

# **Writing Between the Lines: Perspectives on the Anglo-Boer War in Letters from Detention Camps**

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## **1 Introduction**

Two types of detainee camps provided the impetus for letters exchanged between prisoners-of-war on the one hand, and their wives, families or close friends on the other. At a fairly early stage in the war a great number of Boers were taken prisoner by the British forces were subsequently shipped off to detainee camps on the island of Ceylon, nowadays known as Sri Lanka, thereby effectively removing them from the battleground until the end of the war. Whereas the practice of physically removing people from the scene of battle was originally restricted to Boer soldiers who had either surrendered to or were captured by the British, at a more advanced stage of the war, the British resorted to the strategy of literally rounding up women and children with the purpose of detaining them in the notorious concentration camps, set up in different locations in South Africa. The fact that families were separated by these arrangements, resulted in letter-writing as a means of combating the intense longing for loved ones, which, in the case of the Boer prisoners in camps on distant islands, was exacerbated by the constant concern about what was happening at the home front, coupled with the agonizing yearning to be reunited with the land from which they had been forcibly removed. As such, these letters bear the stamp of private correspondence, containing statements and communicating thoughts and feelings probably never intended to be of significance to any other than the addressee.

If the correspondence had not been intended for persons other than the original addressees, the question arises as to whether they should be read at all by outsiders, let alone discussed in public as I intend doing with the corpus of letters, referred to in our family as the “Ceylon letters”, consisting of approximately fifty communications and containing, amongst others,

letters exchanged between my grandmother and grandfather during the period from July 1900 to August 1902, coinciding roughly with my grandfather's detention as a prisoner-of-war in Diyatalawa on the island of Ceylon.

An aspect of these letters which goes beyond mere involvement with immediate family members or friends concerns the self-conscious reflection on the effects of war as experienced by the authors of these mini-documents in which the contemporary reader may find fragments of personal stories, sometimes pointing towards a more general observation of a people at war. A recent collection edited by Karel Schoeman, compiled from personal documents housed by the South African Library in Cape Town, suggests the proper genre for such letters. As Schoeman puts it in the preface to the anthology, the *personal documents* (emphasis mine) provide an "account of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances", thereby complementing the existing official documentation on the Anglo-Boer War.

Apart from referring to the potential value as personal documents augmenting official historical accounts of the war, I shall also touch on some general stylistic features of the letters. In this regard, one is struck by the apparent discrepancy between the understatement of recorded events and, by contrast, with the space allotted to detailed reflection on the effects of such events on the individuals subjected to the extraordinary circumstances of war. One explanation for the underplaying of events, in favour of emphasising the personal response to the utter disruption of their lives caused by the war, is probably that the magnitude of the events surrounding every aspect of the war was taken for granted, with the result that the correspondents did not, in personal letters to loved ones, waste time unnecessarily to dwell on the harshness of their particular situation. Sometimes the absence of actual news from the home front is explained as the result of a deliberate news blackout; in other letters, especially those written at Diyatalawa, the authors would state repeatedly that they did not know what more could be said or written, which accounted for the suspicion that such observations may be indicative of a feeling of powerlessness to describe the events. Be that as it may, the correspondents preferred to focus on communicating their personal

response to the dire situation, which included repeated individual expressions of longing, as could be expected, but which also focussed, to a surprising extent, on broader philosophical issues such as possible reasons why, as a God-fearing people with justice presumably on their side, the Boers were being subjected to such untold suffering. These reflections of the correspondents also invariably included signs of resistance to their fate or expressions of profound misgivings about their Christian faith, and their struggle to continue to believe in the wisdom of God's will in the light of such adverse circumstances.<sup>1)</sup>

Given the sparseness of factual detail, it would seem an impossible task for a contemporary reader to recapture the stories behind the correspondents' self-reflective deliberations on the war. This holds true even if one were privileged, as I was as a child, to have had countless opportunities to listen to a grandmother who, in retrospect, seemed to have had at her fingertips an almost inexhaustible storehouse of anecdotes about her experiences during the Anglo-Boer War. Yet, one cannot but feel that it would be a worthwhile effort to try and extract the stories intimated between the lines in these highly condensed letters. For, one might well ask, do not these events so sparingly presented here constitute the very fabric of the personal stories as well as the communal history of a people exposed to the hardships of war? On the other hand, in revisiting these letters, as a member of the third generation, I think that this contemporary reader should concern herself not only with what was intimated, but indeed concentrate on what was explicitly and emphatically expressed in letter after letter.

