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## Writing Alberta: Building on a Literary Identity

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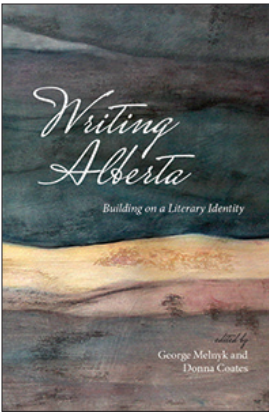
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**WRITING ALBERTA: Alberta Building on a Literary Identity**  
Edited by George Melnyk and Donna Coates

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## *Fin de Siècle Lunacy in Fred Stenson's The Great Karoo*

Donna Coates

The Alberta-born-and-raised writer Fred Stenson has produced seventeen works of fiction and non-fiction, numerous magazine articles, and an astonishing 140 scripts for film and video, but it is his recent historical fiction that has garnered the most praise. *The Trade* (2000), set against the backdrop of the fur trade, was nominated for the Giller Prize, and *Lightning* (2003), about the open-range ranch era in late-nineteenth-century Alberta, was also critically acclaimed. *The Great Karoo* (2008), which follows the young men from Alberta towns such as Pincher Creek, Fort Macleod, and High River who enlisted in the 1899-1902 South African War (formerly known as the Second Boer War but renamed to acknowledge that all South Africans, white and black, were affected by the war and that many participated), the only one of his works to combine the genre of war literature with historical fiction, was nominated for both the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Canada and Caribbean region). *Lightning* and *The Great Karoo* are loosely connected: the latter's central character, the Métis cowboy Frank Adams, is the son of *Lightning*'s Alberta rancher Jim Adams and godson and friend of Doc Windham, a Texas friend of his father's whose life lessons Frank occasionally reflects upon during his wartime experiences. Both the first and the last novels share commonalities as well: in *The Trade*, as Stenson tells Herb Wylie, he had "the luxury of creating fiction out of historical materials that had not been heavily fictionalized" (217); to my knowledge, Stenson is the first to fictionalize Canadian participation in the South African War. *The*

*Great Karoo* signals a departure, however; in spite of Stenson's declaration that he is a "deeply regional" writer ("Fred"), much of the action takes place in faraway South Africa, with brief episodes occurring in Alberta, England, and Ireland. But as Frank puts it, most books about the Boer War "don't contain the feeling of being there. Mostly they're just place names and dates and how many got killed, and who won a DSO or a Victoria Cross" (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 585). They also omit references to Canadian participation. Stenson's richly detailed descriptions of the ever-changing terrain, which he acquired through a month's journey through South Africa, create for his readers a visceral sense that we are either right in the saddle with the cowboy-soldiers from Alberta, or walking alongside Frank when his horse is stolen or lost and he must serve as a "pedestrian."

When asked about what he was "exploring" in *The Great Karoo*, Stenson replied that his subject was war, which is

humankind's greatest conundrum. Every day, somewhere, it takes lives and devastates lives. As a species, we keep demonstrating genius in countless ways, but cannot seem to make the slightest headway on this most basic of our problems. We cannot seem to find a different way to negotiate our difference as tribes and nations. With this set of beliefs, it was perhaps inevitable that I would write a novel about war. What causes wars? Why do people accept them in the moment when there is a choice? What is it about being a young man that makes war so attractive? ("Fred")

While these are some of the questions Stenson attempts to answer in his novel, I want to address two other intriguing questions which he posed during an interview with Claire Young: why are Albertans "different" and "in some cases ... what right do they have to be different?" (E6).

Regional variation provides a partial response. As historian Carman Miller points out, of the "7,368 young Canadians [who] had served with the British Army in South Africa" ("Heroes" 171), those raised in central and eastern Canada consisted of "a number of university students, teachers, lawyers, engineers, and sons of notables" (172-73), whereas the "contingent from western Canada contained large numbers of cowboys, ranchers, farm labourers, packers, prospectors, and policemen, many of them British

born” (173). Stenson’s novel reflects Miller’s description of the social composition of the troops, as the novel is narrated primarily in third-person by one of his few fictional characters, Pincher Creek’s cowboy Frank Adams, who enlists with the Canadian Mounted Rifles (CMR) near the end of 1899. Two others who sign up at the same time and become his friends are also cowboys—the Fort Macleod-born Métis Jeff Davis, who grew up on the Blood Reserve with his siblings and mother Revenge Walker; and Ovide Smith, an enigmatic thirty-nine-year old from St. Flavie, Quebec, who now lives at the South Fork of the Old Man River. Although the class distinctions between those from the West and East are often unfounded, they continue to rankle throughout the war, as the Rifles grumble that British officers regard them as “motley prairie gophers” but consider the eastern Canadian Dragoons “fair-haired boys” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 273). Although his manly stance changes as the war grinds on, after his first battle, Frank is gratified to learn that one of the Dragoons has shot himself “rather than face battle” (158), whereas the Rifles he fights with knew “they were not cowards . . . they could face enemy fire” (161). Age-old rivalry between the West and East has also played a role in recruitment: Pincher Creek’s fervently patriotic Fred Morden calls it an “outrage” that the first thousand troops sent to South Africa were “infantrymen from eastern militia” (12) and demands Albertans’ right to fight.

Another way of finding answers to these questions in this “great whacking novel” (“Fred”), which spans five decades, three continents, includes references to Rudyard Kipling, Winston Churchill, Cecil Rhodes, the Australians Banjo Paterson and Breaker Morant, and offers cameo roles to John McCrae, Sam Steele, and Robert Baden-Powell, among others, is to pay close attention to the two seemingly unrelated Prologues, both of which are tied to specific historical events. “*Prologue* (I), FORT MACLEOD, *March 16, 1897*,” describes the death by hanging of Charcoal,<sup>1</sup> an aboriginal man who murdered Sergeant Wilde, a Mountie (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 2). Later in the novel, Frank reveals that Charcoal had first killed a member of his tribe for having an affair with his wife. But had Charcoal been caught by the authorities before he killed the Mountie, he would not have been found guilty since adultery “was considered justified” (116). Thus Charcoal dies on the scaffold only because he “had not been caught soon enough” (116). Significantly, as Sidney L. Harring points out, under the type of tribal law enforcement “predominant in intra-Indian

