

The Munster Fusiliers and the South African War 1899-1902

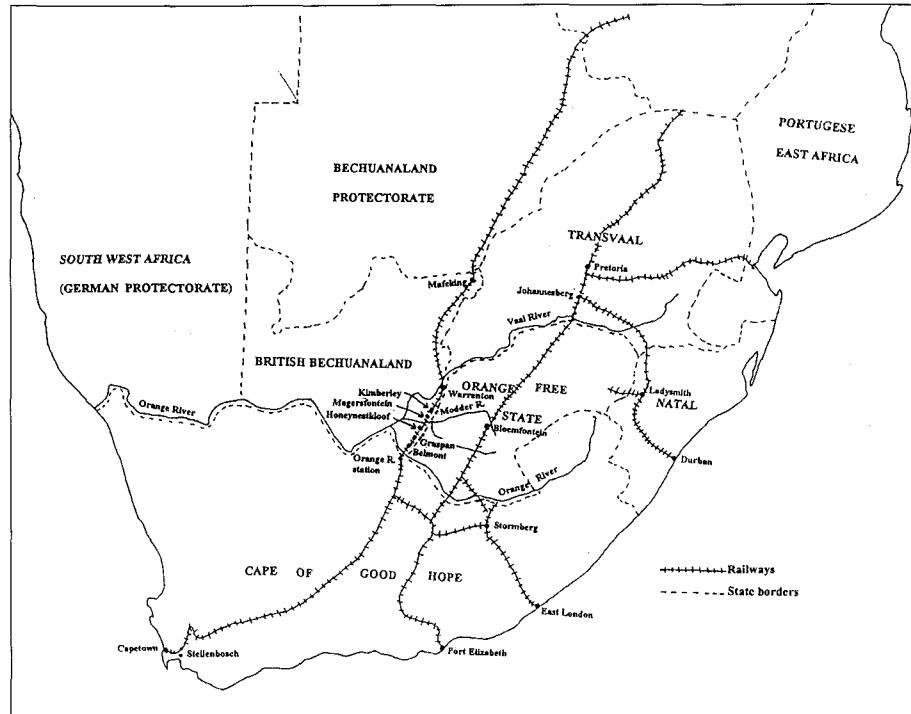
In 1652, Dutch settlers established Cape Town as a stopping off point for ships of the Dutch India Company. During the Napoleonic wars, British forces took Cape Colony by force of arms. Although the British returned the colony to the Dutch in 1802-3, they took it again in 1806. After the defeat of Napoleon, they gained ownership of the colony in 1814 by the Treaty of Paris.

In December 1820, the Rev. Pat Scully set up the first Irish Catholic mission at the Cape of Good Hope.

By 1836, the Dutch farmers, tired of British rule, began leaving Cape Colony in large numbers to colonise new territory in the north-east of the country. The abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire and the policy of handing back land which the Dutch felt was theirs to the indigenous people caused discontent. Having defeated the native tribes, the Dutch settled in Natal. Others moved north of the Orange River, while some more of them settled across the Vaal River. (See map)

Britain, afraid that the trouble between the Dutch settlers and the Zulus would spread to the Cape Colony, annexed Natal in 1843. Five years later, Britain declared all land between the Orange and Vaal rivers to be British territory. In 1854, they gave up that claim and recognised the independence of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. By that time, a 'Volksraad', or parliament, had been elected in both republics, each with its own president. The Dutch settlers lived mainly by farming, and as the Dutch word for farmer is Boer, they became known as Boers.

Between the 1860s and the 1880s, diamonds and gold were discovered in the Boer states. The British then decided that all parts of South Africa were to be under the crown. By April 1877, fighting between the Boers and the Zulus in the Transvaal had led the republic to bankruptcy. Britain intervened and annexed the Transvaal. In December 1880, the Transvaal Boers declared war on the British, and in February 1881, they defeated the British at the battle of Majuba Hill. The following August, Britain signed an agreement which gave complete independence to the Transvaal Boers, but foreign policy was to remain in the hands of the British.



