

SCHOOL TEACHER IN THE CAUSE OF EMPIRE

Sarah E. Drysdale (1864-1951)

In November 1901, after nearly three years of bitter conflict had brought the Boer Republics of southern Africa to imminent defeat, British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain¹ launched an appeal for additional assistance from the Empire's self-governing Dominions. Chamberlain was no longer looking for more Canadian, Australian and New Zealand troops to augment the 500,000-man British army² occupying the former Transvaal and Orange Free states; what was wanted were teachers;

... [to] work in refugee camps, the scholars in which are chiefly Boer children. The candidates must be of good physique, as many will have to live in tents, and the work will be hard, although, on the other hand, the climate is very good. The term of employment will be one year certain, and the teachers will have the option of returning at the end of that period; but for those who are found suitable, and wish to stay, there will be prospect of permanent employment. For this period of one year the emoluments offered by the Administrations are a salary of £100, in addition to accommodation and rations in the camps. Second-class passage to the place of employment will be given and return passage to those who elect to return at the end of the year. Lord Milner³ [Governor of the Cape Colony] undertakes that every provision compatible with camp life will be made for the comfort of those who accept these appointments.⁴

When Canadian Governor General Earl Minto⁵ relayed Chamberlain's call for volunteers he announced that 40 positions were available for Canadians.⁶ Within weeks more than 800 applications poured in. By March 1902 the selections had been made and on April 4th the *Perth Courier* reported;

Though the decision of Miss S. E. Drysdale, of the Public School staff, to accept a position as teacher in the concentration camps, was not announced till Thursday morning last week, the last day before Easter holidays, the scholars of her room got their heads together at recess and did some quick thinking, so that when the school assembled for the afternoon session they had decorated the entire room with bunting, flags & flowers, giving it a quite gala appearance. During the afternoon they sprang a surprise on their teacher, by waiting upon her in a body, and presenting her with, as an expression of their good will, a fountain pen and book.

¹ Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914), began his political career as a radical Liberal but became a Liberal-Unionist and a prominent Imperialist in coalition with the Conservative Party.

² Canada contributed 7,500 volunteers to the British Army in South Africa. The Boer Republics fielded only 88,000 men against Britain's half million-man force.

³ Alfred Milner, 1st Viscount Milner, (1854-1925).

⁴ *Times of London*, November 6, 1901.

⁵ Sir Gilbert John Murray Kynynmond Elliot, 4th Earl of Minto (1845-1914).

⁶ Earl Minto also slightly improved upon the Colonial Secretary's terms. He offered First-class passage from Canada to England, because First-class on north Atlantic ships was considered the equivalent to Second-class on south Atlantic routes.

Miss Drysdale left on Friday evening for Penetanguishene, where she will make a brief visit with her sister, Mrs. J. J. Drummond, after which she intends spending a few days in Toronto, procuring her outfit. It will probably be another week or 10 days before she leaves for her new sphere of business.

On the same day Miss Drysdale rushed off to Penetanguishene the Perth Board of Education convened a special meeting,

... to consider the resignation of Miss S. E. Drysdale who has accepted a commission under the British Government to go to South Africa to teach in the concentration camps. Miss Drysdale was granted one year's leave of absence, and Judge [William Stevens] Senkler, Dr. [Alexander] Munro and Mr. E. G. [Edward Glass] Malloch were appointed to draft a memorial expressing the board's appreciation of her services.

The following week the *Perth Courier* reported that;

Miss S. E. Drysdale will, in all probability, leave on Saturday, on her long trip to the Boer concentration camps in South Africa, where, in company with other Canadian teachers, she will be engaged for a year in instilling truth and knowledge into youthful Boer minds. On Friday the Board of Education passed the following resolution ...

