

# NINE WEEKS IN THE TRANSVAAL

BY

GEORGE CLARKE MUSGRAVE

FROM HIS BOOK

IN SOUTH AFRICA WITH BULLER

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
BOSTON 1900



# NINE WEEKS IN THE TRANSVAAL

**THE WAR HAD PASSED THROUGH TWO PHASES.** *In the first phase between October and December 1899, British forces led by generals who had little understanding of their enemy, were besieged or defeated by highly mobile Boer mounted infantry. It was a period of bloody fighting in which the only real battles of the war occurred. The second phase from January to March 1900, was the British offensive, during which British and colonial troops, vastly outnumbering the Boers, smashed and dispersed the Boer forces and relieved Ladysmith and Kimberley. But the war was by no means over. There were still strong Boer commandos at large, led by experienced and successful leaders such as Koos de le Rey, Jan Smuts, Danie Theron, Christiaan de Wet and others. The British now held the cities and towns, but a vast amount of territory was left to the commandos, who broke into smaller groups and began a guerrilla war, intercepting telegraph messages for intelligence, infiltrating bases, making lightning raids on posts and convoys, and sabotaging rail and road communications.*

---

History has been smoothly and rapidly made during the past nine weeks. When I left South Africa in mid-March, Lord Roberts was formulating an advance north that I expected to provide ample material for a second volume. There was little Boer resistance and there seemed abundant time to recuperate by a trip to New York, and to return to the front ere the British army commenced to hammer at Pretoria's gates. After the relief of Ladysmith, however, I deemed that the Boers, once re-grouped, would in reality be fighting for their hearths and homes, and that their past resolution in the invaded country would be increased tenfold on the Transvaal borders. The natural fortresses of northern Natal contributed conditions by which the Boers could greatly prolong the agony that they had inflicted on Buller's army.

History abounds with examples of such localised intransigence. Austria was forced to send 260,000 men against 55,000 Bosnians twenty-one years ago. The Bosnians were indifferently armed; they had neither resources like the Boers nor modern rifles and cannon. Austria could draw her supplies at hand, and England was thousands of miles from her main base. In Cuba 25,000 poorly armed and half-starved insurgents defied 260,000 Spaniards in that narrow island for three years, when intervention stayed the struggle. In 1870, during the invasion of France, Germany was forced to keep 160,000 men employed on the flanks and line of communications in a practically open country. With a foe as mobile and resolute as the Boers, and a country so favourable to their tactics, Roberts' advance to Pretoria, I thought, would be through a sea of blood, with communications notated with disaster and interruption.

Roberts' successful march omens well for the future. It proves above all things that the burghers were led into the war in an excess of religious fervour, buoyed by a sense of their invincibility. The awakening was so sudden that they were amazed at their own temerity and dazed with its effect, when the vast strength and resource of the despised England was revealed. Their early success was seen as proof of Divine favour; but when the tide of victory turned they became the prey of doubts and fears, and their system of collective individuality went to pieces.

But the British must not hurrah too loudly ere they are out of the wood. The promises by Kruger and Steyn of foreign intervention had little effect, and I am assured that most of the burghers would return quietly to their farms, were they apprised of considerate treatment. But the Boer is credulous to a fault. Wounded burghers have recently been overtaken, crawling over the burning veldt to escape the barbarous rooineks. They believe to-day that Judge Koch was left to die of hunger outside Ladysmith, though his wife is now with him while he convalesces in practical freedom at Cape Town. They have been misled by the wilful lies of their precious Presidents until it is quite possible that they will yet cause grave trouble, and sustain a severe campaign in their mountain strongholds. The duration of this will depend entirely on the quality and quantity of the reports that are allowed to reach them from the burghers who have already surrendered. It is significant also that the Boer can make and break most solemn oaths of allegiance with utmost ease, and entire subjugation may be a matter of time and difficulty.