Consequently, in attempting to come to terms with letters written almost a century ago and probably never intended for public scrutiny, I shall focus in this paper on what I regard as the two major strategies unwittingly employed by the writers: firstly, the "bare" presentation of events determining the course of their lives, hence representing their personal "stories" in the form of a sustained understatement; and secondly, the self-conscious reflection on the individual experience of said events. These deliberations, repeatedly stated and embellished upon in various letters, initially serve as a means of making sense of the inexplicable "present" of the war; later to be developed into an instrument for focussing on ways of

coping with the future, despite the total annihilation of a past way of life.

## 2 Conventional forms of address

Despite the essentially private nature of the correspondence, one is struck by the rather formal tone of the letters, expressed mostly in what appears to be the adherence to a conventional stilted form of address. So, for example, in a letter jointly addressed to her four brothers in Diyatalawa, only their initials are indicated, followed by an obviously stylised form of opening sentence: (see Letter No 1)

Aan My Lieve Broeders P.H., C.T., W.C. en J.J. Gräbe

Voor mij nooit vergetende 4 Broeders nu deze dag Plaats ik my neder om weder voor u alle een briefje te schryf.

To my Dear Brothers, P.H., C.T., W.C. and J.J. Gräbe

Before my never to be forgotten 4 brothers I seat myself to write again a letter to all of you.

At first glance the apparent impersonal address, only mentioning the initials of her four brothers, would appear to clash with the emotional ending and explicit mention of love, and the plea to God to deliver them (from hardship) with which the letter concludes:

Dag dag My Broers uit my Hard julle suster en Liefde O Heere verlos ons spoedig  
W.B.

Good day, Good day my brothers, from the bottom of my heart, your sister and with love. O God, deliver us soon.

W.B.

However, using the initials only is probably a way of saving paper – one finds, as a rule of thumb, that every conceivable space is filled in fine writing, utilising both sides of the paper and also writing in the margins. In one of the letters written from the camp at Mount Lavinia,

C.M. van den Heever refers to the fact that they are allowed only one page of paper per letter (see Letter No 14). Be that as it may, the initials only, coupled with the respectful form of address, “u” instead of “julle”, could also be an indication of the respectful address typical of the conventions of letter- writing prevalent at the time, which would be borne out by the opening sentence with the obvious ring of formality and uniform address about it. That the stylised opening sentence was indeed a well established convention, can also be seen in a letter from one of the brothers already referred to above, addressed to his brother and sisters (see Letter no 5 written by J. J. Gräbe):

Heden en dit morgen zit ik me neder om aan uw allen een paar regelen te melden.

Today and this morning I sit down to write a few lines to all of you.

The following is the opening sentence of a letter (see Letter No 8) addressed to my grandfather by one of his cousins; who, obviously, was not part of the intimate circle of brothers and sisters:

Waarde en liefe neef heden avond neem ik myn pen op om aan u mijn welstand te melden.

Dear and beloved cousin this evening I take up my pen to inform you of my wellbeing.

Regarding the ending of these letters, although as a rule they tended to include explicit emotions, one finds that expressions of longing and endearment are often hidden in conventionalised formulations. So, for example, one of the first letters in the collection written by my grandmother to her husband ends as follows:

Zyt duizend malen van u verlangende Lettie gegroet. Ook van die kinderen al verstaat Let en Daan er niets van. Zyt hartlijk gegroet u verlangende vrouwtje.

Be greeted a thousand times by your longing Lettie. Also by the children although Let and Daan don't understand anything about it. Be heartily greeted, your longing wife.

