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**THE BOER WAR LESSONS THAT CHANGED AND PREPARED
THE BRITISH ARMY FOR WW1**

BY

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**The Boer War Lessons That Changed and Prepared the
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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: The Boer War Lessons That Changed and Prepared the
British Army for World War One

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 12 April 1999 PAGES: 55 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

The British Army eventually prevailed over the Boers of South Africa during their 1899 through 1902 war. However, the Boer War proved to be a difficult undertaking for the British Army. The war exposed deficiencies in a wide variety of crucial areas including organization, equipment, doctrine and training. An important post-war reform movement made drastic improvements that ultimately prepared the British Army for WWI.

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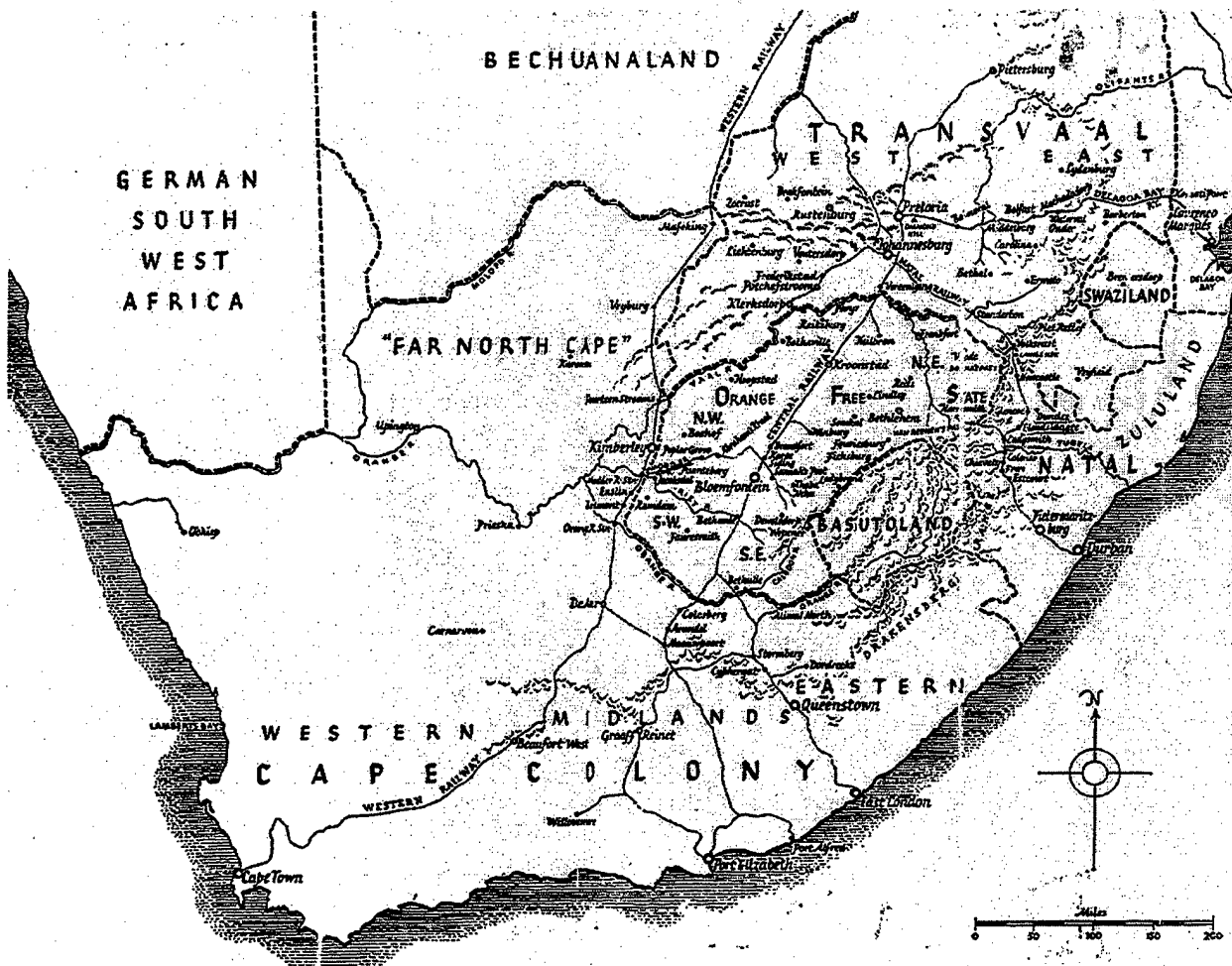


Figure 1 South Africa Region

Table 1 A TIMELINE

17 th Century	South Africa's Cape of Good Hope is colonized by Dutch Boers (farmers). These Boers use African slaves on their farms.
1806	The British occupy the Cape during the Napoleonic Wars.
1815	Britain gains complete control of the Cape Colony following the Congress of Vienna.
1833	Slavery is abolished throughout the British Empire. Many of the Boers then move northward and soon establish two independent republics - the Transvaal and the Orange Free State.
1886	Peace between the British and the Boers is strained when the Boer Republics discover huge reserves of diamonds and gold. Fortune hunters, mostly British, pour in to stake claims. The Boers call these people "outlanders" and bitterly resent their intrusion. The South African Republic refuses to grant political rights to foreigners, including the English and other non-Dutch speakers.
1895	The outlanders in the Transvaal plan a revolt against the Boer government. A small British force invades the Transvaal to aid the uprising. The raid is a total military failure but does spur the angered Boers to arm themselves.
1899	Natal and the Cape Colony are invaded by the Boers. A British force is besieged at Ladysmith. Other troops are pinned down at Kimberley and Mafeking. British reinforcements are sent from around the Commonwealth (UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). British forces will number 500,000 during the operations.
March 1900	The British commander, Frederick Roberts, captures Bloemfontein the capital of the Orange Free State.

- June 1900 British forces reach Pretoria, capital of the Transvaal, but the greatly outnumbered Boers (no estimates exceed 70,000) continue to fight under their leaders: Louis Botha, Christian de Wet and Jan Smuts.
- June 1900 Herbert Kitchener, the new British Commander in Chief, proceeds to bring the war to an end with a "scorched earth" policy of destroying Boer farms and by establishing concentration camps for Boer civilians (more than 20,000 die in these camps).
- May 1902 The Treaty of Pretoria ends the war. The Transvaal and the Orange Free State become additional British colonies. Both Dutch and English are made official languages.
- 1910 The Union of South Africa is established as a self-governing dominion with the Transvaal and the Orange Free State as provinces. The first Prime Minister is the former Boer general Louis Botha.

