In superseding Chelmsford as GOC, South Africa, Sir Garnet Wolseley assumed wide-ranging powers as both high commissioner in southeastern Africa and governor of Natal and the Transvaal. He sought to impose a settlement upon both Zululand and the neighbouring Transvaal (the former South African Republic that Britain had annexed in 1877). Setting aside the confederation plans of Sir Bartle Frere, he resolved that Zululand (other than the disputed territory left in Boer hands) should be ruled by thirteen minor chiefs. He then moved into the Transvaal to restore British prestige by overthrowing Sekhukhune, whom the Boers had failed to defeat in 1876. The strategy had only short-term impact and, after barely a year, 4,000 Boers at their national convention voted to restore the South African Republic, by force of arms, if necessary. In the ensuing conflict, the First Anglo-Boer War (1880–81), soldiers had their first encounter with a well-armed African foe, who was mobile, adept at skirmishing and capable of conducting siege warfare. Some 1,800 soldiers served in the Transvaal and all were besieged in isolated garrisons throughout the war, with few managing to send letters beyond their beleaguered posts. Even the relief force from Natal struggled to maintain its line of communications, and few war correspondents reached the front (none covered the first two battles and only three observed the final battle at Majuba). As the war lasted little more than two months, contained a series of unrelieved disasters, and divided British opinion about its propriety, it aroused scant enthusiasm at home. Indeed the newspapers, at least latterly, were preoccupied with the assassination of the Tsar and the death of Benjamin Disraeli.2

To attack Sekhukhune, Wolseley assembled a formidable composite force, comprising the 2/21st and the 94th (2/Connaught Rangers), with two companies of the 80th, four guns, a party of Royal Engineers with explosives, a troop of mounted volunteers under Commandant Fereira,
another mounted troop of volunteers and natives under Major Carrington, and about 8,000 Swazis. As the force advanced into the eastern Transvaal, it endured extreme heat and had to move through thick bush. The sappers, wrote Commeline, were ‘employed from dawn till dark’, cutting pathways, preparing drifts for ox-driven wagons, and organising the construction of forts: by comparison, he added, ‘the Zulu war was a joke’.³ On 28 November Lieutenant-Colonel Baker Russell launched a two-phased assault on Sekhukhune’s stronghold, employing the Carrington Horse to attack the town from the north and the Fereira Horse to attack the kraal from the south, while the Swazis seized the flat-topped mountain above. Once those objectives were secured, British regulars attacked Sekhukhuni’s ‘Fighting Kop’, a separate rocky salient some 200 feet high that overlooked the town and kraal. As the kopje was honeycombed with caves and crannies, some of which were protected by stone walls, artillery proved relatively inefffectual, forcing the infantry to storm the kopje and take terrace after terrace in fierce hand-to-hand fighting.⁴ Even so, many of the Pedi would not yield, prompting the sappers to spend an hour-and-a-half placing charges of gun cotton into as many of the caves as possible. Commeline ruefully reflected that ‘they did not kill very many . . . yet wounded many and from the dust and smoke produced terrible thirst, and reduced the garrison to a most pitiable condition’. The attacking force had suffered, too:

We had been fighting for seven hours and our casualties are very heavy, probably 200 is under the mark as the Swazis lost a great number . . . Almost all the wounds have been inflicted at close quarters, they are as a rule serious and probably the death toll will yet be considerably swelled. As a battle Ulundi could not be compared to this one where we were the attackers.⁵

Lieutenant-Colonel Philip R. Anstruther, [94th], who commanded the fight in the valley, recalled that the Pedi ensured that ‘I had a very rough time of it the whole night. As the beggars kept trying to bolt out of the caves . . . we were firing hard the whole night through’. He also reckoned that the Swazis were responsible for much of the carnage — they were ‘grand fellows and most picturesque’ (wearing ‘leopard skins and huge bunches of black feathers’), but fearful demons (‘they don’t spare any living thing, man, woman, child’): ‘I don’t know what we could have done without them. You see a British soldier is all very well, but he is no match in moving about hills — for these naked savages.’⁶ Once the Pedi surrendered on the following day, the British had to protect them from ‘the fury of the Swazis’.⁷ Three days later Sekhukhune was captured.
Wolseley hoped that the parading of Sekhukhune through the streets of Pretoria would overawe the Boers, whom he disparaged as ‘in some respects far inferior to the Zulu, and . . . certainly the most ignorant & bigotted [sic] & small-minded of white men’. Anstruther agreed; he thought that the victory would have ‘an immense effect’ on the Boers, whom he regarded as ‘nasty, cowardly brutes’. Corporal William Roe (58th) observed how ‘thousands of people’ came out to see Sekhukhune as he was escorted through Pretoria on 9 December 1879, and noted that many cheered Wolseley when he later addressed the townsfolk. Roe thought that this display of force, followed by a field day, the award of a VC to Lieutenant Darcy of the Light Horse and the arrest of two Boer spokesmen would settle the ‘Dutch question’. Given the relatively large number of experienced soldiers still in the Transvaal, Roe maintained that if the Boers ‘had started to fight, we should show them no mercy at all’.