affairs” in the late 1800s (245), Charcoal had “substantial support [from his tribe] and successfully evaded capture for months” (245), but the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) had put “massive resources” into lengthy manhunts “to make the point that individual Indians should expect to be dealt with severely by crown authorities if they chose to kill settlers or to defy Canadian law” (245). Harring further observes (although in the context of the alarming numbers of hangings in British Columbia at the time) that “public hangings were symbolic displays of state power. The mode of execution was intended to have maximum impact on the people who watched it. ... [T]hose who were hanged most often died by strangulation, after kicking around on the end of a rope for twenty minutes or more, losing control of bodily functions, bleeding, and making horrible noises” (207). While Charcoal’s death comes about through this same disturbing “mode of execution,” perhaps equally upsetting (or is to me) is that so many of the local townspeople see fit to attend “the necktie party”: they include “Indians” accompanied by children whose “starved bodies” resembled “little cadavers” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 2), as well as those from neighbouring communities like Frank and his father. At the end of the prologue, the somewhat ambiguous words of an old man, who remarks that “dey” have hung “da last wild Indian today” (4), and then wonders “what dey’ll ever do now” (4), infer that the native population is dwindling.

The text offers additional reasons for that shrinking population. According to Red Crow, “*Chief of the Blood Tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy of Indians*” (341), his people are “dying steadily, taken off by ‘the blood-spitting sickness’” (342). Red Crow (also Revenge Walker’s brother) fears that the Bloods “must die out, just like the buffalo” (342), and then expresses his guilt that he is unable to “lead his people away from the source of their death” (342). Every spring, he declares, there are “fewer of us” (26). But Red Crow further adds that the government absolves itself of all responsibility: the new deputy from the Indian office “said its cause was Indians living too close together in their houses and spitting on the floor” (170). Another reason, as Stenson recently pointed out, is that “the buffalo were few; liquor and disease had all but destroyed Blackfoot power” (“Wisdom” 61), a set of circumstances Red Crow has himself contributed to, as for some time he had traded furs/buffalo for whisky (*The Great Karoo* 27-28). Once he became an elder, however, “he invited the mounted police in and assisted them in destroying the whisky trade” (“Wisdom” 61).

Another character in the novel, the American-born Donald Watson Davis (Jeff Davis's father), who left the military in the United States to become a whisky trader in Western Canada, also added to native people's addiction to the white man's liquor and their concomitant loss of power. But unlike Red Crow, Davis remains self-serving: in order to "shake off the competition that was gathering" (*The Great Karoo* 29) in the trade, he married Revenge Walker, who came from a powerful family, but then divorced her and married a school teacher before he ran (twice successfully) for election as a Member of Parliament.

These examples of prejudicial thinking, behaviour, and actions attest to the fact that Western Canada was, at the time, deeply racist. It is Jeff Davis who bears the brunt of the racial slurs, which begin in the text with his attempt to enlist in the war under the command of the British-born Lieutenant-Colonel Herchmer. Herchmer demands that a telegram be sent to Ottawa to ascertain whether or not "halfbreeds" could sign up, and receives the reply, only if "intelligent" (21). Davis's acumen is rarely called into question thereafter, as over the course of the war he proves to be a highly skilled scout who draws upon the warrior techniques Red Crow taught him to outfox his enemies, although some continue to doubt the patriotism of a "Halfbreed" (336). (By contrast, Frank Adams, also Métis, is never the victim of prejudice because he has inherited his father's sand-coloured hair and pale complexion.) Most of the denigrating comments about Jeff come from the CMR's despicable American-born Pete Belton. "Raised to hate Indians" (138), Belton consistently blames Davis for anything that goes wrong and also falsely accuses him of "cowardice" (41). But the extent of the prejudice in Western Canada is nevertheless underscored when even the decent and good Fred Morden, who erroneously blames Davis for the death of his horse, calls him a "stupid Halfbreed bastard" (62). That Jeff reacts "as though he'd been expecting the words" (62) confirms that he has grown accustomed to the frequency of such invectives.

Stenson's second prologue develops another key aspect of the Albertans' difference in attitudes to war by accentuating that even though the Rifles, who stemmed from a non-militaristic (although not non-violent) region of the country, were nonetheless better equipped to defend the British Empire than British soldiers. In spite of the useless training the CMR receive in Regina (these episodes are among the novel's funniest), those from the West prove to be, as Miller notes, "fearless, versatile rough riders"

... “comparable to a Boer Commando, somewhat indifferent to the more conventional rituals of war” (“Crucible” 86). Although the British troops make consistently poor showings, the novel emphasizes that the soldiers are not to blame because, as Stenson underscores from the outset, their efforts were consistently undermined by their leaders’ military blunders, many of which he identifies in “Prologue (II), COLENSO, NATAL, December 16, 1899” (*The Great Karoo* 5-7). Historian David Steele records that the outcome of that battle was disastrous, with 1,200 British soldiers wounded or missing, whereas the Boers suffered only forty casualties, with eight killed (12). News of this catastrophic event reaches the home front before the Rifles set sail, but it does nothing to diminish their desire to get to South Africa before the fighting ends.

That Stenson should choose to give weight to the ineffectiveness of British command at the outset is fitting, for as military historian Geoffrey Regan asserts, “British generalship in the Second Boer War ranks, along with the Crimean War and the Gallipoli campaign, as a high point in the history of British military incompetence” (50). Similarly, psychologist Norman F. Dixon claims that “the most extraordinary thing about the events of the Boer War was that they could have occurred not only after those of the Crimean War,” which he refers to as “the prototype for subsequent ineptitude” (50), “but also after the First Boer War of 1880-81” (52). Dixon expresses incredulity that even though both wars were waged “far from home,” in “trying climates,” and against “white races” (52), the British learned nothing from either. Stenson’s novel records that the British finally won the Second Boer War only by resorting to desperate measures which killed thousands of innocent victims. As Sandra Swart observes, “from 1901 the war entered a new phase, with the Boers resorting to guerrilla tactics. The British response was to remove sources of food and shelter, implementing a devastating scorch earth policy” (*Riding* 106). General Roberts pronounced that “rebels ... should have their farms burned and their families turned out” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 315); “Kitchener ... added the gathering of homeless women and children into camps” and contributed to the English language by stating he was “concentrating them” in ‘concentration camps’” (340).<sup>3</sup> Fransjohn Pretorius notes in “The Boer Wars” that the filth and disease within the camps caused severe suffering and numerous deaths, so that “eventually 28,000 Boer women and children and at least 20,000 black people died in the camps.” And as Sandra Swart notes,



