A WOMAN’S WORLD AT A TIME OF WAR: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED WOMEN’S DIARIES DURING THE ANGLO-BOER WAR 1899-1902

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In the case of the Anglo-Boer War masculine military history has attracted scholars, as has the suffering and martyrdom of female internees in the concentration camps. Conspicuously overlooked by scholars are the wartime plights of black women and privileged white women. The focus of this study are those white females who remained outside of the camps. Some such women staked their claim to history by keeping diaries of their wartime experiences. Two in particular, Isabella Lipp and Nonnie De la Rey, chronicled opposing sides of the conflict. Their testimony is studied here both descriptively and comparatively. Because the challenges of war provoked differing responses, adjunct to Nonnie and Isabella's journals are the diaries of Alida Badenhorst, Elizabeth Henrietta Martyn (Bessie) Collins and the unpublished notes of Florence Burgers—daughter of the Transvaal's second president. All these women were privileged and hence advantaged but they also struggled daily for survival and responded proactively. Mrs. Isabella Lipp, wife of a prominent banker, recorded her perception of the war from a cramped third-floor apartment in Johannesburg. Very much in tune with the ideological aspects of war, she wanted imperialism upheld even amidst the unfair cruelty that she witnessed. Nonnie De la Rey, wife of General Koos De la Rey, fled the enemy and lived on the open veld. Her life was not as monotonous or lonely as Isabella's. Had the consequences been less decisive this may have been an exciting adventure. What emerges from these sources, which are representative of white women of society, is a surprising female response to wartime conditions. That response included the sadness, struggle and toil that might be expected, but, significantly, it also included remarkable resilience—manifested in a variety of ways in the face of momentous circumstances. The forgoing findings contribute to the war’s social/gender history by including “people without history” within the written historical record.1 Women displayed a unique reliance and bond between themselves and their black workers; domestic duties and roles were completely disrupted; and the constant anxiety and lack of news about loved ones caused acute family distress. Did women snivel submissively, waiting to be rescued by men? Were they victims of circumstances thrust upon them? Did they succumb to the Victorian model of female fragility? My findings offer evidence to the contrary.

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