Within four months Wolseley returned to England, claiming: ‘The quiet and settled aspect of the Transvaal is even to me a matter of surprise: I attribute it greatly to the arrests I made, and to the show of force.’ He was replaced in July 1880 by another Asante veteran, Sir George Pomeroy Colley. Meanwhile the Boers’ hopes of independence had been raised by the election of a Liberal Government under William E. Gladstone in April 1880, only to be dashed by the inability of the cabinet, split between Whigs and Radicals, to devise an agreed policy. Thereafter Boer grievances mounted over the revenue-raising activities of Sir W. Owen Lanyon, the administrator of the Transvaal, and the behaviour of the British soldiery. The British forces in the Transvaal were reduced when Wolseley departed, and were cut again under Colley until he had only 1,800 men, with no cavalry and only four guns. The soldiers were also widely dispersed in six isolated posts. As the men endured a dreary and monotonous existence under canvas in all seasons, bereft of a varied diet, many found solace in drink and some sought the charms of Boer women. Desertions reached unprecedented numbers as soldiers were tempted by the propinquity of the diamond fields and mining interests in the Orange Free State. A Royal Scots Fusilier explained: ‘Life here is provocative of every vice, not for vice’s sake, but by way of protest against the aggressive morality not only of the Boers, but also of the British who are only different from them in name and birthplace. They have all the narrowness of Scottish elders without their good qualities.’

The rebellion was triggered by local events, namely the attempt of the authorities to recover ‘legal costs’ by selling the wagon of Piet Bezuidenhout at Potchefstroom after a dispute about his tax arrears. When local Boers blocked the public auction (11 November), Lanyon
despatched a field force with two 9-pounder guns to aid the civil power at Potchefstroom, without anticipating ‘any serious trouble’. The Boers, however, brought forward their national convention from January to December, and, on 13 December, demanded a restoration of the republic. They established a provisional capital at Heidelberg, where a ‘Triumvirate’ – Paul Kruger, Piet Joubert and Marthinus Pretorius – was to organise a government. With about 7,000 Boers liable for active service, the first shots were fired at the garrison at Potchefstroom and, three days later, shots were exchanged near Pretoria.
The first engagement of the war occurred at about 12.30 p.m. on 20 December 1880 nearly two miles from Bronkhorst Spruit, where a column of the 94th, marching to Pretoria, was intercepted by a Boer commando led by Commandant Frans Joubert. The column, under the command of Anstruther, included a convoy of thirty-four wagons stretching out over a mile on the road, accompanied by 268 men of all ranks, 3 women and 2 children. En route since 5 December, the column marched with little sense of apprehension – only 2 mounted scouts preceded it, the regimental band about 40-strong and unarmored was playing at its head, and a rearguard of twenty men was about 200–300 yards behind the last of the wagons. Conductor Ralph Egerton (Army Service Corps), who was one of the more lucid commentators, had ridden ahead with the colonel and his adjutant, Lieutenant H. A. C. Harrison, to select a camping ground. When the band ceased playing, they turned around to see 150 armed, mounted Boers, spaced about ten paces apart, along a ridge on the left-hand side of the road. Egerton rode to meet a Boer horseman under a flag of truce, and took a sealed despatch from him to the colonel, who had dismounted. The despatch stated that the Transvaal had been declared a republic, and that any advance by the column beyond the spruit would be interpreted as a declaration of war. Given two minutes in which to reply, Anstruther insisted that he must follow orders and proceed towards Pretoria. The two parties returned to their respective forces, but the Boers, who had filtered through thorn bushes to about 200 yards from the column, opened fire before Anstruther rejoined his column. ‘The fire of the Boers’, wrote Egerton, ‘was directed on the officers, oxen, and ammunition wagons, the latter being denoted by a red flag.’

The opening volleys caught the column before it could deploy, hitting soldiers lolling on the tops of three wagons as well as the unarmed cooks, grooms, bandsmen and prisoners seeking ammunition, and all but three of the rear guard. After a fire-fight of only fifteen minutes in which fifty-seven officers and men were killed and another 100, including a woman, were wounded, the column surrendered. Many, like the colonel, had suffered severe and multiple gunshot wounds – an average of five wounds per man – as calculated by Dr Harvey Crow, who came out from Pretoria to tend the wounded. Another twenty men would die of their wounds, including Anstruther after his leg was amputated. In the immediate aftermath few of the survivors could explain the debacle other than by claiming that the Boers had carefully planned the ambush (which seemed plausible), and that they had an overwhelming advantage in numbers (which was less likely). One of the survivors recalled that the Boers took advantage of any available cover – ‘a sort of “little bush”, and an incline in their favour’, and that they ‘told us
afterwards they had everything arranged beforehand, the distance having been ascertained exactly. Although the 94th, as Private Thomas Crann recalled, had tried to follow the colonel’s injunction and kept firing, they soon found their ammunition running low (as they were carrying only thirty and not seventy rounds of ammunition per man). Egerton recognised, too, that their firing was relatively ineffective, and a corporal explained that the soldiers ‘in their hurry sighted their rifles at 650 yards’. E. H. Brett, a wagon master, almost certainly exaggerated when he claimed that the Boers had suffered significant casualties – twenty-seven dead and ‘a large number of wounded’ – Egerton saw one dead and five wounded, while Crow counted only ten dead horses ‘close to the camp’ (the Boers claimed that two commandos died and five were wounded).