“Africans’ participation was on a substantial scale, with at least 100,000 in military employment on both sides, and the death toll for black combatants and refugees was between 16,000 and 20,000” (*Riding* 104). Or, as Davis divulges in a letter to Red Crow, “black people were made to work for the whites and were treated poorly, as bad or worse than white people treated Indians” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 172). Stenson’s novel, with its frequent depiction of African blacks taking on back-breaking work in often appalling conditions, underscores that they were exploited by Brits and Boers, both of whom were equally racist and intolerant. Present throughout the text as grave-diggers, horse-handlers, or as spies, their invaluable contribution to the war effort shattered the oft-repeated claim that colonials were volunteering to fight in a “white man’s war.”<sup>24</sup> It is significant that Frank and Ovide, who are occasionally assigned to both live and work with the blacks, do so without prejudice: they get to know them by name, find them hospitable and generous in their sharing of meager supplies of food and drink, and Frank learns they are more sympathetic to his grief when Ovide dies of “bad arithmetic” than members of the CMR. (While Frank is off scouting with Jeff, Ovide becomes ill: unfortunately, he takes the advice of Eddy Belton, Pete’s younger brother, and inadvertently poisons himself. The Belton brothers are thus responsible for Ovide’s death.)

The text further suggests that Canadian colonials—here mostly Alberta cowboys and their officers—were largely spared from (and in some instances outright refused) any commitment to the barbarity exercised by both Boers and Brits. According to Colonel Bernd Horn, when the British government was working out the details of how the first Canadian contingent would be deployed, it informed the Canadian government that troops would be, “like all colonial contingents ... absorbed into British units and formations.” But the British had failed to anticipate that “Canadians had developed a national identity and pushed for a strong, unified Canadian contingent” (Horn A11). As Miller stresses, the Canadian government’s insistence “that their volunteer soldiers be placed into battalions under Canadian officers, rather than in companies and placed in British battalions as the British authorities had initially requested” (“Crucible” 86), proved advantageous: once freed from a “mindless deference to class and social distinction,” officers were able to exercise “their own energy, initiative, resourcefulness and freedom from constraints” (96). These colonial officers were not the only ones on the battlefield capable of independent thought,

however; the Elgin Commission of 1903 describes “the Canadians and colonial troops as ‘half soldiers by their upbringing,’ natural horsemen, observant scouts ... whose men are trained to think for themselves” (94). Moreover, the American Lieutenant Arthur “Gat” Howard, who forms the notorious Canadian Scouts (many of whom are former CMR) later in the war, also declares that they are the “only soldiers on the British side who were a match for the Boer bitter-enders” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 470).<sup>5</sup>

The text includes numerous examples of the Rifles and their leaders’ refusals to surrender to imprudent British authority. When, for example, an English Mountie from Fort Macleod informs them they are privileged to be “advance guards” who have the “honour” of “draw[ing] fire so the artillery could spot enemy guns” (150), Albertan cowboy Waldron Hank organizes a meeting where he encourages them to “be damned careful which ... orders they obey” and just “try and survive” the war (200). Their survival, which often hinges on starvation, entails a willingness to take risks, though. Disregarding military command, and in full knowledge that they could face court martial or a firing squad if caught, they skillfully rope, kill, bleed, and roast sheep in order to have “full bellies” (110). Captured soon after, they learn they are “damn lucky” to have such a fine man as Pincher Creek’s Lieutenant Davidson in charge; his effective pleading of their case means they will escape punishment. While Frank observes that British army officers refuse to give men what they “crave” (67), Davidson is the kind of leader who “like[s] to do what his men want” (138). Although Davidson warns his subordinates that a Tommy had been “court-martialled” (147) for stealing a chicken, he merely “look[s] elsewhere” (147) when, by necessity, the Rifles go rustling again.

Throughout the text, Canadian officers (especially those from the West), prove superior in numerous ways to their British counterparts, in part because they tend to be relatively young in a field crowded with elderly officers who, like Colonel Herchmer, are “tyrant[s],” often found “staggering; cursing wildly; and forgetting what [they were] about to say” (178), and so bound by adherence to decades of military rule that they lack judgment. As Regan argues, the failure of the sixty-eight-year-old Lord Frederick S. Roberts to defeat farmer-enemies he outnumbered by a hundred to one could also be blamed on age, because “It is a problem of any system which depends on promotion by seniority rather than merit that men can achieve positions of considerable power and responsibility at an

age when their faculties are no longer as effective as they once were” (38).<sup>6</sup> Another aspect of military conduct which underscores the westerners’ common-sense approach lies in their disdain for unyielding military discipline. Unlike the British, who insist upon stringent punishment for slight misdemeanour, the Albertans readily dismiss minor infractions. When the British threaten to shoot a Rifle who has fallen asleep during battle, the Fort Macleod officer in charge of his sentencing simply says, “Don’t waste [my] time” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 199). Under their Canadian leaders, the Rifles are freed from the British officers’ absurd imposition of military ritual which forces men to attend daily drills when seasick (56); to move equipment about needlessly (77); to attend church parades in the blazing sun while suffering sunstroke (94); or to spit-and-polish boots that within minutes are filthy from marching in the mud (441). Similarly, at the Canadian Scouts’ camp under Howard’s command, when there is no fighting to be done, idleness prevails (441).

Davidson further demonstrates his strengths as a leader either by disregarding British officers’ foolish orders which threaten to place his men in jeopardy or, on occasion, in typical Canadian fashion, striking a compromise. He also adopts the unusual tactic (by British standards) of informing his men how various combat tactics have worked (or not) on the battlefield. Unlike his British counterparts, whose worst shortcoming some historians regard “an underestimation, sometimes bordering on the arrogant, of the enemy” (Dixon 67), Davidson admires the Boers’ skills and attempts to formulate his own adroit deceptions which emulate their skills and determination (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 239). Colonel Evans, another capable Canadian officer assigned to lead the CMR, also acknowledges the Boers are as smart and “by no means defeated” (153-54) as consistently rumoured to be and, like Davidson, apprises his men of his plan to win the next skirmish (153). Evans also takes the hitherto unheard-of approach of notifying the CMR about the nature of their missions and destinations, a practice so unfamiliar to the men that it takes them completely by surprise. Davidson is also the rare leader who utilizes his men’s strengths (particularly Davis’ scouting abilities) and, aware of Ovide’s and Frank’s competence with horses, often assigns them horse detail. Unlike many British commanders, Davidson is neither vindictive nor malicious (262).