The Board of Education of the Town of Perth, in consenting to grant Miss S. E. Drysdale leave of absence for a year, to enable her to proceed to South Africa, desire to place on record the high appreciation of her valuable services to the Board. Among the members of the able and efficient staff of teachers in the Public School of this town, Miss Drysdale stands second to none. Her 13 years of service in the school have earned for her the respect and esteem of each individual member of the Board. The Board wishes her every success in her proposed undertaking and will be only too glad to welcome her back to her old position, which she has filled so well and so long.⁷

Sarah Evelyn Drysdale, known to family and friends as 'Sadie', was born at Pakenham in 1865 to Alexander G. Drysdale (1817-1872) and Martha O'Neill (1828-1897). Her father was a blacksmith and owner/operator of an axe factory⁸. In the latter half of the 1870s, Sarah, her widowed mother and her seven siblings moved to Perth. In 1889, at age 25, Sarah was engaged as a teacher at the Perth Public School where she would work until 1902.⁹

When Colonial Secretary Chamberlain instructed the Canadian Governor General to recruit teachers, he stipulated that no Catholics should be considered and that Minto must ensure that "*no teacher selected is opposed to British rule in South Africa*". In his call for teachers Chamberlain had also carefully chosen the term "*refugee camps*", but that choice was an attempt at political spin. Throughout the war the camps had been officially designated "*concentration camps*" and, as the *Perth Courier* reports and the Board of Education memorial show, "*concentration camp*" was the term in common usage. Through the humanitarian work

⁷ *Perth Courier*, April 11 1902.

⁸ *Pakenham Village Directory 1851*.

⁹ After the death of her mother in 1897 Sarah and his sister Jean formed a household. Jean Drysdale (1859-1936) was for some time Perth telegraph operator for the G.N.W. Telegraph Company.

and journalism of Emily Hobhouse (1860-1926) the inhuman conditions, and the associated death toll, in those camps was widely known.

Britain had seized the Cape Colony from the Dutch in 1795¹⁰ and for half a century was content with control of the Cape of Good Hope. In 1843 however they annexed the independent Boer state of Natalia (Natal). Then, in 1867, gold was discovered in the Boer Orange Free State and in 1886 diamonds were dug up in the Boer Transvaal. The Transvaal was annexed in 1886. Britain's land grabs led to a brief armed conflict in 1880-1881, the First Boer War, and subsequent British interference in the affairs of the Orange Free State led the Boers in the Transvaal and Free State to attempt a joint invasion of Natal in 1899, initiating the Second Boer War of 1899-1902.



A Boer homestead torched by the British Army

Unable to defeat or even contain the highly mobile and fiercely committed Boer Commandos (guerrilla fighting units), in March 1901 Army Chief of Staff Lord Horatio Kitchener¹¹ instituted a brutal scorched earth program, ordering destruction of all sources of food, shelter and other resources that might support the Boer fighting force. British troops burned houses and crops, killed livestock and poisoned wells. As Boer families were driven from their farms and villages Kitchener created 'Concentration Camps'¹² to house them in isolation from men still fighting with the Commandos. Ultimately 100,000 Boers, mainly women and children, occupied 50 camps for white civilians¹³ and another 64 camps housed tens of thousands of displaced blacks. British authorities were quickly overwhelmed by the numbers

¹⁰ In 1795 the Dutch Batavian Republic was created in an alliance with Revolutionary France.

¹¹ Horatio Herbert Kitchener, 1st Lord Kitchener (1850-1916).

¹² The Boer War of 1899-1902 brought the terms 'Commando' and 'Concentration Camp' into the English language.

¹³ There were also separate Prisoner of War camps for captured Boer fighters who refused to take an oath of allegiance to Britain.

and their own incompetence. There was insufficient food, water, accommodation, fuel and medical care. Epidemics of typhoid, enteritis, measles, diarrhea and pneumonia swept the barbed wire compounds killing 28,000 Boers (10% of total population), of which 22,000 were children. In the African camps another 17,000 died.

