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Photographs in Boer Women's Wartime Testimonies

HELEN DAMPIER AND LIZ STANLEY

Introduction

Discussion here draws on our wider joint research about women's testimonies of the concentration camps of the 1899-1902 South African War.¹ Our research has focused, amongst other things, on a network of women cultural entrepreneurs whose activities in 'working up' Boer women's testimonies as 'the facts' played an important part in the politics of Afrikaner proto-nationalism until the late 1930s. The research shows that these Boer women's testimonial narratives, while presented as entirely factual, cannot be classed straightforwardly as either fact or fiction, but instead inhabit an 'in-between' area, with their factual claims – claims which may but sometimes may not be 'true facts' – often supported by what Eakin (1985) calls fictive devices.

Building on this earlier work, we focus here on the photographs used in the key published volumes of testimonies, both single-authored as well as collections. These published volumes were written or edited by women who were on the right of Boer proto-nationalism. Indeed, they were important figures in establishing the particularly racialised form of nationalism in South Africa which eventuated in apartheid from 1948 to 1994, emphasising here that until the end of the 1930s, nationalism in South Africa took a strongly cultural form.

Women cultural entrepreneurs were key figures in the making of Boer proto-nationalism and then Afrikaner nationalism – the useful term of cultural entrepreneurs comes from Young (1976). Well-organised networks of Boer women's congresses and parties mushroomed after 1902, with some women from these becoming important figures within the cultural politics of proto-nationalism. Central to their activities was the soliciting, collecting and publishing of women's testimonies of their war-time experiences, testimonies which self-consciously emphasised a particular political point of view in promoting a 'pan-Boer' nationalism across existing political boundaries around the idea of a specific Boer 'way of life' damaged and nearly destroyed by the British.

Over time these testimonies became seen as ‘the facts’ of Boer women’s experiences of the war – in South Africa they became cemented as ‘the history’, as Boer and then Afrikaner nationalist organisations became increasingly powerful and gained more political control from the mid 1920s onwards. The result was that, instead of being viewed as ‘the facts as represented from one particular viewpoint, a proto-nationalist one’ – as they had been when originally published – they eventually became seen as ‘the facts about the past’.

Women’s Testimonies: Time, Politics and the Visual/Written Narratives

Around 250 Boer women’s testimonies were produced between 1902 and 1940, some written many years after the war, the majority between 1902 and the mid 1920s. Around 130, a combination of longer testimonies by ‘grandee’ women from the political, religious or civil service elites of the old Boer Republics, and shorter testimonies by radical women from political functionary and farming backgrounds, were published. The other approximately 120 were similarly solicited and collected, but not published, and were subsequently archived. The photographs that appear in the published volumes provide a parallel but rather different kind of narrative to those presented in the written texts. They enabled the editors of these to convey considerably more forceful messages than in the written texts, presenting in visual form highly resonant ideas about the Boer ‘way of life’ and challenges to it, coded references to a binary racial order overturned but subsequently restored.

What follows looks at the parallel narratives of the photographs and their captions. These visual narratives, with their strong ‘look, see’ claims, became for most readers ‘Boer women’s testimonies’, rather than the relatively more nuanced written texts, and were literally seen to stand for the content and meaning of the written testimonies. The relationship between the written texts and these photographs is a complicated and at times disjunctural one, and the changes that occurred to this relationship over time brings into sight the increasingly hawkish politics of Afrikaner nationalism.

Photo 1: 'Joh. Brandt-Van Warmelo' [frontispiece from *Het Concentratie-Kamp*]



We begin discussing this using the frontispiece photograph in Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo's 1905 *Het Concentratie-Kamp van Irene* [The Irene Concentration Camp]. This book purports to be the diary of Johanna Van Warmelo, a young woman who worked as a volunteer at Irene concentration camp near Pretoria during a two-month period in 1901. Brandt-Van Warmelo indeed explains in her preface that the book concerns "my experiences of the two months, when I acted as a Voluntary Nurse in the camp at Irene", and that this publication of her diary would be "received with interest by those who still

sympathise with the plight of our country and people, and would be of some value for the history of South Africa” (Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1905: Foreword).

This signed photograph of her in a nurse’s uniform pouring out into a spoon what is presumptively medicine, authorises the book as hers, and also emphasises her ‘I was there as a healer’ and ‘a proper nurse’ claims. However, Brandt-Van Warmelo was in fact *not* a nurse but a volunteer, and was eventually expelled from Irene camp with a group of other young Boer women volunteers for suspected ‘political agitation’. While the text of *Het Concentratie-Kamp* only comments obliquely on the controversy surrounding the volunteers’ dismissal and the claims about their political activities, as a parallel narrative the photograph unequivocally insists that she was specifically present as a nurse – with the nurse’s uniform, red cross armband and medicine bottle seemingly confirmation of this – and, tacitly, without any political agenda.