Davidson’s greatest strength as leader, however, lies in his deep concern for the well-being of his subalterns, which again runs counter to British

command. As Dixon writes, one of the great failings of British officers was their “apparent imperviousness . . . to loss of life and human suffering amongst their rank and file” (67) or, as Frank cynically puts it after being ordered to play his part in what he knows will be more bureaucratic bungling, “Throw some soldiers on the fire. Show these Boer farmers what mad bravery Britain could summon from the ends of the earth” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 194). By contrast, Davidson is utterly overcome with grief when Albertans Fred Morden and Robert Kerr are both killed in action and so wracked with guilt over having convinced them to enlist by claiming “Britain’s interests were their own” (244), that he makes a passionate speech to the CMR praising Morden’s bravery and writes letters to General Hutton and the people of Pincher Creek demanding they not ignore “the dead men’s heroism” (254). By describing in detail the proficiency and consideration of officers Davidson and Evans in his novel, Stenson draws comparison to Joseph Boyden’s depiction of the Canadian officers Sergeant McCann and Lieutenant Thompson in his Great War novel *Three Day Road* (2005). Both stress that young and inexperienced Canadian officers not bound by high regard for military tradition are obliged to figure out the way *this* war works, and do; both novels argue that these untested leaders ultimately put up a better fight than the senior British military commanders unable to learn from past mistakes or adapt to changing conditions, but continue to repeat practices which had never worked.

Arguably, serving under men like Davidson proves instructive to Frank. Although he reflects early in the novel that neither he nor Ovide are leaders, whereas Davis and Morden clearly are (114), he proves himself wrong when Davidson promotes him to the rank of Acting Corporal in charge of three men. Although the four initially joke about Frank’s new role, seconds after Frank realizes his men are in danger, his “acting rank suddenly meant something,” and he immediately issues clear, direct orders that help secure his men’s survival on the battlefield (236). Months later, while serving with the Canadian Scouts, he is again promoted, this time to Corporal, with Danny from Regina and two Australians under his command. Prior to this latest advancement, Frank has often felt, like many other war-weary, disillusioned soldiers, that he has no reason to live. But when he has men who depend on him for their safety and well-being (550), he foregoes his customary heavy drinking because he is “enjoying the men under him and almost enjoying the war, and d[oes] not care

to have a rum-cloudy head in the morning” (516). He also warns Davis, whose sudden inexplicably reckless behaviour often places Frank and his men in danger, that he will no longer tolerate it. In a manner reminiscent of the constructive teaching methods of Boyden’s Sergeant McCann and Lieutenant Thompson, Frank patiently instructs his subordinates how to perfect the “hoolihan throw, the overhand toss where you didn’t swing the rope and scare the horses” (513); how to snub and saddle horses; and how to choose suitable mounts (513). Like Davidson, Frank acquiesces to his subordinates’ wishes to fight in perhaps the last battle of the war (530) because they argue he has trained them well; and redolent of Davidson’s passionate concern for his men, Frank feels “sick” when he hears that a young Canadian Scout has been killed, but relieved that “this dead boy” had not been “one of his” (515). While I have argued elsewhere that Boyden’s *Three Day Road* should be considered a kind of “military conduct manual” which provides an analysis of how positive interactions between superiors and their subalterns might be actuated in the context of a hierarchical relationship,<sup>7</sup> here, I assert that *The Great Karoo* should also be required reading for all those contemplating how men in command should behave under the appalling stresses of war.

Not long after Frank arrives in South Africa, he begins to “think” (96, 159, 197, 216) about how badly the war is organized, and about the irrational, even foolhardy way the war is being conducted. Like Boyden’s Xavier, who also begins to “think” early in the war, Frank becomes critical of British army practice, particularly Lords Roberts’ and Kitchener’s failures to provide their men (and horses) with an adequate food and water supply. Ironically, Frank realizes that when the British should have maintained “the old way of supply—with each battalion looking after itself,” a system which *had* worked well in the past, they deemed it “outmoded” and “replaced it with one big system: the smooth-functioning one that kept their army sick and hungry, and in one place” (146). This pathetically inefficient and seriously defective system leaves the men suffering through freezing nights without the aid of tents or blankets (154, 197), and hence often insures that many were often “too sick to go on. They were left coughing and with fevers for the Red Cross ambulances to find” (197). Miller’s assertion that medical care was often dispensed “according to rank and title rather than need” (“Crucible” 86), also occurs in the text; Frank is sickened when he learns that Dakomi, a black African labourer he has befriended,

has died because a British doctor has given priority to a major's superficial wound (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 304). Ultimately, Frank's precise observation—that the number of men “who had died of enteric fever and dysentery” was a “much bigger number than those killed in action” (337)—leads him to conclude that there was no point in the Boers bothering to attack them because “the Field Force was taking itself apart so efficiently” (96). Frank's assessment is correct, as Thomas Pakenham documents that of the “twenty-two thousand imperial and colonial soldiers who died during the Boer War, 5,774 were killed by enemy action (or accident) and shoveled into the veld, often where they fell; 16,168 died of wounds or were killed by the action of disease (or the inaction of army doctors)” (572). Frank's increasingly assiduous study of the war also brings him to recognize, like Davidson and Evans, how truly innovative, enterprising, and creative the Boers were, particularly in terms of their use of modern weaponry when the British continued to rely on antiquated equipment.

