

BMJ

---

The War In South Africa

Author(s): Anthony A. Bowlby and Frederick Treves

Source: *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2061 (Jun. 30, 1900), pp. 1610-1612

Published by: [BMJ](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20265027>

Accessed: 07/02/2015 12:02

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Digitization of the British Medical Journal and its forerunners (1840-1996) was completed by the U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM) in partnership with The Wellcome Trust and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in the UK. This content is also freely available on PubMed Central.



BMJ is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The British Medical Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## THE WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA.

## THE PORTLAND HOSPITAL IN SOUTH AFRICA.

By ANTHONY A. BOWLBY, F.R.C.S.,

Senior Surgeon to the Hospital; Assistant-Surgeon to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London.

*Bloemfontein, May 31st, 1900.*

## SITE OF THE HOSPITAL.

THE Portland Hospital arrived here six weeks ago, having been sent up from Rondebosch as soon as the line was clear enough to allow it to get through, these difficulties of transit being due to the destruction of the Orange River bridges and the urgent necessity of sending supplies of food and clothing for the army.

We found an admirable camping ground about a mile to the south-west of the town on the slope of a hill, and near to excellent wells, the water supply being indeed the chief attraction, for much of the drinking water in the town itself was bad, and it had to be carted to very considerable distances owing to the occupation of the waterworks by the enemy, and the cutting off of the regular supply.

## ENTERIC FEVER.

The health of the troops was bad. They had been without proper tents or shelter, and the nights had often been pouring wet; the ground in many places was a swamp, and much of it had been fouled. Owing to the forced march from Kimberley many regiments were short of boots and clothing, and food had been scanty and men had frequently been on short rations. There was, therefore, plenty of reason for sickness, and diarrhoea and dysentery were common. There was unfortunately a worse enemy to come, and within a few days of their occupation of Bloemfontein enteric fever broke out in many camps and spread rapidly. It appeared to have been brought in by the men in many cases, but it is certain that in many other cases it was acquired through bad water or other local insanitary conditions, and various localities, such as Thaba-N'chu, acquired a bad reputation, which was very well deserved. At this time there were no general hospitals at Bloemfontein, and in spite of utilising many public buildings in the town the field hospitals rapidly became overcrowded, so that they had to accommodate three or four times the numbers for which they were equipped, and it became impossible to nurse or treat the patients satisfactorily.

As soon, therefore, as we were ready to take the patients the tents were filled with cases of enteric fever from field hospitals, and it became necessary to increase the hospital accommodation by the addition of more tents, so that we soon had 160 beds instead of 100. We put aside two large tents holding 18 beds each for the treatment of enteric alone, but unfortunately these were quite insufficient for all our cases of this class, which at one time reached nearly 100.

## THE WOUNDED.

The opening of Nos. 8 and 9 General Hospitals now enabled the field hospitals to empty, in part at least, and to join in the general advance, and a few days after we arrived our first wounded were sent to us, whilst within the next fortnight some 60 or 70 of them came into hospital. They were chiefly men of the cavalry and mounted infantry, and almost all were wounded by Mauser bullets, though one at least had been hit by an expanding bullet.

Among the first thirty-five men who arrived no fewer than six had been wounded in the knee-joint. In two of these the lower end of the femur was broken across and comminuted, and in two others it had been simply bored through without any transverse fracture. In another case the upper end of the tibia had been similarly perforated, and in the sixth patient the bullet had passed through the left thigh and lodged in the right knee. This man was also the subject of enteric fever at the time he was shot, but this made no difference to his wounds, which healed well on the left side at once, though the entry wound over the right knee did not close till the bullet was extracted after he had passed through a very severe attack of enteric fever. In the case of the patient shot through the tibia the joint remained painful and swollen for

several weeks, and showed a decided tendency to contraction and ankylosis, though there was no tendency at all to suppuration and no pyrexia.

Another interesting case was that of an officer shot in the gluteal region two days before admission; the bullet had not perforated, and there was much stiffness of the hip-joint. The *x* rays showed the bullet lying close to the articulation, and an exploratory operation disclosed it embedded in the bone forming the upper part of the acetabulum, a position from which it required a good deal of force to extract it. This officer had previously been in the Portland Hospital for a wound through the right side, and he again returned to his regiment a fortnight after the bullet was removed from the neighbourhood of his hip joint.