THE BOER WAR LESSONS THAT CHANGED AND PREPARED THE BRITISH ARMY FOR WORLD WAR ONE

For most Englishmen the war with the Dutch farmers of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State broke what was frequently called "the long peace" - the eighty-four years between the battle of Waterloo and the outbreak of the Boer War. The Boer War, or South African War (the Afrikaners called it the English War) was not the usual little war fought by professional soldiers with armies largely composed of native troops, but a major and a serious war, in which the general public became intimately involved. The Boer War had many of the characteristics of the later world wars. It involved both large armies and masses of ill-trained volunteers. It affected large numbers of civilian noncombatants and drew rather heavily on the civilian resources of the countries involved. It was affected by technological changes in warfare and presented great logistical problems and it lasted longer than any previous conflict since the Napoleonic Wars.¹

The Boer War was disturbing for the British. It began in the conventional style of British military dramas: In Act I the Boers beat the British; in Act II the British beat the Boers; then in Act III it all became very messy and the final scene was unsatisfactory. The Boers refused to believe that they were

beaten and took to guerrilla warfare. The British retaliated by burning farms and inventing the concentration camp. By the time the final curtain fell Queen Victoria was dead and so was an era.²

The unexpected difficulties the British Army experienced in subduing an amateur force of farmers that bore little resemblance to any conventional army rattled senior leaders and politicians alike. The Boer War inspired numerous reforms that reshaped the British Army prior to World War I.

THE WAR

Throughout the winter months of 1899 - June, July, August and September in South Africa - both sides prepared for war and waited: the Boers for the spring grass to maintain the horses and oxen of their commandos; the British for reinforcements of Imperial troops. When the spring grass covered the veldt, Paul Kruger demanded that Britain cease interfering in the internal affairs of the Transvaal, and he issued an ultimatum. When this expired at 5:00 p.m. on 11 October 1899 the Boers moved on their British neighbors, across the border from the Transvaal and the Orange Free State into Cape Colony and Natal. The first act of the war had begun.

As usual, the British were not quite ready. There were only 14,750 regulars in South Africa, but a field force of 47,000 men under General Sir Redvers Buller was on its way.

This was a very sizeable portion of the British Army, which then consisted of only 250,000 regulars. It was not enough.

Estimates of the size of the Boer forces vary wildly, but it is doubtful that they ever had more than 45,000 men under arms at one time and usually fewer than 30,000. To subdue these tough, stubborn men the British were eventually forced to raise a large volunteer army from social classes other than the lowest - fortunately, it was a popular war - and eventually to commit nearly half a million men to the South African struggle, 21,000 of whom died from bullets or diseases.³

It was, for the British, the first war in which brains and skill on the part of the generals were more important than bravery and endurance on the part of the soldiers and junior officers.⁴ Unfortunately, brains seemed in rather short supply in the early going. As the British Commander in Chief, Lord Wolseley told the Queen's private secretary, "What we are now most in want of is good Generals."⁵ Britain's Boer War generals have often been portrayed as stupid. Certainly many of them did a number of incredibly stupid things. But most of the senior officers were not stupid; they were simply average Victorian officers who found themselves in positions where what was required of them was a rather high degree of intelligence, initiative and imagination, and they were found to be somewhat deficient in these qualities.

By the time Buller and his army arrived in South Africa the Boers were already besieging a number of towns. Boer commandos had bottled up British forces at Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking. The first phase of the war involved the gallant defense of these towns. However, pressing home an attack on a fortified town was not the Boers' forte and the besieged towns were rarely in danger of being overwhelmed. The lengthy sieges were mainly the result of inept British relief attempts.⁶

Strategically, the relief of Kimberley was not at the top of the list of military priorities. But politically it was crucial as Cecil Rhodes, the most important man in South Africa and the richest Briton alive, was in Kimberley and demanding the immediate relief of the town.⁷ Reluctantly, Buller dispatched 8,000 men to raise the siege. In command was fifty-four-year-old Lord Methuen, who had served in a number of campaigns but always as a staff officer. This was his first important command. He exhibited considerable bravery but little tactical and operational proficiency.⁸

Methuen first encountered the Boers on a hill at Belmont on 23 November 1899 and decided on a frontal assault. When a staff officer suggested that perhaps this was not the best way to attack an entrenched enemy, Methuen replied, "My good fellow, I intend to put the fear of God into these people."⁹ The Brigade of Guards (Grenadier, Coldstream and Scots) moved up close to the

Boer positions at night and charged at dawn. The Boers coolly sighted down the barrels of their modern Mauser rifles and knocked over 291 British soldiers; then they mounted their horses and rode off, suffering little loss to themselves.¹⁰

Two days later Methuen again encountered entrenched Boers at Graspaan. When the officers and men of the Naval Brigade learned that they had been selected to lead the assault they were overjoyed. One naval officer later said that "the news seemed almost too good to be true, and it was some time before we could believe it and realize our luck."¹¹ It was the Naval Brigade's luck to suffer 50 percent casualties, including nearly all their officers, when they led the frontal attack Methuen had ordered. *The Times* described the charge of the sailors as "an attack that will live to all times as one of the most splendid instances of disciplined courage."¹² It was that, of course. It was also tragic. Boer losses were negligible. They had again bloodied the British nose and trotted away on their horses.¹³

Three days after the Battle of Graspaan, Methuen reached the Modder River where 3,000 Boers were entrenched and, as a new refinement, had stretched barbed wire in front of their position. It was a blistering hot day, the thermometer reaching 110 degrees Fahrenheit. The Boers had anticipated that the British would again make a frontal attack and did not bother to protect their flanks. Methuen did not disappoint them. He

launched another frontal attack. The Guards charged and were shot down. The entire attacking force was soon pinned to the ground in the hot sun by the fast, accurate fire of the Boers' Mausers. They stayed on their stomachs all day. Some of the Guardsmen actually fell asleep and the kilted highlanders got sunburned on the backs of their knees.¹⁴ Methuen personally led a small party in a charge and was slightly wounded. The Boers inflicted 483 casualties, waited until dark and then retreated. Methuen, whose knowledge of military history was obviously deficient, called it "one of the hardest and most trying fights in the annals of the British Army."¹⁵

As a result of these Pyrrhic victories Methuen had lost 10 percent of his original force, but he had been reinforced by a Highland Brigade (Black Watch, Gordons, Seaforths and the Highland Light Infantry), the 12th Lancers, more artillery and some Canadian and Australian troops. The Boers, led by Piet Cronje', had also been reinforced and now mustered 8,500 men, including a foreign legion of Americans and Europeans.¹⁶

