the people at home (although *The Times* man attempted to in a book later). Certainly, Baden-Powell did nothing to disillusion the public. In his official report he claimed he had been surrounded by 8,000 enemy, although in his general orders at the start of the siege he had put the figure at "5,000 to 6,000." The figure went up nearly every time he wrote of the siege, which was not infrequently, reaching 12,000 by the final account. But probably it was too late for anyone involved to explain that the siege had been one of the most comfortable in all history.

After the relief of the three sieges, Roberts pushed his army on to Bloemfontein, capital of the Orange Free State. A silk Union Jack, given to the Commander-in-Chief by his wife for the purpose, was run up a flagpole in the city centre. After a short rest, and intermittent fighting, the same flag was raised in the town square of Pretoria, on June 5, 1900. Roberts, with his sound generalship and his overwhelming superiority in arms, had, it seemed, won the war without any difficulty at all, whereas poor Buller had been able to do nothing right. Little "Bobs" had not let his country down. He returned home to an earldom, the Garter, an award of £100,000 and the gratitude of the public generally. The government, anxious to benefit from the mood at what seemed an imminent end to the war, called a general election. The election was fought entirely on the issue of the war, which the Liberals claimed they would have averted altogether. It was known as the "Khaki Election." The Conservatives won, but with a diminished majority

THE WAR OF WORDS

Propagandists on both sides presented the enemy as a brutal and cowardly monster and vaunted their own virtues. The British were accused of riding down unarmed men with their cavalry and of arming and inciting natives against their Boer masters. The Boers were accused of using "dum-dum" bullets and of firing on stretcher parties, while British advertisements made much of the glories of the war. Those in Britain who refused to join in the chorus were denounced as traitors. Any criticism of the war, noted the eminent Socialist, Mrs. Beatrice Webb, "is hopelessly unpopular."

A Boer view of "Tommy Atkins's" exploits in South Africa shows him retreating before the oncoming Boers – but assumes he will nevertheless brag of victory to Lord Kitchener.



"IT'S good for the brain," says the Absent Mind;
"It hardens the muscles," the Handy find;
The very best thing, both in peace and war,
So south we sent it, the ocean o'er!

Even malted milk found a part to play in the propaganda war, as this advertisement shows. Such labels reminded those at home that men were dying to defend the Empire.