While there is no certain way of knowing when this photograph was actually posed and taken, the implication is that it was taken at the time; and this, combined with the verifying signature, acts to emphasise the ‘I was there at the time’ truth-claims made in the book about the mistreatment of Boer people in the camps. We have demonstrated elsewhere that *Het Concentratie-Kamp* was in actual fact not a ‘diary’ written at the time of the war but written up post-war to serve particular proto-nationalist objectives,² as evidenced for example by Brandt-Van Warmelo’s rallying call towards the end of the book: “O, women of South Africa, write about everything you have suffered at the hands of our mighty oppressors. Nothing may be lost, nothing may be forgotten” (Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1905: 123). However, this photograph works to subsume the book’s political agenda under the banner of ‘a diary written at the time by an impartial healer, an innocent young nurse’, and thus functions to shape readers’ responses to the text that follows.

Interestingly, the photograph of Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo is echoed in the frontispiece photograph for Hendrina Rabie-Van der Merwe’s 1940 testimony, *Onthou! In die Skaduwee van die Galg* [Remember! In the Shadow of the Gallows] which we discuss later.

Photo 2: 'Skryfster – Op weg na die Slagveld as Rooikruisverpleegster – Oktober 1899' [Author – En route to the Battlefield as Red Cross Nurse – October 1899] [frontispiece from Rabie-Van der Merwe's *Onthou!*]



Skryfster — Op weg na die Slagveld as Rooikruisverpleegster — Oktober 1899.

In spite of its similarities with Johanna Brandt's photograph, this photograph from *Onthou!* makes a much stronger political point, with the author posing with an Orange Free State banner and flag – a reference to the Republican past but with strong nationalist resonance for the 1940 present. However, Brandt-Van Warmelo's book is designed to appear as above politics, and thus her carefully posed photograph.

The next text we comment on is Magdalina Margaritha Postma's collection of women's testimonies, published in 1925 and re-published in 1939, focusing on the relationship between its written texts and its photographs, and then

differences in this between the two editions. The 1925 edition is entitled *Stemme Uit Die Vrouekampe* [Voices From the Women's Camps] and is a short 110 page soft-covered book containing, mainly in Dutch, 37 short women's testimonies. In these *Stemme* testimonies, there is both a surface narrative and an implied slantwise one, with the latter consisting of coded references to the racial order. The surface narrative of *Stemme* is that acts of murder against 'het volk', the people in a nationalist sense, being treated like Kaffirs (a term of enormous racial opprobrium in South Africa), and having Africans in positions of authority over Boer people, are all equivalently heinous. Its slantwise narrative is that all these are attacks on the 'natural' and morally correct binary racial order. *Stemme* was re-published in 1939 as *Stemme Uit die Verlede* [Voices From the Past].

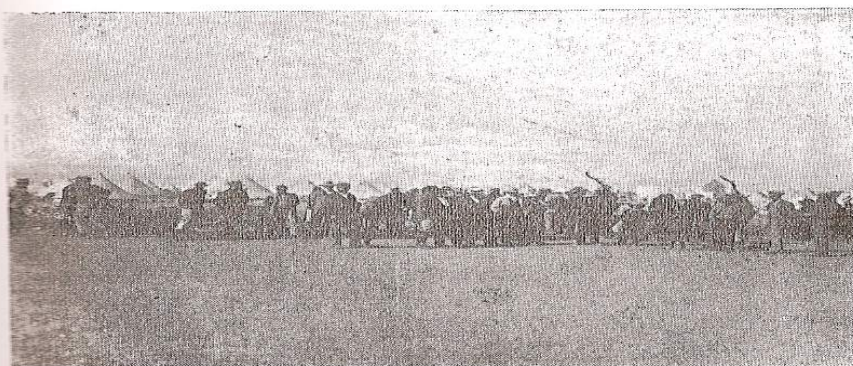
Some comparisons between the editions are: Firstly, the 1939 edition is in the then-current Afrikaans of the day and its contents have been made consonant with the ongoing valorisation of Afrikaans as a 'proper' European language. Secondly, its new publisher was the Voortrekkerspers, in 1939 a new publishing house, which represented the far right of the National Party under D.F. Malan, later a key figure in nationalist politics. Thirdly, its title has become 'Voices from the Past', *Stemme Uit Die Verlede*, with this change pointing implicitly to the moment of its present-time reading in 1939, for what had followed 1925 was the increasing political dominance of the National Party and its splinter groups and the massive increase in political support for the Nationalists occasioned by the triumphs of the Great Trek Centennial Re-enactments which had taken place all over South Africa between 1936 and 1938. And fourthly, there were also changes to the photographs between the 1925 and 1939 editions, such that the visual narrative became more pointed and stark.