If the British were appalled at the spectacle of the Boers riffling through the pockets of the dead, they appreciated the permission granted them to pitch their tents, care for the wounded and bury their dead. Egerton and Sergeant Bradley were also allowed to seek further medical assistance from Pretoria (enabling Egerton to smuggle out the regimental colours, to the immense relief of the dying Anstruther). The survivors realised that the Boers had not only prevented a concentration of soldiers at Pretoria but had captured valuable arms, ammunition and wagons. All soldiers, other than the thirty left to tend the injured, were taken prisoner and others were removed to Heidelberg when they recovered from their wounds. Dr Crow, who spent three months tending the wounded, expressed admiration for the calm and courageous way that Anstruther met his death, for the many acts of kindness by local Boers and for the unremitting efforts of Dr Ward, the regimental surgeon, and Mrs Smith on behalf of the wounded. However severe the loss to the 94th and to British ‘prestige’, Crowe could not blame ‘our men’, who ‘had no cover at all – nor time to get under cover, but had to lie on a wide level road . . .’. Their uniforms, as Lieutenant J. J. F. Hume later conceded, had compounded this vulnerability, namely ‘scarlet jackets, white helmets, white pipe-clayed belts and equipment straps, pouches, etc.’

Colley recognised that the disaster of the 94th had ‘changed the whole aspect of affairs. The loss of 250 men out of our small garrison was no trifling one, and the moral effect, of course, much greater.’ He feared lest the conflict would precipitate a wider war between the two white races in South Africa, and that the Transvaal Boers would attract support from the Orange Free State and the Dutch populations of Cape Colony and Natal. Hence, in planning to relieve the British garrisons, he resolved to assemble a field force without enrolling volunteers from Natal and Kimberley but insisted upon the inclusion of cavalry (in case
a guerrilla war ensued) and artillery to exploit the ‘moral effect which guns have on the Boers generally’. Having chosen Newcastle, a small town in northern Natal as a place of assembly, he brought together 1,474 of all ranks, including a strong body of infantry (five companies of the 58th, five of the 3/60th Rifles and a draft of the 2/21st), a mounted squadron (and some mounted Natal Police), a Naval Brigade (with two Gatling guns and three 24-pounder rocket tubes), and six guns (four 9-pounders and two 7-pounders).

Delays in procuring transport and in moving soldiers across rain-sodden terrain prevented the Natal field force from assembling fully before 19 January. A Rifleman recalled that the march was a ‘a hard dragging’ ordeal, with the men pulling ‘mules and wagons along by sheer force’. Spirits improved when they arrived at Newcastle: soldiers cheered Colley’s speech after a parade of the field force, while Lieutenant Percy Scrope Marling (3/60th Rifles) wrote that the Government should not ‘show any misplaced weakness as regards the Boers, they have committed the most cruel & cold blooded murders & ought to be punished accordingly. They have treated the Kaffirs also in the most brutal manner’. Even when the field force began its advance towards the Natal–Transvaal border on 24 January, it could move only a few miles each day, struggling across drifts and up a rocky hill known as Schuinshoogte before reaching Mount Prospect on 26 January. Piet Joubert had anticipated this incursion, moving his forces inside Natal as early as 1 January and, when he learned of Colley’s advance from Newcastle, moving forward to occupy the heights above the key pass of Laing’s Nek along the road from Mount Prospect.

‘Torrents of rain’, as described by Lance-Sergeant W. J. Morris (58th), prevented any advance on 27 January, but, on the following day, Colley ordered an advance with four companies of Rifles, five of the 58th, the mounted squadron, most of the Naval Brigade, some supporting troops and about fifty mounted police (the remainder guarded the camp). At 9.30 a.m. he ordered the shelling of the Boer positions with rockets and the 9-pounders firing shrapnel. Although Joubert admitted that the Boers ‘suffered heavily’ from the bombardments, their losses were many fewer than some British infantry anticipated. Accordingly, when the mounted squadron of 100 men, led by Major William Brownlow and Troop Sergeant-Major Lunny (King’s Dragoon Guards), charged up Table Hill – on the left of the Boer position – the leading troopers encountered volleys of rifle fire. All observers praised the ‘splendid’ charge with Brownlow and Lunny (the latter was killed in the attack), exhorting their men onwards, but the squadron soon retreated (with 17 killed, wounded or missing, and 32 horses lost). The charge had foundered, in the opinion of Sergeant Jeremiah Madden...
[King’s Dragoon Guards], because the squadron was a mixed body
‘made up of K.D.G.’s and transport train’ (and some mounted infantry),
the climb was very steep (‘the true summit . . . was invisible to us’),
and the Boers opened fire while they were ‘wheeling’. So,

before the left troop had completed its movement to bring us again in
line, the order to charge was heard. In a moment we were face to face
with the Boers, who fired sharp at us. The Sergeant-Major, with his
revolver, got right in amongst the men, and shot one dead, wounding
another with his pistol, when he fell – horse and man shot down

together.35

The 58th, led by Colonel Deane, struggled up the steep open spur of
the hill and came under fire from front and right (where Commandant
Bassa’s picket provided enfilade fire after thwarting the mounted
troops). The letter written by Morris, much of which was reproduced by
Emery, exaggerated the odds against the 58th who, he said, were ‘out-
numbered by five to one’ and made claims about a final charge that were
at variance with Colley’s official report (‘when the men got near the top
they were too fatigued and breathless for a charge’).36 Private M. M.
Tuck, 58th, confirmed that an order to charge was made but as the men
were ‘so much exhausted it could not be done to any good advantage’.37
Nevertheless, Morris endorsed the official report by lauding the gal-
lantry of Colonel Deane before he fell mortally wounded and by prais-
ing the resolve of the Boers, who charged the British soldiers at short
range and harried them in their retreat. He noted that the Boers were
‘dead nuts’ in targeting officers and non-commissioned officers, and
identified Sergeant Bridgestock as the soldier who saved the colours.38