At one of the numerous fights near the waterworks the regiment known as "Marshall's Horse" suffered severely, especially in officers. Of these one was killed, the major himself was shot through the left lung and three of his juniors were also hit. One of these had a slight flesh wound of the arm, but the other two were both severely wounded. In one of these the bullet had entered the middle of the third sacral vertebra and had emerged through the abdomen two inches above the spine of the pubes and two inches to the left of the middle line. There was no symptom of peritonitis, so no operation was performed. Recovery was uninterrupted save for a curious attack of localised pain with rapid pulse and pyrexia three weeks later, which, however, passed away in a day or two. A temporary incontinence of faeces suggested injury of the sacral nerves where the bullet had traversed the spine, but this trouble lasted only a few days.

## BOER BULLETS.

As to the bullets used by the Boers the majority are certainly Mauser, though not only have we seen several wounds caused by expanding bullets, but Mr. Cuthbert-Wallace found at Winberg a large number of expanding bullets of many varieties, and it is curious that in some commandoes at least the use of them is increasingly common. Shell wounds are very few.

## WOUNDED BOERS.

We have had six wounded Boers amongst our patients, all of them Free Staters from the De Wet's Dorp commando—large-limbed well-built men. One of them had a fractured femur, and another a bullet through the knee with partial paralysis of the parts supplied by the external popliteal nerve, but there was no appreciable difference between the wounds inflicted by the Lee-Metford bullets and the Mauser. Four or five men have had typhoid fever as a complication of their wounds, but the latter have done quite well in spite of this.

## THE CLIMATE.

The climate at present is excellent. The days are bright, clear, and sunny, and the air is dry. The temperature falls suddenly directly after sunset, which is now at about 5 P.M., and the nights are cold and often frosty—we had half an inch of ice in our buckets last week. It is said by the people here that enteric fever always stops when the frost begins, so it is to be hoped that this will be the case again.

## MEDICAL ARRANGEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA.

## MR. BURDETT-COUTTS'S ALLEGATIONS.

THE *Times* on the June 27th published a letter, dated Cape-town, May 29th, from Mr. W. Burdett-Coutts, in which he alleges that the medical arrangements in South Africa have failed to keep pace with the epidemic of typhoid fever, which has caused a very large number of cases of illness, especially among the troops in and about Bloemfontein. He gives a graphic and very distressing account of the overcrowded condition of a field hospital used as a stationary hospital in Bloemfontein.

The letter as it stands would certainly convey the impression and, as a matter of fact, has conveyed the impression, that the deplorable condition under which Mr. Burdett-Coutts described cases of typhoid fever to have been treated in this field hospital were typical of those to which the majority of the patients who have been treated at Bloemfontein have been subjected. Mr. Burdett-Coutts's allegations, the gravity of which he states he fully appreciates, undoubtedly demand the most searching examination. With no desire to condone or

excuse such deficiencies, as he alleges to have existed, we may point out that Mr. Burdett-Coutts's statements are in some respects contrary to information in our possession. He makes no mention, though his letter is dated May 29th, of the three large military general hospitals which, as we stated last week, were in full working order early in May, and had apparently been taken into use some time during the previous month if not earlier.

There is no doubt that there has been a great deal of typhoid fever in the army, especially among the forces engaged north of the Orange River. Mr. Fripp, the Chief Surgeon of the Imperial Yeomanry Hospital, in a letter dated June 4th, informs us that he had shortly before visited Bloemfontein and Kroonstad. In Bloemfontein there were at that time over 5,000 sick, most of whom were suffering from enteric fever; while in Kroonstad the three hotels, the Town Hall, and the church had been converted into hospitals, even the billiard tables being requisitioned to accommodate cases of enteric fever. He adds that as the railway had been opened the Surgeon-General was engaged in rapidly pushing up adequate hospital accommodation. The train in which Mr. Fripp returned brought down 241 sick to Bloemfontein, where they were admitted into one of the general hospitals, bringing the number of sick it contained "to the huge total of 1,800." Mr. Fripp describes the water supply all over the country as extremely bad. "Water," he says, "in the small streams at the bottom of the river beds is often very muddy. Dead horses are generally to be seen in the streams, and they are never above the strong suspicion of being typhoid infected. It is impossible for all water that is required for drinking purposes to be boiled; there is not fuel enough."

Sir William Thomson, writing from Bloemfontein early in May, stated in a letter published in the BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL of June 2nd that there were between 3,000 and 4,000 sick in the town, and that of these 1,200 were cases of enteric fever. He stated that the three general hospitals were crowded, that several of the public buildings were utilised for the accommodation of the sick, and that there were in the town in addition the Irish, the Portland, and the Langman Hospitals.

