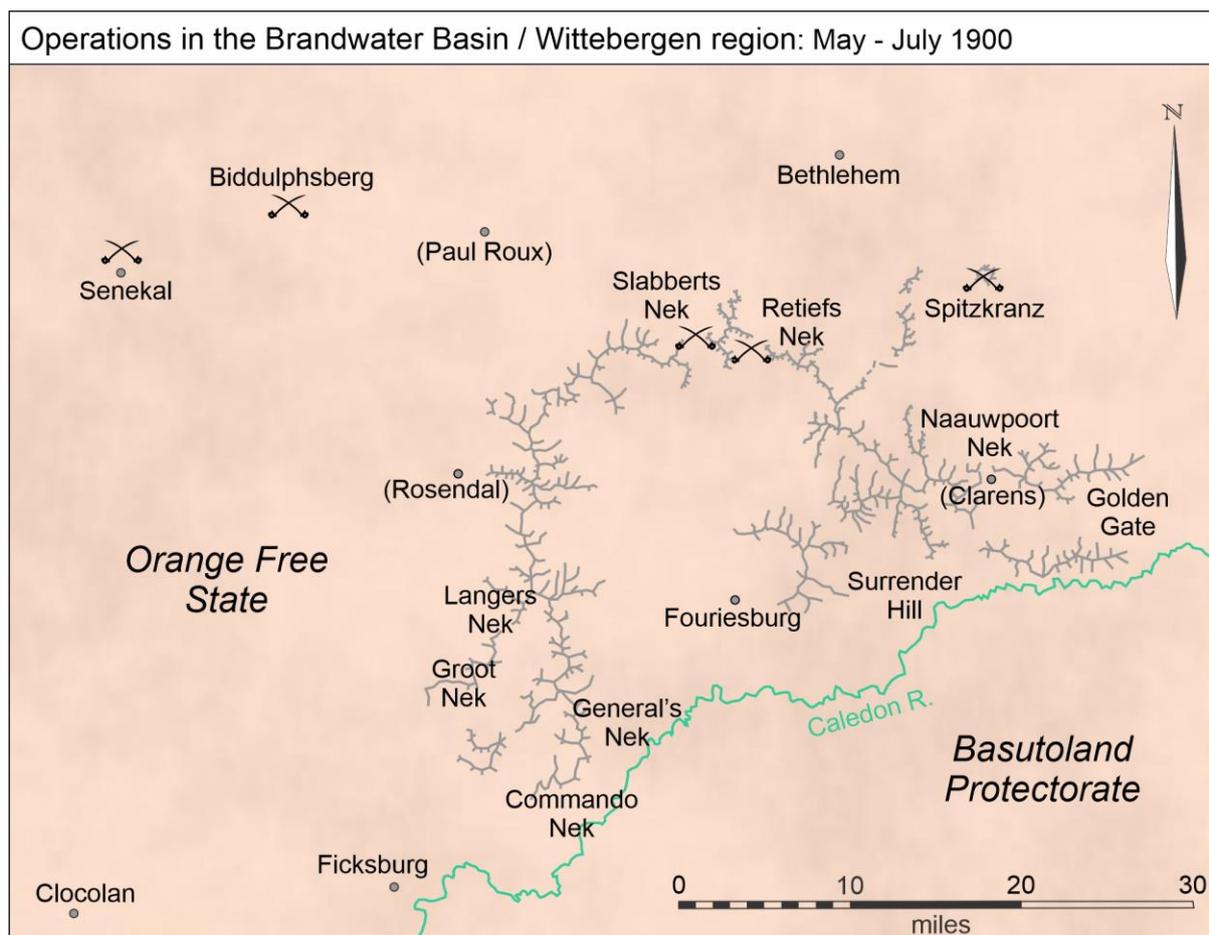


Rosendal and the Eastern Free State in the Anglo-Boer war

Rosendal did not yet exist as a town at the time of the 1899-1902 Anglo-Boer War. But it, and the immediate area in this part of the Eastern Free State, were the scene of a number of important engagements and developments critical to the course of the war.