Photo 3: 'Kampkerkhof, Bethulie' [Camp cemetery, Bethulie]



KAMPKERKHOF, BETHULIE. (Foto by C. Kriel)

Photo 4: 'Uitdeling van brandhout (Kroonstad Kamp)' [Queuing for firewood rations, Kroonstad camp]



UITDELING VAN BRANDHOUT.
(Kroonstad Kamp).

Photo 5: 'Lykhuis, Kroonstad Kamp' [Mortuary, Kroonstad camp]



Photo 6: 'Kroonstad Kamp'

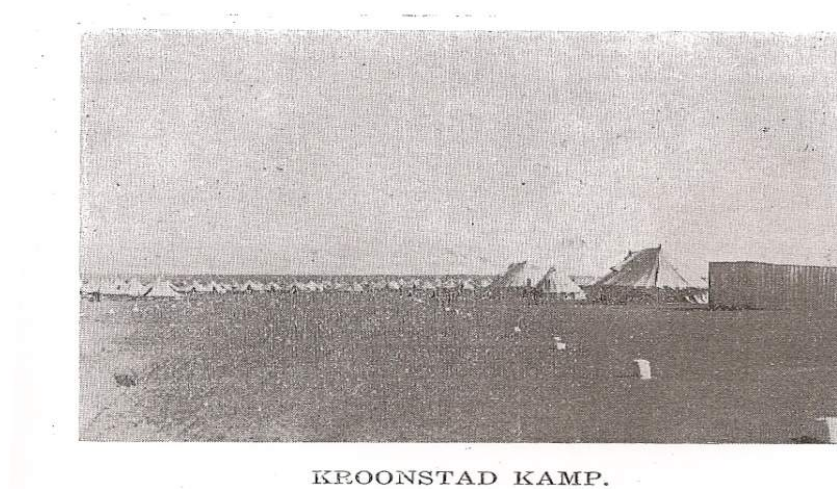
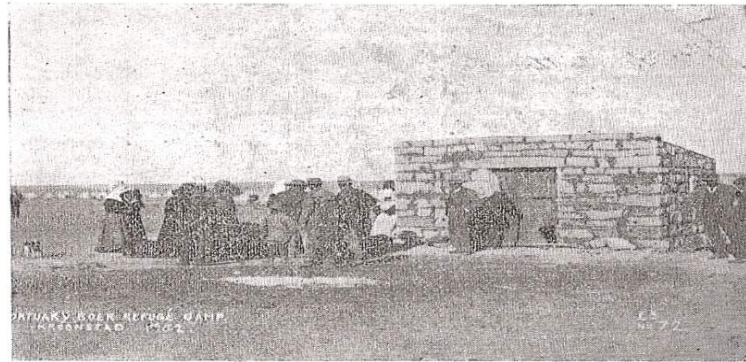


Photo 7: 'Lykhuis, Kroonstad Kamp' [Mortuary, Kroonstad camp]



LYKHUIS, KROONSTAD KAMP.

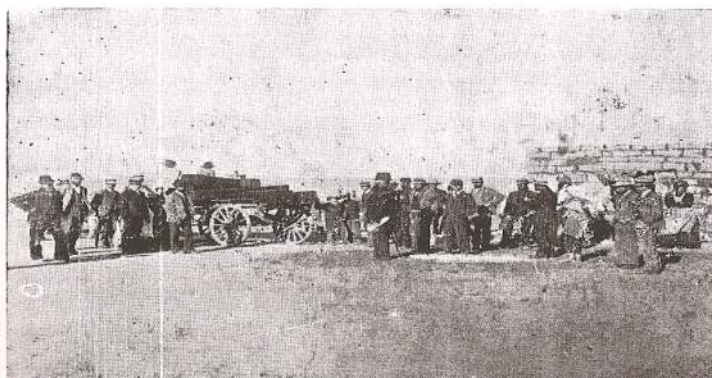
The sequence in which the five photographs that appear in the 1925 *Stemme Uit Die Vrouekampe* appear tells a resonant story, with the photographs of the graveyard and the mortuary emphasising 'our people died, we buried them', the photograph of the ration queue indicating that 'even we Boers had to queue' and thereby implying a terrible disruption of the racial order, and the photograph of Kroonstad camp suggesting the exile of the Boer people to a barren and desolate place. There is an interesting relationship between the written text and these visual narratives – they are disjunctural, there is not a direct relationship between the written and the visual. Both tell a story but a rather different story. The visual narrative is a stronger more focused one than the written – it concerns claims about a way of life destroyed; death, deliberately produced; degradation and remembering. These photographs as a set also evoke more than is immediately obvious from their individual surfaces because they call on and reinforce the implied slantwise ideas in the written testimonies concerned with the Boer way of life and its binary racial order.