Roberts' advance has abounded in picturesque detail; the thoroughness of his plans and the precision of his movements have overawed the Boer power of resistance at every point, and forced them to make one of the most masterly retreats in history. On March 6th Labuschagne was defeated by Brabant, Gatacre drove the Boers from the Stormbergen, and the "annexed" district again passed under British rule. The commandoes concentrated at Poplar Grove, Presidents Kruger and Steyn came to the front from Bloemfontein with several fresh commandoes, and the burghers took up a strong position extending fourteen miles across the Modder. On the 7th the cavalry brigade turned the enemy's left flank, the 6th Division moved round the flank to menace the line of retreat, and the entire Boer army, seized with panic, fled in confusion. Kruger and Steyn strove to rally their forces, the latter lashing his Free Staters to hold them to the trenches, but the retreat was general, mounted infantry, cavalry, and horse batteries pressing the fleeing burghers to Abraham's Kraal, where the ZAR Police commando under Van Dam arrived to make a plucky stand, checking the pursuit and enabling the scattered forces to reform behind them.

The Boers then occupied a strong row of kopjes at Driefontein, fifteen miles east of Poplar Grove. Roberts attacked on March 10th, the Welsh and Essex of the 6th Division storming the first line of defences and inflicting severe loss on the enemy. The cavalry again turned the flank and the Boers were routed, leaving 173 dead on the field. Repeated abuse of the white flag, and the use of explosive bullets during the battle led Lord Roberts, who twice witnessed the former, to protest against Boer methods of war.

The disheartened burghers fell back to a strong position along the highroad to Bloemfontein. Roberts, however, led his army by forced marches around the flank, through Venter's Vlei, French's cavalry closing on the Free State capital on the evening of the 12th. Disconcerted at the rapid counter-march, and fearing their retreat would be cut off, the Boers evacuated their final position, and on the 13th Mr. Frazer, Steyn's rival for the presidency and the head of the strong anti-war party in the Free State, met Lord Roberts on the outskirts of Bloemfontein and formally surrendered the capital. Hundreds of burghers now surrendered and took the oath of allegiance. President Steyn, however, removed the capital to Kroonstadt, where the Boers prepared to make the great stand of the war. President Kruger now decided that the Free State had forfeited its independence, and coolly annexed it to the Transvaal. This action made a wide breach between the allies, and hundreds of Free Staters returned home in disgust. Steyn refused to fight as a "Transvaaler," and finally Kruger withdrew his proclamation.

On the night of March 27th, General Joubert, who had long been ailing, passed quietly away in Pretoria. The death of the "Grand Old Man" of South Africa was an irreparable loss to the Transvaal cause. Incorruptible, liberal, and of sterling honesty, the commandant general represented all that is best in the Boer character. "Nature made him and then broke the mould." Though he adopted an uncompromising attitude against the Raiders, his liberal views toward the Uitlanders during the early Reform movement lost him both his civil official position and his popularity inasmuch as in 1898 he secured less than one-third of the votes recorded for him in the previous presidential election in 1893. As Kipling said of him, "With those that loosed the strife, he had no part, whose hands were clear of gain;" but he was a great patriot, ready to sacrifice all for his country. His military glory waned somewhat after his failure to take Ladysmith, and the brave old spirit was sorely tried by the petty bickering and jealousies dominating the affairs of the Transvaal. He gradually relaxed his hold on military affairs until the end, when Botha succeeded him certainly the most worthy successor on the roster, and one whom we may hope to see Premier of the Transvaal under the new regime.

While Roberts was re-mobilising at Bloemfontein and Kitchener was again giving proof of his vast administrative ability by reorganising the transport and equipping the ragged army to face the winter of the African uplands, Boer commandoes under De Wet, who had evaded French's best endeavours to pin him down, swept down the southeast flank of the British, moving against Colonel Broadwood and a small column occupying Thaba Nchu, forty miles east of the capital. Fearing to be cut off, the British commander retired to the Water Works, seventeen miles from Bloemfontein, to which place the 9th division was at once despatched.