The next battle was at Magersfontein on 10-11 December. Here even Methuen could see that the key to the Boer position was a hill which the Boers would be forced to defend. On the evening of 10 December the British laid down a splendid artillery barrage on the crest of the hill. It would have had a devastating effect had any of the enemy been there, but none

were. Jacobus De La Rey, a brilliant Boer leader who had been averse to beginning the war but was determined to win it, had convinced Cronje' that the Boers should not entrench on the crest but at the foot of the hill - a bold and original idea.¹⁷

A thunderstorm rolled overhead as the Highland Brigade commanded by popular, experienced, much-wounded Andy Wauchop (known as 'Red Mick') moved by night into attack positions. At dawn they charged. It was, of course, another frontal attack and under the intense fire of the murderous Mausers the Highlanders wilted. Red Mick was killed. There was a stampede to the rear by the pride of Scotland. The Highland Light Infantry panicked and trampled on their colonel in their retreat. The Boers shot them in the back as they ran. A few stayed to fight, charged the Boer trenches and were caught on the barbed wire. Officers managed to stop the rout of the Highlanders, but then the Boer artillery opened on them and they fled again. Methuen's only order was "Hold on until nightfall."¹⁸ He assumed that the enemy would again retreat under cover of darkness. But this time they stayed. One Highlander, speaking of Magersfontein, said that his regiment had been "led into a butcher's shop and bloody well left there!"¹⁹

For Scotland, Magersfontein was a calamity. It was also a disaster for Methuen and for the Empire's reputation. Methuen

had led the flower of the British infantry to defeat - and at the hands of an inferior force of Dutch farmers! The next day he began a retreat to the Modder River.

The force opposing the British was composed of Boers from the Transvaal and Methuen estimated that there were 17,000 of them.²⁰ Cecil Rhodes in Kimberley was scornful:

Look at the census reports. Men cannot be made in a minute. It takes twenty years to make a man, and we know how many they had at the beginning of the war. The Transvaal only polled a little over 17,000 voters at the last election. No, we are exaggerating their numbers simply because by doing so we account for bad generalship without confessing it.²¹

The tactical errors that haunted Methuen and other British commanders could be traced to the same basic handicaps: weak intelligence and poor mobility. Methuen had been forced to march his troops forward from Orange River and fight the Boers at locations of their choosing. He could not bypass them. He had to clear the enemy from his line of communications, his railway. He had no means of satisfactorily reconnoitering the enemy positions at Belmont and Modder River. His official intelligence maps marked no contour lines and were of little use.²² Methuen's total ignorance of the enemy's position at Magersfontein is not so forgivable. Had he waited one more day to attack, he would have had the use of an aerial observation balloon Buller sent to him over the railway.²³

The week of 10-17 December 1899 was known as "black week." It was, said Conan Doyle, "the blackest one known during our generation, and the most disastrous for British arms during the century."²⁴ During this week, in addition to the disaster at Magersfontein, a force under General William Forbes Gatacre was routed at Stormberg and Buller himself, leading a large force towards Ladysmith, was repulsed at Colenso on the Tugela River. Among the setbacks that convinced Buller to disengage at Colenso was the quick loss of 10 field guns brazenly placed well forward of infantry support.²⁵

The failure of Buller to get across the Tugela River was the greatest setback of the war. Gatacre's disaster was the most disgraceful. On the night of 9 December General Gatacre set off in the dark from Molteno in northern Cape Colony with 2,700 men - three battalions of infantry, some mounted men and two guns - to surprise the Boers at the Stormberg railway junction. He lost his way and some of his men bumped into an enemy outpost. There was firing and a Boer commando group arrived on the scene and began to cut them up. Gatacre beat a hasty retreat but it was too hasty. Only when he got back to Molteno did he discover that he had accidentally left some 696 of his men behind! They were surrounded and forced to surrender.²⁶ Total losses at Stormberg were 719 officers and

men, of whom only 29 were killed. "Hope better luck next time," telegraphed Buller to Gatacre.²⁷

A bloody defeat at Spion Kop on 24 January 1900 was a major shock to which Fleet Street reacted with anger and Whitehall with deep anxiety.²⁸ The British seized a ridge and then the troops lay there on the crest all day under intense fire, suffering heavy casualties. When night came, the British withdrew. The Boers, feeling that they had failed to dislodge the British, were about to give up the fight and retreat when they discovered that the British had retreated first. They reoccupied the ridge and claimed a victory.²⁹

Black week and Spion Kop were too much for the people at home. To lose three battles in the space of a week could be put down to incompetent generalship; to keep losing battles thereafter suggested that the War Office and the army were prey to deep-rooted deficiencies that imperiled the very safety of England itself. For the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, the problem went deeper even than that: "It is evident," he told Parliament on 30 January, "there is something in your machinery that is wrong."³⁰ The failure of Buller was a personal disappointment to Wolseley, who told his wife that Buller, his protege, "had not shown any of the characteristics I had attributed to him: no military genius, no firmness, not even the obstinacy which I thought he possessed when I discovered him.

He seems dazed and dumbfounded."³¹ It was now time to change generals. It was "Britain's other general," Lord Roberts, known affectionately as "little Bobs," who was chosen to take command in South Africa. Wolseley was bitter. In another letter to his wife he called Roberts a "cute, little jobbing showman" and "a snob as regards Dukes and Earls."³² Although Wolseley and Roberts were about the same age, Roberts was at the height of his power and his star was ascending; Wolseley's great career was over and he retired.³³

Roberts reached Cape Town on 10 January 1900 and Act II of the war began one month later when he took the offensive. Methuen's force lay, still licking its wounds, on the Modder River when Roberts joined it. There he received a message from Cecil Rhodes in besieged Kimberley: "There is no fear of our surrendering, but we are getting anxious about the state of the British Army. It is high time you did something."³⁴ Roberts did not need this advice. By the middle of February he had flanked the Boers and relieved Kimberley. The *Daily Mail* crowed:

Kimberley is won, Mr. Cecil Rhodes is free, the De Beers shareholders are full of themselves, and the beginning of the war is at an end. It is a great feat to have accomplished and the happiest omens for the future. There is no one like Bobs!³⁵

On 27 February Roberts captured Cronje' and 4,000 Boers at Paardeberg. On 13 March he entered Bloemfontein, capital of the Orange Free State.