The photographs in the 1939 *Stemme Uit Die Verlede?* appear in two groups of two photographs:

**Photo 8: 'Lykhuis. Kroonstad-kamp' [Mortuary. Kroonstad camp.] +
'Lykhuis. Kroonstad-kamp' [Mortuary. Kroonstad camp]**

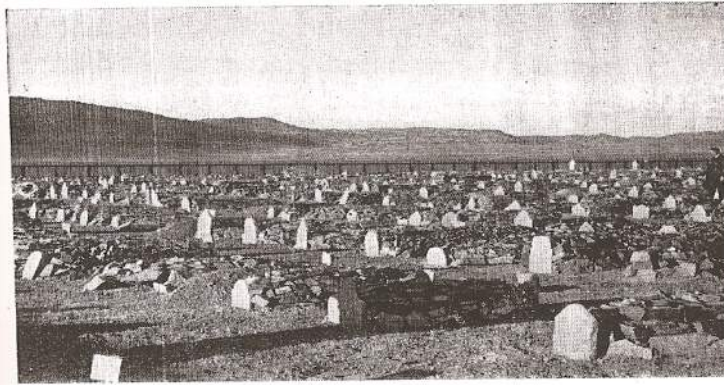


Lykhuis. Kroonstad-kamp.



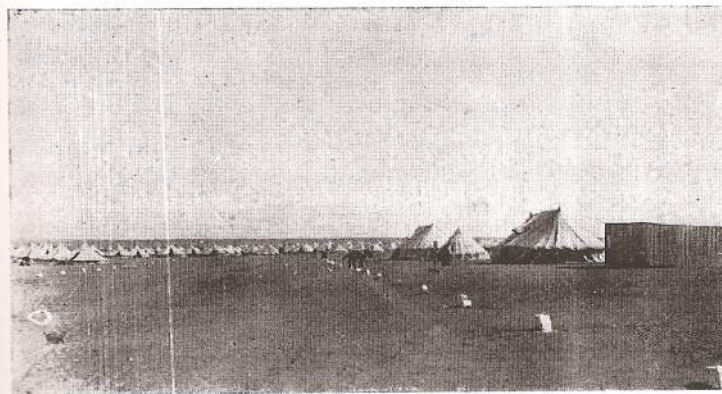
Lykhuis. Kroonstad-kamp.

**Photo 9: 'Kampkerkhof, Bethulie.' [Camp cemetery, Bethulie] +
'Kroonstad-kamp' [Kroonstad camp]**



Kampkerkhof, Bethulie.

(foto by C. Kriel)



Kroonstad-kamp.

That is, from 1925 and five separate photographs on five separate pages, in the 1939 edition there are two pages each with two photographs on them. So what do these changes add up to? Firstly, the photograph of men and boys queuing for the firewood ration in the 1925 edition has been removed. This has the effect of making 'ordinary life' in the camps, and also the presence of large numbers of men of commando age in them, vanish from sight, with the omnipresence of death in the camps and all Boer men as loyalists at the front fighting the British, both being among the canonical facts of the war by 1939. Secondly, placing the photographs in two groups of two has the effect of further condensing and sharpening the 'they killed us, they treated us badly'

insistence of the 1925 photographs. And thirdly, as the result of both changes the visual message has become more hawkish and also even less closely related to the more mixed effect of reading the written testimonies.

The point we are making here is that the photographs in the edited collections – *Stemme* is a fairly typical example – were not directly related to the testimonies they appeared alongside. The photographs were in effect a separate project, with the written testimonies and the photographs being parallel narratives. The editors who selected the photographs – in this case Postma – did so to put across a punchy message of their own, one which over time became increasingly political and hawkish.

