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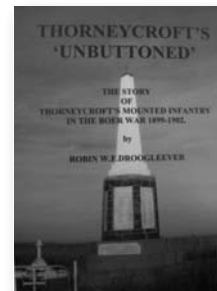
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## BOOK REVIEW

# *Thorneycroft's unbuttoned: the story of Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry in the Boer War 1899–1902*

by Dr Robin W. F. Droogleever

*Robin W. F. Droogleever: Melbourne; 2011; 454 pp.; ISBN: 978-0-9872045-0-9 (paperback)*



One may well question the relevance of a book, emanating from Melbourne, Australia, that pertains to an unheralded, irregular unit that fought during the Boer War over a century ago. The fact is that there was intense interest in Australia in the War at the time and Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry had approximately 200 Australians in its ranks. *Thorneycroft's Unbuttoned* traces the path of this unit from its formation in the Pietermaritzburg showgrounds in October 1899 until after it was officially represented at the postponed coronation of King Edward VII at Westminster Abbey on 9 August 1902. The protracted stay in England for these soldiers at the expense of the British Government was one of their most enjoyable experiences of the entire War.

Robin Droogleever is regarded as an authority on the Boer War, particularly from an Australian perspective. This book provides a valuable insight into the war from the position of an individual unit. It follows the deployment of Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry throughout the War and details the origins and fate of its soldiers. His research is thorough, much of it coming from primary sources such as soldiers' letters and reports from contemporary newspapers. A surfeit of maps allows the reader to follow the peregrinations of the unit across the sub-continent.

This book differs from other contemporary histories in that it does not have a fixation on enumerating the shortcomings of the British Army, which was fighting a distant war at the extremity of the African continent. It was a war unsuited to an infantry-based army and the British training was inadequate to combat the type of warfare it faced. Major Alexander Whitelaw Thorneycroft of the Royal Scots Fusiliers was a veteran of the Zulu Wars and the First Boer War, and had recent service in India. He was respected as an outstanding leader and organiser. In forming his unit, he was greatly assisted by the local Uitlander<sup>1</sup> Committee in Natal that had developed a register of volunteers which contained information on their age, war experience, trade skills and character. Thorneycroft was soon fully occupied testing and training the recruits in marksmanship and riding, whilst identifying a short list of prospective officers and senior non-commissioned officers to take the leadership positions in his unit.

In October 1899, he was authorised to raise a mounted unit at a time when the British were desperately short of mounted infantry. The unit was categorised as an "Imperial irregular unit". The necessity for mounted infantry became more pronounced as the war progressed to meet the demands of mobile warfare, particularly in the open country of the high veldt and to meet what are known today as guerrilla tactics employed by the Boers. Many of the soldiers who joined Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry were Uitlanders who had been working in mining-related occupations in the Boer Republics. Prior to the outbreak of war, they had fled their homes for Natal and the Cape Colony.

After the invasion of Natal by the Boers, Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry had a critical, although dismounted role in the shell scrapes at the top of Spion Kop, assisted in the Relief of Ladysmith and advanced north as they pursued the Boers back to the border. They saw the destruction wrought on properties by the invading Boers and found the remains of Boer women and children involved in the fighting at the frontline.

The Boers flagged the brutal future of the War when they did not simply concentrate on military objectives at the time they invaded Natal, such as railway lines, bridges and food supplies. Instead, they wantonly looted and destroyed private property. In due course at the end of 1900, Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry experienced the transition of the conflict from conventional to guerrilla warfare as they entered the Transvaal. However they did not escape the ennui of war and the discontent associated with the frustration of having to remain in camp. The seemingly interminable delay in advancing north against the Boers following the Relief of Ladysmith is an example of this. As well, the situation was not improved when the unit received little recognition or precedence for the role it had played in the war to that time and was sidelined on the periphery of the town.

*Thorneycroft's Unbuttoned* provides an alternative and fascinating perspective on the nature of the conflict in the Boer War. It will be of interest in Australia at a time when the erection of a new memorial to the Boer War in Anzac Parade in Canberra is receiving serious consideration. It adds to the knowledge of the role Australians played in the War, apart from soldiers who fought in formed colonial and Australian units.

**Rowan Tracey<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Uitlander is Afrikaans for 'foreigner' (literally 'outlander'), especially a British resident or expatriate migrant worker in the Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State.

<sup>2</sup>The reviewer is a previous contributor to *United Service*. His wife's grandfather left Barberton for Natal and was an initial enlistee with Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry.