

Secret shame of the Boers

Box A

A major new book by A M Grundlingh, a young Pretoria historian, explodes many of the myths that have been built up around the Boer War. **WESSEL DE KOCK** examines the book and its relevance to the modern Afrikaner, and his deep-seated roots.

THE popular picture of the Boers as a brave and united band resisting Imperial Britain to the end, is finally shattered in a pioneering work by a young Pretoria historian.

The book, A M Grundlingh's *Die Hendsoppers en Joiners*, published by HAUM, is the first comprehensive research on Boer traitors. And a startling one to many Afrikaners.

It upends the myth of a people determined to survive at all costs and puts paid to the heroic stereotype nurtured in countless books and speeches.

It also reveals the cracks which develop in the Afrikaner psyche under pressure of war.

While many stayed in the fight, a large number gave up easily and went back to their farms.

As the military tide turned, Boer commanders such as Botha, De Wet and Smuts had to counter increasing dissension and despair in the ranks. Their men, no professional soldiers, were being hit where it mattered most — family and home.

For the glory of Magersfontein and Spioenkop, there was the Transvaal town Roossenekal, sharing a triangle with equally obscure places such as Tonteldoos and Vroegkoud, where treason was grey reality. There several turncoats were tried and shot.

A poignant moment described by Grundlingh found a firing squad of young Boers beyond themselves with grief at having to execute their own flesh and blood, one a venerably bearded church elder.

For, many of those who compromised with the enemy were no cowards but men of influence and stature driven by moral anguish to see God's Will in the British juggernaut.

They joined Kitchener's peace committees to propagate surrender — sometimes at great personal risk — in order to, as they believed, save their people and country from ruin. They ended up being blamed for giving the British the idea of the concentration camps.

Affluence and poverty on the other hand turned out to be twin ravishers of patriot-

tism. The affluent, "who love their property more than they hate the British," as Milner drily remarked, needed little encouragement to down arms. Many *bywoners* again, with no stake in the land, took up arms against their republican governments with enthusiasm.

In certain respects the Boer war became a civil war. Nearly 26% of the total Boer force of 54 000 hendsopped (downed arms) in the first 10 months of conflict. Towards the end of hostilities a mini-Boer army, the National Scouts, was fighting under British colours.

The picture is not the simple one of the school history books. Hero-shattering images from Grundlingh's book:

● The Boers in the Free State who crawled into caves

and under their floorboards, emerging only at night, to escape serving in the commandos;

● The numbers, including ex-Volksraadslede and top officers, who poured into the Protectorates seeking refuge from their own people;

● One party of *handsuppers* in Bechuanaland was protected by 50 armed warriors of Chief Khama. For this duty the blacks received two shillings a day from the British.

Wrote the war correspondent of the London Times: "... One feature that will always command attention ... will be the active support afforded us, especially in the latter half of the campaign, by a large body of the Boers themselves."

But shame, and the need to forgive and forget, led to a conspiracy of silence about the Boer "black sheep" even among some present-day writers.

Grundlingh himself in an interview admitted to "misgivings, in some quarters about his choice of subject."

At the end of the war, "for the sake of future generations," Generals Botha, De La Rey and De Wet agreed to destroy a list of National Scouts. One of those was De Wet's own brother, whom he had threatened to shoot.

But "National Scout" and "Joiner" had seared themselves into the Afrikaner soul. An imprecation spat out at a turncoat says it all:

*Verrader, monster, vloek der Aarde
Vernederde skepsel der natuur
Godswraak die u tot hede spaarde
Verdelge u deur donder en helse Vuur*

This hate was reciprocated: "A 20-year-old Boer, wounded and unable to move, was beaten to death by a stirrup-wielding National Scout; Boer guerrillas who cornered four National Scouts, a father, his two sons and one other, in a house in the Lydenburg district, set it alight and shot the men as they emerged. The bodies were left in the smouldering ruins.

A satisfied British view of the internecine strife: "... Tame Boers out from Winburg ... had a stiffish skirmish with a party of wild ones. In this fight ... none but Dutchmen were engaged."

Behind the crumbling of Boer morale, the turning of brother against brother and the transformation of independent-minded men into fawning Anglophiles, was a superbly cynical and ruthless

British propaganda campaign.

In a finely balanced carrot and stick operation, Kitchener followed devastation — 30 000 houses were destroyed in the republics — with proclamations of purring reasonableness, some ambiguously worded, promising amnesty and access to wife and children to those who laid down arms.

"... The Boers are an intensely domestic people," said Smuts, "... the ruin of his property and family is sufficient in most cases to utterly crush his spirit."

The British aim was to indoctrinate fighting Boers with the futility of it all. No help could be expected from the outside world. British victory was inevitable. The sane thing was to come to terms with it.

And in the public mind the Boer guerillas took on the aspect of desperate marauders, not conducting a proper war but undermining British-imposed peace and security.

In this atmosphere, subverting the war effort of one's country — either by joining the other side or by preaching peace — became a patriotic duty, the visionary and responsible thing to do. The most tragic and hitherto barely told story of the Boer war is the one of its turncoat peacemakers.

One of them, a Transvaal burgher, Meyer de Kock, was executed at Roossenekal after entering Boer lines under a white flag. Less than four months later the man who sentenced him for treason also surrendered to the British. Further resistance would be "criminal," he said.

The irony was that it was all in vain. Those who cooperated with the British in what they saw as the best interests of their country, were at the close of war treated with contempt by both victor and vanquished.

The "peacemakers" were conspicuously absent from the Vereeniging negotiations. The British would not deal with them.

History — and the future — belonged to the hollow-eyed men of the veld, the bitter-einders, who against unbelievable personal and military odds, carried on the fight to the bitter end.

They, the *koppige minderheid* (stubborn minority), became the benchmark of *Afrikanerwees*, the material from which Afrikanerdom's myth was fashioned.

How, in the light of the Boer war experience, the inheritors of this myth will in time stand up to the lure of affluence or the despair of deprivation and hopeless odds, is the real question.