Following the outbreak of conflict, in October 1899, farmers in the Rosendal area, as Free State burgers, were liable for military service and joined the Commandos that were raised from Ficksburg, Senekal and Fouriesburg. These groups participated in the opening stages of the conflict, including the invasion of Natal and the siege of Kimberley in the Cape Colony. The war came to the Free State proper, and directly to the Rosendal area, in 1900. Bloemfontein was captured by the British, March 13th, under General Roberts, following relief of the siege of Kimberley and the subsequent Battle of Paardeberg which cleared organised resistance to the British advance. The Free State government under President Martinus Steyn then evacuated Bloemfontein, moving the state capital to Fouriesburg.

The main British force began advancing north from Bloemfontein to take Pretoria and the Transvaal. But first, the bulk of the Free State's armed forces, over 8,000 men, were still intact and had taken up position in the Brandwater Basin, the area between Fouriesburg and the Witteberg Mountains. The British needed to ensure that Boer forces here did not consolidate a rump state that could continue to prosecute a war against Britain. Accordingly, they set out to draw the Boers into combat, putting into play a pivotal set of battles for control of the South Eastern Free State and its towns.



A British force of 11,000 men was assigned to this, under General Leslie Rundle who marched, mostly unopposed, across the eastern Free State and had reached Koppieskraal, 28 km south-west of Senekal by May 24th. The next

day a mounted scouting party of sixty soldiers was sent ahead under Major H. Daibac who entered Senekal, then a settlement of 25 buildings and one Church, alone. The town was occupied without resistance; Boer forces of the Senekal and Ladybrand Commandos were seen leaving the other side of town, retreating north. Others stayed behind to surrender, asking to be allowed to return to their farms.

The Battle of Senekal

The retreating Boers, seeing that the British contingent was so small, returned to Senekal the same day, engaging the British in battle in which four British soldiers—including their commander, Major Daibac—and one Boer were killed. The British had established defensive positions at all four corners of town as according to standard procedure in hostile territory, but, utilising their knowledge of local terrain, the Boers were able to approach closely before opening fire. Outnumbered and being fired upon from three sides, a group of 13 British soldiers on the hill on the north-east side, near where the N5 Road now enters town from Paul Roux, surrendered. Another group remained holed up in a building in town, exchanging gunfire, while the remainder retreated west. A late attempt by Rundle's advancing forces to apply artillery fire to the Boer positions was ineffective. The Boers held Senekal again and delivered the wounded British soldiers to a makeshift hospital in the local school, under the town's doctor, before withdrawing and taking the prisoners with them. General Rundle's force occupied Senekal the next day, making it their headquarters.

The Battle of Bidulphsberg

On May 29th another engagement was fought outside Senekal at the Battle of Bidulphsberg, 10km to the east on the road toward Bethlehem, where Boer forces, including artillery, were entrenched on the lower slopes of the Bidulphsberg mountain, visible now near the intersection of the R70 and the N5 highway. The British lost 47 killed and 138 wounded in this action, many of them trapped between the Boer guns ahead and a large grass fire behind them. A number of the fatalities resulted from the wounded being unable to move out of the way of the advancing fire.

The Boers withdrew again as a larger British force advanced. The battle is still known locally, through veteran accounts on the Boer side, as the *veldbrand slag* (veld-fire battle), and is well documented^{1 2}. The British dead were buried in a mass grave at the foot of Bidulphsberg mountain, but were reinterred and moved to the Senekal cemetery in 1964. The battlefield is now sign-posted and is easily visible from the road.

British forces take control of the Rosendal area and up to the Witteberg Mountains

Having captured Senekal, British forces sent out patrols to take control of territory up to the Witteberg mountains down to Rosendal and past Moolmanshoek and Rustlers Valley to Generaalsnek, guarding the mountain passes to prevent escape by Boer forces then directly on the other side of the mountains. Although there are a number of secret trails that allow the Witteberg to be crossed—there are several near Rosendal—this can be done only on foot or by horseback, not with wagons.

Running north to south from Senekal to the Caledon Valley, the Witterberg Mountains boxed in the Boers from the west side. To the south were the Maluti Mountains and the Rooiberg to the east. The British moved to gain control of the remaining escape routes to the north, near Bethlehem, and to the south east, at Naauwpoort's Nek.

Rundle's forces moved south from Senekal, past, or through, Rosendal, and then on to Generaalsnek and Commandosnek in the Caledon Valley—now on the R26 road—controlling access from Ficksburg, and bringing the British to the final approaches of the Brandwater Basin and Fouriesburg.