‘Now’ and ‘Then’ in Visual Narratives: ‘Collected by the Author’

Photo 10: ‘Versamel deur skryfster gedurende die oorlog, waarna verwys word in die boek.’ [Collected by the author during the war, and made reference to in this book ...] [from *Onthou!*]



The last photograph we comment on appears in a single-authored testimony, the very last published by a woman, and at a point when major splinterings among the various factions of the National Party had occurred. This is Hendrina Rabie-Van Der Merwe’s 1940-published *Onthou!*, mentioned earlier in relation to its frontispiece’s echoing of Johanna Brandt’s 1905 photograph. We have selected this specific photograph from *Onthou!* as part of showing the political changes occurring over time and the accompanying sharpening of the message of the visual narratives we have been discussing.

During the war, Rabie-Van Der Merwe was involved in a killing – her testimony describes the shooting of an unarmed African prison warder, when she was helping spring her husband Sarel, a captured Boer commando, from a British jail. The book contains eight photographs in total. The one we shall comment on is 'Versamel deur skryfster gedurende die oorlog, waarna wervys word in die boek' [Collected by the author during the war, and made reference to in this book], chosen because it visually points up some of the political changes over time we have been referring to.

Firstly, the only object in this photograph which is clearly referred to in the text is an African prison warder's badge of office, which, after the man was shot and dying, Rabie-Van der Merwe made a young boy take from his cap and give to her – so that for the reader of the testimony, the photograph in its entirety becomes emblematic of this particular event. Secondly, the objects shown in 'Versamel deur skryfster...' belong to the 'then' of the South African War but they appear here in a different representational medium. They are removed from 'then' of their collection, and assembled in late 1939 or early 1940 to be transported photographically into the 'now' of Rabie-Van der Merwe's book – and of course, this 'then' and 'now' effect continues for all later readers of the photographs as well. The photograph thus represents a number of different and overlaying representational, temporal and spatial orders, but in particular it 'spoke to' the 'now' of Afrikaner politics when it was published. And thirdly, this photograph is not a picture of disparate objects, but instead the representation of an assemblage, because the objects were assembled and the photograph was taken for the sake of this itself. While 'Versamel deur skryfster...' is apparently just about various events during the war, it is actually a strong statement about the hawkish political 'moment' of Afrikaner nationalism in 1940 and its massive increase in popularity and political importance from 1936 on.

Conclusion: Parallel Narratives

The Boer women whose testimonies referred to here certainly had a hard time during the war, but not the particular version that was orchestrated through their testimonies. They and the women's organisations which represented them were strong, determined, powerful, racist, and their activities underpinned the development of proto-nationalism. The overlaying of cultural politics with women's politics was crucial to proto-nationalism in South Africa up to the 1930s and later underpinned apartheid. Also, proto-nationalism always has strong cultural aspects, and other counter-gender examples of women as politicians, agents provocateur, murderers, cultural entrepreneurs, political organisers and as strong nationalists, are likely to exist elsewhere too. This cultural politics involved a testimony-based version of what the sociologist

Maurice Halbwachs (1992) called ‘the history after the fact’, with these written narratives providing the single most powerful element of this. The photographs included with the published testimonies, single-authored as well as collections, provide parallel but rather different kind of narratives, and they represent highly resonant ideas about the Boer way of life and challenges to it, and coded references to a binary racial order overturned, but subsequently restored.

The photographs we have looked at represent *parallel narratives* to the testimonies of which they form a part, because they tell stories that are related to, but not coterminous with the stories present in the written testimonies. The photographs also point up some of the fictionalised aspects of these narratives – as noted in our introduction, Boer women’s testimonies do not fit easily into either ‘fact’ or ‘fiction’ categories, and Eakin’s argument that “the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” can be readily applied to them (Eakin, 1985: 3). Also, while the ‘look, see’ aspects of photographs are often associated with presenting documentary ‘factual’ evidence, the photographs discussed here are instead closer to ‘fiction’, or at least Eakin’s fictive devices, in that they have been deliberately contrived to tell a particular – and political – story.

These visual narratives and their captions and messages in a striking way ‘became’ the women’s testimonies for most whites in South Africa – that is, they came to stand for and to symbolise both the content and the meaning of these. They are secular icons indeed, to use Cornelia Brink’s (2000) term. As a consequence, the photographs we have discussed and those like them should be seen much less as “an instrument of memory, much more as purposefully used at the time to function as an invention of or replacement for it” (Sontag, 1977: 165).

¹ See Dampier, 2005; Stanley, 2002, 2004, 2006; Stanley and Dampier, 2005, 2006, 2007.

² See Stanley and Dampier, 2006

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