Meanwhile Buller was still trying to relieve Ladysmith, and the day after Cronje's surrender to Roberts he finally made it. Ladysmith was relieved, but many were still bitter at the length of time it had taken Buller to accomplish it. Lord Rawlinson, a staff officer in Ladysmith, said, "The British infantry has once more saved their generals."³⁶

Roberts had achieved almost instant success. He had seen at once that failure had resulted from bad management and lack of mobility, and he had promptly set about to correct both. In less than three months after his arrival he got rid of five generals (including William Gatacre), six brigadiers and nearly two dozen colonels commanding regiments. Buller, no longer commander in chief, was allowed to stay on as a subordinate of Roberts and Herbert Kitchener, his Chief of Staff. Roberts collected all of the horses he could find and formed units of mounted infantry. Every infantry battalion in the field was ordered to form one mounted company. Cavalry regiments were raised from local volunteers and a cavalry division was formed and placed under the command of Major General John French.³⁷

On 17 May Mafeking was relieved. British troops had in their history relieved dozens of forts and towns and won dozens of brilliant victories. Yet no event in British history, either before or since, ever created such wild jubilation in England as did the news that Mafeking had, after a siege of 217 days, been

at last relieved. In London there was a spontaneous outburst of joyful hysteria. For years afterwards, "Mafeking night" was a yardstick against which all celebrations were measured.³⁸

On 5 June 1900 victorious British troops occupied Pretoria, capital of the Transvaal, and Paul Kruger fled to Europe. However, it was not until October that all organized Boer resistance came to an end and Roberts sailed for England, leaving Kitchener to deal with the numerous guerilla bands of stubborn Boers who refused to quit. The Boers finally acknowledged British sovereignty in May 1902. As all the world knows, the children and grandchildren of these proud, brave, bigoted men at last won their fight and in 1961 carried the Republic of South Africa out of the British Commonwealth.³⁹

Although the war ended in victory, neither British soldiers nor politicians took any comfort in that. What had been envisaged as just another colonial expedition, an activity in which the British army was much practiced and commonly successful, had turned into a debacle. A puny David had dealt the imperial Goliath some severe blows before finally succumbing to massively superior military strength that had only been generated with considerable difficulty. In the view of Leopold Amery, author of *The Times' History of the War in South Africa*, the army had been exposed as "largely a sham."⁴⁰ Many of his contemporaries shared that view.

COMMISSIONS, INVESTIGATIONS and REPORTS

Victorian cabinet government, though well enough designed for peacetime purposes, seemed clearly inadequate when it came to war. As Britain faced potential enemies in Europe who were militarily infinitely more powerful than the tiny Boer Republics, Lord Salisbury felt that the time had come to reexamine the whole structure of military policy making.⁴¹ At issue was the extent to which the commander in chief should have authority over every branch of the army. Behind this stood the broader but no less contentious question whether soldiers or civilians should have ultimate authority over military business. The Liberals regarded the prospect of a powerful Commander in Chief with acute alarm as the unwanted harbinger of continental militarism as well as reviving unsettling memories of Oliver Cromwell. In 1895 the government had reached an uneasy compromise by giving the Commander in Chief authority over the so-called military departments (which meant mainly the Intelligence Branch and the Military Secretary's Office), whereas the heads of the Supply and Ordnance departments enjoyed semiautonomy.⁴²

While he was commander in chief (1895-1900), Wolseley complained bitterly, both in public and in private, about his lack of power and his inability to exercise control over the army. He also made no secret of the fact that he wanted to see

a serving soldier as minister of war.⁴³ His successor, Roberts, soon came to share his frustration. Roberts had held office for only a very short time before complaining to the Secretary of State for War about "the impossible position" he was in as "one of a board" and demanding more authority. He wanted to establish a modern general staff.⁴⁴ A debate in the House of Lords in March 1901 over civilian and military authority forced the government's hand. Aware that all was far from well in the War Office, the government announced an official inquiry. The managerial revolution, which was to transform the structure and functioning of the army's upper echelons between 1901 and 1904, began with a select committee of the House of Commons which, on 8 January 1901, started inquiring into the organization of the War Office. It found the army overcentralized and yet simultaneously suffering from the long-established rivalry between the civil and military elements. Its report recommended the creation of a permanent War Office Board to combine the autonomous and often warring branches.⁴⁵ The government responded cautiously by marginally extending the Commander in Chief's authority. More importantly, concepts of business management were being consciously applied to military affairs for the first time. In bringing the idea of a board system into the public arena, the report invited comparison between the War Office and the Admiralty. Such a board system had been

functioning very successfully in the Navy since the nineteenth century. Sailors crowed and soldiers steamed as the navy was presented as a model institution that the army would do well to copy.⁴⁶

The War Office was not the only institution that needed to take a more businesslike approach toward the management of defense. The cabinet, too, required a thorough overhaul, as Lord Salisbury had intimated. The particular target for criticism was the Standing Defense Committee of the cabinet. It had been created in 1895 to deal with military policy at the highest level but had completely failed to generate considered and coordinated defense policies. In John Ehrman's words, "It seems to have met irregularly and seldom, and when it met to have devoted itself primarily to considering financial questions and to settling specific inter-departmental disputes."⁴⁷ Its unimportance in peacetime was more than matched by its inadequacy when war occurred. The mystery of surprise and unpreparedness that characterized the government's reactions to the outbreak of the Boer War sounded the death-knell for the Defense Committee. Arthur Balfour, Lord Salisbury's heir apparent to the premiership, was keenly aware of the committee's deficiencies and its limited potential. He told the incoming Secretary of State for War:

For purposes of reorganization, I believe it to be utterly valueless. We cannot, I suppose, get rid of it altogether. It may indeed perform useful work as a cabinet committee, examining, on behalf of the cabinet, schemes already more or less matured. More than this would be folly to hope from it.⁴⁸

However, two more years passed, during which the storm of public criticism intensified and the difficulties of the Conservative government grew. Finally, Balfour responded to direct pressure from the Secretary of State for War and the First Lord of the Admiralty and reconstructed the Defense Committee as the Committee of Imperial Defense. Its new charter made it an advisory committee of the cabinet with both civil and military members. A year later, in 1903, Balfour took over the chairmanship, thereby giving the committee the weight and impact in government it had previously lacked. With that development, a new era in British defense policy making began.⁴⁹