From the 1880s criticism of British policy in South Africa had been growing and sympathy for Boers took root. As the second Boer conflict expanded from a colonial dust-up into a lengthy, full scale war, international relations (particularly with France, Holland and Germany) were strained. Public opinion across the Empire also began to shift, and this was particularly true in the Dominions. Anglo Canadians were generally enthusiastic supporters of Britain's annexation of the Boer Republics, and regarded the suffering of the Boers as self inflicted by foolish primitive opposition to enlightened British imperialism. Canadians of other ethnic backgrounds however, in particular the Quebecois and recent immigrants from Germany and the Low Countries, considered Britain's African adventures a brutal example of might over right. Even Canadian Governor General Minto wrote privately that he regretted Canada becoming involved in such an *"unjust conflict"*. In Britain itself public opinion also split, largely along the fault line of class.



French Anti Boer War Poster

By late 1901 Kitchener's campaign was bringing the Boer Commandos to terms, but the conduct of the British Army in doing so left the Home Government in need of a reconstruction plan that would polish its international image and integrate their new Boer subjects into the British Empire. The scheme to establish schools and recruit teachers was part of an effort to counter growing criticism (at home, across the empire and around the world) and to specifically address the Army's ill-considered establishment and incompetent management of the concentration camps. Teachers of the 'right sort', were a key element of Britain's post-war policy.

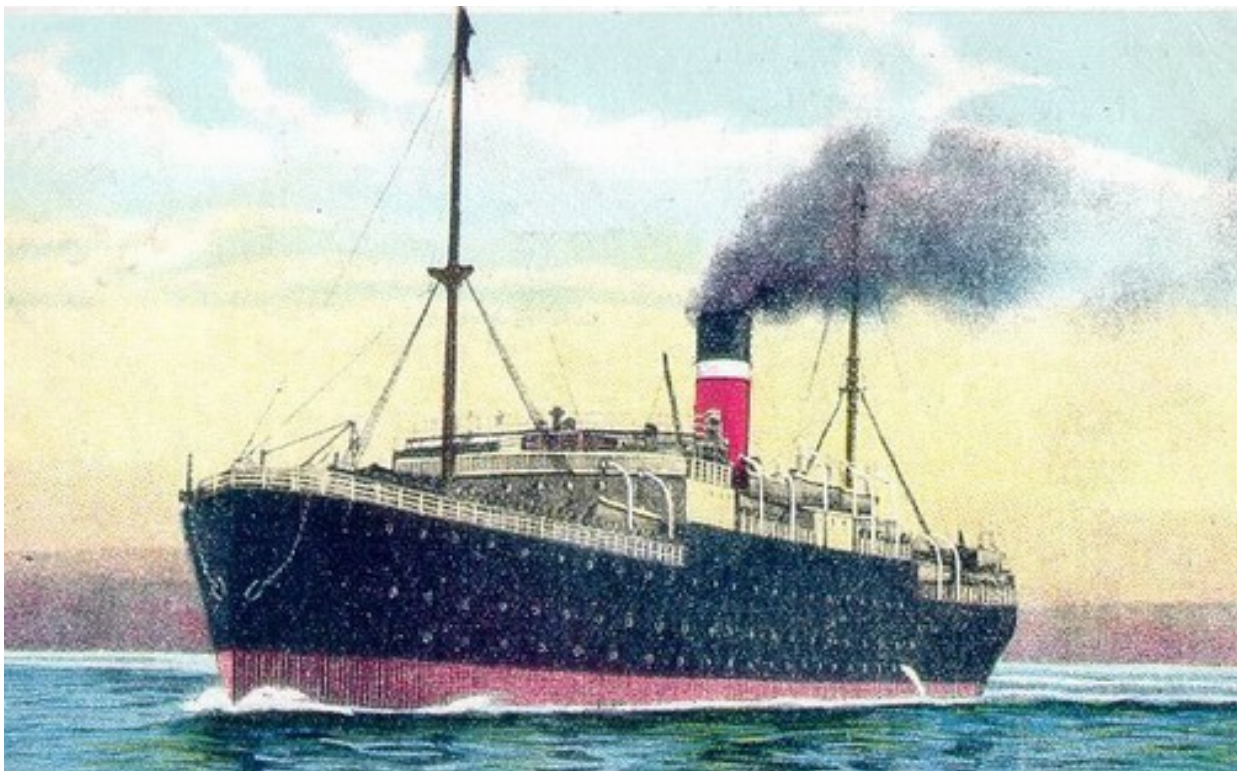
Winnowing the flood of applications, Government and education officials in London, Ottawa, Canberra and Wellington ensured, through resume, recommendation and personal interview, that Sarah Drysdale, and all 300¹⁴ young women selected, were of the 'right sort'. All were of British stock, Protestant (Sarah was a Presbyterian Free Church adherent), middle-