The battle of the Brandwater Basin

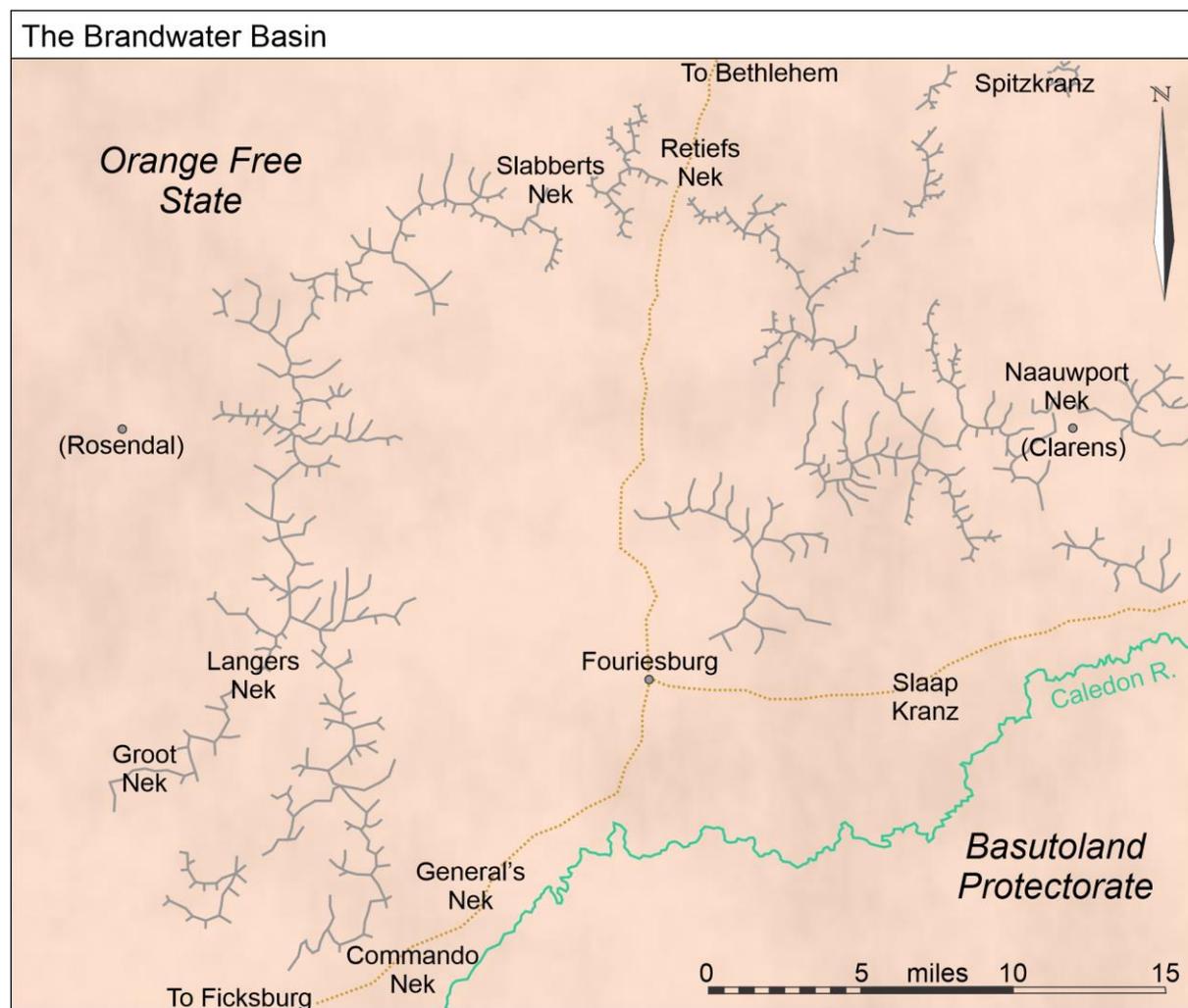
¹ <https://www.angloboerwar.com/forum/16-on-this-day/24767-may-29-1900-battle-of-biddulphsberg>

² <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol086sw.html>

Separately, another British force under General Hunter, was advancing south from Bethlehem, which had been captured July 7th, with the goal of gaining control of the last entry and exit points at Retief's Nek and Slabbert's Nek. The Brandwater Basin, seemingly safe and secluded, was becoming a trap for the Boers.