#### *Died of Disease in South Africa.*

Week Ending.	Officers.	Men.	Total.
February 17th ... ..	1	49	50
" 24th ... ..	6	111	117
March 3rd ... ..	3	89	92
" 10th ... ..	4	111	115
" 17th ... ..	8	85	90
" 24th ... ..	5	179	184
" 31st ... ..	5	159	164
April 7th ... ..	3	167	170
" 14th ... ..	9*	368*	377*
" 21st ... ..			
" 28th ... ..			
May 5th ... ..	4	197	200
" 12th ... ..	7	193	200
" 19th ... ..	9	302	311
" 26th ... ..	8	361	369
June 2nd ... ..	20*	538*	558*
" 9th ... ..			
" 16th ... ..			
" 23rd ... ..			

\* These figures are for the fortnight, April 7th to 21st and May 26th to June 9th. They were published as figures for the fortnight, no tables having been published for the weeks ending April 14th and June 2nd.

The amount of sickness in the forces in South Africa has been large, about 7 per cent., but this is less than in previous campaigns. The exact figures are not available, but the above table, compiled from the official returns issued by the War Office, shows the number of officers and men who have died of disease in South Africa from the middle of February to June 23rd. The number of deaths attributed to enteric fever is not distinguished, but there can be no doubt that a very large proportion have been due to enteric fever, and a large number also to dysentery. It will be remembered that Cronje surrendered on February 27th, and it will be seen that a sudden rise in the number of deaths from disease occurred between three and four weeks later. Mr. Watson Cheyne attributed the great amount of typhoid fever prevalent in Bloemfontein at the end of March and the beginning

of April to infection by the polluted water of the Modder river, which the troops were compelled to drink during the time for which Cronje remained in his laager, and Mr. Bowlby, whose letter is printed above, appears to entertain a similar opinion, though he speaks also of other infected places. It will be seen also that there was another sudden rise in the number of deaths from disease in the weeks ending May 19th and 26th; this was some seven or eight weeks after the water-works of Bloemfontein were occupied by the enemy and the water supply cut off. Whether these two circumstances are to be connected or not it will be as yet premature to conjecture.

#### LETTER FROM MR. TREVES.

We are indebted to Mr. Treves for the following letter which he has written in response to our request for his opinion:

SIR,—I have read Mr. Burdett-Coutts's letter in the *Times* of to-day, and am shocked and surprised at the report he furnishes.

I left Natal in March, some time after the relief of Ladysmith, and the account I gave on my return to England of the work of the Army Medical Service in Natal was based upon my experience up to the period of my departure.

Mr. Burdett-Coutts comments upon this account as if it dealt with events which were to be in the future, rather than with events which have happened in the past.

To every word I have said as to the excellence of the army medical arrangements in Natal I adhere most absolutely.

It is difficult to believe that a department which stood with such credit the exceptional strain of the Natal campaign can have suddenly exhibited the alarming collapse depicted by the writer of the letter in question. My experience had induced me to think that the organisation of the Army Medical Service was sound and good, that the general scheme of work and of administration was efficient, and that the lavish arrangements planned by the Director-General were carried out by his subordinates in a liberal, thorough, and business-like manner.

There was no evidence of the intervention of red tape nor of hindrance by petty formalities, and the hospital work was not only not hampered by other departments, but was helped in every way with the heartiest readiness.

I cannot think that our sick have been treated with "neglect" and "inhumanity," as Mr. Burdett-Coutts asserts.

Instead of neglecting their patients the surgeons I met worked with heart and soul, sparing themselves in no particular, and of the untiring and unselfish devotion of the nurses I have already spoken.

This war has been a war of surprises. The casualties have been higher than the gloomiest ever dreamt of, and there was no reason to anticipate that the outbreak of enteric fever would assume the enormous proportions it has assumed.

The circumstances of war unfortunately render an immense amount of suffering and distress absolutely unavoidable, and the difficulties of furnishing adequate supplies from a far-distant base are extreme.

I left South Africa with the impression that nothing more could have been done to mitigate the sufferings of the sick and wounded than had been done when a temperate regard for the circumstances of war was kept in mind.

The Army Medical Service can lay no claim to the gift of prophecy, nor to the power of anticipating the future, but so far as any reasonable foresight can go the department seems to have done all that in fairness could have been expected of it. Mr. Burdett-Coutts will, no doubt, substantiate the points detailed in his report, but his preliminary account is conveyed in language which so savours of the theatrical that it fails to carry with it an overwhelming conviction.

Mobile field hospitals, if they have to do the work they are intended to do, cannot take beds with them. It is better for a typhoid patient to lie upon a blanket and waterproof sheet on the ground—as Mr. Burdett-Coutts describes—than to be hurried helter-skelter to the base.