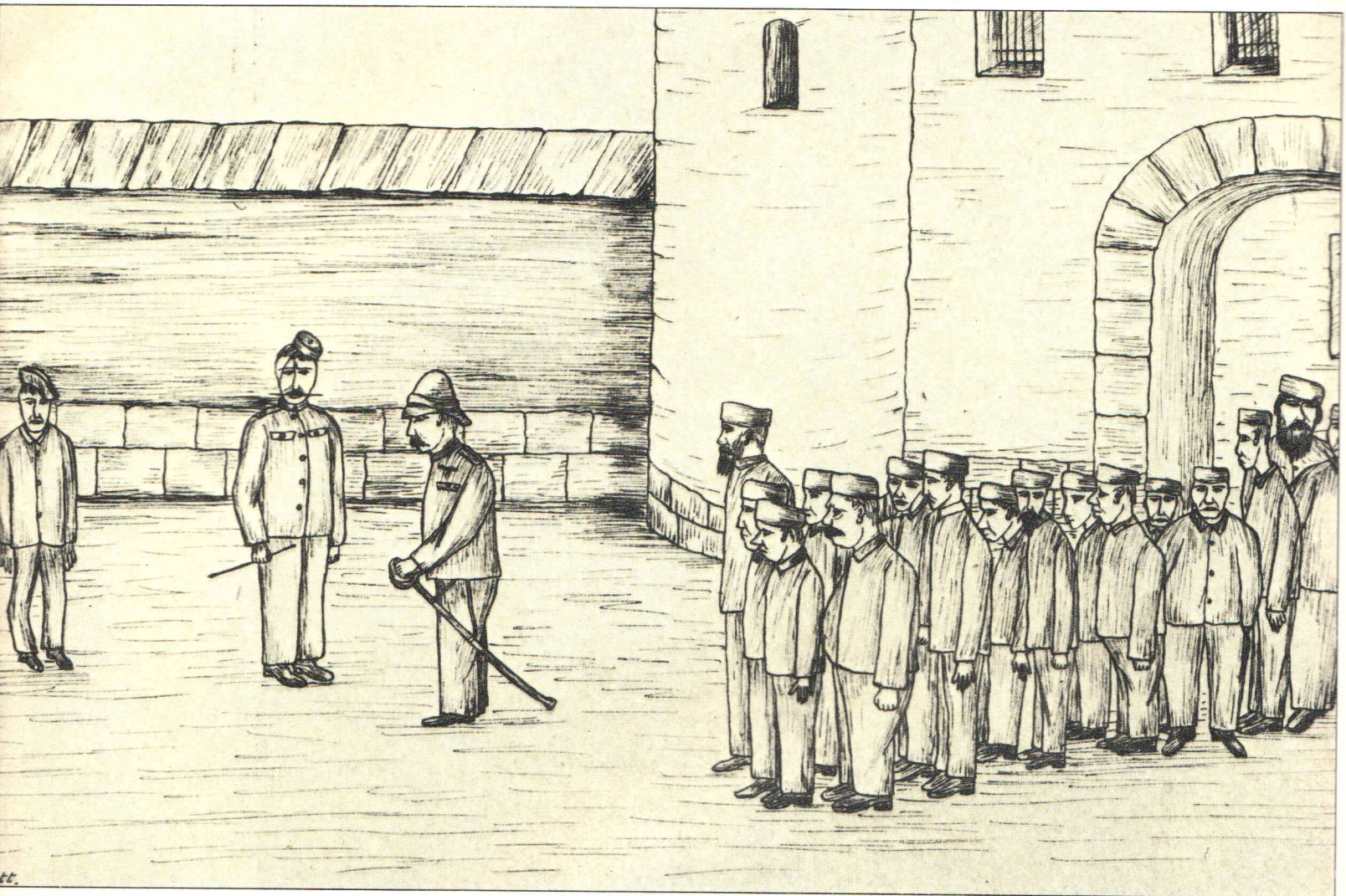
Britannia the Barbaric!

Boer propaganda portrayed the British as callous murderers desperate to get their hands on the goldfields of the Transvaal. The examples on these pages stiffened Boer resistance and helped to rouse world opinion against the British. Resentment at what one critic called the Englishman's "self-sufficiency" was already widespread and it took little to whip this up into an almost hysterical hatred of all things British. So abusive were the French papers that the Prince of Wales refused to attend the opening of the Great Exhibition held in Paris in 1900 and the Queen cancelled her annual spring holiday on the French Riviera.

Propagandists in Berlin, Paris and St. Petersburg took their cue from their counterparts in Bloemfontein and Pretoria, often going beyond the Boers in the scurrility of their lampoons. The British soldier, Joe Chamberlain, the Queen – all were targets for their venomous pens. Who, asked Mrs. Webb, "can fail to be depressed at the hatred of England on the Continent: it is comforting and easy to put it down to envy and malice, but not convincing." More than 2,000 foreign volunteers – a quarter of them Irish – fought with the Boers, while one artillery commander was a German major.

"Stop," yells Joe Chamberlain, unmonocled as the Boer cartoonist's vulture carries him off. "Give me a chance to take the gold. That's the only reason I murdered and burned."

Two mounted and lightly armed Boers, conscious of their own vastly superior mobility and marksmanship, look on with amused contempt as a team of sweating and bedraggled British prisoners of war manhandle their cumbersome field gun across the sun-baked South African veld.