Several Albertans prove as resourceful and inventive as the Boers, however: they are Davis, Young Sam, a Nez Perce horse wrangler from Pincher Creek whose forefathers had fought the US Cavalry, and James Whitford who is, like Frank's mother, a Montana Halfbreed. But while she had moved from Manitoba's Red River to Montana and then to the District of Alberta, Whitford's “Indian half was Crow and the rest American” (208). Frank knows that Whitford is a legend, “said to have been in the U.S. Cavalry” and rumoured to have “survived the Custer massacre” (208), though it was “broadly known that no one had” (208). Both Young Sam and Whitford scout and track for Lionel Brooke, a British remittance man turned rancher from Pincher Creek who volunteers to fight with Lord Strathcona's Horse, a private army under the command of Sam Steele, but has defected to try to hunt down (unsuccessfully) the South African Boer general, rebel leader, and politician Christiian de Wet. The exceptional abilities of Davis and Whitford in particular negate Davidson's comment earlier in the novel that “being Indian doesn't add anything” (252): it does, as even the accomplished scout Casey Callaghan, an Irish teamster from Maple Creek, Saskatchewan, consults Jeff when he requires an “expert” opinion on scouting (451). Moreover, Red Crow has trained Jeff so well to be a “good and ... useful warrior” (26), that the British General Francis William Butler is moved to remark how “remarkable” it is that “a Halfbreed

in a white man's war" (340) should have achieved the rank of regimental sergeant-major.

Like Boyden's aboriginal soldiers Xavier Bird and Elijah Weesageechak, Davis and Whitford readily adapt to the harsh conditions of war. While members of the Rifles appear gaunt-faced and years older after only one month in South Africa, Jeff remains vigorous and healthy; the middle-aged Whitford is so fit that he can "run forever" (491). In spite of their lack of familiarity with the South African landscape, both Davis and Whitford are able to find food when none of the others can spot wildlife in the barren landscape; Davis also cleverly imitates the sounds of the local birds and animals. Most significantly, Davis ceases doing any "war work" during the winter because, unlike his superiors, he has studied the Boers' routines and realizes that they remain idle while waiting for spring to arrive (503). Although Davis's commanding officers often assume that his languor stems from either boredom or disinterest in their war plans, they fail to comprehend that he has simply figured out their strategies in advance (517). Jeff also proves to be an astute judge of human character. He devises a clever plan which outmanoeuvres Colonel Herchmer and forces him to rethink his foolish scheme to shoot the battalion's most valuable horses (88-89). Moreover, aware of Ovide's devotion to horses, Davis pries him from his sick bed by informing him of the horses' desperate conditions on the voyage to South Africa (56-58): both horse and human heal quickly. Like Davis, Whitford and Young Sam have carefully studied their "white masters" and cleverly mimic Brooke's snooty British accent while maligning his irrational notion that the Brits treat the Boers fairly. Both Davis and Whitford concoct brilliant—in Whitford's case humorous (496)—fictional narratives which help Frank locate Alma Kleff, the young Boer he has (foolishly) fallen in love with (315).<sup>8</sup> But because Frank is often a poor judge of character, he convinces himself that Jimmy is his foe and hence never acknowledges his discretion, quick-wittedness, loyalty, or intelligence. Years later, after he has been back in Pincher Creek for some time, he learns that it was Jimmy who saved not only his life, but the lives of Jeff and Danny by killing the sniper who had drawn a bead on them.

Another important aspect of the Albertans' primacy lies in their knowledge of, and passion for, horses and their corresponding revulsion for the appalling conditions they are forced to endure. As Swart observes, horses imported to foreign soil had to contend with numerous problems,

such as “eating unusual fodder, drinking too much water after hard work, a spell out in very hot or very cold weather, unfamiliar pathogens and alien plants, [that] can all lead to incapacitation and death” (*Riding* 104), and in Stenson’s novel, they do. Those who brought horses from overseas were also disadvantaged because Boer mounts “had more immunity to local diseases and were usually more robust because they had not suffered the rigours of maritime transportation, which weakened these imported horses’ immune systems” (Swart, “Horses” 354), and, moreover, they were ridden by “adaptable, experienced horsemen fighting in familiar environs” who thus had “greater mobility” (*Riding* 105). But Swart further acknowledges that both Boer and British sides “relied heavily on mounted troops, and the casualties suffered by these animals were on a massive scale” (“Horses” 349). On the British side, “326,073 horses ... died over the course of the war, at the rate of 66.88% of the total headcount,” a figure “widely regarded as proportionally the most devastating waste of horseflesh in military history up until that time. The slaughter was actually described as a ‘holocaust’ by an eye-witness, Frederick Smith” (348-49). Swart further adds that “the theatre of war carried a heavy cost, with the scorched earth policy shattering the rural economy of the two Boer Republics and transforming the landscape itself” (*Riding* 104).

But whereas the British sent to the front “large, unwieldy animals” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 35), some, but not all, of the Albertan cowboys chose horses capable of withstanding the rigours of combat in a strange new territory. These would be, of course, Davis, Adams, Whitford, and Callaghan, who ride into war on *cayuses*, “descendants of old-time Spanish horses ... that had run wild for centuries before becoming saddle stock again” (43). Frank observes these horses “tended to do better at picking their way over rough ground. Their eyes were set better for seeing in every direction, and that kept them from falling into badger and gopher holes” (43). Frank’s Dunny also sees better in the dark than Frank (460). Because their *cayuses* can swim, both Frank and Jeff are able to escape a “sickly camp” by offering to go scouting across a flooded river (479). Throughout the novel, Frank frequently acknowledges how strong Dunny is: while other horses quickly grow sick and weak even in the early stages of war, “she still had her flesh and her clarity and still responded to every flicker in the bush, quick ears snapping” (96). Later he observes that although other horses were “still thin and weary” (248), Dunny “was sparky and



insisted on pushing ahead” (248). Frank further acknowledges that Dunny’s “freakish vitality” (107) and “intelligence” (451) have more than once saved his life. Stenson’s textual statistics further confirm the superiority of cayuses: “by December 1900, [only] fifty of the eight-hundred horses brought from Canada had survived” (336), and by July 1900, only six remain (253). Among them are Frank’s Dunny, Jeff’s Blue, and Casey’s General. (The text infers that had Dunny not been stolen but remained under Frank’s care for the duration of the war, she might have, like Jeff’s Blue, arrived back in Halifax at war’s end “fatter and sassier than ever” [587].)