¹⁴ England supplied about 200 teachers, Australia 40, Canada 40 and New Zealand 20.

class, well educated, experienced and deeply loyal to Queen and Empire. Most were in their mid to late 20s, although Sarah Drysdale was 38 years of age.

On April 12, 1902 Sarah Drysdale and 19 other Canadian teachers boarded the Allen Line's SS *Corinthian* at Halifax and sailed for England¹⁵. The second contingent of 20 followed aboard the Elder-Dempster Line's SS *Lake Ontario* sailing from St. John, New Brunswick, on April 19th. As Sarah and her compatriots took ship, the *Toronto Globe* wrote that;

... the 40 young ladies who are going to South Africa from Canada to instruct the young Boers in the English language and train them up in the ways of civilization, are handsome, athletic specimens of Canadian womanhood ... If the young Boer farmers are at all susceptible to feminine influences one can easily foresee what will be the result of the arrival of such a bevy of handsome Canadian girls.



S.S. Corinthian

On arrival at Southampton the Canadian teachers were whisked away for a whirlwind visit to London. In addition to touring the famous sites they were invited to tea at 10 Downing Street by Alice Balfour (1851-1936), sister of British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour (1848-1930)¹⁶. At Downing Street, they were presented to the Prime Minister, Lord and Lady Roberts¹⁷ (recently returned from commanding the British Army in South Africa), Earl Grey¹⁸, the Baden-

¹⁵ In some accounts teacher Sarah E. Drysdale who sailed on the Corinthian is incorrectly identified as coming from Perth, Australia.

¹⁶ Arthur Balfour, Prime Minister 1902-1905, never married and his sister Alice lived with him at 10 Downing Street, serving as his hostess.

¹⁷ Frederick Roberts, 1st Earl Roberts (1832-1914) and his wife Nora Henrietta Bews (1838-1920).

¹⁸ Albert Grey, 3rd Earl Grey (1851-1917). He would serve as Governor General of Canada 1904-1917 and give his name to the Grey Cup football trophy.

Powells¹⁹ Michael Sadler²⁰ of the Education Department and other political and social luminaries of the time.

The London visit also included several briefing sessions by the Colonial Office and Education Department. The teachers were somewhat surprised to learn that they “*could hire Boer girls and Kaffirs²¹ to do our housework²²*”.

Ten days later they sailed for Africa. Arriving in late May 1902 teacher Maude Graham recalled that;

.... we found the weather very cold, wet and windy. We were told that we had arrived in the middle of winter. There was much travelling between this office and another while we were allocated to our final destinations.²³



Concentration Camp children

When the Canadian teachers reached Cape Town in early 1902 there were more than 17,000 school age children in the Transvaal camps and 12,000 in the Orange River Colony camps. Their task was to Anglicize and ‘civilize’ the Boer children, remoulding them into loyal British subjects. To do so English was essential and it was taught by immersion. Some math, history and geography were taught, but the English language was paramount and all subjects were used to impart the British world view.