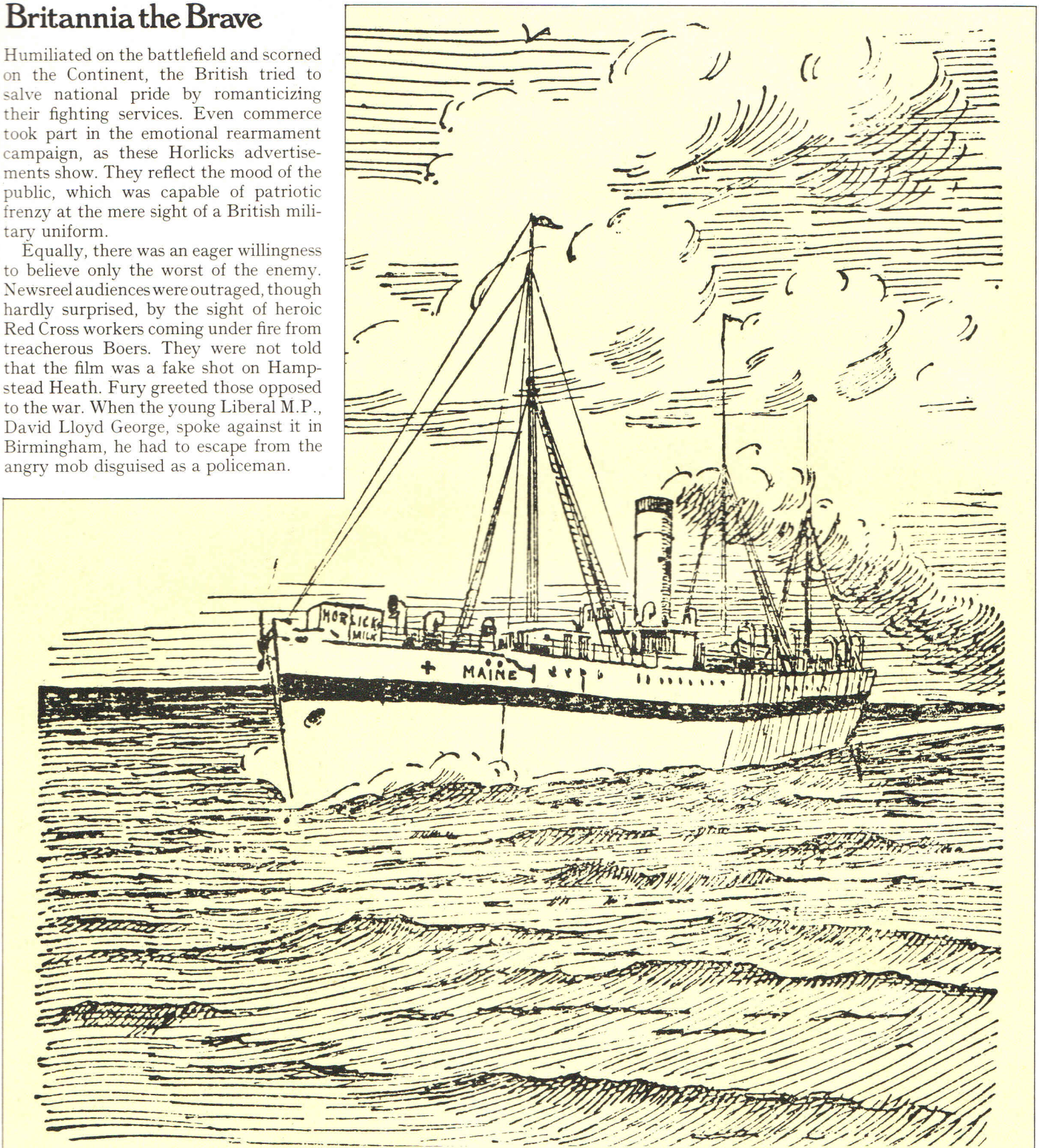
Back in Britain, a group of convicts is marched into a prison yard and told by a British Army officer that they are to be sent as reinforcements to South Africa. When his aide protests that they are all condemned murderers, the officer replies that they are well qualified for their work.

An indifferent world looks on while John Bull entangles himself in the South African spider's web. The Tsar, who carries a map of Afghanistan, was under pressure from some of his advisers to strike through that territory at India while Britain was distracted by the Boers.