### **3 The “story” between the lines**

The collection of letters on which this paper is based concerns the two-way communication between family and friends somewhere “at home”, be it on a farm, an ox-wagon or in a concentration camp, and burghers captured by the English and held prisoner in camps such as Diyatalawa on the island of Ceylon. The correspondence consists, on the one hand, of letters written to my grandfather by his wife, my grandmother, and other family members or close friends during his detention in Diyatalawa; and, on the other, of letters written by my grandfather or one of his brothers, addressed to my grandmother.

The letters written by my grandmother were at initially sent from the farm, later to be replaced by exchanges from Wentworth, a concentration camp near Ladysmith where she was compelled to stay with some family members and three small children, aged one to four, after having been caught by the English while fleeing from them in an ox-wagon. The letters written by my grandfather were all despatched from Diyatalawa, the camp on the island of Ceylon to which he and three of his brothers had been sent after General Cronjé’s disastrous surrender following a siege of his laager by the British.<sup>2)</sup>

#### **3.1 Historical detail**

##### *3.1.1 Conditions on the home front*

In many of these letters some historical detail or other is unwittingly disclosed. So, for example, when one of my grandfather’s sisters, in a letter addressed to all four brothers and dated 22 October, 1900, gives as her address *Du Plessis Laager*, it becomes clear that at that stage of the war it was customary for the Boer women and children to accompany their men to the battlefield. Indeed, it is this very practice which gave rise, fairly early in the war, to the capture of General Cronjé, with his full complement of Free State burghers, resulting in my grandfather and three of

his brothers being sent to Diyatalawa. In the same letter, the concluding rhetorical question addressed to the brothers, was whether they had thought about meeting again, one day, on their farm Otterhoek and how they would find their place of birth:

Broers het julle al gedink Hoe ons de plaats Otterhoek eens sal ontmoet die nog leef

Brothers have you given some thought to how we would one day find the farm Otterhoek, those of us still alive?

suggests to the reader, who has a fair knowledge of practices during the war, the policy of destroying crops, killing live-stock and burning farmhouses which formed the sinister prelude to the subsequent strategy of shepherding homeless women and children into concentration camps.

An even more disquieting aspect of the war is disclosed in some of the letters written from “home” and containing traces of explicit condemnation of Afrikaners who had betrayed their compatriots. The role played by traitors (branded as “hensoppers”<sup>3)</sup> by those who continued fighting) has always been, of course, one of the most contentious aspects of the war. So, for example, one of my grandfather’s cousins writes that there is nothing to report, because news is being withheld from them. However, in response to my grandfather’s question as to why the Afrikaner people should be punished by God to such an extent, he offers the following scathing analysis:

Gij vraag wat de oorzaak is dat de Heere ons zoo kasteiden ek dink 2 oorzaken: het zijn hoogmoed en liefdeloosheid onder ons volk. En zoo zijn zij over gegaan tot roverij, diefstal leugental enz. Tot myn spyd moet ik het zeggen.

You ask what caused our castigation by God I think 2 causes: they are vanity and lovelessness among our people. And so they have resorted to robbery, theft, lying, etc. To my regret I have to say this.

### 3.1.2 *Conditions at Diyatalawa (Ceylon) and similar camps*

The clearest account of the environment and living conditions in these camps, is provided by a friend writing to my grandfather after he had apparently been moved from Diyatalawa to another location, called Mount Lavinia, close to a beach. He informed my grandfather that there were four huts of which two could house 50 and the other two 25 exiles each. In addition, there was a hut serving as a dining-room and doubling as a room for holding religious services. The names of two prominent clergymen are mentioned in this regard, namely the Reverends Postma and Roux. From his description of the surroundings one learns that they were not far from the beach and that twice a day they were allowed to bathe in the sea. He also mentioned a nearby station and an hotel which was favoured by visitors from Colombo. It would appear that the exiles had time for some recreational activity, as this friend mentioned that he was collecting shells, offering my grandfather some, should he be interested.