In 1902, against the wishes of the King who was worried about the harm it might do to the army, a royal commission was established under the chairmanships of the Earl of Elgin to examine the preparations for the war and its conduct up to June 1900. The Elgin Commission sat for 55 days, during which time it examined 114 civilian and military witnesses and asked them 22,000 questions. Its report, published a year later, did not contain any direct condemnation and offered no clear recommendations for reconstruction. However, the evidence, in

two bulky volumes, provided the army's and the government's critics with plenty of ammunition. What the Elgin Commission's evidence made unmistakably clear was that the organization of the War Office was in complete disarray. In a minority report, Lord Esher again recommended the establishment of a board to run the War Office along the lines of the Board of Admiralty.⁵⁰

The reform movement became the celebrated political question of its day. Both the Conservative government in power and the Liberal opposition party were continually called upon to address it. Lord Selborne, not only the First Lord of the Admiralty but also one of the wisest Conservative politicians, warned the Prime Minister that the party's hold on office depended on proper reform. "The danger seems to me to lie in Army questions," he told Balfour, "and I think that unless you can satisfy the strained and irrational public sentiment of the moment about the War Office, we stand a good chance of being beaten in some division in the House."⁵¹

In 1904, the War Office (Reconstitution) Committee, also known as the Esher committee (he of the earlier minority view on the Elgin Report) produced the crowning achievements in the spasm of institutional reform that followed the Boer War.⁵² Its recommendations swept away much of the pre-1899 War Office and replaced it with a functional structure designed to prepare the army for war, at whatever time and against whatever foe.

The position of Commander in Chief was abolished and that of Chief of the General Staff was created. Leading politicians and even some military leaders had opposed such a move for the past fifteen years. But now it was done. An Army Council, modeled on the Board of the Admiralty, was established to bring soldiers and civilians together and to provide managerial control over the army's varied affairs. The committee also recommended that a permanent secretariat be added to the committee of Imperial Defense to strengthen it. The Esher committee also produced a list of candidates for the new jobs it had created and managed to get most of its favored sons installed in them. Britain was the last European nation to adopt a general staff.⁵³

The work of these various committees and commissions was certainly noteworthy. However, as is often the case, an individual became the key focal point of the reform movement. Sir Richard Burden Haldane served as the Secretary of State for War from 1905 through 1912. He has been credited for leading the greatest and most successful reorganization of the British Army in modern times. He earned that credit by insightfully instituting many of the key recommendations of the Esher and other committees. He personally oversaw the creation of the initial General Staff and established permanent higher unit organizations.⁵⁴ His successful efforts at reorganizing the reserve forces and his introduction of the Officer Training

Corps (OTC) in schools will be described later in this paper. Haldane's superb and timely efforts have been justly characterized as preparing the British Army for a major war, not just colonial wars.⁵⁵

THE ARMY

Asked by the Elgin Commission what "great lesson" he would draw from the Boer War, Wolseley replied: "We were not prepared for war, and are not prepared for war at all times."⁵⁶ The defeats and setbacks suffered by the army between 1899 and 1902 certainly suggested that Wolseley's view was broadly true. The army quickly set about making good some of its defects. The reforming zeal was somewhat tempered by the argument that the South African war was exceptional, even abnormal, on account of its duration, the unusual physical conditions in which it was fought (including an exceptionally clear atmosphere, which was thought to have increased the range of rifle and artillery fire), and the peculiarities of Boer tactics and organization.⁵⁷ The process of analyzing the lessons of the war—the necessary precursor to any reforms—revealed that, although the war might in some respects have been novel, by no means had everything failed in and after 1899.

One part of the military machine that went like clockwork at the outbreak of the war was the mobilization of the 30,000-

man army corps into the field. Also, the transportation of the newly mobilized force did not present any great difficulties. Close peacetime cooperation with the Admiralty, which had joined the War Office on a joint ad hoc conference on shipping on 14 April 1899, ensured that the troops and their equipment were shipped to South Africa speedily and efficiently.⁵⁸ This was not the only feather the old War Office could put in its cap. As the Elgin commission revealed, the Intelligence Department had been remarkably accurate in its estimations of Boer strength and perceptive in its warnings about the likelihood of attack. At the same time, the Intelligence Department prepared a remarkably accurate handbook, *Military Notes on the Dutch Republics of South Africa*, which is issued first in 1898 and then, in revised form, in June 1899. It also monitored the importation of artillery, rifles, and ammunition into the Boer Republics. It underestimated Boer manpower by only 991 (out of total of 55,641) and overestimated Boer artillery by 8 (putting Boer strength at 107 guns when the true figure was 99).⁵⁹ However, the Treasury's parsimony had undeniably restricted the opportunities to completely prepare for war: a derisory mapping budget had meant that the forces sent out to South Africa had to depend mainly on local maps, which were often well-nigh useless.⁶⁰

If Wolseley was required to bear a lot of the blame for the deficiencies in the army, he also had the right to claim a large share of the credit for its most striking success. Shocked by the administrative incompetence revealed during the Zulu War of 1878-79 and the first Boer War of 1881-82, he had revitalized the supply system, introduced a single communications authority and instituted a system of regimental transport for the first time. The Quartermaster General's responsibilities were revised in 1887 to include the feeding, moving, and quartering of troops, and in 1888 Wolseley's selection for the new post, Redvers Buller, created the Army Service Corps. By the time of the Boer War, an echelon supply system had been perfected that worked extremely well.⁶¹

TACTICS, TECHNIQUES and PROCEDURES

Although the British military system did not completely fail when put to the test in 1899, its defects certainly outnumbered and outranked its strengths. For example: guns and munitions proved inadequate; prewar tactics and training turned out to be ineffective on a modern battlefield; the role of cavalry in war appeared to have drastically altered; the officers, both senior and junior, gave evidence of not being up to their jobs; and even the "queen of the battlefield" seemed to be a pretender to the throne and not the rightful monarch. "The British infantry, on whom British generals had always relied,

could not shoot straight, its fire discipline was rotten, and its old-fashioned reliance on drill precluded the use of field craft and battle craft."⁶² Much of the experience garnered during the war provided unambiguous evidence of inadequacies that fueled a short but violent spell of upheaval and reform.

The Royal Artillery had not kept abreast of the artillery revolution of the 1890s and was at once outclassed by the new quick-firing guns that the Boers had bought from Krupp and Schneider-Creuzot. British field guns were outranged by those of their opponents, which could fire twice the distance and could also keep up a rate of fire two or three times their own. They also quickly ran out of ammunition, thanks to a serious underestimation of the stocks that would be necessary in war. With only 300 rounds per gun and a further 200 rounds in reserve, the army's supplies were exhausted long before the middle of December 1899, and it was forced to borrow from the Royal Navy and the Government of India.⁶³ The guns also had the wrong kind of shells. When fired from field guns, shrapnel, which formed the great bulk of artillery ammunition, merely caused the Boers to duck into their trenches. A number of officers came back from South Africa demanding howitzers and high-explosive ammunition or even "common shell" (solid shot filled with explosive) as the only tools with which to kill or demoralize an enemy who had taken to the earth.