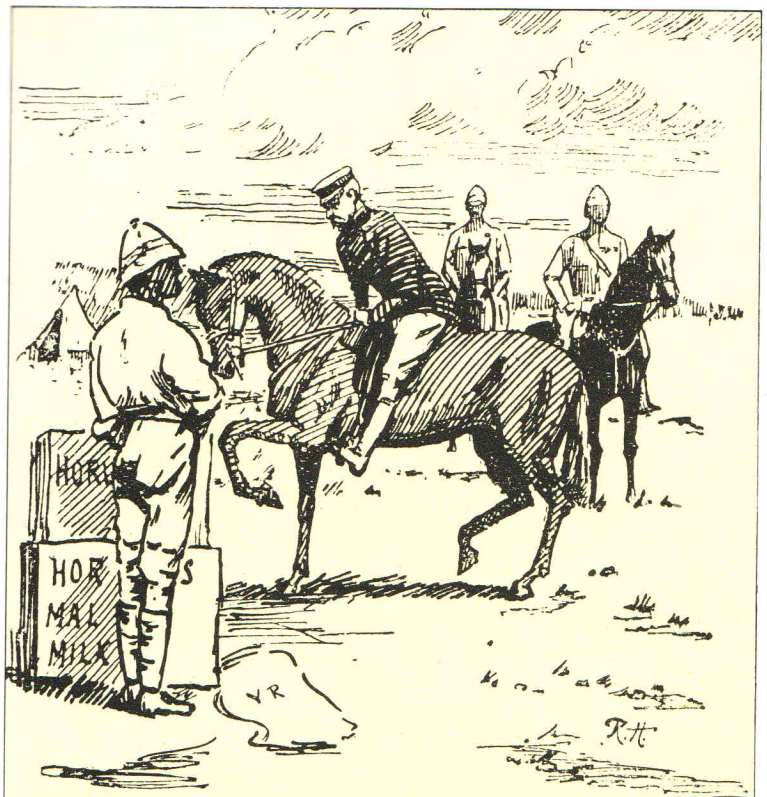
Britannia the Brave

Humiliated on the battlefield and scorned on the Continent, the British tried to salve national pride by romanticizing their fighting services. Even commerce took part in the emotional rearmament campaign, as these Horlicks advertisements show. They reflect the mood of the public, which was capable of patriotic frenzy at the mere sight of a British military uniform.

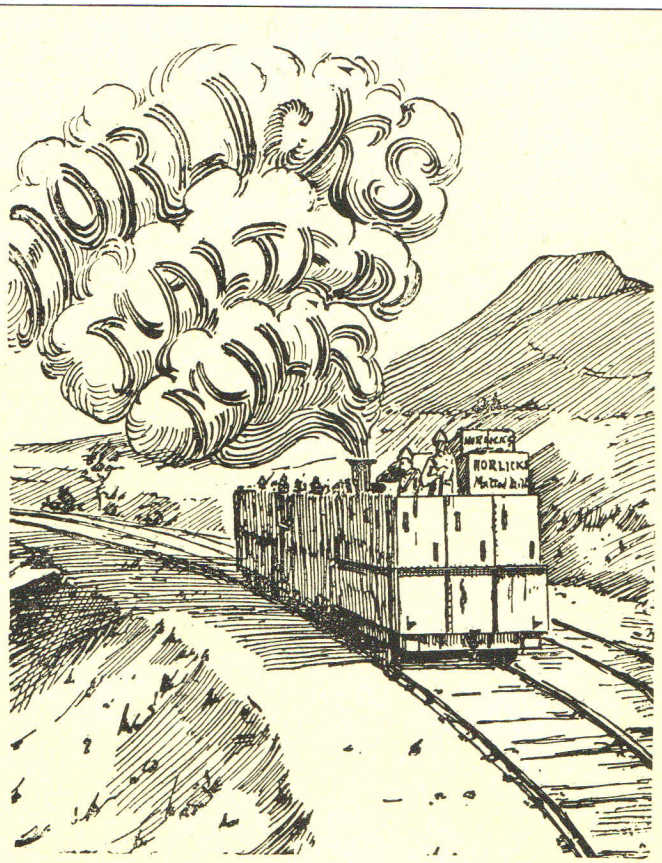
Equally, there was an eager willingness to believe only the worst of the enemy. Newsreel audiences were outraged, though hardly surprised, by the sight of heroic Red Cross workers coming under fire from treacherous Boers. They were not told that the film was a fake shot on Hampstead Heath. Fury greeted those opposed to the war. When the young Liberal M.P., David Lloyd George, spoke against it in Birmingham, he had to escape from the angry mob disguised as a policeman.