By contrast with the above, as far as Diyatalawa was concerned, one surprisingly comes across very little detail about actual life on the island or in the camp, other than statements that they were still in good health, that they hoped to hear the same from the loved ones at home, and that they prayed that God would soon deliver them from bondage so that they could be re-united with their family and friends. In a letter written by one of my grandfather's younger brothers (see Letter 5), addressed to his brother and sisters at home, the sentence informing them that he did not know what to write, takes up about half a paragraph in a very short letter consisting of two paragraphs covering little more than one page:

Nu lieve broer en zusters ik weet waarlijk niet wat om te schrijven al wat ik kan schrijf is dit dat ik al veel verlang naar huis ach mocht de lieve Heere ons tog nie maar verlos en ons zal hem de eere en aanbidding toebring.

Now dear brother and sisters I really don't know what to write all I can write is that I already long for home a great deal oh, may the dear Lord deliver us and we will honour Him and worship Him.

And again, as is the case in letter after letter, the concluding lines invariably refer to intense longing and, in this case, also the awareness of the distance separating him from those to whom he

is writing:

...nu zal ik maar sluiten met mijn verlangende hart zoo blijft ik uw verwyderde broeder Jacobus J Gräbe.

...now I shall close with my longing heart I remain your distanced brother Jacobus J Gräbe

(what he probably meant was “your brother far removed from you in terms of geographical distance”).

The letters written by my grandfather similarly contain little factual information about conditions on the island. He does observe that the post was unreliable and sometimes mentions that he has run out of money but asks my grandmother not to send any, as “God will provide”. The reader is left in the dark as to why and for what purpose they would be in need of money in the camp.

Arguably the piece of paper with the strongest claim to being a historical “document” is a note, signed by a certain H. T. M. du Toit who most probably acted as teacher, listing a number of persons who had been absent from the “Grasdak School, Diyatalawa Kamp” for three consecutive days without notice. The note, written on both sides of the paper, also contains information about the reasons, ranging from indifference to outright rejection that some burghers had put forward for their refusal to attend school. One surmises that a few detainees took the initiative in starting a school, so that they could pass the time constructively by catching up on their schooling. From the reported responses to school attendance, one can infer that the level of the burghers’ formal education was such that they could have benefited from getting some tuition. The counter argument here would be that these grown men, experienced fighters and fiercely independent farmers in most cases, in all probability considered formal schooling to be beneath their dignity and a waste of time.<sup>4)</sup>

The other major activity at Diyatalawa centred around the attendance of religious sermons, possibly in the kind of facility that could double as dining-room and general recreational space. It is clear that the sermons were devoted to in-depth reflection on their situation, which emerges as a

profound test of their faith in the Will of God and the belief that God had a purpose even with their exile. That this religious activity was taken seriously becomes clear when, in a roundabout way, a family member writing from home mentions in a letter to my grandfather (see Letter No 10) that she was filled with deep gratitude to have understood from him that “powerful conversions” (“kragdadige bekeringen”) had taken place at Ceylon.

### **3.2 Personal stories**

Karel Schoeman shrewdly observes, in the preface to *Witnesses to War* (1998), that despite subsequent attempts to glamourise the events of the war, drama and excitement were relatively scarce, and that for the majority of those involved,

...it was a time of boredom, frustration, futility and physical discomfort, of separation, disruption and destruction, difficulties of transport and supply, dysentery, blisters, dust, mud, flies and lice, against a constant background of actual or potential violence and danger.

It is certainly true that for the women left in charge of the family and the farm in the absence of the traditional head of the house life on the farm entailed taking on new responsibilities and rising to the challenge of caring for their families in every conceivable way. A number of subtle changes in the social stratification of what had been, before the war, an essentially patriarchal society may be discerned in the manner in which the women perceived their changed circumstances. At the same time it is clear from the men’s continued concern about family matters, despite their physical removal not only from their families but also from their country, that they still regarded it as their main responsibility to see to the physical and spiritual welfare of their loved ones.