Before the reinforcing column arrived De Wet attacked on three sides, and Broadwood decided to send his baggage, with Q and U Batteries, Horse Artillery, and the Mounted Infantry into the capital. To check anticipated reinforcements, and to cut off Broadwood's retreat if defeated, De Wet had placed the Winburg, Moroka and Ladybrand burghers in a deep donga and along a spruit on the main road in the British rear. The Boers were greatly

surprised to discover the convoy advancing leisurely into the trap at 4 am. en route to Bloemfontein. The advance guard was allowed to cross the water; the wagons, intersected with the batteries, were winding down the steep banks into the ford, when volleys were poured into them at close range. Gunners, troopers, and drivers were shot down; horses and mules fell in writhing heaps. Five guns of U Battery were captured, but one team bolted when the drivers had been shot from the saddles, finally drawing up with their gun in the British lines. Q battery was further in the rear and suffered less. Under a heavy fire, the surviving gunners manhandled four of the guns over the rocky veldt from the tangled mass of wagons and teams and commenced to heavily shell the Boers, keeping them at bay until reinforcements arrived and the pieces were safe. Of the entire convoy, however, 360 failed to answer to their names, killed and wounded constituting the greater number of "missing."

Colville had left Bloemfontein at dawn to relieve Broadwood. Hearing the firing, the division marched the 17 miles at a rapid pace. Hector Macdonald's Highlanders, coming on the enemy in the main drift, forced them to abandon some of the wagons, but the bulk of the convoy with the captured guns had been sent to the rear, and before Dorrien's brigade could outflank the commandoes the captures had been despatched up country. After a stiff fight the Boers were beaten off, and retired to Brandfort.

The commandoes swooped down on Reddersburg, forcing three companies each of the Royal Irish and 9th Mounted Infantry to surrender after a plucky resistance of a day and night exposed to the fire of five guns. Gatacre's attempts to extricate these troops miscarried, and after this second failure he was recalled to England, his reputation marred by attempting great things with too small a force to even the chances of victory. Menacing the line of communications south of Bloemfontein, Olivier and De Wet now had 8,000 men. Finding that the railroad was strongly occupied, they moved along the Basutoland border, investing Wepener, with its garrison of Colonials under Dalgetty. From April 5th until the 28th, in roughly constructed defences, this small force withstood successive assaults of a force ten times their superior, under continuous bombardment from five guns. With Dalgetty's force as a bait, Roberts rapidly prepared a trap for the Boers in the interim. Rundie was ordered to Springfontein, Chermside, Gatacre's successor, gathered his division at Bethanie, and Pole-Care with the guards moved down to the Kaffir River. Dickson, with the 4th Cavalry brigade, and Dorrien's Infantry brigade, with an artillery division, then marched beyond Korn Spruit to cut off the retreat northward.

The British advance was contested at all points by burghers swarming the kopjes, and ere the cordon could be completed to encircle Wepener, the commandoes hurriedly retired, hugging close to the Basutoland border. Superior mobility and knowledge of the country enabled the bulk of the Boer forces to get clear by skilful manoeuvres which could not be anticipated by the infantry encumbered with transport.

Roberts had formed an advanced base at Karree Siding on the Pretoria railroad. With the southern districts clear of the enemy, he gathered in his divisions, and with machine-like precision, in an extended line, the centre resting on the railroad, he swept forward from the siding against the Boer

positions on the Vet River. With French and the cavalry on the left, Hamilton, with the Mounted Infantry on the right and the 7th, 11th, and 9th divisions between them, Roberts' front covered twenty-five miles, and after a desultory affair of outposts, the Boers, rather than risk envelopment, retired. Similar lines on the Zand and Valsch rivers, where the Boer entrenchments extended over a front of twenty miles, were occupied in a like manner, and despite the elaborate preparations for prolonged defence, Kroonstad, the second capital, was captured on May 12th.

During the month Buller had slowly swept the Boers from Natal, recapturing Dundee, and forcing the commandoes into their passes. They held a strong position on Laing's Nek, the scene of their old victory, but they were finally outflanked, and after a severe fight, were forced to retire. Clery's Engineers are now rapidly repairing the tunnel under the Nek. Buller occupies Wakkerstroom, and is in communication with Roberts. With the railroad restored he should soon be able to advance west and join Roberts.