Sensing ensnarement, Generals Christiaan de Wet, Paul Roux, Jonathan Crowther and President Steyn escaped through Slaabert's Nek July 15th with 2,600 men, narrowly evading British forces while crossing the Bethlehem to Senekal road, and heading north and east. The bulk of the Boer forces were left behind under General Prinsloo. Prinsloo was meant to follow. But he could hardly do so. The British had been alerted to the Boer's intentions by De Wet's escape, and Prinsloo could not be expected to move such a large force, 6,000 men and wagons, through these narrow passes without being noticed. Battles ensued for control of Slabbert's Nek, July 15th and Retief's Nek July 23-24, with the British emerging victorious. The last remaining exit point was at Golden Gate, but over difficult terrain.

Fouriesburg fell July 26. The Brand Water Basin campaign culminated four days later with the capitulation of Boer forces. This resulted in the capture of 4,300 soldiers on July 30th at Surrender Hill, south of Fouriesburg, the largest defeat of Boer forces in the entire war as measured by number of PoWs taken—followed closely by Paardeberg—and one of its most decisive.



One group of Boer soldiers, about 1,500, under Generals Olivier, Van Hattingh, and others, refused to acknowledge the surrender and escaped through Golden Gate and on to Harrismith. The British were aggrieved at this outcome. They had stood down offensive operations and liaison officers had made contact with Van

Hattingh, who claimed he was awaiting orders from Prinsloo but in fact continued escaping. Olivier was subsequently captured, or recaptured, some weeks later.

The surrender was remarked upon as being civil and dignified. Boer soldiers arrived in groups, throwing down their weapons in a pile and which were then destroyed. One element of the terms of surrender was the insistence that the Boers retain their horses and journey on them into captivity, at least up to the rail head at Winburg. There was fascination on the British side with these adversaries who had fought so well. It was observed that they looked more like hunters than soldiers, and that some were, physically, the largest men they had ever seen³ / ⁴.

Those willing to sign the Oath of Neutrality or allegiance to the Crown, were released, although some subsequently reneged when recruited by General de Wet in the following months. The remaining Boer prisoners of war were marched to Senekal and on to Winburg, taken by train to Cape Town and then sailed on to captivity in Ceylon. Approximately 100 soldiers considered either too old or too young, were issued with railway passes to return home.

The Orange Free State's conventional forces are destroyed, opening the guerrilla phase of the war

Brandwater Basin marked the destruction of the bulk of the Free State's remaining armed forces and civilian government—gone were many of the most senior officers and staff, a blow from which it never recovered. The capacity to fight a conventional war was over, leading to the final, guerrilla phase, of the war which persisted for another two years.

The battle itself, a series of engagements spread over a period of weeks, involved uncharacteristic errors by the Boers and acrimony over chain of command. Prinsloo's authority was questioned, even his ultimate decision to surrender was disputed. The primary error lay in Boer forces having forfeited mobility, their chief asset, by retreating into the Brandwater Basin, backed up against the Witteberg, Rooiberg and Maluti Mountains, where access through a limited number of passes could easily be controlled. The mountainous terrain was not well suited to Boer tactics based on manoeuvre in the open rather than the restricted valleys, hemmed in by hills where they found themselves. Opportunities to either break out, or maintain control of the critical passes, were lost. Blunders and infighting among Boer forces, and disciplined application of strategic and tactical military principles by the British, ultimately shaped the outcome.

The retreat of De Wet and other generals is debated in historical scholarship. In their defence is the case that, as high value targets for the British, they got out while they could and lived to fight another day. President Steyn also needed to be protected from capture, as he carried with him the last vestige of authority for the Orange Free State as an independent country.

The counter argument is that this was dereliction of duty, leaving the elderly General Prinsloo in an impossible position and facing defeat⁵. Others regard the surrender to have been unnecessary, and insist that Prinsloo could, and should, have fought on. Christiaan de Wet called it a "a horrible murder of government, country and people".

The Brandwater Basin marked the last large scale engagement in the south-eastern Free State. Thereafter the war moved into its final, guerrilla, phase during which the towns were occupied by British garrisons but with the Boers controlling the countryside, amid skirmishes with mounted British patrols.