#### *3.2.1 Events worth mentioning in personal communication*

A common occurrence in the daily life of the women left behind to cope as best they could, was

the constant threat of illness and death in the family, especially of the small children. Usually these events are glossed over, which may point to their acceptance, by the wives left in charge of their families, as part of their daily routine. Indeed, the manner in which illness and suffering are presented as events within a chain, reminds a reader schooled in narrative analysis of the bare sense in which one would usually summarise the main events of a narrative when reconstructing the chronological sequence of the underlying story (Genette's *histoire*). Let us look at a typical example of a reference to illness, sandwiched between expressions of faith in and gratitude to God, thereby underscoring, once again, the intertwining of events and reflections on their possible significance in the context of an assumed Christian belief:

Nu lieve Brs wat ons Leve aan gaa ons leef nog alle onder de Kragtig Hand Gods' met de kinkhoes veel beter de Heere sy dank

As regards our life, we are all still living under the powerful Hand of God and the whooping cough is much better, praise the Lord.

Similarly, my grandmother wrote to her husband (in Letter No 2) that they were in good health and mentioned in passing that since she last wrote to him, the little boy (of about nine months, who later became my father) had been very ill, but that he was better again, praise the Lord.

At the other side of the ocean, my grandfather continued to ask after the welfare of his children. Without having received my grandmother's letter already written in January 1901 (see Letter No 2) he said that he found it impossible to sleep, because he kept thinking about his wife and his three small children. In an early letter, written in March 1901 (see Letter No 6), he voiced his concern that the "dominee" had not been to baptise the little boy. Were it not for their enforced separation, and the repeated expressions of longing for his family, one could almost think that this is a letter written by a husband assuming that conditions at home were still fairly "normal"; whereas it is quite clear, even from the sparse information provided in my grandmother's letter of January, that she had to cope with harrowing conditions far beyond his imagination. In a

subsequent letter, written on the little boy's first birthday boy at the beginning of April 1901 (see Letter No 7) it is clear that the desire to be reunited with his family and to be "delivered" from the island has become all-consuming, to the extent that his longing renders him incapable of doing anything else.

### 3.2.2 *Effects of war on the conventional roles of men and women*

In the meantime, while my grandfather was fretting on the island, my grandmother had risen to the challenge of coping with new responsibilities and assuming a different role. One finds, for example, some slight humour in an early letter written to her husband far away in Diyatalawa, informing him, by way of a rhetorical question, that she is acting as the boss in his absence, and adding that "I shall probably still want to rule the roost when you return one day – from habit".

Ik hou my een baas dat gij weg is niet waar? Ik zal als gij eendag terug kom ook de baas wil wezen. Uit gewoonte.

I am assuming the role of boss in your absence, all right? One day, when you return, I shall still want to be the boss. From habit.

Here is a clear instance where the reader suspects that a "story" lurks behind the deceptively innocent words. It shows how the women were forced to take charge of farming in the absence of their husbands – not only as far as hard work was concerned and the planning associated with it, but also the responsibility of being at the head of the household, and seeing to the wellbeing and safety of their own families as well as to that of the black labourers on the farm. In my grandmother's case this involved, for example, taking precautions of to safeguard at least some of the valuable pieces of furniture against destruction by the English by having some of it hidden in caves. It also involved enduring the discomfort of fleeing before the English, with her family in an ox-wagon, in the bitter cold of a highveld winter.

## **4 Reflections on the conditions of war**

### **4.2 Lamentations over hardships and suffering**

Empathy with close relatives or friends is often expressed by lamenting over the hardships they have to endure. So, for example, the sister writing to her four brothers (see Letter No 1), at some stage in the letter, directly addresses her brothers' presumed suffering as follows:

Ag ons tyd is tog Bitter. Ag ik weet Hoe julle Harte voel wand ik is Deelgenoot

Oh, our times are bitter. Oh, I know how you must feel in your hearts, because I share in these feelings.