Private Joseph Venables, (58th), who was captured after the attack,
gave another perspective:

Our path was through the grass, and the march very exhausting. (The
incline was 1 in 15) . . . The advance was steadily continued, but the men
were teeming from perspiration, which ran into their eyes. We got flank
fire from a hollow, and half a company was thrown back to check it, but
was at once shot away, but one man standing when I saw it. Then we met
the enemy almost muzzle to muzzle, with some of the guns all but
crossed . . . I reckon the force opposed to us at 80 men. The extended
companies fought very well, but the exhaustion of the men, and the
deadly accurate fire, forced them down. An immense number fell, and I
was all but alone when the artillery re-opened, hurting many of our
wounded in the attempt to check the Boers now charging and shooting
down the retreating companies.39

Riflemen looked askance at the 58th being ‘literally slaughtered’ and
the ‘regular butchery’ as they reached the summit and then retreated.40

[ 66 ]
Although Sergeant Henry Coombs (Army Hospital Corps) was reasonably accurate in his estimate – ‘We lost 70 men killed, seven officers killed, and 119 men wounded’ (some of these men later died of their wounds) – he thought that the Boers might have suffered ‘between 400 and 500 casualties’ (whereas Joubert reported losses of only ‘twenty-four of our best men’).41

In official correspondence Colley remained resolutely confident that the ‘political effect’ of Laing’s Nek would not be great: the Boers, he affirmed, would soon tire of the war, and the arrival of large reinforcements from India and England would protect Natal. Privately, he conceded that the repulse ‘had a bad effect, both in prolonging the investment of our garrisons and in giving further encouragement to the Boers’.42 The vulnerability of Colley’s camp at Mount Prospect was soon exposed by a Boer attempt on 7 February 1881 to intercept the mail along his line of communications to Newcastle. On the following day, Colley led a small column of five companies of the 60th Rifles, a detachment of 38 mounted men, 2 field and 2 mountain guns with some medical support to patrol the road for part of the way. After 5 miles the column reached the Ingogo River where Colley detached one company and the two 7-pounder guns to guard his retreat, while the remainder crossed the river. Within another 3 miles, scouts encountered a large body of Boers which Colley decided to engage from the bolder-strewn plateau at Schuinshoogte. An officer of the Rifles recognised that the ‘position was much too large for our numbers, which were only 290 all told . . .’. Outnumbered (by possibly 300 Boers, later reinforced to between 800 and 1,000) and almost surrounded, he added: ‘Half an hour after the fight began everyone considered the fight as hopeless . . .’ because the Boers

are the perfection of skirmishers, taking advantage of every atom of cover, and shooting with the greatest accuracy and precision. Before the first five minutes were over the guns were firing case. This will give you an idea how rapidly the Boers advanced . . . They directed their fire principally at the guns, and very soon they had killed every man but one at one of the guns, including poor Captain Greer . . .

The action commenced at twelve and went on until eight p.m. We were exposed not only to frontal fire but also to enfilade and reverse – in fact, there was a perfect hail of bullets coming over us from all four sides for eight hours . . . The whole of our men behaved like heroes. They were as cool and well disciplined as if they had been at a review, never throwing a shot away for we had no reserve ammunition.43

Once the Boers withdrew, soldiers gathered the wounded together (about 50 per cent of the fighting strength), with many, like Lieutenant Haworth, suffering from multiple gunshot wounds. ‘We had been 12
hours without food’, wrote Coombs, ‘and were quite tired and worn out’, but, as only a withdrawal could avert the prospect of a surrender, Colley ordered a retreat at about 10 p.m., leaving the wounded behind. As an officer of the Rifles admitted, this seemed a ‘dreadful’ decision: it was, however, ‘imperative’ as the column lacked either ambulances or a water cart and had only one doctor. The officer was nearly drowned crossing the swollen Ingogo (an officer and seven men drowned either in the retreat or in returning to assist the wounded); and he encountered further difficulties: ‘I was in command of the advanced guard, and it was very hard work finding the road, for there was a tremendous storm, and the night was as dark as pitch. This was a good thing, as it concealed our movements from the Boers.’

Retrieving the guns became a desperate ordeal, ‘as there were only twelve horses left, and two of them were wounded. One gun came in with four horses, one of which was shot through the knee. Going up the hill the horses were taken out, and our fellows pulled them up the three-mile hill with drag-ropes.’ After twenty-one hours the Rifles returned to camp, having fought for eight hours and marched for 18 miles, half of that distance at night, without any food and only a canteen of water apiece: ‘Our getting back to camp was one of the luckiest things on record. Our men behaved quite magnificently.’