The hope was to achieve the aspiration expressed by Sir Bartle Frere (1815-1884), British High Commissioner for South Africa 1877-1880, who had written to Queen Victoria that the Boers were “*a most interesting and primitive people*” who could be made “*as loyal subjects to your Majesty as French Canadians*”.

The Concentration Camp to which Perth’s Sarah Drysdale was assigned is uncertain. In 1905 she was living at Krugersdorp²⁴, a short distance north-east of Johannesburg, so she may have first worked at the nearby camp. Krugersdorp was the first of the camps to be established and, when Miss Drysdale reached South Africa in May 1902, it housed about 6,000 women and children. By that date the worst of camp shortcomings had been addressed, but an outbreak of disease at Krugersdorp during October and November of 1901, related primarily to polluted drinking water, had claimed 809 internee lives.

¹⁹ Robert Baden-Powell, 1st Earl Baden-Powell (1857-1941) and his wife Henrietta Grace Smith (1824-1914). Baden-Powell had also recently returned from service in the Boer War.

²⁰ Sir Michael Ernest Sadler (1861-1943).

²¹ ‘Kaffir’, a word derived from the Arabic, ‘Kafir’, meaning an unbeliever or non-Moslem, was/is a derogatory term for black Africans in use in South Africa, equivalent to ‘Nigger’ in English.

²² *A Canadian Girl in Africa: A Teachers Experiences in the South African War, 1899-1902* - By E. Maude Graham (1905).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Perth Courier*, May 12, 1905.



Krugersdorp Concentration Camp

The Camp School day ran from 9:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., with a recess from 10:30 to 11:00 a.m. It began with 20 minutes of religious instruction in Afrikaans followed by a hymn, a check for cleanliness, passing out slates, pencils and books, copying figures and letters from the blackboard, recess, a lesson in reading, basic math, spelling, memorization of a new verse, and a simple story. All classes were in English except the opening devotions and three hours' instruction per week in 'High Dutch' (as opposed to the vernacular of Afrikaans²⁵). The British government provided each teacher with £3 for teaching supplies, most of which had been purchased when they visited London. Teachers were free to choose from the Board of Education's extensive holdings but the books on offer, including *100 Gems of English Scenery*, *Pictorial Britain and Ireland* and *England's History as Pictured by Famous Painters*, are indicative of the kind of lessons the British government was keen to support.²⁶ The objective, as described by the *Toronto Globe* was that;

*... [as] the Canadian soldier boys won the admiration and respect of brother Boer upon the battle field. It now becomes the duty of Canadian maidens to bring the blessings of education and refinement into the homes of the Dutch.*²⁷

Isabella Perry, a teacher from Montreal, agreed;

*... our mission was a very important one, equally important as that of soldiers, for it was to implant feelings of loyalty to the British flag in the hearts of the Dutch children and to endeavor to reconcile the Dutch women to British rule.*²⁸

²⁵ A dialect of Dutch spoken by the Boers.

²⁶ Description of a School Day drawn from the introduction to *A Canadian Girl in South Africa: Teachers Experiences in the South African War, 1899-1902* - By E. Maude Graham (1905) – Edited by Michael Dawson, Catherine Gidney & Susanne M. Klausen (2011).

²⁷ *Toronto Globe*, April 1902.

²⁸ *A Canadian Girl in South Africa* - By E. Maude Graham (1905).

Toward this end, the work of Sarah and her fellow teachers in the camps was considered a great success; although the men who selected them garnered much of the praise. A Government Report of December 1902 noted that;

To the judicious selection on the part of the gentlemen at the head of the educational departments in several provinces is due the admirable result of the undertaking; the entire contingent, it is gratifying to know, having given complete satisfaction, both as regards its personnel and the accomplishment of its purpose. As the request, in itself, was a tribute to the systems of education in the Dominion, so the outcome may justly be regarded as a striking proof of their high standard of excellence and efficiency.²⁹

The Boers formally surrendered on May 31, 1902, the concentration camps were closed in September, and the teachers sent out in pairs to establish schools in Boer villages and farmsteads. Sarah Drysdale seems to have been sent to the town of Krugersdorp, but may also have been posted to other communities as various times. On May 15, 1903 the *Perth Courier* reported that;

Miss S. E. Drysdale, who is one of the Canadian teachers in South Africa, has written her relatives in town that she intends to remain for another year. She is meeting with marked success.