Some striking syntactic features concern the division between reporting on the one hand, and lamenting on the other. As we have already seen, the sentences in which adverse events are reported, show little awareness of punctuation, making no division between mentioning whooping cough and referring to God, for example, thereby showing that, for these people, "talking to God" was a spontaneous and natural phenomenon. By contrast with the rest, the sentences containing lamentations all start with a capitalised "Oh" ("Ag"), thereby clearly signalling those parts of the text devoted to some reflection or other on personal and communal suffering caused by the extraordinary circumstances of the war.

### **4.3 Expressions of faith**

In keeping with the relation between understatement, as regards the account of actual events, and the sustained elaboration of the reflection on such events, one invariably finds in these letters that some news, about a sick child, a detail about the farm or news of the battle, would be followed by declarations of faith often couched in the form of lamentations to be delivered from hardships suffered as a result of the war. The same is true of letters written from Diyatalawa where once

again, concern about the wellbeing of family and issues of religion are preferred to reporting on, for example, the changed circumstances in which the detainees found themselves and with which they had to cope as best they could. Indeed, one is tempted to say that these expressions of faith, which include a profound questioning, bordering on disbelief in some instances, constitute the actual “story” documented in the correspondence. So, for example, my grandfather admits, in the same sentence in which he encourages my grandmother to trust in God’s mercy, that the detainees have so many questions about the war, that they have had days set aside for prayers of deliverance and that they have also asked God to give them clarity as to what the Afrikaner people could have done wrong to deserve such treatment. As far as his personal faith is concerned, he states in a subsequent letter (See Letter No 11) that he realises that God had a purpose in sending him to Ceylon, since he has had time to reflect, with the result that

hier is mij veel geopenbaar wat my lewe was en my land

here much was revealed to me about what my life consisted of and my country

Similarly, testimony of their belief in God takes up a substantial part of almost every letter whether sent from home or despatched from a distant island. So, for example, in the letter already referred to above, in which a sister writes to her four brothers in Diyatalawa (see Letter No. 1), she mentions the disconcerting news that although my grandfather’s father -in-law was said to have been seen in the town of Harrismith, the women were all in the camp. However, instead of lamenting these circumstances, this bitter news is followed by a statement that they should all be content, since God directs man’s affairs. The next sentence clearly testifies to the power of such faith to sustain them in their suffering:

Broeders als ik dat nie weet dat onze Heere sta aan de roer der schepping en stuur alles na syn Goddelijke wil dan ware ik reeds lank in mu drukt verga.

Brothers, were it not for the fact that I know that our God is at the helm of creation and

[He] guides everything according to His divine will, then I would long ago have succumbed to the pressure brought to bear on me.

At a later stage in the letter one is given a glimpse of the severe despondency that had to be combatted with reference to this belief in God's Will. Describing unmistakable symptoms of depression she confesses to the fact that she finds it an uphill battle to retain her faith. After having stated that it was bitter to think that their sins might be the cause of their suffering, the following observations are given in the plural and the iterative is used to suggest the repetitive and representative nature of such deliberations:

Ag lieve Broers ik Betreur dat er aan te dink dat ons sonde de oorzaak is van ons lyden. O' en ik sie nog soo veelle verhardings als ik saans voor een ogenblik ga sta en ik bepyns ons toestand dan moet ik ook seg Here Bewaar tog my verstand als een blief wand my bitter is te bitter.

Oh, dear Brothers I regret having to think that our sins are the cause of our suffering. Oh, and I still see so much hardheartedness when I come to a brief standstill, in the evenings and I consider our state then I have to say God please preserve my mind because my bitterness is too bitter.

Here the deviation from the intimated Biblical image, of Christ's cup being too bitter, serves to underscore the extent of the suffering. This example is representative of how expressions of the struggle to keep faith in God rather than detailed references to the nature of the suffering or the events that had befallen them, form the substance of the communication between close relatives under the circumstances imposed upon them through the war. A particularly harrowing example of the extent of the depression that had to be combatted only with reference to their faith, is found in the following confession directly after a sentence in which she thanks my grandfather for his words of consolation, telling her to get up and eat!):

Ag My Br ik moet baija dage my kappie vad en die bosse in ga en my met traane voor my Heere uitstord en dan moet ik tog soo baija mal nog seg Ag Here ik geloof kom my ongelooft te hulp.