Map of South Africa, 1899-1902.

by Des Ryan Part One

After regaining their independence, the Boers were faced with new problems. The discovery of diamonds and gold, and the richest goldfield in the world being in the Transvaal, had brought an influx of 'Uitlanders' (foreigners), mainly British, into the Boer republics. They were beginning to outnumber the Boers and began demanding the right to vote. The President of the Transvaal at that time, Paul Kruger, was determined not to let them have it. This played into the hands of the young, rich, 37-year-old Cecil Rhodes (founder of De Beers Diamond Co.). Rhodes' dream was that Britain would rule a stretch of land from the Cape to Cairo. He was appointed Prime Minister of Cape Colony in 1890. In December 1895, Rhodes gave his support for a raid into the Transvaal by the Commissioner of British Bechuanaland, Dr. Leander Starr Jameson. Leading 500 armed raiders in an invasion of the Transvaal, Jameson was captured, and Rhodes had to resign his position. After this, distrust of the British grew stronger and Kruger, with the

collusion of the Orange Free State government, passed laws limiting the rights of the 'Uitlanders'. On top of that, the Boers began importing arms from Germany.

In March 1899, the 'Uitlanders', to the annoyance of Kruger, had a petition of their grievances presented to Queen Victoria. After a summer of fruitless attempts to reach a settlement, the Boers of the Orange Free State declared themselves in support of their 'brothers' in the Transvaal in their dispute with the British. By October, both sides saw that war was inevitable; the Boers and Britain began preparing to issue ultimatums. The Boers were first to issue theirs on October 9th, demanding that British troops move back from Boer frontiers. Britain rejected the ultimatum, and war began three days later.

At the outbreak of the war there were about 12,000 British soldiers in South Africa. An army corps was sent out from England under the command of General Buller. Splitting his forces, Buller sent General Methuen up the Western Railway line to relieve Kimberly and Mafeking, while he himself headed eastwards towards Ladysmith, in Natal. At the start



President Kruger and his advisers.

of the hostilities, the railway lines were vital to the British due to the fact that soldiers could be moved more quickly, or so they thought.

In an effort to stop British forces entering Boer territory, Boer commando units moved east and west, out of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, to cut the railway lines. On November 21st, General Metheun, with a large force of men, which included the Munster Fusiliers, began their advance towards Kimberly. In the flat open country, the infantry marched behind an armoured train.

A day or two before President Kruger's ultimatum, a manifesto appealing to all Irishmen living in the Transvaal to take up arms and defend the state made its appearance. A section of the manifesto ran as follows:- "The Government of the

Transvaal being now threatened with extinction by our ancient foe, England, feel it is the duty of all true Irishmen to throw in their lot with the former, and be prepared by force of arms to maintain the independence of the country that has given them a home. The Treaty Stone of Limerick remains to this day a mute but eloquent witness to England's worthless promises and broken faith."¹

It appears that the British government had already anticipated a conflict with the Boers as early as August 1899. At that time, the 1st Battalion Royal Munster Fusiliers were stationed at Kilworth Camp, Fermoy, Co. Cork. The battalion, 23 officers and 789 other ranks, left Kilworth on August 23rd for Southampton; on August 24th, they set sail on the "Arundel Castle" for South Africa, arriving at Capetown on the 16th September.² After

leaving a detachment at Capetown, the rest of the battalion marched to Wynberg barracks. From there on October 23rd, minus 'F' Company, they proceeded to the town of Stellenbosch, which is about 30 miles from Capetown. There they formed a mounted infantry company. A few days later, five companies of the battalion, including the mounted infantry, were deployed at the Orange River bridge and station, on the border of the Orange Free State, where they were joined by the Northumberland Fusiliers. Meanwhile the battalion headquarters, which was at Stellenbosch, was moved back to Capetown.

While they were waiting for the arrival of Lieut.-Gen. Metheun's force of 10,000 men, the Munsters mounted infantry company made a reconnaissance foray towards the town of Belmont, which was held by the Boers. Metheun's force arrived in the area on November 20th. Meanwhile two companies of the Munsters were attached to the 9th Infantry Brigade for the attack on Belmont. Prior to the opening shots of the engagement, the two companies of the Munsters had not received any rations. After their midday meal on November 22nd, they had marched 16 miles and were on continuous duty except for about six hours that night, when it was impossible to sleep because of the cold. When the battle began in the early hours of the 23rd, the Munsters, who were in the reserves, entered the fight to support the 2nd Coldstream Guards. By 10.00 that morning, Belmont was taken and the battle was over.