The army reacted quickly to the revelation that its field guns were obsolescent. A committee set up by Roberts (a convert to quick-firing artillery since 1893) in January 1901 to reequip the Royal Artillery produced approved final designs just over three years later. They put into production the 13 and 18 pound quick-firing guns with which the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) went to war in 1914. In 1914, the BEF was second only to Germany in number and weight of guns per thousand troops.⁶⁴ The problem of ammunition allowances was less successfully solved. A battery of quick-firing artillery could shoot off up to 5,600 rounds in an hour, and no horse-drawn supply system could feed such a ravenous appetite. Nor had the artillery used anything like that amount of ammunition. At Magersfontein, the heaviest artillery engagement of the war, British guns had fired an average of 175 rounds apiece. So in 1905 stocks were set at 500 rounds per gun in the field—doubled in 1914 to 1,000 rounds—with a further 500 rounds in reserve. Unfortunately, disagreements about experience in the war allowed the army to overlook demands for howitzers and heavy siege artillery. By 1907 the cycle of artillery rearmament was over and thereafter government expenditure dropped.⁶⁵ The reforms had probably gone as far as was possible under the circumstances but, as it turned out in 1914, that was not far enough.

The mobile and tactically dispersed nature of the Boer War also bolstered the role of the machine gun (often referred to as a "Maxim"). The usefulness of machine guns had been appreciated since the mid-1890s. But the British appreciation grew after the Boers used this weapon successfully to disperse attack formations at the Battle of Thaba-N'Cheu. On that day, two Maxim Nordenfeldts threw two regiments of lancers into disorder. The machine gun's ability to adjust ranging quickly and constantly made it lethal against cavalry. Cavalry units, despite their speed, depend on close packed formations for maximum effect. The Boers used their dispersed machine guns in a defensive mode. The British had begun to cast them in a more offensive role and classified them as artillery.⁶⁶ After the war, the Douglas Committee on Machine Guns accomplished much regarding the weapon's future design and usage:

Increased ranges, automatic and semi-automatic firing modes, tripods, protective bullet shields, rifle ammunition interchangeability and durability were among the recommendations. A preference was manifested for lighter 30-pound Colt and Hotchkiss models, over the 60-pound Maxim.⁶⁷

The decade following the Boer War saw a great deal of attention paid to the proper utilization of the machine gun. An important Boer influence was the expansion of thoughts on its defensive role. This was elucidated in the manual **Infantry Training 1902** which included designs for gun pits "invisible"

from 500 yards. The cardinal points of the evolving tactical system were concealment, surprise, the avoidance of a premature exposure of position and a priority of targets in depth. The other point of evolution was fielding numbers into unit formations. The British entered WW1 with 24 machine guns in each Infantry Division, similar to the numbers in German and French divisions, and they were the only army to place substantial machine guns with their cavalry formations.⁶⁸

The experience of a modern battlefield and particularly of the effects of magazine rifles and smokeless powder came as something of a shock to some of the participants in the Boer War. "I never saw a Boer," wrote Lord Methuen after the battle of Modder River, "but even at 2,000 yards when I rode a horse I had a hail of bullets round me."⁶⁹ The contrast between the battles in South Africa and the old-style British infantry training ranges was a striking one. It brought home the need to adjust infantry tactics to the new circumstances, and a string of witnesses appeared before the Elgin commission, with Lord Roberts at their head, to certify the need for greater individualism on the battlefield. It was hoped that this individualism would find its expression in a more open order in attack and aimed fire, instead of volley fire.⁷⁰

Although significant reforms in military doctrine followed quickly after the end of the war in South Africa, they were not

simply the consequence of a novel and shocking experience. Rather, the Boer War speeded up an on-going process of reform and underlined the central significance of developments whose importance had already become apparent. Some reform had, indeed, already been taking place. British infantry tactics had abandoned close formations after 1872 in favor of the "swarm" and had laid emphasis on flexibility and the accumulation of firepower at the enemy's weak points. A passage on "extended order" had appeared in *Field Exercises* in 1877, and the message had been reiterated twelve years later in *Infantry Drill*.⁷¹ Some corps commanders had put these ideas into practice and underlined the validity of "modern" doctrine.

The battles in South Africa provided Roberts and his supporters with both the opportunity and the justification to introduce reforms they had already decided were necessary. Between 1902 and 1905 something approaching a common body of written doctrine was created to replace the prewar situation in which individual commanders had exercised a gentlemanly autonomy. A small committee, which included several of Robert's favorites, quickly produced a *Manual of Combined Training* and a *Staff Manual*. At the same time, the regulations on field artillery, cavalry training, and musketry practice were revised and brought up-to-date to incorporate the South African experience. Much greater stress was now laid on the power of

the rifle and the effectiveness of defensive firepower.⁷²

However, Roberts was not persuaded by the marksmanship fetishists such as Sir Ian Hamilton, who wanted the British infantryman to "be able to shoot up to the standard of excellence which is required from the chamois hunter, and march 30 miles when required."⁷³ The volume of aimed fire laid down in an engagement was recognized to be critical but in the last resort, quantity was more important than quality.

In general, the army accepted the reforms in tactics and training introduced by Roberts and his acolytes as a consequence of the Boer War without undue opposition. However, this was not the case as far as cavalry doctrine was concerned. Discussion and debate over the role of the cavalry on the modern battlefield had begun as soon as the Franco-Prussian War was over, but the supremacy of the gun or the machine gun when ranged against horsemen armed with sword or lance was still far from obvious.

In 1899, proponents of the so-called *arme blanche* (cavalry) were still holding their own. Roberts had quickly organized mounted infantry upon his arrival in South Africa. He had even written Lord Lansdowne demanding that large bodies of mounted infantry be organized and shipped from England. Against the Boers who never risked a charge and operated across vast spaces with mobility at a premium, what Roberts and many of his

commanders wanted was men who could both ride and shoot. The enemy's tactics and the Commander in Chief's preferences together meant that "true" cavalry actions were few and far between.