By targeting the children, it was hoped to make the former Boer Republics 'British in one generation' and, initially, it did seem that the education component of the reconstruction and reconciliation policy was meeting with "marked success". In the end, however, the imposition of English-only education had the opposite effect. It fanned the un-extinguished flame of Boer identity and nationalism.

The motivations behind Sarah Drysdale's decision go to southern Africa, in the middle of a war, to work in the widely publicized appalling conditions of the Boer concentration camps, can only be guessed at. In turn of the century Victorian Canada, for a small-town, unmarried, 38-year-old woman, secure in a teacher's position she might expect to hold for the rest of her life, to make such a choice is remarkable, but perhaps instructive.

Money probably had little to do with it. In 1902 Sarah was earning an annual salary of about \$300 at the Perth Public School³⁰. The £100 salary paid by the Transvaal Colonial Administration was the equivalent of only about \$190 Canadian dollars, although that total amount was free and clear of all costs for accommodation, food, medical care, etc. which she would have paid from her salary at Perth. There may have been some small net gain in income, but under conditions far less comfortable than those she knew at home. Other teachers who went to the camps expressed their desire for travel, adventure, and the prospect for future career opportunities. Sarah probably shared some or all of those aspirations. In that she was among the one in twenty applicants selected by the Colonial Office, her patriotism and self-identification as a citizen of the British Empire must have been strong motivators. Sarah Drysdale must also have been possessed of a strong spirit of independence and conviction

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ A male teacher at Perth Public School would have earned an annual salary of about \$425.

about what a woman's role could be in society. As the new century dawned a Canadian woman's world was changing and Sarah's decision doubtless reflected the hopes of many other women who were not offered the same or similar opportunities. When Sarah boarded the *Corinthian* at Halifax, however, she had well and truly kicked over the traces of contemporary social convention which largely confined a woman's role to wife and mother or spinster school teacher.

Sarah Drysdale continued to teach in Transvaal Colony until 1907. Then, on August 31st that year, under the headline '*Home From Africa*', the *Perth Courier* reported;

Miss Sadie Drysdale returned Tuesday night from South Africa. Miss Drysdale was one of a number of Canadian Teachers who, five years ago, were sent out to South Africa at the conclusion of the war to give assistance in the schools.

Of her fellow Canadian teachers, at least one, Sylvia Lee of Waterloo, Quebec, died (of enteric fever) and, as anticipated by the *Toronto Globe*, about a dozen married in South African and did not return.

Back in Canada Sarah Drysdale abandoned the school room. In 1908 she went to work for the Carnegie Library in Ottawa, initially as an 'Assistant' and then from 1916 as 'Chief of the Children's Circulating Department'. She worked for the library until about 1920 when joined the Civil Service, working first as a Clerk in the Department of External Affairs³¹ and then in the Prime Minister's Office until her retirement in 1933³². During her years with the Carnegie Library she was an active member of the Ontario Library Association. From 1917 into the 1920s her name frequently appears among the executive of the 'Women's Canadian Historical Society of Ottawa' and she was a member of the Chelsea Club of Ottawa³³.

Sarah Evelyn Drysdale died on December 31, 1951 at the age of 87 years. Her place of burial is uncertain. There are gravestones bearing her name and dates in both Elmwood Cemetery at Perth and Pakenham Union Cemetery.

- Ron W. Shaw (2016)

³¹ *Might's Ottawa City Directories.*

³² *Perth Courier*, January 17, 1952 – Obituary.

³³ Today's 'Women's Canadian Club'. the Chelsea Club was established by the 'Women's Canadian Historical Society' in 1910.