

VISITING SOUTH AFRICA

Jackie Grobler

Joseph Chamberlain's visit to South Africa in December 1902 to February 1903 is remembered for the inability of the two protagonists, Chamberlain and his team on the one side and the spokesmen of the bitter-ender Republican burghers of the Anglo-Boer War on the other, to reach any form of understanding on the post-war dispensation.

Chamberlain undertook this visit on his own initiative, to gain first-hand knowledge of post-war conditions in South Africa on which to base his future policy decisions. He was accompanied by his wife, Mary, who made extensive notes of their experiences. They visited both urban and rural centres, starting in Durban in the last week of December 1902 and ending in Cape Town two months later. In almost all instances they were heartily welcomed by the segment of the public which had supported Britain in the Anglo-Boer War. Chamberlain received memorials from a variety of interest groups, including British South Africans, Boers who supported Britain in the latter stages of the Anglo-Boer War (the so-called hands-uppers and joiners or National Scouts), Boers who fought to the end and with whom the peace treaty was negotiated (the so-called bitter-enders) as well as black South Africans.

During the whole course of his visit he met with representatives of the bitter-enders twice. The first time was in Pretoria on 8 January 1903 when he had an interview with, amongst others, the wartime generals Louis Botha, Koos de la Rey and Jan Smuts in the Old Government Buildings. In Bloemfontein he had a tense meeting with a bitter-ender delegation including Christiaan de Wet and Barry Hertzog. It is notable that after each of his two meetings with spokesmen of Britain's former Republican enemies, he was politely thanked for having given the delegates an opportunity to air their views, even though the outcomes of each of the meetings were fruitless. Indeed, Smuts afterwards wrote that 'Mr Chamberlain's visit to South Africa has been a dismal failure and has



A 1903 programme for part of Joseph Chamberlain's tour of South Africa, during which he visited 29 towns, delivered 64 speeches and received 84 deputations.

left matters worse than he found them.'

Why a failure? The immediate post-war years were the era of British supremacy in South Africa. Chamberlain simply could not (or refused to) develop any form of empathy with the wishes and needs of his former foes. Indeed, he preferred to castigate them for their presumption when they requested amnesty for the Cape rebels. He blamed them for the damage caused by the war, since they kept fighting after their republics had been annexed. And he accused them of ingratitude, since they thanked their benefactors in Europe for their contribution of £100,000 for the relief of distress in the former republics, but did not thank Britain for contributing 150 times more, namely £15 million pounds. The bitter-enders similarly refused to become part of the purely British 'New Nation' which Chamberlain envisaged for

post-war South Africa. They rejected Chamberlain's claim that the British Empire was extremely generous towards them.

Little came of Chamberlain's vision for the new South Africa. Indeed, his South African visit, which on the surface seemed to have been a crowning glory in his distinguished career, ultimately had more negative than positive results. ●

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Further Reading

Julian Amery, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain, Part 4* (Macmillan, 1951).
Donald Denoon, *A Grand Illusion. The Failure of Imperial Policy in the Transvaal Colony during the Period of Reconstruction 1900-1905* (Longman, 1973).
W.K. Hancock, *Smuts. The Sanguine Years 1870 - 1919* (Cambridge University Press, 1962).