No human being can tell how the progress of an epidemic may proceed, nor how the numbers of the sick will be distributed. Preparations may be made for 1,000, and the admissions may not reach 10. It is impossible to avoid overcrowding at times, and equally impossible to provide in every



detail for emergencies which no reasonable foresight could anticipate.

That our gallant soldiers should suffer is deplorable indeed, but the blame must fall rather upon the miserable fortunes of war than upon a department which has spared neither men nor money nor care nor devotion in a work which has assumed dimensions out of all proportion to that anticipated at the outset.

The seat of war is at least three weeks distant from the seat of supplies, and in those three weeks a region free from disease may become the seat of a desperate epidemic. The movements of the troops cannot be exactly foretold. It would be better for the country to be flooded with doctors and nurses rather than that the soldiers should suffer, but it is quite impossible that the medical arrangements can at a time of war overthrow all those circumstances of transport and supply upon which the conduct of the campaign depends.

Unfortunately in war the war comes first, but I should imagine that in no campaign has there ever been such solicitous and successful care for the sick.—Yours faithfully,

FREDERICK TREVES.

## ASSOCIATION INTELLIGENCE.

### COUNCIL.

#### NOTICE OF SPECIAL MEETING.

A SPECIAL meeting of the Council will be held at the office of the Association, No. 429, Strand, London, W.C., on Wednesday the 4th day of July next, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

FRANCIS FOWKE, *General Secretary*.

June 20th, 1900.

### COUNCIL.

#### NOTICE OF MEETING.

A MEETING of the Council will be held in the Council Room of the Association at 429, Strand (corner of Agar Street), London, on Wednesday the 18th day of July next, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon; not on July 11th as previously announced.

June 20th, 1900.

FRANCIS FOWKE, *General Secretary*.

### BRANCH MEETINGS TO BE HELD.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND HUNTINGDONSHIRE BRANCH.—The annual meeting of this Branch will be held on July 5th, at Royston, Mr. D. B. Balding, F.R.C.S., President, in the chair. Programme: 2.15 P.M., Luncheon at the Beeches, Royston. 3 P.M., General meeting at the Institute, Royston, for business, election of officers, etc. The following papers will be read: Dr. Joseph Griffiths: Notes on the History of the Branch for the First Fifty Years. Dr. Windsor: A Case of Hypertrophic Paralysis. The President: A Case of Painless Gangrene of Fingers. The President and Dr. Joseph Griffiths: A Case of Universal Ankylosis or Arthritis Ossificans.—E. LLOYD JONES, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, Honorary Secretary.

NORTH WALES BRANCH.—The annual meeting will be held at Denbigh on Thursday, July 12th. Members having any new member to propose, paper to read, or case to communicate, should notify the same before June 30th.—W. JONES-MORRIS (Portmadoc), H. JONES-ROBERTS (Pen-y-groes), Honorary Secretaries.

SOUTH WALES AND MONMOUTHSHIRE BRANCH.—The annual meeting of this Branch will be held at Cardiff on July 3rd.—A. SHEEN, Cardiff, Honorary Secretary.

BORDER COUNTIES BRANCH: SECTION FOR THE COUNTIES OF ROXBURGH, BERWICK, SELKIRK, AND PEEBLES.—This Section will meet at the Roxburgh District Asylum, Melrose, on Thursday, July 12th, at 3.45 P.M., on the kind invitation of Dr. Carlyle Johnstone, the Medical Superintendent, who will conduct the members over the wards of the new hospital and introduce a discussion on What to do with the Insane Poor Man. Dr. Johnstone has most kindly offered to provide tea after the meeting. It is hoped there will be a large turn-out of members to show their appreciation of Dr. Johnstone's kindness and hospitality.—W. HALL CALVERT (Melrose), Honorary Secretary.

NORTH OF IRELAND BRANCH.—The annual meeting of this Branch will be held at Portrush, co. Antrim, on Thursday, July 5th, at 11.30 A.M., in the Town Hall. The business will consist of the annual report of council, annual statement of accounts, draft scheme of subcommittee on nursing in Ulster, report of deputation to Local Government Board, election of office-bearers for the ensuing year, and the following cases will be shown

and papers read: The President (Dr. Martin): Portrush from a Medical Aspect, and show several specimens. Dr. Stafford Smith and Mr. Kirk: Notes of a Successful Case of Splenectomy. Mr. Kirk: Notes on the Successful Intra-abdominal Fixation of the Rectum for Complete Prolapse. Dr. Williamson: (1) A Case of Uterus Bicornis; (2) a Case of Acephalic Fetus. Dr. Mitchell: (1) A Successful Case of Ligation of the Third Stage of Subclavian for Axillary Aneurysm; (2) Notes on Two Gastric Operations. Dr. E. C. Biggar: Some Points in the Treatment of Typhoid Fever. Dr. John M. MacCormac: Neurasthenic Dyspepsia. Dr. Calwell: (1) Notes of a Case of Gastropexia (with Dilatation) due to Duodenal Stenosis; (2) Photographs of a Case of Onychogryphosis.—W. CALWELL, 1, College Square, Belfast, Honorary Secretary.