But while the Albertans know their way around horses, the Canadian government has no idea how to transport them safely to Halifax by train or to Cape Town by boat. British horses transported to South Africa fared no better, however, because according to Swart, the military did not know how to convey them to South Africa effectively and efficiently, either. While Swart suggests that no one on the British ships “had any veterinary experience” (*Riding* 109) and adds that the Army Veterinary Department (AVD) was “widely damned as inadequate in dealing with equine casualties” (“Horses” 349), both veterinarian Staff Sergeant Tracey and Ovide conceive imaginative ploys to help horses not only survive the journey, but to heal upon arrival: for example, they allow the horses to exercise in the sea after disembarkation so their tender feet can then be shod quickly (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 75). But Frank, who “thinks on behalf of the horses” (90), wonders what the point of pampering them has been if, having arrived, like their British counterparts “incapacitated—dehydrated, malnourished, and their immune systems severely compromised” (Swart, “Horses” 351), they were given so little time to acclimatize or revive but were pressed into duty almost immediately.

In suggesting that Frank “thinks on behalf of the horses,” Stenson leaves himself open to the accusation that, according to David Brooks, critics often raise—that it is “unwise to extend . . . our feelings to the things and creatures around us, because this is to colonise them, to appropriate them for our own purposes, and so to some extent to relegate or deny them their unique essence” (52). Brooks argues, however, that if we do not ascribe human feelings to non-human animals, we then make an exclusion which “is a *violent* isolation and effacement of the very creature we are supposedly respecting” (52). Brooks further stresses that “the extension of our feelings to the things and creatures around us is the basis of empathy, and

the only kind of empathy we can feel, since the actual nature of ‘feelings’ ... of these things and creatures cannot be known to us” (52). He concludes that it would be instructive if “we saw their pain as our own” (54). Stenson’s Ovide clearly feels that pain: after his mare has to be shot (when he knows she could have survived with proper rest and care), Frank observes that “Ovide’s face was hard to look at. The emotions all boiled over there, and the sunken eyes were deep and glaring” (105). Moreover, “in Ovide’s way of thinking, there were certain things you could not forgive. Deliberately killing a horse was chief among them” (105). But while Frank “thinks for the horses,” Ovide thinks *like* a horse; he has the “ability to fool a horse’s mind, to wake it from its nightmare and help it remember there was something about living that it liked” (58). To further comfort sea-sick horses on board ship, he talks, sings, gently strokes ears, lips, and noses (59). So acute is his empathy for horses that he “lacks any self at all” (52), and on occasion even “mutters” like a horse (257). When he encounters men from Lord Strathcona’s Horse in Cape Town, he asks after the well-being of the Albertan horses, not the local inhabitants (211), and later, once released from a sick bed, rushes straight to the horses (176). Although the text offers no reasons for Ovide’s enlistment, it seems likely that while he might have wanted to see lots of horses and does, he has doubtlessly anticipated that war will be harder on horses than humans, and wants to help care for them, not see them die. But he is helpless to offer aid on more than one occasion. For example, one of the problems the horses encounter on the boat that transports them to war is that while they become seasick in the same way as the men, “they can’t puke” (58): according to Swart, “simple indigestion [for horses] can mean death” (*Riding* 103). As they watch the horses’ agony, the men suddenly consider puking “a gift from God” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 58). John Sorenson concurs that animals suffer differently, noting that while war is a “nightmarish” experience for humans, it is truly hell for horses:

Horses are sensitive animals, well known for their flight reflexes, and in combat the noise, smells and explosions must have been indescribably frightening. Obviously, humans suffered greatly in these conditions but they could at least understand what was happening around them and some were able to console themselves with thoughts of patriotism, heroism, glory

and sacrifice for their nation. Horses had no such consolations but, prevented from escaping, simply had to endure the incomprehensible terrors inflicted upon them. In wartime, those animals we have forced to work for us as beasts of burden are threatened by even greater dangers than those they normally face. In all wars, animals' lives are cut short by direct violence, overwork, exhaustion, disease and starvation. (27)

As Sorenson concludes, "our assertion that nonhuman animals exist only as property has allowed us to exploit them in countless ways" (27).

Like Swart, who observes that "the war and contemporary writings helped propagate the idea of seeing and talking about the horse as an individual, with a personality and agency of its own" ("Horses" 357), Stenson, too, insists that "horses ... are characters of considerable importance" ("Fred"), their significance perhaps made more comprehensible once imbued with human characteristics. While Swart argues that "horses mattered as individuals in a way that other animals did not" (*Riding* 125), Stenson stresses that horses "are important parts of the emotional landscape" ("Fred"). Accordingly, after the deaths of Fred Morden and Robert Kerr, the Rifles seek comfort not from each other, but from their horses (*The Great Karoo* 246). Swart also attests that "the value of horses was such that their loss brought combatants to utter despair" ("Horses" 360), and for some, amounted to "their worse experience of the war" (360), a statement borne out when the theft of Dunny brings Frank to his lowest ebb. Although some of the men felt that "time would make him forget," if anything, "Frank's sense of loss was increasing and ascending into a right twist of obsession" (Stenton, *The Great Karoo* 275). When Davis eventually finds Dunny, Frank is disappointed to learn that she and The Blue have "buddied up" (447), but soon laughs when he realizes that the two mares had "planned a rendezvous" (461). Frank notes that The Blue is a jealous lover, as he gives a gelding accompanying Dunny and Frank a "warning look" (494), which leads Frank to "marvel at the unerring constancy of buddied horses. Compared to it, human relationships were fickle and qualified" (461). But the bond between horse and man is, for the Albertans, also one of absolute fidelity: some Rifles signed on for another tour of duty rather than give up their horses that "had carried them through a year of war" (336), whereas others remained to find "missing horses" or to "avenge

a friend” (468). It is noteworthy that neither the despicable Pete Belton nor his slightly nicer but dumber brother Eddy ever express any genuine concern for the health or safety of horses, perhaps because, as Swart observes, “the treatment of horses was increasingly . . . a hallmark of civility” (*Riding* 130). Equally important is that after Ovide’s death, Frank goes about his work with horses “carefully, trying to mimic Ovide” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 301), and vows thereafter to act out “what Ovide would have heard and done” (301).