The men returned to camp without any food and very little water. The official history of the battalion tells us that, owing to some mistake, the Munsters had received no food because the camp kettle and blankets had been left behind at a place called Witteputs.³

After Belmont, companies of the Munsters were deployed along the railway line from the Orange River, as Gen. Metheun made his advance. Others were employed on armoured train duty and were present at the battles of Graspan (Nov 25th), the Modder River (Nov 28th) and during the battle of Magersfontein (Dec 11th). It was at Magersfontein that Metheun's advance was brought to a standstill.

By December 1899, the Boers had the upper hand and were laying siege to the British-held towns of Mafeking in British Bechuanaland, Ladysmith in Natal, and Kimberly. They also had victories over British forces at the battles of Stormberg (Cape Colony) and Colenso (Natal).

In Limerick, a reporter with the *Munster News* newspaper had paid a visit to the Clothing Factory in Edward Street, where nearly 1,000 workers were employed, to see the new khaki uniforms being made for the soldiers in South Africa. He was disappointed to find that, although thousands of uniforms were being manufactured, the khaki uniforms took up only a small part of the production line. He was heartened to find that



Royal Munster Fusiliers fighting at Honey Nest Kloof, 16 February 1900. Note the dead and wounded soldiers in the trench.

Photo courtesy Clem Brosnahan.

production wasn't entirely confined to Limerick, but extended to Dublin and other centres, where branch houses had been established.⁴

It was during December that the first batch of reservists arrived to join the Munsters in South Africa. By that time, the battalion was stationed at Honey Nest Kloof, and the arrival of the reservists brought their strength to over 1,000 men.

Some letters written home during the early months of 1900 show that morale was low and that the men weren't happy with the way they were being treated. The first letter reads:-

Dear Mother,

We are still here at Honey Nest Kloof, and will be here for some time. There is no fighting here for the last two months, but there is a big battle coming off in a few days. They have brought a siege train from England, and I think they will want it, too, for the places they are going to take is a terrible place. If they take it all, it will only be at a terrible loss. The Boers have trenches made all around the hill, which is a terrible height. They have also wire entanglements that the English will get caught in the first time they attempt to mount the hill. You can see by the map that we are not far from the fighting line, but I don't think we go up any farther, we have good officers with us. We are supposed to be part of a column, and we are told off for the relief of Kimberly, which is some 26 miles from Honey Nest Kloof, where

we are staying. The place they are trying to take is called Spytfontein, some nine miles beyond Modder River. We got an account to-day that Buller is in the enemies country for the first time since the war began, but it will take fully three months before this war is over. It is very well for some of the people at home to say that the Boers are only a few farmers, but if some of them were out here, and in front of the Boers, they would have a different tune. I have not fired a shot yet, nor any of the men that came out with me. We got a terrible name over the meeting in the Corn Exchange the Sunday before we left; it is thrown in our faces all over South Africa. I am sending you a slip out of a South African paper in answer to a letter about the meeting in Cork. Dear mother we did not get a bit of anything in the line of tobacco or anything else, and every other regiment got tobacco, cigars, cigarettes and plenty of everything from the people out here. The cry is "Send the Munsters nothing; they are from Cork. Let the members of Parliament give it to them." So you can see how we suffer over the meeting. You might send me out a couple of papers as we have nothing to read. All the boys are quite well out here."⁵

The second letter was written on 24th February 1900:-

"I am writing these few lines to you, to let you know the way the men of the Munster Fusiliers are treated. Our lives are a misery to us. We have to do all the

fatigues of other regiments, and also do our own duty. We have to sleep in our equipment at night, with 100 rounds of ammunition and our rifles alongside us. We get up in the morning at four and work like "niggers" for a dirty shilling a day. That is a very nice thing indeed. There is not another regiment in South Africa so much neglected as the Munster Fusiliers. Our rations were given away to another regiment one day because they were the Gordons, the men that were the first to retire at the battle of Magersfontein, and run under the artillery guns. I think the Munster Fusiliers are as good as any regiment, at the front, as any other. They were the first ordered out to South Africa to keep down hostilities and only got one chance, and that was the battle of Belmont, and then our regiment was not published. We were never heard to say "Roll on England", but "Roll on Kruger." The men are very much pleased the way the people of the city have treated them by sending out tobacco, pipes, and butter. All we want now is clothes and something to live on. I would not wonder why we mutinied on account of the way we are treated. We are doing manual labour, and you would laugh if you saw us doing so. Living on three-quarters rations is a fearful thing. Kaffirs [native South Africans] would not eat bully beef, but we must eat it or starve. If a man makes a complaint he is put in the "klink" for doing so. It is hard but I must now close my letter, as I am going to work for the day and do picket duty when I am finished. Take a tip off this and you will learn something of the army. I would like to see this in the paper so send one out to me. I wrote this as you asked me, to let you know something of the way in which we are treated. A chum of mine was tried for saying he would rather fight for the Boers than the British, and he got twelve months for it. I hope that you will not have the misfortune of going into the army it's a dogs life."⁶