SOUTH OF IRELAND BRANCH.—The annual general meeting of this Branch will be held at 118, Patrick Street, Cork, at 4.30 P.M. on Saturday, June 30th, for the election of office-bearers and representatives, and to transact any medico-ethical business.—PHILIP G. LEE, 25, Patrick's Hill, Cork, Honorary Secretary.

### METROPOLITAN COUNTIES BRANCH.

THE forty-eighth annual meeting of this Branch was held on June 19th at the Hotel Cecil, Mr. BRYANT in the chair.

*Confirmation of Minutes.*—The minutes of the previous meeting were read and approved.

*Mr. Long and the Extinction of Rabies.*—Sir WILLIAM GOWERS proposed the following resolution:

The members of the Metropolitan Counties Branch of the British Medical Association beg to express to the President of the Board of Agriculture their appreciation of the success of the measures he has adopted for the extinction of rabies, of his firmness in maintaining them, and their sense of the great service he has rendered to the community by thus abolishing a cause of death and intense suffering to both man and animals.

He pointed out that no case of rabies had occurred for six months owing to the action of Mr. Long.—The PRESIDENT seconded the resolution, which was supported by Sir SAMUEL WILKS and others, and carried without a dissentient vote.

*Reports of Council and Treasurer.*—Reports of the retiring Council and Treasurer were read and adopted.

*Election of Officers.*—The following list of officers were elected for 1900-1901: *President-elect*: Dr. Stephen Mackenzie. *Vice-Presidents*: Mr. Bryant, Mr. Andrew Clark, Dr. Farquharson, Dr. Oswald. *Treasurer*: Mr. George Eastes. *Honorary Secretaries*: Mr. Betham Robinson and Dr. Washbourn. *Ordinary Members of Council*: \*Campbell Boyd, \*George Brown, \*Frederick Durham, Frederic Eve, \*George Greenwood, \*Major Greenwood, M.D., W. S. A. Griffith, M.D., \*G. A. Heron, M.D., \*J. Brindley James, \*Hugh R. Ker, J. A. Masters, M.D., Isambard Owen, M.D., George Rowell, \*W. Knowsley Sibley, M.D., \*Crawford Thomson, M.D., Frederick Wallace, \*Dawson Williams, M.D. *Representatives of the Branch on the Council of the Association*: \*H. Radcliffe Crocker, M.D., \*George Eastes, M.B., Victor Horsley, F.R.S., \*Leonard W. Sedgwick, M.D., \*C. S. Tones, F.R.S., and the Senior Honorary Secretary. *Representatives of the Branch on the Parliamentary Bills Committee*: \*George Brown, \*Major Greenwood, M.D., \*Victor Horsley, F.R.S., \*Dawson Williams, M.D. *Members of the Ethical Committee of the Branch*: R. Percy Smith, M.D., C. Crawford Thomson, M.D., Frederick Wallace. (\*Filled the same office during the past year.)

*Installation of New President.*—Mr. BRYANT then invited the new President, Mr. George Eastes, to take the chair.

*Votes of Thanks.*—Votes of thanks were passed to the retiring President and other officers.

*President's Address.*—Mr. EASTES gave his inaugural address upon "Our Numbers and Our Work at the End of the Century," which will appear in the BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL. A vote of thanks to Mr. Eastes concluded the proceedings.

*Dinner.*—Subsequently the members dined together, Mr. Eastes in the chair, being supported by Dr. Ward Cousins, President of the Association; Dr. Roberts Thomson, President of the Council; Mr. Andrew Clark, Dr. Stephen Mackenzie, Dr. Pavy, Dr. Dawson Williams, Mr. Butlin, Mr. Fowke, and others. After dinner a capital programme of music and recitations was given, and the following toasts duly honoured: (1) "Her Majesty the Queen and the other Members of the Royal Family;" (2) "The Imperial Forces," proposed by Dr. PAVY and responded to by Brigade-Surgeon ANDREW CLARK; (3) "The British Medical Association," proposed by Dr. RADCLIFFE CROCKER and acknowledged by Dr. WARD COUSINS, the President; (4) "The Metropolitan Counties Branch," proposed by the PRESIDENT OF COUNCIL, Dr. Roberts Thomson,