Several African campaigns did not involve skirmishes, sieges, battles or engagements of any significance. Whereas the British Army had to mount offensives and seek rapid, decisive military outcomes to disperse and demoralise its enemies (while minimising its own logistic burdens and likely losses from sickness and disease), African adversaries responded to these offensives in different ways. If facing overwhelming odds, they sometimes avoided engagement and opted for manoeuvre (or even complete dispersal), luring the British and their auxiliaries across an inhospitable landscape and leaving them tired, thirsty and despondent. Inevitably these expeditions attracted less attention at home, especially if they coincided with major campaigns elsewhere – as happened to the Bechuanaland expedition (1884–85) and the two Asante expeditions of 1896 and 1900 – and so few letters from them survive. Nevertheless, the Bechuanaland campaign at least demonstrated the degree of British adaptation since the Anglo-Boer War of 1881.

The expedition was occasioned by Boer freebooters exploiting the rivalry among Bantu clans along the border from Vryburg to Mafeking and proclaiming the two semi-independent republics of Goshen and Stellaland in Bantu territory. The Gladstone Government regarded these incursions as breaches of the London Convention (1884), and resolved to protect the Bantu chiefs and retain control of the trade route from Cape Colony to Central Africa. It despatched Major-General Sir Charles Warren (RE), as a special commissioner with some 4,000 men, including 1/Royal Scots, the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons, three batteries of field artillery, a battery of Gardner machine-guns, three regiments of mounted rifles (recruited partly in Britain and partly in the Cape), balloon and field telegraph sections, a pioneer corps, and a corps of Bantu guides. Warren was required to evict the Goshenites from Bechuanaland (the Stellalanders had accepted British rule) and re-establish order.
The first units of regulars and volunteers reached Cape Town on 19 December 1884 and left by train the same day for the Orange River, disembarking near Hope Town. They struggled over 12 roadless miles through deep sand, and waded the Orange River, to reach a camp site at Langford Rest. An old volunteer recalled that the dust and sand was so thick that ‘we could not see five yards forward’, so arriving ‘with our tongues sticking to the roofs of our mouths’. They found the camp infested with snakes, scorpions, ants and beetles, and temperatures that reached 112 degrees Fahrenheit in their tents. Life was made even more miserable by the sandstorms which repeatedly swept the site, the ban on ‘intoxicants’, and the cost of extras (including Bass pale ale, which was presumably not regarded as an ‘intoxicant’, at 2s 6d, or 12.5p, a pint bottle). Yet one trooper was impressed by the ‘good many troops here’, particularly the batteries of artillery and machine-guns and the many mounted men (all distinct improvements on the preparations of 1881), while another correspondent regarded the men of Colonel Paul S. (later Lieutenant-General Lord) Methuen’s Horse as ‘admirable, both physically and in morale’. Almost as impressive was the health of the incoming men: by 4 January 1885 when half the force had arrived, there were under a dozen men in hospital and, after eleven days, only one of the Royal Scots, 740-strong, had fallen sick. Of more immediate concern was the ‘want of water, transport and supplies’, especially the lack of native labour, so the burden of ‘constructing kraals, loading and unloading waggons, etc., falls on the soldier’. However, by 13 January, Warren had sufficient mule-carts, wagons and drivers to march towards the Vaal River, where a forward base was established at Barkly West.

Although sunstroke took an increasing toll on the line of march, and many of the gentlemen troopers suffered ‘severely from the heavy marching’ (as their horses had yet to arrive from Natal), soldiers rapidly recovered at the camp site which had ample water, trees, shrubs and plenty of fresh meat from nearby sheep, goats and cattle. Visitors were surprised to see British soldiers (apart from the Royal Scots) wearing ‘rough corduroy’ suits with their formerly white helmets ‘travel-stained to a dirty brown’. Julius M. Price, a volunteer of Methuen’s Horse, confirmed this image of soldiers wearing inconspicuous kit and adapting to local conditions by sketching, for the Illustrated London News, officers in slouch hats and living in makeshift accommodation.

Engineers, including the telegraph-laying section, and mounted rifles led the way into the disputed territory, with men aware that they had ‘to march up the country to show the natives and Boers our strength’. Writing on 4 February, some 80 miles north of Barkly, a trooper acknowledged the sensitivity of the mission: ‘It is a most diffi-
cult thing to find out anything about the Boers. We absolutely don’t know if we are going to fight or not . . . Stellaland seems to be quiet; and if we can manage to capture or kill the Freebooters we shall have easy work. But if, on the other hand, we kill a Transvaal Dutchman, there will be a general rising.10

As the field force pressed on to the village of Taungs, it established an extensive line of communications, with telegraphic connections, wells dug at 12-mile intervals, and detachments posted along the route. The Royal Scots based its headquarters and four companies at Taungs, with detachments at Bank’s Drift, Barkly and Langford ‘holding wells and fords’.11 After two months of trekking northwards, a Port Elizabeth volunteer affirmed that ‘we are in excellent health. We have very fine horses. I do not think that the enemy can fly from their pursuers. The men here who are making money are the parties following the corps selling everything except liquors . . . Our haults [sic] have all been made on the open veldt so as to avoid inebriation’.12 As patrols and outposts failed to find any freebooters in Stellaland, speculation mounted: what had become of them, wrote a colonial volunteer, ‘goodness only knows, though we hear they talked big up to a fortnight of our arrival. They have entirely disappeared. They and their friends confess to being quite funk ed by the force – so I hear’.13