Another letter, written by John Sullivan, a Limerickman who was living in the Transvaal, gives us an idea of the prevailing conditions there and his opinion of the war⁷:-

Dear Brother-I hope you will forgive me for not letting you know where I am. Well, I still remain in Johannesburg, and received no news from you for the past five months. In the last letter I mentioned that I joined the special Police here, in which I remained for six weeks. During that time there was no work that I could find, and as there was no pay attached to the Police, I resigned when work offered; so that since then I am doing very fair considering the times, and I must say, that the Government here is treating us very well. We have plenty of food up to the present, with the exception of sugar which is becoming very scarce; the price is now 1s6d per lb. The President tells us that even if food



Some fighting Boers.

becomes scarce we can stay just the same as the Burghers that are fighting for the country, and trying to keep the blood suckers from it. I prayed when the war commenced that they would do so, and they have done it so far and more success to them. The Boers are honest and upright people which can't be said for the other side. At present they are fighting very hard, there have been four very heavy battles, in which the Boers have been victorious every time. England lost 9,000 men up to the present, and will lose them all if she don't give up in time, and go fight Kaffirs and Dervishes, not her superiors. I hope none of the fellows around your place have joined the army for if they come out here they come to die, not to live.

There is a place called Ladysmith where 9,000 British troops are caged up, the most of them are Irish regiments, there are in all eleven Irish regiments here and most of them dying every day; the Munster Fusiliers are here, so I guess there is many a mother's son from Limerick and the County Clare that

shall never see dear old Ireland again. I told you in my last letter before the war broke out, what they would have to go through, that is fever and Boer's bullets, and of the last named there are plenty, and every shot straight at that never misses the bull's eye. I hope this letter reaches you as it may be the last for some time to come as we get no mails from home, so don't worry if you don't hear from me for some time, as the war is going to last for six or eight months yet, so give my best to all, hoping none will join the army for the sake of the millionaires of England, not for Ireland. A good bye for a while, and God bless you all.
Your affectionate brother,
John Sullivan.

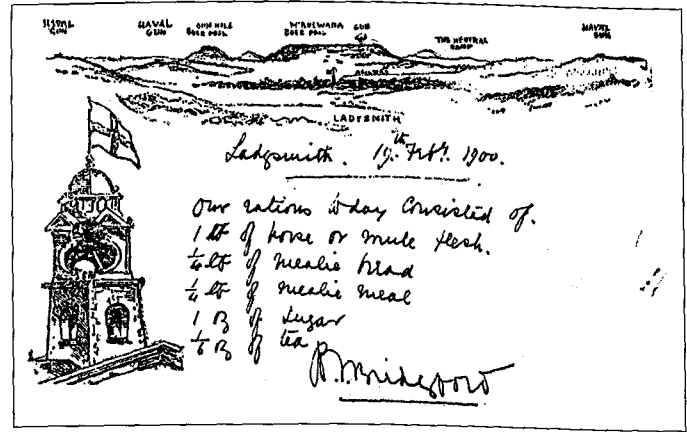
By the time these letters arrived home, General Buller had been replaced as commander-in-chief by General Roberts, with General Kitchener as his chief of staff. By February 1900, Kimberly and Ladysmith had been relieved and the Boer General Cronje, who had been besieging Kimberley, was shelled into surrendering at a narrow passage near the Modder River. Cronje had once said that "the English do not make turning movements. They never leave the railway, because they cannot march."⁸

With the arrival of Kitchener a new strategy was implemented; he improvised a system of wagons for transport, which unshackled the British forces from dependence on the railway line, along which they had doggedly plunged in the Boer fortifications.⁹ By March, British forces had captured Blomfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State.

In early April, the departure of over 100 men of the 7th Batt. Munster Fusiliers (County Militia Reserve) from Limerick railway station created heart-breaking and, at times, comical scenes, as they marched



Cronje surrenders to Roberts.