As five officers and sixty-one men had been killed at Schuinshoogte, and another four officers and sixty-eight men wounded, confidence in Colley began to ebb. After Laing’s Nek one veteran officer doubted that Colley should be trusted with a corporal’s guard on active service, and, in his diary of 10 February, Marling wrote: ‘The General telegraphed home the fight at Ingogo was a success – we certainly did pass the mails through to Newcastle and remained on the field of battle, but one or two more Pyrrhic victories like that and we shan’t have any army left at all.’ Colley seemed oblivious of these concerns: he lauded the men after each reverse, commending ‘the conduct of the young soldiers of the 60th at the Ingogo’ and claiming that the ‘health and spirit of the troops remain excellent’. He was correct inasmuch as the mood within the camp fluctuated rapidly: even the Riflemen whom Colley ordered on 12 February to exhume the bodies of officers at Schuinshoogte for re-burial at Mount Prospect (a thoroughly nauseating task in rain-soaked conditions) were enjoying athletics and cricket in the camp three days later. Spirits rose on 23 February when the first reinforcements from India arrived, including the 15th Hussars, 2/60th Rifles and the 92nd (Gordon) Highlanders (all veterans of the Second Afghan War), a Naval Brigade from HMS Dido and HMS Boadicea, and some drafts for units already based at Mount Prospect. As Colley pondered a riposte to the reported Boer fortifications of the Nek (by seizing
‘some ground which has hitherto been practically unoccupied by either party’), he affirmed: ‘These fine Indian regiments will make a most valuable addition to my force; but I doubt if even they, fine soldiers as they are, can fight better than my young soldiers have done on the two late occasions.’

So the seeds were sown for the fateful decision to occupy the summit of Majuba, a mountain 2,000 feet above Laing’s Nek, on the night of 26 February, with a mixed force (two companies of the 58th, two of 3/60th, three of the 92nd, a company-strength Naval Brigade and smaller supporting units). As Major T. Fraser, RE, recalled, each man was ordered to carry seventy rounds of ammunition, a blanket, greatcoat, water bottle and three days’ rations, with six picks and four shovels per company. In great secrecy (only Colley, Fraser and Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert Stewart, Colley’s replacement military secretary, knew the destination), the march began at 10.30 p.m. Two companies of Rifles and, further on, a company of Highlanders were detached to guard the line of march as the force scrambled up the mountain, enabling Colley with his staff and some 350 infantry to occupy the summit between 3.40 a.m. and 5.40 a.m. Fraser had ‘never had such a climb . . . the men were very done and the General too’. Colley had the men dig two wells but reportedly considered them too tired to make entrenchments or fortified positions. He and his staff seemed to regard the summit as unassailable, but some soldiers constructed small stone walls as they were dispersed at intervals of about fifteen paces around a perimeter of three-quarters of a mile (other than an unformed mixed reserve of about 110 men). More significantly, as Fraser testified, discipline slipped when some men opened fire, without orders, on the Boer patrols below, thereby revealing their position and prompting a Boer counter-attack (once it was clear that the British lacked any guns on the summit).

Utilising long-range covering fire to pin down soldiers and sailors on the perimeter (mortally wounding Commander Romilly, RN, in the process), the Boers exploited the ‘dead ground’ and natural cover to scale the northern slopes. They then extended unseen around a grassy terrace below the outer knoll held by five or six Highlanders and began to mass in vastly superior numbers. Fraser confirmed that Lieutenant Ian Hamilton, who commanded the Gordons on the forward knoll, repeatedly requested reinforcements; but Colley, who slept for part of the time, was unperturbed. In any case, detecting the Boers or establishing a good field of fire remained problematic, even after the first Boer fusillade had overwhelmed the Gordons on the forward knoll and driven back the few survivors. Although Colley belatedly deployed his reserves, another series of rapid Boer volleys drove them back to a cen-
tral ridge. Here Colley still held the Highlanders in check, refusing to let them mount a bayonet charge (which may or may not have worked, but was the one riposte that the Boers actually feared). From the central ridge, admitted Fraser, ‘we had but little command of the ground, which rolled from the crest up to it in rounded form’, and so when the Boers launched their next attack, firing on the British positions from three sides, ‘with extraordinary rapidity . . . We could see nothing but rifle-muzzles and smoke; I told my men to fire at the grass; they did so for a few moments and then, without any order to retire . . . they began to fall back’. In the ensuing rout Colley was killed, and morale collapsed save for about twenty men, mostly of the 58th, who stood at a kopje with Second Lieutenant Hector Macdonald, (92nd), until all but two were dead or wounded. In only thirty minutes the British were swept from the summit, with the numbers killed, wounded or taken prisoner representing 78 per cent of the officers engaged and 58 per cent of the other ranks. They had suffered latterly from indiscriminate fire as experienced by Lance-Corporal Farmer, AHC, who earned a VC when he waved a white bandage as a flag of truce over some wounded men and was promptly shot, first in the right wrist and then the left elbow. He reckoned that ‘even a “savage” foe would have respected such a signal’.