Oh, My Br on many a day I have to take my bonnet and go into the bushes to unburden myself with tears before God and then so many times I still have to say Oh, God I do believe please help me in my disbelief.

## 5 Concluding remarks

In conclusion I should like to refer briefly to some recent publications on the Anglo-Boer War. The first is a collection of personal documents compiled and edited by Karel Schoeman entitled *Witnesses to War* (1998). There is no doubt that the account of “ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances” found in the personal documents collected by Schoeman, or in the fifty or so letters in my possession, contain the stuff stories are made of. Proof of that may be found in two more recent publications inspired by the Anglo-Boer War, namely a collection of short stories solicited and edited by Jeanette Ferreira, entitled *Boereoorlogstories* (1998), and a novel by Christo Coetzee entitled *Op soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz* (1998). Inspired by Cronjé’s inexplicable, and possibly traitorous, surrender, Coetzee’s novel deals with a mythical general who had concentrated on intercepting burghers captured by the English and either helping those escapees willing to fight, to join De Wet’s forces, or summarily executing those who indicated that they had lost heart and wished to return to their homes.

If I were a talented teller of tales, I believe that I could easily construct a powerful story from the bits and pieces of information revealed in the Ceylon letters. I would be tempted, in that case, to complement and flesh out the written account with what I can remember of my grandmother’s anecdotes about her experiences during the Anglo-Boer War that kept us spellbound when we were little.

However, given the focus on reflection in the letters in my possession, and the concomitant unmistakable downplaying of anything that could be construed as “adventure”, I believe that that would be disloyal to the spirit of the letters written by ordinary people under duress almost a

century ago. The *real* story, I now believe, is to be sought in the gradual and painstaking account of people forced by extraordinary circumstances to introspection and what they might have called a probing of the soul. What I personally found fascinating, is the power of a statement such as the one offered by my grandfather, after repeated indications, in letter after letter, of his almost unbearable concern about the well-being of his wife and the three small children, stating that he had eventually come to the conclusion that God had had a purpose in sending him to Ceylon, in that

hier is mij veel geopenbaar wat my lewe was en my land

here much has been revealed to me about what my life consisted of and my country

The present project, which is offered here as work-in-progress and intended as part of a bigger research project, took me on a different course than I had anticipated. If there is a story, or stories, to be teased out of the letters that originally found their way across the ocean, were subsequently passed on to my father and his brothers, and which eventually came into my possession after my own mother's demise about three years ago, then it is the story of the remarkable "reading" of events over which ordinary people had had no control, but which resulted in the extraordinary insight they eventually managed to derive from them. In retrospect, and given the challenges with which their descendants currently have to come to terms, I would think that rather than the events of the war, be they dramatic or boring as the case may be, the reflections of ordinary people like those offered by my grandparents, the thoughts and beliefs they found worthwhile sharing repeatedly on scraps of paper covered entirely in ornate handwriting, deserve our serious scrutiny.

But that is a topic for future research.

## Notes

- 1) It is interesting that Karel Schoeman implies that there could be another reason for the scarcity of dramatic events reported in personal documents – the fact that, to paraphrase him, most of the people suffered from boredom for the greater part of the time. In other words, there was, for example, little worth writing about in terms of dramatic events.
- 2) It seems ironical that as a descendant of the men and women who were the victims of inexplicable conduct, I apparently have to thank the incompetence of a respected general for the collection of letters written by family or close friends that originally found their way across the ocean, that were subsequently passed on to my father and his brothers, and eventually came to rest, temporarily, in my study after my mother's death.
- 3) This term has been derived from the English "hands-uppers", referring to the practice of raising your hands as a sign of surrender to an adversary.
- 4) Although my grandfather's name appears in the list of burghers who did attend the school, there are sufficient indications that the burghers found other ways of occupying themselves. So, for example, in my family as well as in numerous other families, I presume, the objects carved from the blackish wood on the island, and brought home with them as presents for their loved ones, have become treasured heirlooms in our family.

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