HERE is the famous Hospital Ship,
The steamer "Maine" on her outward trip.
And MALTED MILK, by one accord,
They voted the main thing there on board.

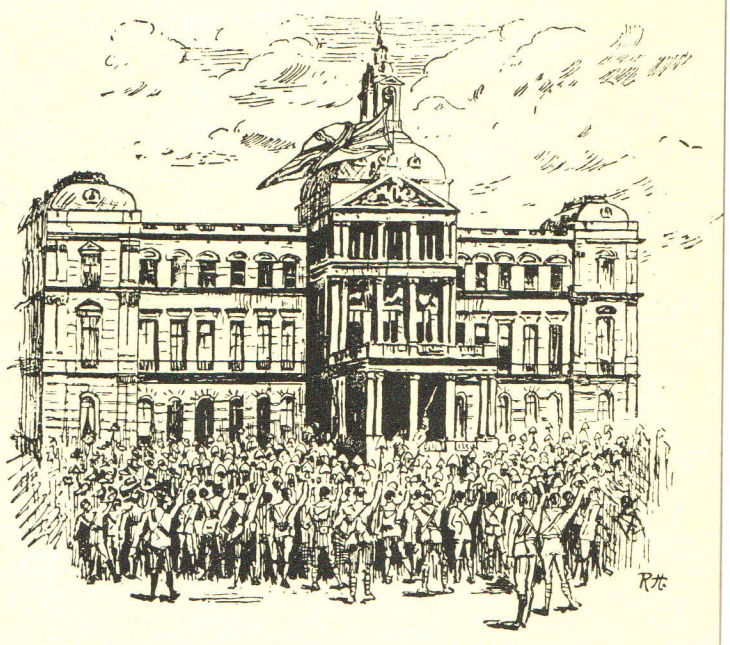


STARTING for Kimberley, Bobs devises
The best safeguard against all surprises:
"MALTED MILK, and plenty of that!"
Says Bobs to the Commissariat.



THIS is the marvellous Armoured Train,
Puffing and blowing with might and main;
Look at the words that the white smoke makes,
As MALTED MILK to the Front it takes.

WITH huts so spacious and tents so tall,
Here is the Yeomanry Hospital;
Now MALTED MILK to the wards has come
You don't hear much of the muffled drum.



PRETORIA'S Parliament House looks fair,
And we all know why we at last got there;
Kruger had plenty of powder and shot,
But MALTED MILK he had clean forgot.