Once back in England, Roberts set out to relegate the sword and the lance to ancillary status and to make the rifle (or carbine) the primary arm of the cavalry. The Dickinson Committee of 1900 found that "A more prominent position must be given to the training of the cavalry soldier in the use of the fire weapon."⁷⁴ Furthermore, Roberts and the mounted infantry advocates prophesized an end to shock action as the primary objective of cavalry. Reconnaissance, screening, and mobile firepower were to be the essence of the horsemen's existence.⁷⁵ Robert's preface to *Cavalry Training*, published in 1904, did not rule out the charge but emphasized the primary use of the rifle by all mounted troops. A *Times of London* correspondent commented, "It is nothing less than a revolution in cavalry tactics to which Lord Roberts has lent all the weight of his practical experience."⁷⁶ The cavalry took considerable exception to this view, and a bitter controversy broke out. Over the years, both sides moved somewhat toward one another's position. Roberts came to accept that the sword had some role in battle, while French, Allenby, and other senior cavalrymen had come to believe by 1910 that the rifle would be their main arm in war.

The British cavalry became the only rifle-armed cavalry in Europe before 1914.⁷⁷

Improved infantry training was designed to remedy the defects of the British soldier, about which there was a striking degree of unanimity in the higher reaches of the army. In South Africa, "Tommy Atkins" had shown himself to lack resourcefulness and to be unwilling to accept responsibility for his own well being content always to wait for the lead of his officers. He had shown great courage but little dedication to mastering his profession. Kitchener believed that this was largely the fault of the prewar training system and that it could be remedied, but not everyone agreed with him. Sir Thomas Kelly-Kenny spoke for the conservative old guard when he declared that the raw material from which the army was fashioned was irremediably flawed:

The British soldier we recruit as a race has very little imagination; he finds it very difficult to realize that if he does not see an enemy standing up or on the skyline he may be hiding behind a rock, this notwithstanding the training at Home, the Officers' Lectures and other means of inculcating this knowledge in the men... His mental perception is not up to requirements, nor is his education.⁷⁸

In society at large, the view that the Boer War had revealed fundamental weaknesses in British stock generated the "National Efficiency" movement. In the army such views were the springboard for attempts to replace voluntary service with

conscription. Roberts was a convinced believer in compulsion and eventually resigned from the army in order to campaign for the introduction of national conscription. Recognizing hard political realities, most of the high command accepted that peacetime conscription was impossible no matter how much they might secretly desire it. It was not until 1916, two years after a European war had begun, that the British government introduced conscription for the first time.⁷⁹

The military advantages of conscription were that it would greatly increase the size, not only of the standing army, but also of the reserves. The War Office had scraped the bottom of the barrel to put two army corps into the field and had to depend heavily on volunteers, yeomanry, and imperial contingents to make up the numbers that were eventually required in South Africa. Two successive secretaries of state for war—St. John Brodrick and Arnold Forster—tried to devise schemes to produce short service troops for home defense, long service troops to defend the empire overseas, and a reserve for wartime expansion. Both failed miserably. During their struggles, another royal commission reported that among the auxiliary forces the militia were unfit to take the field and the volunteers not qualified to face regular troops. Eventually, between 1906 and 1908, Sir Richard Haldane rebuilt the army as six divisions backed by a Special Reserve and the Territorial Force.

Haldane took a more aggressive approach with the passage of the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act of 1907. Failing to make the Militia a source of army drafts or to merge it with the Volunteers as a true second line, Haldane abolished it altogether. He offered its members the choice of a six-year enlistment in the Special Reserves with an overseas obligation or in the lesser-paying Territorials, which lacked any overseas requirement. The Reserves would provide the bulk of the first-year drafts necessary to maintain an expeditionary force.⁸⁰

The final test of Haldane's army came in 1914 when within two weeks of the opening of hostilities over 100,000 well-trained men were deployed in Belgium with more on the way.⁸¹ Haldane's army was perhaps the most important outcome of the Boer War.⁸²

The Boer War also revealed deficiencies in both the quality and the quantity of the officer corps. According to Roberts, the proportion of failures among commanding officers and brigadiers during the campaign was "considerably larger" than among the junior ranks.⁸³ However, the junior officers of the regular army showed a distressing lack of professionalism, which raised questions about their education that were borne out by the Akers-Douglas parliamentary report. It castigated the officer education system as "providing little incentive to learn and operating on a basis of lengthy periods of idleness interrupted by brief interludes of cramming."⁸⁴

A large part of the problem of inadequate officers revolved around the acute shortage of trained staff officers. A trickle of trained officers had graduated from the Staff College during

the 1890s, and although they sufficed for an army of 90,000, their numbers were totally inadequate for a force of a quarter of a million. Expansion could not be supported since there were few officers with staff experience to fall back on. Moreover, the importance of a trained staff had been underlined by the complexities of the field—a scale of operations with which the army was completely unfamiliar. Against a handful of Boers the problem had not proved fatal, but it might easily be otherwise. "If we take the field with a force the size of this one against an European enemy," wrote Sir James Grierson in July 1900, "and continue in our present happy-go-lucky style of staffing we shall come to most awful grief."⁸⁵

Part of the solution to the problem was to update and improve the Staff College curriculum. Sir Henry Rawlinson, another of Roberts's proteges, was brought in as commandant in 1903. Over the next three years he reformed its program by reducing the number and importance of examinations, increasing the emphasis on continuous assessment, and revising and modernizing the course content to include study first of the Boer War and later of the Russo-Japanese War.⁸⁶ Gradually matters improved as the infant general staff played an increasingly important role in the work of the Committee of Imperial Defense, but the young plant had only just taken root when war broke out in 1914.⁸⁷

If something could be done about the staff, it proved very much harder to do anything about the run-of-the-mill officer. The army was entirely in the grip of its main supplier of officer candidates—the public schools. From 1873 onwards, the War Office had tried to raise the level of scientific knowledge of its schoolboy entrants and to substitute written and colloquial French and German for the classics but had encountered unyielding resistance. In 1893 it had capitulated, recommending that the entrance examinations conform to the public school syllabuses. Latin therefore remained compulsory.

The Boer War—and the recommendations of the Akers-Douglas Committee that English, mathematics, and French or German should become compulsory subjects in the army entrance examinations and Latin and Greek only optional ones—prompted the army to try once more to bring the public schools into line with its requirements. These proposals unleashed a storm of opposition, in which the *Times* took the lead. The Headmasters' Conference argued that the principle of nonspecialization in public service examinations must be adhered to at all costs. What this amounted to, as the headmasters of Eton and Wellington both forcefully pointed out, was that Latin should be a compulsory subject qualifying a young man for a commission.