Warren, accompanied by 600 dragoons and mounted riflemen, rode north to Vryburg and thence over rolling grassland and through woods of acacia trees to Mafeking, where he sought to restore order in Goshen. He arrived on 9 March and Carrington’s Horse moved up to the frontier at Rooi Gronde on the following day. Only a few Boers remained in the vicinity: as a trooper observed, ‘They generally refuse to speak to an Englishman or at best answer in monosyllables; but the natives seem genuinely pleased to have us among them.’14 As the expeditionary force now languished, patrolling along the frontier until October 1885, officers indulged their passion for shooting and some old soldiers found solace in drink. Several troopers insisted: ‘We are all tired of the bloodless campaign’, and claimed that ‘more than one longed to return as speedily as possible’.15 Warren, though, had to establish a British protectorate over Bechuanaland, and in doing so demonstrated another means of surveillance and control by deploying a balloon on the veld. Major Henry Elsdale, RE, was delighted that his team was able to spend a week in April, often ‘in very unfavourable gusty weather’, conducting reconnaissance operations. ‘We pulled it off by a very narrow margin’, he wrote, ‘for our balloons were designed for Egypt at a low elevation above sea level, and the great elevation here [about 5,000 feet above sea level] is so much against them . . .’.16 The whole exercise was given maximum publicity as colonial
reporters described the size and scope of the balloon (20 feet in diameter, containing 10,000 cubic feet of hydrogen gas, and able to float steadily at 1,000 feet), and noted that Elsdale could scan a horizon of over 30 miles’ radius while communicating with the ground by telephone. At least one correspondent concluded that ‘henceforth no army in the field will be complete without its ballooning detachment’.17

If the campaign had demonstrated that some lessons had been learned about campaigning in South African conditions, particularly in respect of dress, fire-power and mobility,18 the outcome was scant consolation for the soldiers involved. If they were well fed (graphically depicted by Price in his sketch of a sentinel standing on 2,000 cases of corned beef), generally healthy, and able to enjoy shooting game in the environs of Taungs,19 they had little to show for the expedition itself. Bored and isolated (hence the anxiety about the receipt of post and newspapers from Britain),20 they endured the heat, thunderstorms, and the ordeal of African campaigning without the excitement of engaging an enemy and the accompanying opportunities to earn medals and promotions in the field. In writing to his wife, Methuen, a veteran of the Asante and Egyptian campaigns, deeply resented his exclusion from the Nile expedition. ‘It is hard to see the chance gone’, he had written in September 1884;21 six months later he still thought ‘of the chance I lost’, adding:

It is a very bitter disappointment having toiled here for nothing particularly for the others, who have never seen service: had a shot been fired, my feeling is that there could have been heavy losses, as the Boers shoot so well, and the hatred here is intense. We all long to wipe out the shame inflicted on us, though at a heavy sacrifice.22

Notes
3 ‘The Bechuanaland Expedition’, Surrey Mirror, 7 March 1885, p. 2.
4 Ibid; and ‘With the Bechuanaland Field Force’, Scotsman, 31 January 1885, p. 7.
5 Ibid.
6 ‘Bechuanaland Expedition’, p. 2; ‘With the Bechuanaland Expedition’, Natal Witness, 3 February 1885, p. 3.
7 ‘With the Bechuanaland Expedition’, p. 3.
9 ‘Bechuanaland Expedition’, p. 2.
10 ‘Sir Charles Warren’s Expedition’, Morning Post, 6 March 1885, p. 5.
11 ‘Affairs of Bechuanaland’, Times of Natal, 2 April 1885, p. 3; PP, Further Correspondence...
dence Respecting the Affairs of the Transvaal and Adjacent Territories, C 4432
(1884–85), LVII, Sir C. Warren to the Earl of Derby, 28 February 1885, p. 21.
12 ‘News from Bechuanaland’, Eastern Province Herald, 11 March 1885, p. 3.
13 ‘Affairs of Bechuanaland’, p. 3; see also ‘The Bechuana [sic] Expedition’, Leeds Mercury, 13 March 1885, p. 3.
15 ‘Affairs of Bechuanaland’, p. 3; ‘Warren and the Rooi Gronders’, Natal Witness, 4
April 1885, p. 3; PP, Further Correspondence, Transvaal, C 4432 (1884–85), LVII, Warren to High Commissioner, 11 March 1885, p. 83; PRO, WO 106/264, ‘Report
from Colonel Methuen on the Organization and Recruiting, 1st Mounted Rifles’, 20
16 ‘Balloon Work on Active Service’, REJ, 15 (1 June 1885), 119.
17 ‘Ballooning in Bechuanaland’, Times of Natal, 15 May 1885, p. 3.
18 But Methuen advocated further improvements in some pieces of kit: see PRO, WO
106/264, Col. P. Methuen to Assistant Adjutant-General, 12 June 1885, in ‘Report of
19 ‘Affairs of Bechuanaland’, p. 3; ‘The Bechuanaland Expedition’, Illustrated London
News, 28 March 1885, pp. 328 and 334.
20 ‘Bechuanaland Expedition’, p. 2.
21 Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office (WRO), Methuen MSS, WSRO 1742/8564, Col.
P. S. Methuen to his wife, 17 September 1884.
22 Ibid., WSRO 1742/8565, Col. Methuen to his wife, 16 March 1885.