Morale plummeted in the camp: ‘Our men’, wrote Private Tuck, ‘are getting in low spirits through these defeats.’ Hampered by rain-sodden conditions, and fatigued by alerts lest the Boers attack the camp, soldiers had the arduous task of bringing down the wounded and burying the dead. As some of the wounded languished on Majuba for twenty-four hours, they were in a pitiful state, ‘soaked through and through with the rain and mud’. What exacerbated the anguish of the burial parties was their inability to find any Boer wounded or dead, giving credence to Piet Joubert’s claim that the Boers had suffered only a single fatality and five wounded. In these circumstances resentments mounted: Colley may have died gallantly, prompting Fraser to describe him as a ‘Homeric hero’, but death, argued Marling, may have been ‘most fortunate’ for this ‘much liked man’. ‘After Ingogo’, wrote Marling, Colley ‘hardly slept at all’, and many officers felt that he ‘was determined to get Laing’s Nek before some other General came up to supersede him’. There were regimental recriminations, too. After Fraser specifically praised the 92nd in his official report (‘The conduct of the 92nd was excellent throughout’), Colonel W. D. Bond took every opportunity to defend the reputation of the 58th. Many blamed Colley for employing a mixed force. Captain Charles W. H. Douglas, (92nd), who was not present at the battle but who interviewed several survivors, reckoned that some of the 92nd ‘should have behaved better,
& not have been carried away by the 58th . . . I think the ninety twas [sic] might have made a better fight of it & undoubtedly they c[oul]d have had the whole Regiment been up Majuba instead of a mixed force’.62

If they had not done so before, most soldiers now recognised that they had greatly underrated the Boer as a fighting man. ‘There is no doubt’, wrote Douglas, ‘the Boers are magnificent skirmishers, and A1 shots, and as plucky as possible’; they also possessed, in the opinion of a staff officer, Major Fitzroy Hart, the ‘best’ of rifles (predominantly the Westley Richards) and benefited from ‘a life spent in the stalking of game, the judgment of distance, and the practice of aiming . . .’.63 Such recognition only made British soldiery even more determined to prevail in battle and avenge fallen comrades. The British believed that reinforcements under Sir Frederick Roberts would bring superior numbers, artillery and cavalry to turn the tide against the Boers.64 Hence they felt deeply affronted when the armistice talks between Piet Joubert and Sir Evelyn Wood, the acting-governor of Natal and high commissioner of the Transvaal, evolved into peace negotiations at the behest of Gladstone’s Government (and after a conciliatory letter from Paul Kruger). When an agreement was signed, on 23 March 1881, Marling claimed: ‘Everyone is cursing Gladstone and the Radical Government . . . A more disgraceful peace was never made.’ Douglas agreed that it was a ‘disgraceful peace’, and Fitzroy Hart wrote that he felt ‘inclined to weep with vexation . . . the vexation of not being allowed to fight it out to the end’.65

As controversy raged over the peace, Wood’s role in producing a settlement and, within military circles, the failure to award a campaign medal,66 there was little interest in the post-war accounts of the beleaguered garrisons in the Transvaal. Apart from official despatches and testimony before courts of enquiry, only a few letters were published in contemporary British and colonial newspapers, and a couple of longer accounts in periodicals.67 The Reverend C. M. Spratt, the military chaplain at Standerton, was disappointed that he had not been able to emulate the achievements of the Reverend George Smith, who had distinguished himself at Rorke’s Drift. The well-provisioned and fortified garrison had provided refuge for some 60–70 civilians and, apart from an engagement with the Boers during a sortie on 29 December, had not encountered any ‘fighting of importance’. As the Boers were too ‘cowardly’ to attack and settled for long-range firing,

Our Commandant has contented himself with holding his own and constructing outworks to keep the enemy at a distance while he has attended to the Commissariat with a view to feeding the whole town and garrison equally until the Relief Column under Sir George Colley arrives.68
At Wakkerstroom two companies of the 58th provided the garrison for the camp and town, where they protected thirty-three civilians. Once again, as described by Sergeant M. O. O’Callaghan, it was largely a passive defence in the face of long-range fire, much of which ‘was quite harmless and caused us a deal of amusement’. As the garrison awaited reinforcements, O’Callaghan’s motivations ran the gamut from patriotism (‘all our hard work is for the glory of Old England’) to contempt for the ‘most cowardly race of men on the face of the earth’, and, following news of the Bronkhorst Spruit massacre and the killing of Captain Lambert, ‘many a vow of retributive vengeance has been registered against them’. He repeatedly thanked ‘our heavenly Father’ as bullets whistled harmlessly by, and remained ‘proud of the uniform I wear and the gallant regiment I am serving in. I am proud of the officers too. No better gentlemen are in our Army.’

Despite the debacle at Bronkhorst Spruit, Pretoria remained the largest, best-supplied and best-equipped garrison in the Transvaal, with the aid of about 170 mounted volunteers and 150 foot volunteers. It was able to protect some 3,700 men, women and children either in the military camp or the fortified laager that bounded the gaol and convent. Sappers, as Commeline recalled, had ‘an immense amount of work’, constructing shelters, cattle kraals and blockhouses on hills overlooking the camp. Each of the blockhouses were manned by 25–30 men and held Krupp 4-pounder guns (liberated from the arsenal of the former republic) to keep the Boers at bay. Commeline, who regarded the Boers as a ‘foe worth fighting’, spent his time in command of a blockhouse, strengthening his position, watching the movements of the enemy and signalling to the camp below (by flags during the day and lanterns at night). He also monitored several sorties from the camp, which were feasible from the Pretoria garrison by virtue of its relatively large proportion of mounted men. Even so, by 6 February, he feared that the Boers would never attack Pretoria ‘because their loss would be so great as to cripple them for any future resistance’.