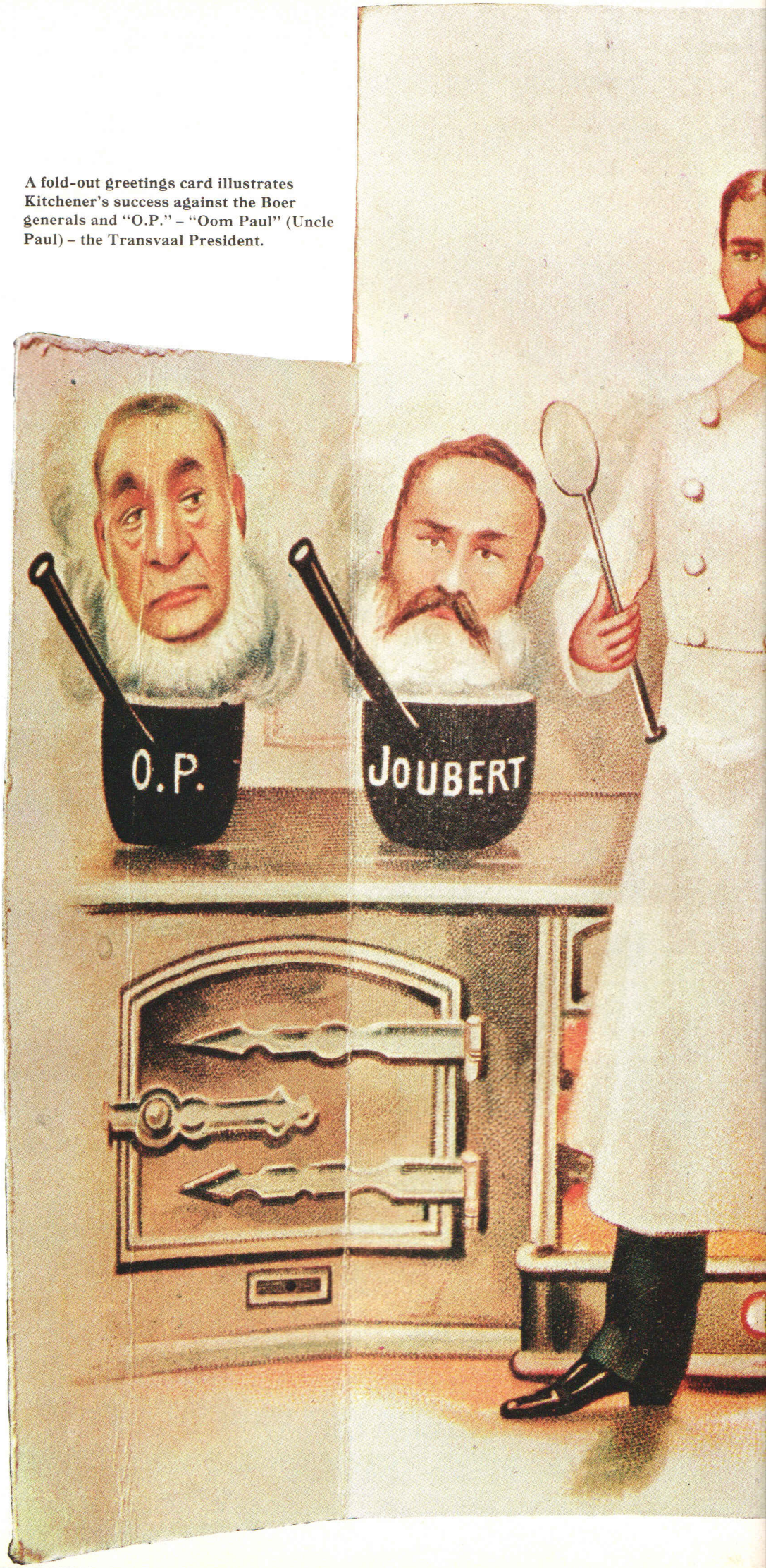
III. The Bitter End

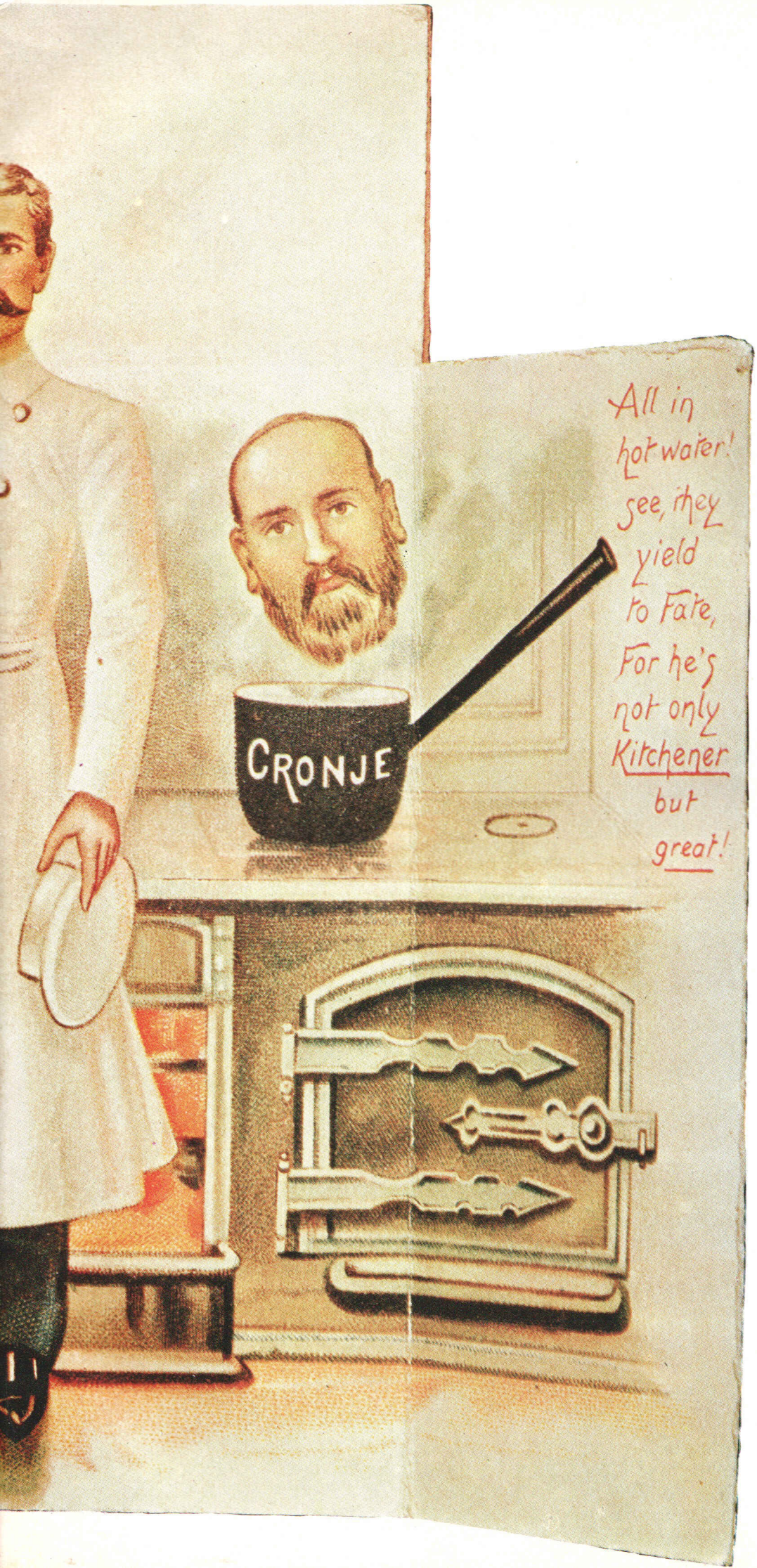
But was the war really over at all? There were no more battles, but the infuriating Boer forces were still at large, moving about much as they pleased. They mingled with the population, or disappeared into the vastness of the veld, to reappear suddenly and unexpectedly when attacking an isolated strongpoint or an unwary column. The new British Commander-in-Chief was Lord Kitchener, who prided himself on cool efficiency. "People here do not seem to look upon the war sufficiently seriously," he said of his officers, "they consider it too much like a game of polo with intervals for afternoon tea." Being a practical man, he believed the only way to combat the Boer commandos was by cutting up the country into sections, using wire fences guarded by some 8,000 blockhouses; he could then sweep across each section. Kitchener, who had never before been engaged against Europeans, was an engineer by training, and it was an engineer's decision. It was not, however, by any means an unqualified success.

It was an expensive policy, largely responsible for an increase of income tax at home. It turned public opinion, both at home and abroad, against the war, and public opinion, as the relief of Mafeking had shown, was making itself more vocal than ever before. The public also reacted with horror to the inhuman consequences. Farms owned by Boers who were said to have fought against the British were burned, often indiscriminately. The thousands of people left homeless were herded into a new sort of institution – what were called "concentration camps."

The conditions in these camps, which eventually contained 60,000 Boers, were the subject of bitter controversy. Kitchener, who seldom saw one, said they were all right; but an Australian reporter wrote of "criminal neglect of the most simple laws of sanitation." At one time in 1901, deaths in the 46 camps rose to a rate of 34 per cent per annum. The most tragic aspect was that the majority of deaths were of children, many of them from measles. In Bloemfontein camp, the death-rate for children was 50 per cent per annum. When the news of conditions in the camps trickled home, there was a surge of feeling against this new horror.