³ William Corner, The Story of the 34th Company (Middlesex) Imperial Yeomanry. Op. cit. H W Kinsey, *The Brandwater Basin and Golden Gate surrenders, 1900* The South African Military History Society, Journal Vol 11 No 3/4 - October 1999

⁴ de Moulin, *Two Years on Trek, Being some Account of the Royal Sussex Regiment in South Africa*. Op. cit. H W Kinsey, *The Brandwater Basin and Golden Gate surrenders, 1900* The South African Military History Society, Journal Vol 11 No 3/4 - October 1999

⁵ Chris Ash, *The Boer War Atlas*.

The last major action of the war took place in the eastern Free State at the battle of Moolman's Spruit farm April 20th 1902, 27km south of Rosendal. The British garrison in Ficksburg mounted a night time attack on the farm after receiving information that a Boer force was encamped there. But the Boers seem to have got wind of this plan and surprised the British force who suffered casualties—eight killed, 12 wounded and 28 taken prisoner. This is notable for also being the last major action of the war, which came to an end a month later with the Treaty of Vereeniging, signed May 31st 1902. It also underlines an important historical fact—the Boers of Ficksburg District were never defeated. Armed groups contested control of the district and maintained resistance until ordered to lay down arms by their leaders.

Local points of interest in the Rosendal area

The Eastern Free State and the territory around Rosendal was no sideshow in the Anglo-Boer War as is sometimes alleged. It was front and centre to critical developments—the defeat of the Free State's conventional army at Brandwater Basin, the conquest and occupation of the towns and the beginning of the closely fought, irregular war. Rosendal itself was passed over by both British and Boer military formations, throughout the war, as a transit point between Senekal, Ficksburg, Fouriesburg and Bethlehem. Then, as now, it was a day's ride on horseback between the various settlements and was a natural stopping point.

Both the Grootnek and Langersnek Passes south of Rosendal were of importance in controlling access to the area. Grootnek is on the R70 road 20km south of Rosendal on the way to Ficksburg and is notable for being at the crest of hills from where the Maluti Mountains, snow-capped in winter, are first visible. Langersnek pass is located on the S-384 gravel road, bestriding the Moolmanshoek Game Reserve. Further on are Generaalsnek and Commandosnek on the R26 tar road between Ficksburg and Fouriesburg.

Social context of the war in the Rosendal area—neighbours, friends and divided loyalties

One point of interest is the social context in the Rosendal area as the war unfolded. The Orange Free State prior to the war had an overwhelming Afrikaner, demographic, majority among the European population but there was a sizeable minority of English settlers and Jewish traders in the towns. Despite antipathy to Britain in relation to OFS sovereignty, at a personal level relations were cordial and close, based on shared experience in a frontier society, as well as commerce and personal bonds, including marriage. President Steyn's own wife was of Scottish descent.

Deneys Reitz's war time auto-biography, *Commando: A Boer Journal of the Anglo-Boer War*, is clear that Afrikaners in the OFS before the war held an affinity for Britain and British culture and that this was not in conflict with Afrikaner identity or the desire for freedom and autonomy from the British Empire. Moreover, and unlike the Transvaal, electoral franchise rights for Uitlanders were not a contentious issue. The English minority, involved in farming, commerce, professional trades or as clergy and missionaries, had full rights of citizenship within three years of residency.

English settlers were prominent in Ficksburg District before the war

In Ficksburg District the English minority was far more prominent than any other area of the Free State—probably 30-40% of all Europeans. In part owing to proximity to Lesotho, then a British protectorate, English traders, missionaries and settlers had already had a presence in the Caledon Valley for some time. There are still English families in the district dating from this period.

For the English of Ficksburg District the war was a disastrous event they had wanted to see avoided at all costs. Once underway, the English being so prominent in the district made prosecution of the war more complicated for the authorities. Divided loyalties became an issue but were accommodated to varying degrees. All Free State burgers were liable for military service and were called up. Most English settlers in the area refused, as they were still British subjects and could not be expected to commit treason against the Crown. Many responded by moving their livestock and belongings to Lesotho and riding out the war from there. One English family, the Barrets, still resident on Kromdraai and Essex farms on the Caledon River, moved to Lesotho but left their farm house open, to be used as a field hospital by either Boer or Brit.

