

## The Boer War, history and poetry

Hardy wrote several poems in response to the Second Boer War (October 1899 – May 1902). The Boers were settlers and farmers of mainly Dutch origin. The word 'boer' was originally Dutch, and simply means 'farmer'. The Boers were descendants of Dutch and Huguenot ancestors, who had settled in Southern Africa and the Transvaal (land in north-eastern South Africa) during the seventeenth century.

However, gold had recently been discovered there and many people, including the British, came prospecting for it. The Boers were fighting for their independence while the British were claiming rights. At first the Boers succeeded but by 1902 they had been forced to surrender. The British were much criticised internationally for using concentration camps into which they herded a hundred thousand women and children. The Boer Republics of South Africa and the Orange Free State became British colonies by the end of the war, and later formed the Union of South Africa. Mark Weber has written a very clear item about the conflict. He states that this was a war between 'globe-girdling British Empire, backed by international finance' and 'a small pioneering nation of independent-minded farmers, ranchers and merchants'. You can find out much more about the war in two articles by him, both entitled The Boer War Remembered

[http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v18/v18n3p14\\_Weber.html](http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v18/v18n3p14_Weber.html)

<http://www.boer.co.za/boerwar/weber.html>

'Imperialism in the dock: the Boer War' is a BBC website which explains the Boer War clearly <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/513944.stm>

As you would expect, this website, <http://www.boer-war.com>, contains comprehensive information about every aspect of the Second Boer War (and the First). You may find the picture gallery particularly interesting. Page 3 has a photo entitled: Drummer outside tent. On page 4 is a heart-rending photo called 'Relaxing after Colesberg 1900' of a very young drummer boy (with drum) writing home.

Hardy's antipathy to war in these poems is echoed in some of his letters, although it is fair to say that his feelings about war were mixed. In a letter to a friend, he described his conversation with a vicar:

'We the civilized world have given Christianity a fair trial for nearly 2000 years, & it has not yet taught countries the rudimentary virtue of keeping peace: so why not throw it over, & try, say, Buddhism? (I may have said the same thing to you). It shocked him, for he could only see the unchristianity of Kruger.' (Feb 25, 1900. Letters, vII, 248). (By Kruger, Hardy means Paul Kruger, leader of the South African Republic, or Transvaal.)

Hardy's wife, Emma, was also opposed to the war. She thought it an imperialistic smash-and-grab: 'the Boers fight for homes & liberties — we fight for the Transvaal Funds, diamonds, & gold!'

St Andrews University has excellent websites on Thomas Hardy and the Boer war which you can investigate on

[www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pvm/HardyBWar/poetry.html](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pvm/HardyBWar/poetry.html)

The same university also has a selection of Boer War poetry on this website:

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pvm/HardyBWar/poems.html>

It includes Hardy's: 'The Departure (Southampton Docks: October 1899)'; 'Drummer Hodge'; 'The Souls of the Slain'; and 'A Christmas Ghost-Story'. You will find other poems of the time taking different points of view: A C Swinburne's infamous 'Transvaal'; an extract from Henley's 'The Song of the Sword'; Kipling's 'The Absent Minded Beggar' and part of 'Alfred's Song' by Alfred Austin who was poet laureate during the Second Boer War. The selection ends with T W H Crosland's 'Slain' and A E Housman's 'Astronomy'. Some of these are, to our modern ears, horribly jingoistic, exhorting Britain to defeat the foreigner and enlarge her empire; some are surprisingly modern in their anti-war sentiments. Swinburne's 'Transvaal' ends:

scourge these dogs, agape with jaws afoam,  
Down out of life. Strike, England, and strike home.  
October 9, 1899.

Obviously this attitude is far removed from Hardy's, whose 'A Christmas Ghost-Story' provoked denunciation for pacifism from the *Daily Chronicle* of 25 December 1899.

A critical look at 'Drummer Hodge' can be found at:

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pvm/HardyBWar/pracrit.html>

The website: <http://trish-m.hubpages.com/hub/A-Wife-in-London-Thomas-Hardy> gives a very accessible look at two of the Boer War poems, 'A Wife in London' and 'Drummer Hodge'.

Another website you might investigate is

<http://www.channel4learning.com/support/programmenotes/netnotes/sub/subid23.htm>

This website contains photos from the Boer War and information on drummers:

<http://streamsandforests.wordpress.com/tag/military-drum/>

From Wikipedia: "Before motorized transport became widespread, drummers played a key role in military conflicts. The drum cadences provided set a steady marching pace, better than often accompanying wind instruments such as flutes..., and kept up the troops' morale on the battlefield. In some armies drums also assisted in combat by keeping cadence for firing and loading drills with muzzle loading weapons."

'From Decomposition to Dissolution: a reading of Thomas Hardy's war poems' by Cristina Ceron is full of interesting information. <http://www.ablemuse.com/v9/essay/cristina-ceron>