A fold-out greetings card illustrates Kitchener's success against the Boer generals and "O.P." – "Oom Paul" (Uncle Paul) – the Transvaal President.





A Quaker spinster, Emily Hobhouse, saw the camps for herself, and returning to Britain, she agitated against the government to such effect that a committee, composed entirely of women, was sent out to investigate. Lloyd George declared: "A barrier of dead children's bodies will rise up between the British and Boer races in South Africa." The Liberal leader, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, described the policy as one of "barbarism." Lord Kitchener, however, remained totally unmoved and unrepentant.

Early in 1902, a year and a half after the capture of Pretoria, sporadic fighting still continued. Christian de Wet, an aloof potato-farmer, and J.C.Smuts, a Cambridge-educated lawyer who had left his home in the Cape Province in disgust after the Jameson raid, led commando attacks even against Cape Colony. In March, Lord Methuen returned to the news, much to the chagrin of all. His large column, engaged in "sweeping" operations, was surprised, panicked and fled; Methuen was taken prisoner. Kitchener was appalled at the disgrace of a defeat, and of a general being captured, at a time the war was supposed to be virtually over. He went to bed for 36 hours, "gone all to pieces," as he said. However, his tribulations were not to last much longer.

The Boers were near the end. Kitchener's policy had at last taken effect; there was, as they now realized, no chance of help from abroad, and the "bitter-enders," as they were called, had lost support among their own people. In April, Kitchener met President Schalk Burger, Kruger's successor (Kruger had fled to Holland). Also present were the President of the Orange Free State, and Botha, de Wet and de la Rey. Negotiations were begun and another conference was held at Vereeniging a month later, when the British government was represented by Milner and Kitchener. At first the British were prepared to concede little, but Kitchener, anxious to get away from South Africa, shrewdly pointed out that the pro-Boer Liberals were almost bound to win the next election, and then the Boers could expect to get some of their independence back. The peace treaty was signed shortly before midnight, May 31, 1902, on Kitchener's dining-room table. Within four weeks, Kitchener was

on the seas for Southampton. Over 400,000 British troops had been engaged in the war, against a Boer army less than a quarter of that number. Twenty-two thousand British troops had died, the majority from disease. The war had shocked the British as nothing had done since Napoleon's day. Imperial confidence was never to be quite the same again.

As defeated nations, the Boers did not do so badly after all. Under the terms of the treaty, the Dutch language was to be retained in schools and law courts, £3,000,000 was to be granted by the British taxpayer to restore farms and a civil administration leading to self-government within the Empire was to be set up. After the election of a Liberal government in Britain, the Transvaal became a self-governing colony in 1906; the Orange Free State followed in 1907. The new leaders in South Africa, Botha and Smuts, recognized that Boer interests would be best served, not by conflict but by co-operation with the British, and the two Boer colonies joined Cape Province and Natal in 1910 to become the Union of South Africa. The enemy, it seemed, had been absorbed in the imperial ideal. But Afrikaner nationalism was to prove far too strong for that. The constitutions for the two Boer provinces had enfranchised only white men, since the Liberal government had given way on this point to the Boers. Winston Churchill, a Liberal at that time, was Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies. He told critics in the House of Commons that the Boers had shown their customary stubbornness: "I think we could not do more." What in fact the Boers had done was to play on the sensibilities of the Liberals, reminding them of their promises to grant autonomy. As a result, the British, having won the war, lost the peace. After the Act of Union, the franchise of the non-whites in Cape Province was whittled away by Pretoria, the administrative capital of the Union. The bitterness of the Boers over British interference in their affairs, far from being solved by the Boer War, had become even more intense. In South Africa's subsequent history, Afrikaner nationalism kept alight the prejudices and views which had inspired the Great Trek away from the Cape over 70 years before.

A British postcard celebrating the 1902 peace treaty emotionally welcomes the Boers into the bosom of Empire.

Officer, 1st or Royal Regiment of Foot, 1830