As Swart also observes, “some Boers granted their horses almost mystical powers, feeling that they would warn them of danger ahead” (*Riding* 127), an attribute Stenson applies to his horses. On one occasion, Frank notes that “Dunny did not like the look of the bridge” ahead, and she is right because when Frank “forces her on,” he sees they are in danger, as the Boers “loved what they saw: the enemy laid out like a buffet meal” (*The Great Karoo* 187). When Eddy Belton steals Dunny, Frank is offered a “ridgling,” defined as “a colt whose nuts, one or both, stayed inside his body. . . . [R]idglings were sterile because their bodies were too hot inside to make living jism” (279). Although at first unimpressed by the ridgling, who looks “pissed off, then bored, then calm, then asleep” (281), Frank sets out to train him carefully: he talks constantly, informs the ridgling what comes next, and then once saddled, tells him stories (281). The ridgling, like Dunny, is also impressively “mystical”: he anticipates an explosion which finds Frank the only survivor by “staggering around in his knee-halter, wittering” (332) and shortly after gives Frank a look which says “Let’s get the hell out of here” (314). But in part, the ridgling remains an angry horse nonetheless: after he and Frank find shelter with a Boer family, the ridgling escapes from their barn: once returned, he looks “tired” but “pleased with himself” (370). But then, finding himself stuck back in the barn, he signals his displeasure by “kick[ing] the wall for an hour” (370). Although he clearly resents the reprimand, he remains loyal to Frank; when separated, he refuses to go north because that is not the direction Frank would take (417). (The ridgling also becomes bilingual when Jimmy Whitford, an even-better trainer than Frank, speaks to him in Cree.) That equine agency is significant becomes evident later in the novel: after the now-lame Dunny is returned to Frank, he invites her to “have her say” about the gelding he finds to replace her, but notes that Dunny seems “more disinterested than disgusted” (495); by contrast, the gelding, anxious to please, pretends

“to have energy like a man applying for a job” (495). Horses also appear to be shrewd judges of character—Dunny flattens her ears whenever the reprehensible American Pete Belton passes by (265)—but they are also, like children, susceptible to affection. Dunny falls prey to Eddy Belton’s “petting and nuzzling” (268), which makes it easy for him to steal Dunny away from Frank.

Stenson’s suggestion that “horses are generators of the story” (“Fred”) partially explains Frank’s reasons for going to war. Having learned that “they could take their own horses” to South Africa (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 12), Frank jumps at the opportunity. Like many cowboys, he does not want to be “fenced in,” but to ride in “a big and fenceless prairie” the way “Alberta used to be when it was wide open and innocent of the plow. . . . [He] had wanted to ride on Dunny in such a place, so he could talk about it when he was old” (107). But before he confronts the harsh realities of battle, he imagines himself and the intrepid Dunny as heroes:

On the ocean, Frank had spent many hours staring at the line that divided water from sky. In his head, he was watching himself in battle. Across the sweeps of imaginary landscape, he and Dunny galloped. They scared up fantastic birds. A herd of giraffes tall as storefronts raced away. Dunny had never been braver, or more sure-footed. Neither of them so much as flinched when Boer bullets floated by. (72)

It does not take long before he realizes that he had “outfoxed himself. Like a moose to a horse, the Great Karoo was open all right, but was nothing like Alberta would have been in that condition. Thinking that it would be like home, but a purer version, had been a dangerous mistake” (107). Years later, back in Alberta, Frank admits to his children and grandchildren that he was no “war hero” who would ever “take much of a risk to shoot a Boer” (587); during the later stages of the war he carries a pistol, but without any bullets, and does not know if he killed *one* or not. During the war, he begins to regard any act of violence, even cudgeling a sheep, abhorrent. He also admits to being frightened in battle, terrified of flooded rivers, and hence in no way resembles, as Andrea Pettit puts it, “the archetype of macho culture. The epithet ‘cowboy’ is often used to describe a rough, careless, daring and macho person” (67). Frank is none of the above: an

often lonesome cowboy, Frank is devastated when Dunny is stolen; moved to tears when Morden treats him as a friend; feels “pangs of loss” when Davis rides away without him; and cries over the death of Ovide and the loss of Dunny.

Frank is also not the only Albertan to enlist with the concept of heroism in mind, although Davis’s motives for enlistment have more to do with making love than war: as he tells Frank, he has “a girlfriend on the Blood. Her father doesn’t want [him] to have her. If [he] kill[s] enough Boers, he’ll change his mind” (290). But when he learns that both Red Crow and Ran After have died, he engages in “bursts of heroism” and occasionally becomes “dangerously brave” (533) by “skylining” (535) and singlehandedly engaging ten Boers in a fight. Neither Frank nor Callaghan understand Jeff’s behaviour because they have failed to comprehend that Jeff’s war has always been far more perilous than their own. As surrendered “white men” in Boer hands, Frank and Casey would risk losing their “tunic[s] and [their] boot[s]” (464), but Jeff would be murdered for being “black,” a “nigger” (464).<sup>9</sup> Hence he chooses “not to be executed” (465), but “to die in some way he could accept” (533). Another of the Albertan recruits, Fred Morden has been convinced by his patriotic parents that the British Empire is a force worth dying for; having memorized Tennyson’s poem, “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” about the imperialist notion of heroism, Morden goes to war believing “the dream of glory (or duty) still existed” (132). Accordingly, he makes a foolish “heroic sacrifice” which, knowing he could have surrendered, angers Frank. Morden also fails to understand that gallant acts of heroism are rendered less possible as wars become increasingly mechanized and technological. Morden’s sacrifice does serve a purpose, however, as it deters Morden’s cherished young friend Tommy Killam from enlisting in the Second World War; instead, he declares that he wants “to live his life right here in Alberta” (584). His response, Stenson infers, should apply to all others who believe they will find honour and glory in the trenches, or who volunteer to fight in wars against enemies they know nothing about.<sup>10</sup>