The pressures for reform were sufficiently strong for the War Office to alter this requirement for compulsory Latin but Latin and Greek remained optional and the public schools' grip on officer education did not lessen. The director of military operations wrote in 1907:

I wish we could make more rapid progress in obtaining a thoroughly modern education for our officers. I should like to see classics entirely eliminated from all our Army examinations but the public schools and older universities, which can teach nothing else, will try and force us to accept their obsolete ideals as long as they possibly can.⁸⁸

If the public schools and older universities were unhelpful in improving the intellectual qualifications of new officers, they proved crucial in solving another of the problems revealed by the Boer War. The army was quite unprepared for the large demand for junior officers (in the eighteen months from January 1900 they had to find more than 3,000 in excess of normal demand) and had been forced to turn to the militia, with poor results.⁸⁹ Officer training could be considerably accelerated if a part of it were provided in the schools and universities. A proposal that all boys over the age of fifteen should be given instruction in drill, maneuver, and the use of arms was made at the Headmasters' Conference in February 1900. Lord Lansdowne, then Secretary of State for War, rejected this idea due to cost and the likely opposition it would provoke, but the proposal gave rise to an intense public debate. The indirect effects of

this debate were considerable. In 1906, Sir Richard Haldane used the ideas that had been debated a few years before as the basis for a proposal to establish an Officers' Training Corps (OTC) in two divisions: a junior division in the schools and a senior division in the universities. Success in a test and possession of a certificate would give four months' exemption in each division against a total requirement of twelve months for a reserve commission. The OTC was duly established in March 1908 and rapidly attracted support from the schools and universities. By 1911 there were 152 junior and 20 senior contingents and 24,000 officer cadets. The system triumphantly proved its worth during the First World War when the OTCs provided approximately 100,000 of the 230,000-officer candidates.⁹⁰

The Boer War was a watershed in British military history. The army's defeats on the South African veldt and the inquest into their causes and significance fueled a wave of reform. The quality of the British army in 1914 cannot be credited solely to the influence of the Boer War. But if one looks at all the details of the development of a general staff and improvements in command structure, military education, manpower procurement, tactics and technology in the decade following that war, its importance is difficult to overestimate. Had the lessons of the South African War not been learned in time, the war in France and Flanders might have been decided much more quickly and much

less favorably for Britain. That was certainly Sir William Robertson's view, and more than one historian has echoed his claim that "the Boer War changed everything—or at least everything that subsequently mattered."⁹¹

WORD COUNT = 8,560

ENDNOTES

¹Byron Farwell, Queen Victoria's Little Wars (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p.339.

²Ibid., p. 340.

³Ibid., pp. 340-341.

⁴Ibid., p. 341.

⁵Ibid., p. 341.

⁶Ibid., p. 342.

⁷Thomas Parkenham, The Boer War (New York: Random, 1979), p. 64.

⁸Farwell, p. 342.

⁹ Ibid., p. 342.

¹⁰Parkenham, pp. 194-199.

¹¹Farwell, p. 342.

¹²Ibid., p. 342.

¹³Parkenham, p. 195.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁵Farwell, p. 343.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 343.

¹⁷Parkenham, p. 210.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 210-214

¹⁹Farwell, p. 344.

²⁰Ibid., p. 345.

²¹Ibid., p. 345.

²²Parkenham, p. 194.

²³Ibid., p. 211.

²⁴Farwell, p. 345.

²⁵Parkenham, pp. 233-251.

²⁶Farwell, p. 345.

²⁷Ibid., p. 345.

²⁸John Gooch, "Britain and the Boer War," in The Aftermath of Defeat, (New Haven: Yale, 1994), p. 41.

²⁹Parkenham, pp. 301-322.

³⁰Farwell, p. 346.

³¹Ibid., p. 346.

³²Ibid., 348.

³³Ibid., p. 348.

³⁴Parkenham, p. 337.

³⁵Farwell, p. 349.

³⁶Ibid., p. 350.

³⁷Ibid., p. 350.

- ³⁸Ibid., p. 351.
- ³⁹Ibid., p. 352.
- ⁴⁰Gooch, p. 42.
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 41.
- ⁴²Ibid., pp. 42-43.
- ⁴³Ibid., p. 43.
- ⁴⁴Jay Stone and Erwin Schmidl, The Boer War and Military Reforms, (Lanham, MD: University of Press of American, 1988), P. 136.
- ⁴⁵Gooch, p. 43.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., p. 43.
- ⁴⁷Ibid., p. 44.
- ⁴⁸Ibid., p. 44.
- ⁴⁹Ibid., p. 44.
- ⁵⁰Ibid., p. 45.
- ⁵¹Ibid., p. 46.
- ⁵²Stone and Schmidl, pp. 142-143.
- ⁵³Gooch, p. 47.
- ⁵⁴Stone and Schmidl, pp. 154-155.
- ⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 146-147.
- ⁵⁶Gooch, p. 47.
- ⁵⁷Ibid., p. 47.
- ⁵⁸Ibid., p. 48.
- ⁵⁹Ibid., p. 48.
- ⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 48-49.
- ⁶¹Ibid., p. 49.
- ⁶²Ibid., p. 49.
- ⁶³Ibid., p. 50.
- ⁶⁴Stone and Schmidl, p. 114.
- ⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 49-50.
- ⁶⁶Stone and Schmidl, pp. 89-90.
- ⁶⁷Ibid., p. 90.
- ⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 90, 155.
- ⁶⁹Gooch, p. 51.
- ⁷⁰Stone and Schmidl, p. 115.
- ⁷¹Gooch, p. 51.
- ⁷²Ibid., p. 51.
- ⁷³Ibid., p. 52.
- ⁷⁴Stone and Schmidl, p. 110.
- ⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 108-109.
- ⁷⁶Ibid., p. 109.
- ⁷⁷Ibid., p. 110.
- ⁷⁸Gooch, p. 53.

- ⁷⁹Ibid., p. 54.
⁸⁰Stone and Schmidl, p. 150.
⁸¹Ibid., p. 155.
⁸²Gooch, p. 54.
⁸³Ibid., p. 54.
⁸⁴Ibid., pp. 44-45.
⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 54-55.
⁸⁶Stone and Schmidl, pp. 107-108.
⁸⁷Gooch, p. 55.
⁸⁸Ibid., p. 56.
⁸⁹Ibid., p. 56.
⁹⁰Ibid., pp. 56-57.
⁹¹Ibid., p. 57.

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