Another anonymous letter, dated 7 April 1881, concluded that the Pretoria defence was ‘most successful. The Boers never came within six miles. Five successful sorties were made. Provisions were plentiful, and the laagers strong enough to defy any possible attack.’ By contrast it reported that the Potchefstroom garrison ‘suffered severely from their daily exposure to the enemy’s fire and the scarcity of food’. At Potchefstroom, where the only surrender occurred, Lieutenant-Colonel R. W. C. Winsloe (21st/Royal Scots Fusiliers), commanded 213 soldiers, including 45 officers and men of N battery, operating two 9-pounder guns, 26 mounted infantry, 2 companies of the 21st and supporting units. Outnumbered from the start of the siege, they were also
ill-positioned and poorly provisioned. They had tried to hold a small fort – partially built at the outset and only 25 yards square when completed – as well as the office of the Landrost (magistrate) and the gaol. Under heavy fire from close quarters, the Landrost garrison soon surrendered and the garrison withdrew from the gaol to the fort after suffering several casualties from Boer bullets that penetrated the loopholes in the lower walls and passed through upper walls which were only one brick thick.72 Thereafter the small fort, bereft of adequate supplies, accommodated some 200 soldiers, 48 refugees and 61 native drivers and leaders. Although the garrison found an adequate supply of water, Winsloe admitted: ‘For food we were badly off the whole time.’73 By 5 March 1881, as casualties from wounds and disease mounted, Second Lieutenant James R. M. Dalrymple-Hay recorded that ‘enteric, dysentery and scurvy are rife amongst us’.74 Although a majority of the refugees and natives left the fort, thirty-three remained to the end, sharing the meagre supplies of mealies and corn (all damaged after three months on the parapets), with the sick receiving preserved meat and rice. By 20 March the garrison held only 24lbs of preserved meat and 16lbs of rice for the sick; and, as General Piet Cronjé was unwilling to honour the terms of the armistice by letting eight days’ supply of provisions and firewood through to the garrison,75 Winsloe surrendered on 23 March. However galling the fate, Winsloe took comfort from his ability to modify the Boer terms, so surrendering his guns and rifles (but not any ammunition), and leaving with full military honours and not as prisoners of war. The ‘“battle of words”’, he reckoned, had ended ‘much to our advantage’.76

So 23 March involved both a surrender and a peace settlement, an ironic twist of timing that compounded the sense of frustration felt by the British military. Wood negotiated the settlement but affirmed that the British ‘should have undoubtedly taken the nek about the end of March; and I think, such a victory would have been a gain to all – English, Dutch, Kaffirs, and to humanity generally’.76 Although the surrender was later rescinded by the ‘triumvirate’, and the two guns and most of the rifles returned, resentment persisted. It reflected a lingering contempt for the Boers and a feeling that tactical errors by Colley had thwarted the British soldiery just as much as, if not more than, the Boers’ proficiency in skirmishing and short-range marksmanship. Wood felt that the tactical errors made it difficult to draw lessons from the war, other than a need to improve standards of shooting. He believed, too, that the presence of long- and short-service soldiers on Majuba rendered it ‘useless to argue on short or long service from this illustration’.77
Notes

1 This was an unstable arrangement that fuelled tribal battles when Cetshwayo returned in 1883 and a clash with the Boers in 1886: J. Guy, The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom [London: Longman, 1979], ch. 5; I. Knight, Great Zulu Battles 1838–1906 [London: Arms & Armour Press, 1998], pp. 165–92.


5 GRO, D 1233/45/26, Commeline to his father, 29 November 1879.

6 NAM, Acc. No. 5705/22, Lt-Col. P. R. Anstruther, letters of 30 November and 7 December 1879.

7 GRO, D 1233/45/26, Commeline to his father, 29 November 1879.


9 NAM, Acc. No. 5705/22, Anstruther, letter of 30 November 1879.

10 Preston, Wolseley’s South African Journal, p. 264.

12 Pretoria, Rustenburg, Lydenburg, Marabastad, Wakkerstroom and Standerton. When tensions mounted in November 1880, the British also established a garrison at Potchefstroom.

13 Quoted in D. Blackburn and Captain W. Waithman Caddell, Secret Service in South Africa [London: Cassell & Co., 1911], p. 108; see also Bellairs, Transvaal War, pp. 32–42.

14 PP, Further Correspondence, SA, C 2740 [1881], LXVI, No. 61, Sir W. O. Lanyon to the Earl of Kimberley, 14 November 1880, p. 109.


16 ‘The Disaster to the 94th Foot’, Broad Arrow, 29 January 1881, p. 149; see also PP, Further Correspondence, SA, C 2866 [1881], LXVII, pp. 47–8.

17 PP, Further Correspondence, SA, C 2866 [1881], LXVII, pp. 47–8; ‘What a 94th Corporal Said’; and Sergt. Hook in ‘Bronker’s Spruit’, Natal Mercury, 14 January 1881, p. 3, and 4 March 1881, p. 3; Bellairs, Transvaal War, p. 86.


