

BOER WAR REMEMBERED

Maggie Follett

For several years, September 24 has been officially recognised as the day on which we South Africans, in all our polyglot diversity, are encouraged to commemorate our heritage.

For most of us, this national celebration is an enjoyable and welcome annual respite from the pressures of work – however, no matter to which culture or creed we belong – just a few moment's contemplation of our complex history will inevitably summon up the uncomfortable spectre of war.

Of all the conflicts within living memory, one of the most significant, not only for South Africa as a nation, but also for the Western world, was the war fought right here on our soil – the Anglo-Boer War. One of the reasons why this war made such an impact on the international psyche, is that it was the first to be extensively documented, throughout its duration, via photographs.

On Heritage Day this year, Wellington's Breytenbach Centre showcased a unique and remarkable collection of rare Anglo-Boer War pictures, which, according to Martiens van Bart (curator of the Western Cape ABW photographic collection, who opened the exhibition), had long been lying dormant in the archives of the Afrikaner Republic War Museum.

In 2002, on the initiative of the Museum's director, and Bloemfontein's Motheo district municipality, the department of arts and culture agreed to finance the reproduction of some of these photographs, in the interest of our national heritage.

All in all, 180 dramatic shots (taken between 1899 and 1902) were selected from a vast collection, digitally enhanced where necessary, and enlarged for exhibition, under

the title "Suffering of War".

The intention was not to wallow in the misfortunes of any beleaguered minority group, but to bring home to as many people as possible the horrible reality and futile nature of war. This concept gained international impetus, and, on Youth Day 2004 (June 16) the photographs were first exhibited simultaneously, in both Bloemfontein and Moscow.

President Thabo Mbeki attended the official opening, and it was agreed that the collection would find a permanent home in the Nelson Mandela Peace Park, in Pretoria.

Durable, laminated duplicates of selected images were subsequently produced and sent to every province countrywide, to be exhibited at selected venues on Heritage Day.

They have also been shown extensively throughout Europe.

The photographs, ranging from A3 to A0 in size, are not easy on the eye – but that is clearly not their intention. The images themselves are, in the main, neither prurient nor especially harrowing, on an emotional level. With a few poignant exceptions, most are – superficially – merely dispassionate chronicles of everyday life (and everyday death) on the battlefields, on farms, and in the infamous concentration camps.

It is perhaps this feeling of stark, journalistic detachment that makes viewing the collection such a disturbing one. Ultimately, though, the experience is cathartic.

The exhibition serves as an unforgettable reminder of the terrible repercussions that this last, greatest and most expensive British colonial war had upon all our citizens – white, brown and black – and how gravely it affected the relationships and perceptions of future generations – fostering an



ingrained bias that resounds, in many cases, even to this day.

The collection can be viewed daily, free of charge, from Monday to Friday, until October 26.

For more information contact the Breytenbach Centre, Wellington on 021 873 2786.

Die katalogus is ook beskikbaar onder die titel "Smarte van die oorlog", en is deur Paul Alberts van Kraal-Uitgewers uitgegee. Bestel by Posbus 328, Brandfort 9400, e-pos: paul@kraaluitgewers.co.za of 051 821 2299, of 082 923 3666, of faks 051 821 1783.

Die gewilde dokumentêre rolprent oor die Anglo-Boere oorlog, Verskroeiende Aarde (wat by die opening van die Breytenbach-Sentrum uitstalling vertoon is), is oor 18 maande, van 1999 tot 2001, in opdrag van Media24 vir die herdenking van die ABO vervaardig. Dit is in 2002 met die afsluiting van die herdenking die eerste keer op kykNET vertoon. Sederdien is dit by versoek van die publiek weer oor dié TV-sender uitgesaai.



■ Harrowing scenes depicting the ravages of the Anglo-Boer War.