

A. Blake, *Boereverraaier: Teregstellings tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog*

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Over 100 years after the South African War, the subject of the betrayal of the cause by the so-called *bendsoppers* and *joiners* remains an emotional one, as correspondence in the Afrikaans press indicates.¹³ Ultimately several thousand Boers took the oath of neutrality and withdrew from the conflict, while a smaller but not inconsiderable number took up arms against their countrymen. Albert Blake points out that until recently, however, the memoirs of participants gave no names and the archival files were closed until 2000. This extreme sensitivity is by no means unique to South Africa. A veil was drawn over the history of the Vichy government in France for decades, for instance. But in South Africa the determination of Afrikaner nationalism to present Afrikanerdom as monolithic has made it unusually difficult to penetrate nonconformism within their ranks. Even now accusations of *bendsopper* and *joiner* continue to be cast against those Afrikaners, for instance, who joined the ANC in the post-apartheid era. In 2005 the journalist, Max du Preez, suggested that a man like Piet de Wet, brother of General Christian de Wet, who attempted to negotiate between the Boer *bittereinders* and the British, should be rehabilitated but his argument found little favour, even amongst those historians who have pioneered this tendentious topic.¹⁴

Blake's focus is not on the general problem of betrayal but on a handful of men who were executed for their treachery. As he makes clear, although there were some summary executions and the formality of the law was not always enforced completely, there were no lynchings of Boers, although many blacks were put to death with little ceremony. Most of the victims were tried by courts martial; the greatest weakness was the lack of legal representation for the accused. Nor was the death sentence always imposed. Some were flogged; a few were punished and left to return to the British lines. Since imprisonment was unrealistic in a situation of guerrilla war, the decisions were not unreasonable. In general it seems to have been men of standing and influence who were executed rather than men of less importance, unless their treachery had serious consequences, like that Lambert Colyn in the northern Cape. In a number of cases family clans were involved – brothers and in-laws.

Blake does not confront the question of “why” directly, but his case studies cast some light on motivation. Few gained from their apostasy. In the short term members of

13. For example, *Die Burger*, 7 May 2005 and 15 March 2011.

14. *Die Burger*, 7 May 2005.

the “looting corps” recruited from the camps acquired cattle and the freedom to ride out on the veld but they were vilified by their countrymen during and after the war, and many of the families were left penniless. Rarely does their treachery seem to have been worth it unless they were driven by deep conviction. A handful were. The men who formed the peace committees showed remarkable courage in attempting to negotiate surrender and they were, in some senses, surely right. The Boers could not win this war and its continuation would only bring greater suffering. A man like Meyer de Kock was hardly a tool of the British for he paid the ultimate price for his attempt to help his countrymen.

Burghers of British origin were in a particularly invidious position and Blake is not unaware of their difficulties. He is particularly sympathetic to the plight of a man like the Scots-born Robert Boyd who was executed largely because of his loyalty to his friends. He had struggled to maintain a position of neutrality but was arrested and executed mainly because of his relationship with other British-born burghers who were also indicted. He was ultimately a tragic figure, Blake concludes; like so many others he was the victim of a merciless war.

One of the most moving aspects of *Boereverraaier* is the discussion on the effect of the executions on the members of the firing squads. The executions were often singularly ham-handed and, on a number of occasions, the first volleys did not kill the victims. (It is for this reason that the British preferred hanging for judicial murder since this was a not uncommon occurrence.) Under these circumstances men, often young, remembered the event for years. On one occasion a young boy was sent by his mother to witness the killings, that he might understand the meaning of treachery. Blake is particularly interested on the psychological impact of guilt and conflict on the survivors and their families but the silences surrounding the subject make it difficult to determine how people were affected. The political impact is easier to gauge for participation in the war was one criterion for acceptance by the volk. Nevertheless, the notion of betrayal was by no means straightforward, redefined to suit political ends. SAP Afrikaners were often considered not to be true members of the volk, the heirs to the wartime *bendsoppers* and *joiners*, despite the fact that the party was led by an *oudstryder* like Smuts. Accusations continued to be made against such opponents at least up to the Second World War. D.F. Malan’s failure to participate in the South African War, however, was a stain which he overcame with some difficulty.

Boereverraaier makes a useful contribution to the subject. Its greatest value is in the detail for Blake has combed the archives and genealogical sources to put flesh on his subjects. The question of motivation still remains opaque, however, and one would like to know more about the pressures which led to the decision to stand out against the war. How often, one wonders for instance, was betrayal more about local feuds than about loyalty to a vague cause? Blake would gain much from John Boje’s fine thesis on Winburg (to which he makes no reference) which looks more subtly at the process by which many men “slid” into collaboration over time.¹⁵

Elizabeth van Heyningen
University of Cape Town

15. J.G. Boje, “Winburg’s War: An Appraisal of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 as it was Experienced by the People of a Free State District”, PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, 2009.