On May 4th, Hunter and the 10th division engaged the Boers on the western border. Colonel Mahon, with a picked force of 1,600 mounted Colonials with four guns and supplies carried by pack-mules and light carts, secretly left Barkly West to relieve Mafeking. Making a detour, they passed rapidly northward to Kraaipan, where they had a severe but successful fight on the 13th. Continuing well to the west of the investing commandoes, on the 17th they joined hands with Colonel Plumer and his plucky Rhodesian command that had suffered severely in previous attempts to relieve Baden-Powell. Mafeking was in its last gasp. With little preparation it had been forced to withstand one of the longest sieges in modern history. Many citizens bore arms, but with the police and guards the garrison only mustered 1,100. The investing commandoes had been strongly reinforced after the relief of Ladysmith. President Kruger, desirous of capturing at least one British garrison, despatched his nephew, Saret Eloff, with a picked column, to carry the town at all hazards. At 4 am. on the 13th, Eloff, with 700 burghers, crept up the bed of the Molopo River and succeeded in forcing a gap through the line of emaciated defenders. Two forts were rushed and the Boers gained a footing in the town, Eloff shouting to the citizens to surrender or face annihilation.

But Baden-Powell was not to be thus surprised. As the Boers burned the Baralong quarter and occupied the fortified police barracks, he coolly sent forward the artillery under Major Panzera, detached squadrons of the Protectorate regiment, the Rifles, and Cape Police from other points in the perimeter, and by a quick movement swept back the Boer supports, and filled in the gap with these troops. At sunrise the line of defences was intact, with Eloff and his picked force shut inside the town. Baden-Powell then sent an invitation to Eloff to surrender and have breakfast with him. The young Boer declined the invitation until teatime, when, finding that Snyman had abandoned him to his fate, he surrendered with his party, and Mafeking had to provide entertainment for 135 uninvited but welcome guests of her Majesty. The extra mouths to feed tried the commissariat severely, but on May 16th a sudden cannonade and commotion in the Boer lines told the hopeless garrison that relief had come at last. Mahoft and Plumer had a hard fight, but they were finally reinforced by some Canadian artillery, and a

squadron of Queenslanders from Carrington's force that had landed at Beira and was advancing from the north. The Boers, 6,000 strong, were finally driven from the western kopjes, and Baden-Powell joined hands with the relief, his brother, a major of Mahon's staff, being the first to greet him.

Roberts continued his swift advance north and the young general, Ian Hamilton, made a brilliant move. As French forced the river on the west and the Boers massed to meet him, Hamilton's Mounted Infantry made a rapid counter-march on the east, occupying Heilbron and threatening the Boer rear. The burghers made a plucky fight, but were forced slowly northwest as Roberts came up with the main divisions in the centre, crossed the Vaal unopposed, and swept on to Johannesburg. There was a move to destroy the gold mines but Botha, Meyer, and other leaders, learning that the British would respect private property, and having large interests at stake, strenuously opposed this measure; and during the parley, while Hamilton and French were engaged on the west, the city was peacefully surrendered.

On May 31st Lord Roberts entered the city, and at 2 pm. the British flag was formally raised. It was greeted by the frantic cheers of nondescripts and turncoats who also attempted to sing "God save the Queen" with the soldiers that a day before they had been reviling.

Leaving the palatial hotels for others, Roberts established his headquarter in a little inn in the suburbs; and while Johannesburg was celebrating its change of masters in noisy rowdyism, the general-in-chief sat with, the innkeeper's baby-daughter on his knee, giving her a writing lesson, while another tot strutted around the sanded floor in the Field Marshal's hat and gloves. "Oh that all these English were like this!" soliloquized the Boer handmaiden in the hearing of this correspondent.

On June 4th the British crossed Six Mile Spruit, where 2,000 burghers fiercely contested the advance from a row of kopjes commanding the river. The British naval guns were moved forward so rapidly that the Boer artillery was silenced. The burghers then moved in between Roberts' left and centre, but after a hot fight Hamilton in turn outflanked them. French then swept round to the north of the capital, and the forces closed in. Outmanoeuvred at all points, the Boers galloped into the city with their field guns and escaped by train just before the cordon was completed.

At midnight Sandberg rode into Roberts' headquarters asking for an armistice and terms of surrender. He was sent back with a demand of unconditional capitulation. On the following morning the governor and civil officials of Pretoria came out with a flag of truce and formally surrendered the town, and in the afternoon of June 5th, the British flag waved once more over the Transvaal capital.