These references to motivation for enlistment, including the notion of heroism,<sup>11</sup> indicate that few, if any, of the CMR or those Albertans who fought with the Canadian Scouts deserved their reputations as the “very tough desperados” (587) as the British newspapers describe them after the war. Surprisingly, Frank and Jeff, both in England at the time, are pleased

with the description, perhaps because, as Amy Shaw points out, there was an “interesting focus” on recruits’ “physical bodies. These men served as representatives of prescriptive [even idealized] manliness to Canadians reading about their exploits, and as foils for the images of the Boers against whom they were fighting” (97). Those who might be designated as “tough desperados” were two hard-riding, death-defying cowboys—the Australian-born Charlie Ross and the American Gat Howard—neither of whom ever saw a war they didn’t like. Fighting, the thrill of adventure, the constant need to put themselves in risky situations, form the sum of their lives: significantly, neither has a home to return to. While Frank knows that “with their histories of derring-do and their Distinguished Service Orders,” some soldiers “would follow them to hell and back” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 469), he is not one of them, in part because both had fought at the 1885 Northwest Rebellion which dispossessed his mother’s family from their land. (Sam Steele had also rejected Ross’s desire to fight with the CMR.) Ross, who was interrogated but never charged with encouraging the men under him to swear an oath to take no Boer prisoners (and then when captured reputedly made them dig their own graves [502]), is particularly disgraceful. While Ross is a “fanatical” Boer hatred, Frank notes that the many of the Rifles found it “hard . . . to get a proper hatred going for the Boers” (102). Frank believes that Jeff has refused to burn the Kleff farm; and both he and Davis refuse to round up women and children, even though they had been warned that “fugitive women were forming laagers as they went east, well-armed and every bit as dangerous as their menfolk” (456). But in spite of these Albertan men’s efforts to save lives, not destroy them, and in what are perhaps the novel’s most poignant lines, Frank comprehends that “war was a kind of arithmetic that worked only by subtraction. Even in the moments of glory and achievement, there was always less than there had been before. Horses that had been alive were dead or ruined. Men who had been perfect in their young bodies were gone or reduced in some way” (527).

At war’s end, both Frank and Jeff return to Alberta and use their “Boer War Scrip” (579) to purchase ranches and farms. Yet, although Jeff is known to be a highly ranked soldier, the local townspeople—one a writer named Kelly—consider him a “shiftless, unmoral, and whisky sodden Halfbreed” (588). Similarly, Whitford receives no rewards, financial or otherwise, from the Canadian government. The Americans also refuse to

offer him pension monies for his service as a US Calvary Scout, it being more convenient to believe that he had been killed “*at the Battle of Little Bighorn*” (581). All that is known of Whitford is that he lives with the Cree in Hobbema, Alberta. Like the thousands of other “blacks” who devoted years of their lives to fighting in “a white man’s war,” he has nothing to show for it. This is what Frank notes in the brief memoir he writes in 1942 at the behest of his grandchildren on the fortieth anniversary of the ending of the Boer War, but then he promptly destroys the memoir in large part because he knows “it was a stupid war from start to finish and benefited no one but the rich. The proof is that the black people of South Africa never did get the vote, just like Indians here in Canada don’t have the vote to this day” (587). Frank is right to be angry, since at the time of the Boer War, Amy Shaw records that only male British subjects in Canada could vote; excluded were women, Aboriginals, Japanese, and Chinese Canadians (99). Although women were enfranchised federally in 1918, Aboriginals did not get the vote until 1960. South African blacks did not get the vote until 1994. Stenson has remarked, however, that it is his hope both Ovide Smith and Jeff Davis “will be known and remembered now that they are part of a present-day narrative, and that southern Albertans and other Canadians will find them interesting and be proud of them” (“Fred”). We do, and we are. My hope, however, is that this is only Stenson’s initial foray into the writing of war literature, not his last.

## NOTES

- 1 For more information on Charcoal’s history, see Dempsey.
- 2 Harring comments that the Northwest Rebellion, “which looms large in western Canadian history” (245), led to a change in NWMP/Indian relations under policies that were “cruel and unworkable” and resulted in starvation (244). The arrest and punishment of Indian offenders also rose to far higher levels by the 1880s; imprisonment became “an enormously powerful symbol of the meaning of police power” (244). Stenson’s novel also hints at high rates of aboriginal incarceration.
- 3 This was not the first appearance of internment camps, however: both Spain and the United States had used them earlier. But as Stenson’s novel indicates, the Boer War camps were the first time that entire regions were depopulated. For further information, see Tone.
- 4 While Frank provides the “ant’s eye view” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 152) of the war, the Irish-born General Francis William Butler, a former Lieutenant-General of the British army who served in some of the most important British colonial wars of the



- nineteenth century, offers an experienced insider's view. Butler, who traveled several times to Northwestern Canada—once to serve as intelligence officer at the 1870 Red River expedition—frequently voices in separately titled sections his increasing disillusionment with British imperialism and his condemnation of the attempts to coerce “the rebel forces to accept British democracy,” when it is questionable whether “Britain had been a democracy herself” (440).
- 5 Howard's nickname came from his having demonstrated the effectiveness of the Gatling gun as a killing machine. Howard is one of Frank's mother's “least favourite humans” because he had fired on her relatives with a machine gun at Batoche during the “1885 Halfbreed rebellion” (Stenson, *The Great Karoo* 167).
  - 6 Stenson strikes a balance here, however, as not all the aged are incompetent. Both Butler and Red Crow, who both view war as pointless and futile, are thus logical and wise, whereas the younger Kitchener is clearly unbalanced (65, 477); moreover, the bizarre behaviour of three other leaders—only one of whom is old—should have seen them removed from office (327-28).
  - 7 See my “Killer Canucks.”
  - 8 Boyden's Xavier also makes a disastrous, ill-fated romantic liaison. While both soldiers expend a lot of fictional time searching for the women they have fallen in love with, Stenson's Frank offers a brief depiction of the devastating conditions of the camps, which remind him of the terrible treatment of aboriginal children in Alberta. Glimpsing a wire cage “full of Boer prisoners,” Frank reflects that “not one child played in that enclosure, something Frank had seen before during a starvation spring on the Blood Reserve” (488).
  - 9 Earlier in the novel, the Boers have killed Young Sam for being a “nigger” (464), even though Lionel Brooke, whose stupidity and selfishness are responsible for the death of Young Sam, tells them that he is “an American Indian, a Nez Perce” (464). Sadly, neither Frank nor Brooke knows how to pay their respects for Young Sam's death, since he is not a Christian (394).
  - 10 Stenson has indicated that he finds numerous comparisons between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the Boer War. Both the United States and the British Empire purported to be bringing democracy to these countries, whereas the control of resources—oil in the Middle East and gold and diamonds in South Africa—were the real reasons behind the wars (“Fred”).
  - 11 Stenson complicates the notion of heroism by including in his text the story of an officer, Colonel Hannay, who is a paragon of moral distinction. At the battle of Paardeberg, Hannay finds Kitchener's orders so absurd that he sends his men on errands rather than ordering them to face certain death. He then rides heroically into battle himself, but is shot instantly (124).

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