

BOEKBESPREKING/BOOK REVIEW

J. P. BRITS (ed): *Diary of a National Scout*.
P. J. du Toit 1900-1902. Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1974, pp 122 (with illustrations and maps).

This book is the second in the new series of works edited and published by the Institute for Historical Research of the Human Sciences Research Council under direction of Dr C. M. Bakkes. The first book, *Die Dagboek van H. C. Bredell*, cast new light on President Kruger's years in exile; in the new publication some insight is given into the tensions and struggles in the mind of the writer, who originally fought with the Boers but later went over to the British and actively supported them as a National Scout.

From a military-historical viewpoint the diary is valuable because it tells of the activities of Genl P. J. Liebenberg in the Western Transvaal between 5 September 1900 and 6 July 1901, including the battle of Frederikstad on 25 October 1900.

Du Toit's association with the British forces commenced with operations in the Rustenburg district between 6 July and 17 September 1901. Thereafter he proceeded to Dundee and on 26 October 1901 he arrived at Standerton. From there he went with a column to Trichardtsfontein and took part in operations in the district of Middelburg. After this he spent two months in the British military hospital at Wakkerstroom. On 31 May 1902 he was in Durban where he visited the concentration camp at Merebank. He was discharged at Pretoria on 13 June 1902.

Readers will find the succinct text easy to follow, and their task is simplified by the excellent footnotes and several useful maps.

The 'National Scout' phenomenon

This aspect of the book will occupy the thoughtful reader long after the text is read. Du Toit regarded the war as a hopeless cause right from the start, and it was with little enthusiasm that he obeyed the call-up order and took up the post of secretary to Genl Liebenberg. On 28 December 1900 he wrote, 'What is there now to save us? I think nothing, and best thing is to submit [surrender] which I shall do very soon'.

On Old Year's Day 1900 he wrote:

Last day of century and bloody year of 1900. How sad the century closes, with blood and fire, thousands of weeping widows and orphans, thousands of homeless mothers and families . . . What misery, what lamentations, broken hearts, broken up homes, devastated farms, with a devastated country (and a lost Government) . . . If our case is a hopeless one, what can I do to stop it? All is a mystery. I shall act soon, yes this very day or tomorrow.

What options were open to Du Toit? In a clear introduction the editor points out that he could surrender, thus becoming a **hands-upper**. He could leave the republics — **wegkruiper** — or he could enter British service to fight the diehards. Du Toit took the last course, without serious remark in his diary, but on New Year's day 1902 he noted that prospects of peace seemed as far away as ever. He went on, 'The flower of Transvaal and Free State is gone! Yet Thy will be done!' And on the day of his discharge he noted, 'Finish of war'.

Perhaps it is to ask too much, but one wishes Du Toit had committed more of his feelings to paper. And after the war? — 'After the war he regained his place in society and was apparently, in the course of time, forgiven and accepted by his compatriots', according to Dr Bakkes' comments on the dust-cover.

Du Toit's situation was a complex interweaving of motives and influences. Desertion was, understandably, a frequent happening in the period of mercenary armies where often the concept of national loyalty was absent and the soldier felt an obligation only in terms of what the paymaster offered.

With the development of truly national combat forces, desertion acquired a new meaning and was regarded as a primarily military offence of the gravest kind. And nevertheless there were instances such as Du Toit's. This is one of several things to be learnt from the *Diary of a National Scout*, at present a unique contribution to the increasing literature on the Second Anglo-Boer War.

— Jan Ploeger