Postcard home from R.J. Bridgford at Ladysmith, 19 February 1900.

through the city. Their departure was marked by those scenes only to be expected under the circumstances, when men leave their homes and families to embark on an enterprise in which disaster or death is more likely than glory. It was originally intended to have the men undergo training at Tralee (the battalion's H.Q. in Ireland) before being sent out to South Africa, but this arrangement was changed and the men received their training and instruction in military science at Strand Barracks.

The scenes in the streets through which the reservists marched were of an extraordinary nature. The band of the battalion played the men to the station, but failed to keep them in order or inspire them with the discipline of the march. Indeed, no effort was made to do either by the few officers in command, and the men straggled forward in knots of twos and threes, accompanied by a mixture of their civilian friends. They were followed to the railway by an immense crowd, largely composed of women and children coming to take farewell of husband, son or father before a long, or as it may unhappily prove, a final separation.

The military trappings were, in some cases, carried by friends, the women actually shouldering the rifles and sturdily marching along under the awkward load amid shouts of laughter, while the men slipped into public houses or drank from black bottles and other vessels passed to them by sympathetic friends in the crowd. Several of the men were hopelessly intoxicated and were helped along by comrades steadier than themselves. Matters reached a climax at the railway station. The men were admitted by the side entrance to the Cork Direct platform, while quite a large force of police attempted to keep back the crowd. But the rush was too great, and in a few minutes the platform was thronged by wailing women and children and crowds of civilians, some only anxious for a last handshake with friends and comrades. The men, with the exception of those elated with drink and more or less oblivious to their surroundings, appeared less despondent and gloomy.

After considerable difficulty the men were got into the train, where they

appeared anything but resigned to their journey, and some of them, either in excitement or desperation, smashed the windows of the carriages with their rifles. As the train steamed out of the station amid the frantic waving of hands and handkerchiefs, the farewell shouts of the men and the awful cries of the women left behind on the platform in all the striking attitudes of grief and distraction, following with weeping eyes the course of the train until it disappeared in the distance.¹⁰

After the relief of Kimberly, the Munsters moved further northwards with the advancing army. On 1 April, they received orders to proceed to the village of Warrenton, near the Vaal River, where they took over from the 3rd Bedfordshire Regiment. The Boers had a line of trenches stretching for miles on the north side of the river, with a blown-up railway bridge as their centre of operations.

The British, whose main camp was about two miles from the river, held a line of outposts running from the village to the railway station, which was about half a mile from the bridge. The Boer marksmen kept the Munsters and other units in the area under constant gun and rifle fire. This meant that the men could only move about at night.

Corporal James Pennie, writing home to a friend in Limerick, had this to say: *Warrenton, April, 1900.*

Since I wrote to you last we have travelled further up country - we are now 150 miles beyond Kimberly. We are having at present very severe times, being under fire almost day and night. Attached you will find a rough sketch of the respective positions of ours and the Boers. you can acquire as much information from it as I could possibly impart to you. As you will see, we are the only lot holding them in front, and we are utterly at sea as regards the whereabouts of the balance of the column. Perhaps Roberts [General] means a repetition of his movement against Cronje. I hope so. There were some casualties in our list yesterday. I'm not sure how many.

*Royal Munster Fusiliers
Field Force, S. Africa.¹¹*

extraordinarily narrow escapes that some of the Munsters had:-

A detachment occupying Warrenton Railway Station, which as well as the redoubts from this point to the river, are a favourite mark for the Boer artillery. Lieutenant Packman was sitting at his desk in the station, and Private Handley was standing a few feet from him, when a shell crashed through the roof, passed between them, and exploded. Neither was hurt, but Handley's rifle, which he had in his hand, was broken into pieces, and a button torn from his coat. He had been allowed to keep the fragments of the rifle as a memento. A few minutes later, Handley was standing outside describing his narrow escape to the colour sergeant, when another shell dropped between them, but fortunately did not explode, although the shock knocked both of them down. Neither was hurt.¹²

By May of 1900, the siege of Mafeking had been lifted and both Boer capitals, Blomfontein in the Orange Free State and Pretoria in the Transvaal, were occupied and annexed to the British Empire. President Kruger of the Transvaal had set out for Europe that September to try and raise help for his beleaguered country. He was never to return. Many thought that the conflict was over, but unfortunately a new and bitter phase was just beginning.

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