The execution of George Mousley

The strange case of the three Mousley brothers, on Madrid Farm near present day Clarens, is notable. All refused Commando service but, as a compromise, were put on border patrol on the Lesotho frontier. Later on they were informed that they were to be arrested and should present themselves to President Steyn in Fouriesburg and who said that he would hold their trial when the war was over. The arrangement appears to have been gentlemanly—the three brothers retained their arms and their arrest was notional. This eventually broke down in regard to one of them, George Bennett Mousley, who was executed by Boer authorities near Ficksburg November 17th 1901, after a procedurally flawed trial. His grave can still be seen in the Ficksburg cemetery, along with other war dead.

Although British soldiers held Ficksburg and the other towns at this time and mounted patrols in the countryside, Boer forces roamed the district and maintained a sort of parallel administration. In this context local farmers and residents, whether Boer or British, were allowed rights of transit, unmolested. The incident with George Mousley took place during the particularly bitter, final stages, of the war when the British were conducting their own, scorched earth, counter-insurgency campaign of burning farms and placing women and children in internment camps, the closest of which was at Winburg. Mousley appears to have been a victim of charged sentiment at this time and was apprehended on his farm although his trial took place on Boer controlled territory near Ficksburg. The charges against him were that he had carried arms for the British, for which there was scant evidence and is something that he strenuously denied⁶. His gravestone carries the statement that he was: “murdered in cold blood”. After the war, a murder case was opened against Boer officers who had presided over Mousley’s trial but who were released based on the amnesty contained in the Terms of Surrender that brought the war to an end. The Mousley family continues to occupy Madrid Farm.

Aftermath of the war and its legacy

In the devastated aftermath of the war, residents of the Ficksburg area and elsewhere in the Free State attempted to rebuild their farms and livelihoods and resume civilian life. Deep social divisions persisted, however. This pitted *bittereinders* on the Boer side who had fought to the very end of the war, those Boers who had surrendered, the *hands-uppers*, the *joiners*, Boers who fought on the British side, and released prisoners of war. This is apart from the English, either originally from the area or newcomers who settled there after the war.

The latter included the “Milner Settlers”, part of a post-war government programme to establish a sizeable, English speaking, population in the Free State to Anglicise the area and dilute Afrikaner nationalism. This attempt at social engineering involved granting farms purchased by the government to war veterans, or others arriving from elsewhere in the British empire. This presence is signposted to this day in the many English, or English derived, farm names in the area. Kia Ora, south of Rosendal, is of one of them—it means “be well” or “good health” in the Maori language—and was settled by a New Zealand war veteran. Other local farms having their origin in this settlement scheme include Wellington, Morningstar and Kalkoenkrans, the latter one km south of Rosendal and which was farmed by Arthur Fremlin, who became one of the most successful farmers in the district.

One relic of English culture dating from this time was the polo field at Mooiplaas Farm on the S-449 road, south of Rosendal, dating from 1904 and thought to have been one of South Africa’s oldest polo fields.

The Milner plan was not successful in its political goals but did establish a prominent number of English settlers in the area, although many subsequently left farming and went into business. Their influence in the area lives on to this day. Books by Leonard Fleming, a Milner settler himself, recounts the difficulties of these farming enterprises in the Free State, but manages to do so through humour and whimsy.⁷

A first person historical account of the war and the immediate aftermath is related in the book “*Ons Japie*”, the journal of local farm girl, Anna Barry, on Abrikooskop Farm 29km south of Rosendal and whose manuscript was discovered written, double-sided, on old grain order papers. The book, published in 2017, is an important historical document, providing a first-hand view of this period and how the war, loyalties and expediency shaped

⁶ *The Mousley Family and the Anglo-Boer War*, in *All our Yesterdays—an anecdotal history of the Clarens Valley*, Bibliophile, Clarens 2024

⁷ Leonard Fleming, *A Settler's Scribblings in South Africa*. Stepen Green, London 1910.

behaviour and experience. Her own brother fought for the Boer side and died in a prisoner of war camp in Ceylon. Her father was a senior officer, was wounded and captured by the British and then swore the oath of neutrality and moved all the family's livestock to Lesotho. British soldiers on patrol—the "khakis" as they were termed—stopped frequently on the farm searching for weapons and Boer combatants, their officers at times proper and polite, at others not, but all deeply resented.

Some of the book's most illustrative passages are in chronicling the bitter divisions separating the local population after the war, and when neighbours refused to speak to each other. These rifts were not healed for generations and provide context for subsequent political developments in the Free State and South Africa generally.

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