19 While the military authorities came to believe that 1,000 or more Boers were involved, Egerton reckoned that no more than 300 attacked the head of the column – an estimate only marginally larger than the Boer claims. Compare PP, Further Correspondence, SA, C 2866, p. 48, with evidence of Pte. D. Campbell, PP, C 2866, p. 56; Bellairs, Transvaal War, p. 82; and ‘The Transvaal Insurrection’, The Times, 8 February 1881, p. 4.

20 ‘Transvaal Insurrection’, p. 4; see also ‘What a 94th Corporal Said’, p. 3.

21 ‘Narrative of the Disaster’, Natal Witness, 11 January 1881, p. 3; ‘The Transvaal Insurrection’, p. 4; Bellairs, Transvaal War, p. 82.

22 ‘Disaster to the 94th Foot’, p. 149; ‘What a 94th Corporal Said’, p. 3.


24 ‘With the Wounded at Bronkhorstspruit’, p. 3.

25 Ibid., see also ‘True Statement of the Bronker’s Spruit Massacre’, p. 6; and evidence of Pte King, PP, Further Correspondence, SA, C 2866, p. 57.

26 Hume, ‘Narrative of the 94th Regiment’, 177.
The extract from his letter of 7 February was published in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 1881, p. 3.


‘The Boer Rebellion’, *The Times of Natal*, 16 February 1881, p. 3.

NAM, Acc. No. 7005/21, Private M. M. Tuck diary, 23 January 1881, p. 54; GRO, D 873/C110, Lt P. S. Marling to his grandmother, 22 January 1881.

Emery identified the author of this long but not entirely accurate letter, entitled ‘The Disaster at Laing’s Nek, Northamptonshire Man’s Account of the Fight’, *Supplement to the Northampton Mercury*, 19 March 1881, p. 1; see also Emery, *Marching Over Africa*, pp. 103–4.


‘Interesting Letter from Lange’s Nek’, p. 3.


Colley reported that 7 officers and 76 other ranks died, 111 were wounded and two were taken prisoner; see Lehmann, *The Boer War*, p. 155; ‘The Transvaal War. Letter from a Sheffield Soldier’, *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 1881, p. 2; ‘Boer Version of Laing’s Nek Fight’, p. 5.


‘Transvaal War’, p. 2.

‘Rifles in South Africa’, p. 5.


P. S. Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar* [London: John Murray, 1931], pp. 41 and 51; see also Bellairs, *The Transvaal War*, p. 378.


Marling, *Rifleman and Hussar*, pp. 49–52; NAM, Acc. No. 7005/21, Tuck diary, 15 February 1881, p. 64.


Maj. T. Fraser, ‘Majuba’, *REJ*, 11 (1 June 1881), 114–17.


PRO, WO 33/38, ‘Correspondence Relative to Military Affairs in Natal and the Transvaal’, Maj. J. C. Hay, 2 March 1881, p. 221; Fraser, ‘Majuba’, 115.

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55 Fraser, ‘Majuba’, 115; see also PP, Further Correspondence, SA, C 2950 [1881], LXVII, p. 79.


57 NAM, Acc. No. 7005/21, Tuck diary, 28 February 1881, p. 70; Marling, Rifleman and Hussar, pp. 54–5.


60 Marling, Rifleman and Hussar, p. 55; Fraser, ‘Majuba’, 117.

61 PP, Further Correspondence, SA, C 2950, Fraser to General Officer Commanding, Natal, 5 March 1881, p. 79; Ward, ‘Diary of Colonel Bond’, 93, 97.

62 APA, MSS Eur F108/91, White MSS., Douglas to White, 5 April 1881; see also Hamilton, Listening for the Drums, p. 139; Marling, Rifleman and Hussar, p. 55.


64 Letters of Major-General Fitzroy Hart-Synnot, pp. 187–88; Marling, Rifleman and Hussar, p. 55.

65 Marling, Rifleman and Hussar, p. 56; APA, MSS Eur F108/91, White MSS., Douglas to White, 5 April 1881; Fitzroy Hart to May, 30 March 1881 in, Letters of Major-General Fitzroy Hart-Synnot, p. 188; see also Memoirs of Sir Hugh McCalmont, p. 196.

66 On the general controversy, see Lehmann, The First Boer War, pp. 280–4, 289–92; Wood to Childers, 31 May 1881 in, Childers, Life and Correspondence, vol. 2, pp. 27–8; Bennett, A Rain of Lead, p. 239.


68 The Siege at Standerton’, Natal Witness, 6 April 1881, p. 3.


73 Winsloe, ‘Siege of Potchefstroom’, 455.

74 ‘The Defence of Potchefstroom’, JRSF, 3 [1930], 30–4.

75 On Cronjé’s strategy, see Bennett, Rain of Lead, ch. 17.

76 Winsloe, ‘Siege of Potchefstroom’, 456–8; ‘Defence of Potchefstroom’, 34.

77 Wood to Childers, 31 May 1881 in, Childers, Life and Correspondence, vol. 2, p. 27.

78 Wood to Childers, 14 July 1881 in, Childers, Life and Correspondence, vol. 2, pp. 29–30.