



Mercy mission. Woman of quality

IN THIS LAND OF PREJUDICE, THE LAZY MIGHT argue that another (seemingly minor) one won't make much difference. But it certainly does in the case of *The Compassionate Englishwoman* (sub-titled *Emily Hobhouse in the Boer War*). This is a tough-minded historic portrait of a tough-minded heroine, and provides a stinging rebuke to cynics who assume that obstinate do-gooders are, by definition, foolish idealists.

Apparently the PC language gestapo now object violently to the employment of the word "heroine", but the book preserves the honorifics vocabulary of the educated woman of the period, and shows that politeness gained her certain important advantages in the deadly battle fought with the British high command in South Africa and war ministers in London.

Her gracious manners masked steely upper-class resolve in the urgent campaign to save thousands of Boer families dying of starvation and disease in British concentration camps. Hobhouse, pictured on the cover wearing one of those feathery millinery nuclear explosions favoured by the nobility of the day, was a lady. And she exacted her social due from the likes of lords Kitchener and Milner. Well, she did till the authorities took to censoring her reports and vilifying her in the Mother of Parliaments as a traitor to the British war effort.

The invaders were intensely embarrassed by military reverses at the hands of farmers who melted into their landscape after wreaking havoc among the troops. So the British invented concentration camps to prevent the Boer raiders gaining food, fodder and other supplies from their homesteads.

As the death rates at the pitifully inadequate concentration camps soared, Hobhouse undertook increasingly dangerous investigative journeys through war zones, forays often forbidden or obstructed by the army. She compiled statistics, tried to console mothers of starving children and begged that sense would prevail against senseless destruction. All this by a woman

THE COMPASSIONATE ENGLISHWOMAN
By Robert Eales
(UCT Press/Juta)



gently raised, not in her first youth, but determined to salvage some kind of decency from the carnage.

Author Robert Eales tells a moving, lively tale of a remarkable being who bravely represented the best of Britain at a time when the empire was beginning to weary of conquest. She never achieved popular acclaim in her homeland after the scurrilous, partly successful, attempts to discredit her via the newspapers and in parliament.

But she is honourably remembered in South Africa. A plaque on the National Women's Monument in Bloemfontein marks the location of her ashes.

Imagine what this principled, articulate and intelligent woman would have accomplished for humanity if she had been able to lay her hands on a laptop. Given her endless lonely treks to remote concentration camps, confrontations with hostile officialdom, and physical exhaustion after long months on the road, she makes the Christiane Amanpour of this world look self-indulgent.

The total Boer population of the two little republics at the onset of war was 195,000. Some 14% died in the camps. The proportion of children was much higher. Historians found that hardly any children in the first years of life survived starvation, typhoid and other miseries. The worst month in the poorly documented black camps was December 1901, when 3.2% of the residents died. Of the thousands of recorded deaths, only 913 white deaths had been officially reported by the authorities at the end of May. And no black deaths were reported. ■

